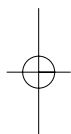
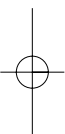


# SOUL

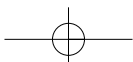
FORGE BOOKS BY TOBSHA LEARNER

*The Witch of Cologne*

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# SOUL



TOBSHA LEARNER



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
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Author's Note:

This is a work of complete fiction written to entertain, inspire, and intrigue, and should be read as such—any similarity to a living person or institute is entirely coincidental.

SOUL

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*For my father,  
Dr. Arnold Learner, mathematician  
(1934–1975)*

*As natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being,  
all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress toward perfection.*

—CHARLES DARWIN, *On the Origin of Species*

*We still dream what Adam dreamt.*

—VICTOR HUGO

# PART ONE



# THE APPLE

  
**I**

*Ireland, 1849*

The housekeeper had brought Lavinia to the remote place before, to this gully south of the village where the peat bog finished in a sharp edge, sliced away like a layer cake. The housekeeper's sister had married a peat-cutter whose small stone and peat hut crouched resolute against the unforgiving elements. They were Catholics, now suffering under the great famine.

It was spring and the squares of turf sitting in piles on the new grass of the returning bog exuded a rich smell that was somehow exciting. The nine-year-old girl glanced back at the hut. The housekeeper, her wispy grey hair tucked firmly under a woolen bonnet, was in intense conversation with her sister, pushing the bound food parcels into her clawlike hands. Starvation had reduced the woman's femininity to a series of sharp corners beneath her ragged dress.

Behind her, Lavinia heard the thud of a sleen, then ringing as the iron turf-spade found a hidden rock. She knew it was the boy. He looked to be a good three or four years older than her, with a fudge of curling black hair over the wind-burnt oval of his solemn face. She'd noticed him as they were driving toward the small outpost: a skinny, shadowy parody of a

man standing by the split peat, scowling at the approaching cart. Here was mystery, and Lavinia had felt her power as she caught him staring at her long loose hair, the ribbons of her bonnet, the extraordinary whiteness of her clean hands, her fresh face.

Without thinking, Lavinia ran toward him while the boy, feigning indifference, knelt to carve a rectangle with the sleam.

“Do you like it here?” She kicked at the soil beside him.

Squinting up, he paused, watching the play of her fingers against the scarlet wool of her cloak.

“It’s a living . . . but you wouldn’t know anything about that, a flash missy like yourself.”

She skipped around to the other side of his patch of peat, turning the word “flash” around in her mind until she imagined she could taste it, like the sugar plums her father had brought her from Dublin for Christmas. The idea made her heart and stomach flutter.

“You think me flash?”

“Flash and pretty, like the sun, like a golden statue that belongs in church.” He sat back, surprised at how the observation had suddenly made him feel demeaned, unclean. He knew her to be the daughter of a Protestant vicar, near gentry, and now he found that he resented the pristine naivety of the child, the plumpness of her forearms visible beyond the sleeves of her pinafore. It was almost as if he could eat the child herself.

Picking up a sod of peat, he threw it at a crow—the bird’s cawing scribbled across the pewter sky as the black wings lifted it high into the air. Standing, the boy wiped his muddy hands across his thighs, then looked back to where the two women were still engrossed in conversation.

“If you like, I can show you some magic—an elvin’s cave.”

Lavinia hesitated. She knew it was wrong to walk off unescorted with a boy, but he looked harmless enough, his adolescent wrists dangling, his face as mournful as a donkey’s. Besides, she liked the burning feeling she had when he looked at her.

“We cannot be long. Mrs. O’Brien will worry if I am not in sight.”

But he was already leading her away from the field, his cutter swinging from a notch in his belt. She followed him, clambering down a hidden ravine beyond the bog.

Looking around, Lavinia panicked at their sudden isolation. “Where is the cave?”

The boy walked across to a clump of low bush and pulled it aside to reveal the darkened mouth of a small burrow. Most likely an abandoned badger's den, Lavinia thought, annoyed that he could believe her so gullible; but she still wanted to see it, just in case—against all the logic her father had taught her—elvins might really exist. Then, later, back at the vicarage, she would be able to tell the story to her whispering box, so that her mother could hear her up there in Paradise.

She hoisted her skirt above her knickerbockers and dropped to the spongy heather to crawl into the cave.

“If you get closer you will see their wee purple eyes glinting in the dark.”

Lavinia peered into the darkness. Behind her, suddenly, she felt the strangeness of his hands under her petticoats, up between her legs. Kicking, she pushed herself back into the light as she tried to fight him off.

To her amazement, she was not so much afraid as surprised when he pinned her against the bracken. As he held her there he supported his weight with one hand while reaching down with the other to his breeches. The glint of his cutter hanging from his belt pulled at her consciousness. Before she had time to think, she'd grabbed it and, with a strange, soft tearing sound, plunged it into the boy's thigh.

He screamed once like an animal. She rolled from under him and for a minute, they both stared down at the buried knife. Fascinated, Lavinia watched as blood began to well around the lip of the wound, staining his thin burlap breeches.

“You have fallen on your own knife, understand?” she said softly. Her cool demeanor sent a shiver through the injured boy. “If I hear mention of any other explanation, I shall have you whipped.”

Lavinia waited until the boy nodded, his ruddy face now ashen. Then she ran, filled with a wild, thumping exhilaration that she intuitively knew she would have to keep secret, perhaps for her whole life.