

DAY OF THE DEAD

Written by: Lesleigh Force

Season 34/Story 10B

Reviewed by: Jez Strickley

Opening in the archetypal rural inn, complete with its own wise woman, Lesleigh Force's *Day of the Dead* presents just the right mixture of folklore and tradition to serve up a very fine example of ghostly story telling. As with any good tale of ghoulish goings on its beginning is quietly sinister, with the Doctor happily ensconced in The Three Crowns, an inn in the village of Chagford, whilst Silver is busy attempting to invoke the spirits of her dead parents at Scorhill Circle, the location of a Celtic stone circle.

Soon the Doctor is engaged in an apple bobbing contest, quickly followed up by an unexpected and foreboding tarot reading. Bobbing apples, Celtic rituals and the odd reading of the tarot deck can only mean one thing – the Doctor and Silver have arrived on the evening of Samhain – or Halloween to the commercialists among us. Silver's attempted contact with her deceased parents doesn't go quite according to plan as she finds her summons has brought into the world a young boy named Alston and a ghostly monk called Ceirnan.

Returning to the inn via a dense forest Silver and Alston get caught up in the hunt of the Sidhe, ghostlike beings who have haunted Chagford for generations, and who have once more returned through an opening or rift which has appeared between the Earth and the Sidhe's eternal realm, the Summerlands. During Samhain these spectral visitors hunt and kill the unnatural creatures which prowl the forest near Chagford, but are equally dangerous to humans, since they are inclined to capture those ignorant enough to wander the woods during Samhain, taking them back with them to the Summerlands.

Events take a turn when a Sidhe lord called Lugh, who is being hunted by a rival Sidhe lord, is mistakenly given refuge in The Three Crowns. Surveying the inn he chooses to challenge one of its occupants to a contest and, unsurprisingly, his challenge falls upon the Doctor. To persuade the Time Lord to accept Lugh claims that should the Doctor win he will explain how the opening between the two worlds may be closed. Lugh's reward for winning is ambiguous, although it is clear that it is highly likely to involve the Doctor forfeiting his life. Without giving too much else away the finale satisfyingly closes an adventure which has all the hallmarks of a good solid ghost story, handsomely tied up with Wicca, the Celtic religion from which the plot draws its essential parts.

Despite the temptation to get caught up in mysterious happenings Lesleigh Force takes time to make sure there is some character development for the regulars. The relation-



“Despite the temptation to get caught up in mysterious happenings Lesleigh Force takes time to make sure there is some character development for the regulars.”

ship of guardian and ward which grows between Silver and Alston is touching and well portrayed, allowing Silver's character to mature by being placed in the role of protector. Her anger at Lugh over his behavior towards Alston is heartfelt, and lends genuine power to the way in which she ultimately avoids confronting the Sidhe head-on for the sake of the bigger game being played out between the Doctor and his challenger.

The flow of the story is consistent throughout and the various guest characters come to life effortlessly. Its quintessentially creepy atmosphere permeates every paragraph and the description of the forest between Scorhill Circle and The Three Crowns is particularly spine chilling stuff. Events set

inside The Three Crowns inn are also noteworthy; bordered by a frightening forest the claustrophobic taproom perfectly emphasizes the dark events unfolding within and without. Still further, the three part contest between the Doctor and Lugh is a master class in tension building, neatly signaled by the previous, entirely benign challenge between the Doctor and a regular at the inn called Burnell.

Lugh, the Sidhe lord, is drawn in fine detail, creating a character that is openly callous and uncaring, yet at the same time manages to demonstrate a sincere bond with his stolen boy, Alston. The way in which the Sidhe are revealed to be unearthly beings of great power that are prone to being unintentionally cruel inspires a natural dread of them, echoing the power of many an ancient evil which has cropped up in *Doctor Who* over the years.

Part of the magic of this story, in fact, lies in the way in which it echoes such *Doctor Who* classics as *The Daemons* and *The Image of Fendahl*. These tales are hugely popular

largely because they tap into hidden traditions – traditions which lie just beneath the surface of some communities and which run like a race memory through the habits and routines of daily life. By taking these cultural fundamentals and wiring them into *Doctor Who* you have the makings of an intriguing, not to say spooky adventure. Lesleigh Force takes just such a winning formula and shapes it into exactly that, paying tribute to the giants of classic *Doctor Who* and presenting a fascinating yarn in the meantime.

To give the story that extra something it's worth noting that its setting is real: the village of Chagford borders Dartmoor in the English county of Devon, and evidence of a human community there pre-dates Christianity by at least two thousand years. Furthermore, along with several other public houses in the area you will find The Three Crowns Hotel, just don't go wandering off into the woods if you're there on All Hallows' Eve.

Rating: 9/10