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Issue 1, Volume 13

2 July 2011

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This Edition

Thirteenth edition (2 July 2011)

Featured in this edition is a collection of stories, new and old.



This week we introduce the illustrations of [Paul Mellino](#).

[From Darkness, They Came](#) Part One of Two by Pete Clark – the future has its prophets...

[Super Duper](#): Part Ten by [James Rhodes](#) - in which the Sellafield nuclear installation becomes the sought after tourist destination it once aspired to be.

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Schlock! **Classic Serial:** [Varney the Vampire](#) Part Thirteen ascribed to [Thomas Preskett Prest](#). Before *Twilight*... before Nosferatu ... before Dracula... there was Varney..

[The Pendragon Inheritance](#) Chapter Six by Rex Mundy – where are the Bretons?

Schlock! **Classic Serial:** [Brigands of the Moon](#) Part 7 by [Ray Cummings](#) “My brother and I know many Martians in Greater New York...”

[Witches and Barbarians](#) Part Four by [Gavin Chappell](#) *Sixth in the [Going Underground](#) series.*

Schlock! **Classic Serial:** [Carmilla](#) Part Five by [J. Sheridan LeFanu](#) - a Wonderful Likeness...

From Darkness, They Came

Part One

He was known as Darkness, a bear of a man with unevenly cropped black hair and eyes that showed nothing. It was most likely these eyes he was named for. His mouth hung perpetually slack and you might be forgiven for thinking he was simple, but he was anything but. Muscles, grown lazy from years of near weightlessness, stretched his AG suit to bursting, and the support system connections around the suit's collar dug into his bull neck. It was only when he smiled that you knew Darkness, for in that smile was all the wit and fierce intelligence you would expect from a Prophet.

The huge blue curve of Earth's flank swam into the viewing window. Darkness removed the filters from the toughened glass with a touch of a button. A second touch would bring the filters back, one after the other, like nictitating eyelids, filtering ultraviolet, infrared and any number of electromagnetic wavelengths.

He drummed his fingers reflectively on the curved surface of the window. The nacelle-window was eight feet across, more than four inches thick. It bulged frog-eyed from the side of the ship and had its twin on the opposite hull, connected by the twenty-foot wide gallery that lined the entire front domed hull of the Darkness Falls. Plummeting from the inner ring of the gallery was a stomach-churning drop to the lower habitation floor, fully half a mile down. Galleries circled each floor, growing progressively narrower to allow for hull-side habitation, offices, shops, and bars. The impression was like looking down the length of a giant whale's ribcage. An invisible guard shield hummed and crackled from the top of the gallery railings.

Darkness felt rather than heard the footsteps come up behind him. He ceased his drumming.

'Prophet?' a nervous voice asked.

He remained impassive, content to look at his home world.

The voice coughed and said,

'Darkness?'

He turned.

The man was roughly half the size of Darkness. He wore the same dark grey AG suit, a replacement support pack slung across his back. Its trailing connection hoses hung like the legs of a dead squid. His face was red and blotched, as if he had run the entire half-mile or so of staircase. He fiddled nervously with the hoses. The connection collar of his suit bore the ring of red gold that marked him as a Second Officer. He cleared his throat.

'Second Officer Spane, Prophet.'

'Pleased to meet you, Spane,' Darkness replied, omitting the man's rank deliberately. The thin white line of Spane's lips tightened, but he said nothing. Perhaps the look in Darkness's eyes stilled him, or perhaps he had been warned of the Prophet's strength and propensity for brawling with officers of his rank.

'Councillor Farson requests your attendance, Prophet. He has need of your...ah...talent.'

'I assumed,' Darkness replied, unmoving. 'Shall we go?'

'Follow me.' Spane turned on his heels, literally; a movement specific, Darkness thought, to men who assumed they were so superior to those around them that they were only one step away from moving without touching the floor at all. Darkness, in a particularly uncharitable moment, wondered how long it would take the man to fall to the lower floors if pitched over the safety shield. He smiled, and had Spane seen it, he would not have turned his back on the Prophet so easily.

They made their way slowly to the head of the staircase, and Spane, perhaps unconsciously, moved so that they walked down them side by side. The hum and spitting ozone reek of the gravity lift-shaft surrounded them as they passed the ovoid entrance door. Spane made as if to continue down the staircase.

‘We will take the gravity-lift, Spane. We don’t want to keep the Councillor waiting.’

Spane began to protest but experienced Darkness’ strength when a meaty hand clamped around his upper arm, circling it completely. His protests ceased, and with eyes squeezed shut, he was dragged into the lift-shaft opening. He punched their destination into the keypad just inside the door opening and they stepped off into the shaft. There was a moment of weightlessness as the gravity-lift counteracted the false-gravity from their AG suits, and then the gravity plates, lining the shaft like plates of a giant armadillo, hummed into life and they were hurled down the shaft. The quarter-mile journey to the level of the Councillor’s quarters flashed by at close to three hundred miles per hour. The negative atmosphere generators at either end of the shaft ensured that they felt nothing, the atmosphere moving at the same speed as they did. Darkness folded his arms and relaxed. Spane did the opposite.

Seconds later, the gravity plates exerted a stronger force on the two men, and they slowed, and stopped. Darkness stepped lightly onto the exit platform and waited while his suit adjusted his false-gravity. Spane crumpled to the floor and turned the colour of cheese. Presently the Second Officer stood.

‘Shall we go?’ asked Darkness, noting with no little satisfaction that this time when he turned, Second Officer Spane kept his feet firmly on the ground.

*

Spane picked up his pace as they walked. Five minutes walking, during which time not a single word was exchanged, brought them to the quarters of Councillor Farson. Farson had been human to begin with, but numerous enhancements and alterations had left his body irrevocably changed. He had uncommon strength and had no need for an AG suit, as he had implanted AG motors behind each eye that regulated his personal gravity. The bones of his arms and legs had been spliced with metal-calcium alloy structures that were, weight for weight, twelve times stronger than bone. The Councillor was virtually indestructible, and for this reason, Darkness was, if not afraid of him, at least wary. Spane pressed the communications console with his thumb. It scanned his thumbprint for recognition and opened a channel of communication to the Councillor’s main office. A female voice said:

‘Yes?’

‘Second Officer Spane, and I have the Prophet Darkness.’

‘Of course,’ the voice said and the door slid open silently on magnetic runners.

Darkness and Spane stepped through into quarters only slightly less profligate than the best hotel on board, and the owner of the voice stepped up to greet them. She was a First Officer, her ranking marked by a neck band of alternating red and black gold. Darkness, although having the reputation, and when the occasion called for it the disposition of a monk, knew neither the denial nor inhibition, and shamelessly eyed the way the AG suit clung to her. She eyed him back, even placing a hand on his immense forearm as she introduced herself.

‘First Officer Williams,’ she said, looking up at Darkness. ‘So pleased to finally meet you, Prophet.’

‘Darkness, First Officer,’ he corrected.

‘Jane,’ she said.

‘Please?’ said Spane. ‘May we see the Councillor?’

Darkness nodded, as a huge door set into the rear of the room swung open. Darkness felt a quiver of anticipation, felt the atmosphere thicken. They entered Councillor Farson’s private office. The room was lined with a cellulose-composite that was grained and polished to resemble wood. The effect was flawless. Only when you put a flame to the walls would you know the difference, for the composite could not burn. What windows there were on the hull side of the room were slightly frog-eyed, like the viewing windows above, but were thicker still, six inches or more. Permanent electromagnetic filters darkened the Earth almost to invisibility against the blackness. False-light came from suspended photocells that could be tuned to any colour and any intensity, with the touch of a button, or Farson’s implanted control system alongside the gravity regulators in his head. His two flanking guards, both droids, both bigger by far than even Darkness himself, did nothing to help the atmosphere. The doors shut behind Darkness, silent and massive, and internal dense-steel locks slammed home. This was a safe room, secure against intrusion. And escape, Darkness noted, with discomfort.

The councillor wore robes that covered him entirely. Most major organs had been replaced by synthetic counterparts, and encasing his head, plugged all around into the support system collar that even he had to wear, was his face shield, and lower helmet. Made of steel-rubber alloy, it was immensely strong and as light as leather. Farson was perhaps a hundred years old, and providing he didn’t lose his head, literally, there was no reason why he could not live another hundred.

He spoke through a system of filters and grilles that lifelessly mechanised his voice. The dome of his head was littered with connector plugs. Trailing support hoses fed down through the back of his robe, and once the upper helmet had been secured, again of deep grey steel-rubber alloy, this set with a transparent upper face plate, the whole formed an almost impenetrable shield.

He spoke now. Darkness felt discomfited, watching the man speak and seeing nothing but scant movements of his eyes.

‘Darkness,’ he said. ‘Thank you for seeing me.’

‘I was summoned. I came.’

Farson nodded. ‘So you did.’ He abruptly shifted his gaze to Spane, so quickly that the smaller man gasped and shifted back a couple of feet. ‘Leave us, Spane.’

The Second Officer began to voice his protest. One of Farson’s droid guards spoke, its face impassive, its voice more natural and humanoid than Farson’s. The final insult, thought Darkness, to have a droid guard appear more human than yourself. No wonder the man seemed shrivelled with bitterness.

‘I will show you the door,’ the droid said, gesturing silently behind Spane. Spane’s protest dried in his throat and he backed away. The vast doors clunked open and he left.

‘Ah, better,’ said Farson. The guard settled back into place.

‘I have to say I was a little bit disturbed by your last report, Darkness,’ Farson said, gesturing to a computer screen. ‘It lacked the...clarity of your others. Would you care to explain?’

‘I would not, Councillor, but I suppose I must.’ Darkness said, taking a step closer. He heard tiny motors whirring; saw almost imperceptible movements from the droids. ‘I, too, am disturbed. I have been on this ship for how long now? Eight years?’ Farson nodded.

‘The prophecy you have in front of you is like no other in all that time. It lacks

clarity, yes, but it is as I saw. I can see no more.'

'But it has no end, Darkness. The report has no end!' The robotic voice gained some human inflection as it rose in pitch.

'It has no end that you wish to see, Councillor. That is not the same as having no end. If so, then that is how it must be. I can see no more,' he repeated.

'You may think, Prophet, that your secondment to this vessel is an easy ride, predicting meteor showers and hostile craft. So far you have done well, I'll admit it, and we have missed those meteor showers, and our battle division has kept us safe from hostility. But this is not an easy ride. I brought you here for one reason only, and not because this ship appears to be named for you. I brought you here because I thought you were the best there is, and yet you present me with this report that is nothing more than deranged nonsense!'

Darkness said nothing.

'Hostility, you predict, for the Darkness Falls. Great hostility, and yet you cannot see a proper end to it, nor even any means of defence! How do I prepare for something that even our greatest prophet cannot predict? These creatures you see? They have no name, as you see it? You do not see when they will arrive?'

'I called them nothing, Farson, because that is how I saw it. And for all I know, they are here already. I have no way of knowing.'

'But you present me with this...this...massacre and expect me to deal with it?'

WHAT NEXT, DARKNESS?'

'That, Councillor, is not why I am here. I do not present solutions. I only tell the predictions as I see them. It has always been your duty to interpret and solve. I am the messenger only.'

Farson screamed into his voice grilles and the sound made even Darkness flinch. The Councillor swept an arm across the desk, hurled the contents to the floor.

'You must predict again, Darkness. I am ordering you to predict again!' The voice had calmed but its venom was unmistakable.

'Councillor, if I was to lower myself into the state again so soon, the results you get would be meaningless.'

'THIS...IS MEANINGLESS!' Farson screamed, pointing to the report that glowed on his monitor. 'You will predict again, and this time you will find an answer for me!'

Darkness inclined his head slowly.

'Whatever you wish, Councillor. I will predict again, and I will report back to you. However...'

'You WILL NOT fail me, Prophet! Guards!'

The two droids began their slow, lumbering move forward. Darkness had no wish for confrontation.

'Give me two days,' he said as he left.

As the dense-steel bolts thumped into place, Farson activated the sound module in his skull that rendered his office soundproof. He screamed and then, using another device located just behind his left ear, raised the volume of his screams until the glass shattered on his drinks cabinet on the other side of his office. The screams stopped and he turned his attention to the report playing out on his monitor.

Grainy images flickered on the screen, and it was as if a camera played out Darkness' very thoughts. It showed the interior of the ship, a storage hold, the lower floors. Farson had watched numerous times, and still the shock of seeing the creatures wrenched the breath from him.

They swarmed in through hold doors that appeared destroyed. They came like a swarm of night; black glistening things, vaguely humanoid, but with grossly

elongated arms and legs ending in razor claws that clattered and tails that rent the air like whip cracks. Their heads were sleek black domes, ringed with translucent teeth. He saw men, his men, form a counter-attack line, and saw that line destroyed, almost casually. The destruction went on then, in different rooms, on all floors. Always relentless, all laid to utter waste. The final scene of the report, before it flickered back to the start, seemed to be from outside the Darkness Falls as it rolled and pitched in the darkness and finally plummeted to Earth. And again. And again.

No mention of when, how and why.

He had seen destruction before, but always there was a when and a how and a why. And they had been prepared. But now? For all Farson knew, the creatures might be outside the hull this very minute, or in the hold. How long before they came for him?

He turned again to the report, replaying on the monitor. The creatures swarmed and killed, but now his attention was on a corner of the hold where he had noticed a cowed figure in the shadows. It was too dark to see the figure's identity, but something about it disturbed him. The mere fact that it stood unharmed where others were sliced and cut and destroyed, spoke of its immunity to the creatures' wrath. And perhaps of its control over them? Harsh breaths filtered out through his face grilles and he balled his fists against his thighs. He resisted the urge to scream and was content with digging the flesh of his palms with his fingernails.

*

Darkness settled into his quarters, cursing Councillor Farson. He dimmed the lights and plugged a long thin tube into a connection port on his AG suit. The drugs in the tube turned it a faint iridescent blue for a brief moment. Darkness's AG suit chilled the liquid as it pumped through and the chill entered him through a capillary-thin needle inserted into his wrist. He shut his eyes and immediately felt swaying dizziness that signalled the start of the prophecy state. The drug was designed not to induce the state itself, but rather to counteract the drugs that all prophets took daily to inhibit their visions. Without the inhibitor, they lived continually tortured with visions, monumental predictions that they could neither interpret nor control. Without the inhibitors, prophets died, unable to cope with the sheer influx of future possibilities.

Darkness lowered his breathing rate. His heart slowed to less than forty beats per minute. He waited. Darkness' final prophecy began in earnest, twenty minutes later, and didn't end for close to three days, by which time it was already too late.

*

Councillor Farson shut off his monitor, closing the report. He rose from his chair, plagued by the image of the shadowed figure. He felt he should know who it was, had to know. Darkness must have seen it. Farson moved quickly across his office, shutting down the lighting system and closing the window completely with a flex of his mind. The doors opened for him.

'Williams,' he crackled through his voice filters. 'Call a meeting of the Council.'

First Officer Williams, who had not seen Farson out of his office in three months, was momentarily lost for words.

'Of course, Councillor. Right away?'

'OF COURSE RIGHT AWAY!' he yelled, and Williams flinched. She backed to her desk and pushed a number of buttons on a console. Each was a personal communications line direct to each of Farson's four Second Councillors. There was

no need for words. Once the Second Councillors saw that the line had been activated, they would come. Farson turned. Williams cringed. She hated the sight and thought of Farson more than anything aboard ship. The sounds he made, the looks he gave.

‘Done, Sir.’ She turned away without suffering further fury and heard nothing more from him except the quiet thump of the doors closing behind him.

*

Councillors Wendall and Crask were first to arrive and took their seats that had risen silently from the floor panels of Farson’s office. They fiddled nervously with the hems of their robes, waiting. Farson’s eye irrigators, which he needed more and more these days, sprayed saline onto his drying eyeballs at intervals with a soft hiss. The slow thrum of the ship’s engines became a hypnotising drone. Crask coughed.

‘Are you well, Sir?’ he asked. Farson didn’t reply, but indicated his body with a wave of an arm. Hearing the mechanics of this movement clearly, Crask wished he hadn’t asked. He fell silent.

Two more Councillors arrived, Haron and Harin. They were the only non-human Councillors aboard the Darkness Falls. In appearance they looked vaguely simian, huge pads of hardened skin on their cheeks like those of male orang-utan. Their heads were completely bald, their skin a deep violet black. They were tall and thin, long arms ending in four fingered hands. The most astounding feature of the two was their symbiosis. It was assumed that Haron was the male, Harin the female. Haron was the taller, so that Harin’s head rested into the space between neck and shoulder. A thin tube of flesh, the same deep violet, passed between the two at chest height, and could be retracted into either one of them. They seemed to melt into one another. And when they spoke, it was in unison.

‘Councillors,’ they acknowledged with a perfectly timed dip of their inky heads.

‘Haron. Harin,’ said Farson, eyeing the pair. They blinked impassively back, their eyes large ovals of jade green, flecked with gold.

‘Is there a problem, Councillors Farson?’ they asked.

‘A prophecy has been made, Councillors.’ Farson began. ‘It shows our destruction. Our utter destruction.’

‘But we will plan for it as we have had to before. Defend ourselves?’ said Crask.

‘Why this meeting, Councillor Farson?’

The other Councillors murmured in agreement.

‘We cannot plan because we have no idea when or how it will happen.’

Haron and Harin spoke. ‘Who was the Prophet?’ They seemed not to care for the prophecy itself, merely the reputation of the Prophet.

‘It was Darkness, which makes this whole matter more confusing. Always his prophecies have been...’ He paused for a moment, weary. ‘It will be easier to watch, Councillors.’

He played the filed report. The Councillors watched in silence.

Haron and Harin were the first to speak. Their ethereal phasing voices lent a particular eeriness to the closing scenes.

‘We know these creatures,’ they said, their deep, normally smooth brows wrinkled as if in deep thought. ‘They have no real name. The Black Death some have called them. Others, Eaters of the Night. Our people call them Harii’s demons. They are hive creatures. One thought. Immeasurable consciousness. Whatever, we know they are unstoppable. Especially as we know nothing of their intention.’

‘Their intention?’ spat Crask. ‘Does that report not answer your question? Their

intention is our destruction.’ His eyes flicked from one twin to the next, unsure as to which was formulating the thought.

‘Do not be fooled by their apparent mindless slaughter,’ said the twins. ‘They most definitely have a plan. Watch again, and this time, concentrate on the dark corners of the room.’

Ah, thought Farson, they have spotted the figure.

But, no. As the Councillors watched intently, they saw something that even Farson had missed. Into each corner, in every dark recess, prisoners were being rounded, herded into tight corrals formed by the black sleekness of the Harii’s demons. Those that offered resistance were being slaughtered, it was true, but only those. The sheer ferocity of the attack gave the impression of total destruction, but it was far from it. Rather they were taking away the fighting force of the Darkness Falls and leaving the workers.

The scenario was chilling.

‘It is as if,’ said Wendall, his breathing becoming laboured, ‘they are harvesting us for slaves.’

The statement was so simply put that suddenly the truth of it was clear. Crask stifled a cry, and even Farson paled as he thumped his hand down onto the table.

‘This cannot be,’ said Wendall. Crask sat with his head in his hands. ‘Darkness must have made a mistake.’

‘I thought the same, but this is Darkness. If we cannot trust him...?’ said Farson.

‘Then we are doomed. Our forces cannot withstand that, even if we knew when they were coming.’ Crask raised his head as Wendall spoke, and his red ringed eyes looked mournfully at the Council.

‘We must try,’ he said. ‘We must make our forces ready and we must head to Earth where we can raise further aid. We still have that hope.’

‘It is futile!’ spat Farson. ‘They could attack now! For all we know, they are mustering themselves as we speak. We simply do not have choices. In the light of that, I may have some answer for you. I was hoping one of you would have spotted something I saw in the report. It may be a glimmer of hope, it may not. But a glimmer of hope is always preferable to none.’

Crask, Wendall and even Haron / Harin brightened visibly at this, although the look was soon dulled as they watched the report again. As each scene played out, they saw some new facet to the Harii’s demons’ plan, some new atrocity. Farson pointed out the dark figure standing like a statue in the corner.

‘It could be nothing more than a man frozen in fear,’ said Crask, feeling emboldened with the doom hanging over them.

‘Look again, Councillor Crask. See how the man’s lips are moving? See his hands? He is summoning these creatures, by God! I am sure of it!’ Farson slammed the table again, his augmentations adding extra weight to his fury.

‘But who is it?’ asked Wendall.

‘Are you able to look deeper, Councillor Farson? To move closer?’ said the twins.

‘Yes,’ he said cautiously. He operated a number of keys to the side of the monitor and the view zoomed in onto the man’s face. It showed nothing more. Dark and hopelessly blurred now, he turned away from the screen in disgust. ‘Nothing,’ he whispered.

‘There is a fresh wound on his chin. It can just be seen. But we do not know the face.’

As abhorrent as the viewing had become, each of the five Councillors present watched the scenes again and again. They were unable to glean anything further, and

twenty minutes later, Farson killed the monitor.

The twins were the first to break the silence.

‘Do you trust your Prophet, Farson?’

‘No. However, I have no choice but to trust him enough to rely on his next prophecy. I asked him to read again.’

Wendall spoke. ‘When did he make this report?’

‘A day and a half ago, more or less.’ He knew what was coming and silenced Wendall and Crask as they jointly began the same argument, sounding horribly like Haron and Harin.

‘But, that is too...’ they started.

‘It is too soon, yes, undoubtedly, but what other choice do we have?’ He paused. ‘We are missing something.’ He said this last almost to himself.

‘Should we guard Darkness?’ asked the twins. ‘He must be protected.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Farson, a little abruptly. ‘Although whether we need to protect him, or protect us from his damnable visions, I have no idea!’

‘You don’t think Darkness is behind this?’ said Crask, his eyes widening. ‘He has ever been our friend, Farson. You cannot shoot him for being the messenger. He is only doing what you have asked of him. That is all he has ever done.’ Crask seemed to realise he had gone too far, and shrank into his chair.

‘GET OUT!’ Farson bellowed. ‘All of you. And think, damn you all. Think!’

The room reverberated with his yells long after the Councillors left. He opened his window filters and stared at his home, floating like a purple glass marble in the velvety depths of space. He had time enough at least to do that.

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Super Duper

Chapter Ten

“What about the M3?” Jon suggested.

“Bollocks to the M3.”

Biggy was tired and he didn’t want to look at any more dead people unless he’d

killed them himself.

“Well, back to the M40 then?”

“Bollocks to the M40. Give me that fucking map.”

Biggy took out his compass and held it against the lines on the Ordnance Survey’s portrayal of the South West of England.

“We stay on the back roads and orient by landmarks, I’m not looking to dodge cars the whole fucking way.”

Biggy and Jon had attempted to follow the helicopter they had seen heading northwards. But they had lost all trace of it. When Jon had suggested they just kept on travelling North in the hopes of finding it, Biggy had strongly rebuked him.

“We need to think this through. Where would you go if you were invading a country?”

“Take out the armed forces, sir?”

“And where is the nearest base?”

“Aldershot’s the only one I know, sir. They packed me straight off from there to the Falklands.”

“Aldershot it is.”

Since then they had backtracked through Northampton and briefly, along the M40; they hadn’t enjoyed it much. Some of the cars had set on fire, a huge pile up of about fifteen vehicles. They had no idea when it had happened, maybe days or weeks before. The ashes had mixed with the rain to create a kind of corpse-based *papier mache* inside most of the visible cars. From then on Biggy had opted to take the side roads, so that he didn’t have to think about it. He couldn’t shake the thoughts though; a little girl had been thrown onto one of the bonnets. He had stopped to check that she wasn’t his daughter Elaine; she was about the right age. Close up, he could just about make out enough of the girl’s hair to know it was a different colour from that of the girl in the picture in his wallet.

Biggy thought about the last time he’d seen the girl, when his ex had said, “She’s needs a father who’s around.”

Biggy had always thought he would have a chance to make it up to Elaine when he passed out in three years time. There wasn’t much chance of that now; he didn’t even know where her mother had moved. The thought that some foreign invaders might have robbed him of that chance or his daughter of life was too much for Biggy.

“The most terrible thing happened to me the other day,” said The Don’s mother:

“I completely ran out of paper towels. I had to cut up some of my old bed sheets and, mind you, they weren’t very old. It’s like living in the stone age.”

Corrine sipped her tea.

“I know what you mean. We ran out of toilet paper and it took me three days to find a shop that had any left. I’ve got a shed full of it now, though. “

The Don’s mother looked at Corrine in sheer horror.

“You do think they’ll start to make more, don’t you?”

“I do hope so. If not I guess we’ll have to use a sponge on a stick like the Romans.”

The Don’s mother’s teacup rattled against its saucer for about thirty seconds.

“I don’t think I’d like that,” she said.

The teacup rattled again as a thought occurred to The Don’s mother and curiosity got the better of her.

“Is that what you did for the three days?”

Corrine smiled.

“No, we used box tissues.”

The Don’s mother took a deep breath of relief.

“I suppose we’re all going to have to learn to improvise like that.”

“I suppose so,” sighed Corrine. “Now are you sure that you have no idea where Smith and Donald went?”

“All I know is that they were going to save the few remaining worthwhile things in the world.”

“That’s not very helpful of them.”

“No, I know. But then they were too busy talking about nuclear power and Cumbria to get into it much.”

Corrine nodded. She took another sip of tea and wondered how long it would take to get to Sellafield on a bike. Probably not long enough to keep her occupied, she mused.

The Aldershot barracks were not totally deserted but those few soldiers remaining there could hardly be described as being on active duty. Loaded M16s and grenades were strewn about the place as if they were fizzy pop cans. Biggy had worn himself out yelling at a soldier who was slumped on a bench in the by now very aptly named mess hall.

“Hopeless,” said Biggy.

“Shall we try the top brass?”

“I don’t see how we have any choice.”

The offices of the top brass were filled with the bodies of the top brass, who were less responsive than the private Biggy had dressed down in the mess hall. Biggy showed them all due respect, calling them sir, and saluting, but he might as well have liberally urinated on them for all the response that they gave him.

“That’s it,” said Biggy, “I give up. Let’s go somewhere clean and have a rest. Then we’ll find some supplies and check the radios again.”

“Good plan sir,” said Jon. “Just one thing.”

“What is it, Jon?”

Biggy’s voice was weary.

“While you were questioning the CO, I found this on his bookcase.”

Jon held up a copy of *Enter the Dragon*.

“I was thinking we could put it on the projector in the briefing room.”

Biggy shrugged.

“You set it up; I’ll go find some beer. I’ll meet you in there.”

Biggy sauntered into the Her Majesty’s Royal Army’s main briefing room with a crate of John Smith’s bitter under each arm and two extra large bags of Walker’s salt and vinegar crisps held between his teeth.

“Is it ready to go, Jon?”

“Almost, but I thought you’d want to see this first.”

Jon turned on the projector and the details of the last briefing that was made in the room were displayed on the cinema-sized projector screen. The cover page of the presentation read OPERATION MELTDOWN: CUMBRIA.

“Well,” said Biggy, “I know where we’re going tomorrow.”

His beer can snapped open with a fizz. Jon just smiled.

“Yes, sir.”

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Babbage Must Die

Chapter Seven

‘We’ve just got to do something!’ Ada demanded.

Will rose. ‘Ned!’ he shouted. Ludlam looked up from the prone body of a press man. Will pointed towards the doorway. By now, Cast Eye and his companions had reached the street.

‘Never mind this lot,’ Will added. The press men still in the alehouse were looking thoroughly subdued. ‘They’ve dragged off Miss Ada’s friend.’

‘Reet, men,’ Ludlam bellowed. ‘Form up! We’re going after ‘em!’

With Ada and Will bringing up the rear, Ludlam and his comrades burst out into the street to find themselves in the midst of a serious riot. Ada stopped dead in her tracks, gazing wide-eyed at the scene.

Men in military uniforms and others in normal clothes were under attack from a mob of locals, some of whom Ada recognised from their clothes as sailors. Where was Brian? She looked around to see Cast Eye and his companions bundling his unconscious body onto the back of a cart on the far side of the street.

‘There!’ she pointed. Ludlam followed her gesture and frowned.

‘Ah, we’ll never get over there, Miss Ada,’ he said. Between them and the press gang cart, the street was jam-packed with rioters.

‘Don’t be so pusillanimous,’ Ada said fiercely. ‘We can’t let them take him away!’

At that moment, shots rang out along the street. Ada whirled round to see men with muskets advancing down from the centre of the city.

‘Someone’s called out the militia,’ Will exclaimed.

‘Hadn’t we better get out of here?’ Ada said. ‘What if they find out there’s a group of machine wreckers in town?’

‘Reckon militia’ll ‘ave they’s ‘ands full,’ said Ludlam.

‘The Chester militia hates the press gang,’ Will told Ada. ‘They’re all shipwrights and sailmakers who joined up to avoid the press. It’s a brave or foolish press man who enters Chester.’

‘Never mind that,’ Ada snapped as the militiamen rushed forwards with fixed bayonets and attacked the press men. ‘They’re still getting away with Brian!’

Cast Eye whipped up the horse and the wagon containing Brian and a few other pressed men rattled away across the cobbles. Rioting citizens fled on either side. Ada saw that this had opened up a path through the throng.

‘After them!’ Ada cried, and Ludlam followed her as she sprinted after the cart.

Cast Eye took a look behind as Ada and her companions broke from the riot where the militia and the other press gang men were fighting savagely. With a sneer, he produced a pistol and fired it at Ada. She flung herself to the filthy cobbles as the deafening report echoed from the surrounding buildings. The shot passed over her head. By the time she had forced herself back to her feet, Cast Eye’s cart had vanished under the forbidding Northgate.

Shuddering, Ada dusted down her gown. Regency clothes were not made for this kind of high adventure – certainly not women’s. Ludlam and Will joined her. She looked back down the street, where a man in officer’s uniform was remonstrating with the militiamen, to no apparent avail. The riot was beginning to spread.

‘Where will they take him?’ she asked.

‘To Liverpool, I reckon,’ Ludlam told her. ‘e’ll be put aboard a vessel of the Royal Navy. Tis an ‘ellish life, by all accounts.’

Ada pursed her lips. Chester was dangerous. She’d already been shot at once; her nerves were still jangling from the experience. The riot was showing no sign of abating. Brian was beyond help. Well, her mission was the most important thing.

‘We’re achieving nothing here,’ she told Ludlam. ‘I suggest we return to your camp and prepare our strategy.’

He looked down at her with an amused expression. ‘Our strategy, miss?’ he asked. He beckoned to the rest of his men and they gathered round him. ‘What strategy would that be?’

‘Do you want a future where machines have stolen everyone’s jobs?’ she demanded, shouting to be heard over the sound of the mob. Ludlam’s men rumbled disapprovingly. ‘I know of an inventor who will create a machine that will do just that, unless we stop him! We need to work out how.’

Ludlam took a step forward. ‘Don’t speak of this ‘ere,’ he said. His look of amusement had gone. ‘Reckon you’re right, we’ll return to camp. Time to leave Chester.’

They hurried towards the Northgate, leaving the city to its rioting and mayhem.

Brian didn’t know where he was. He wasn’t entirely sure who he was. He had dim recollections of going into an alehouse. That girl Ada had been with him. Yes, he’d travelled back in time with her! He was in 1812! He wasn’t quite sure who he was, rather oddly, but he remembered that much.

His head lay on hard planking that juddered and banged. He could hear a creaking sound, the clatter of hoofs and the squeak of wheels. Opening his eyes to a crack, he saw a grey sky passing by overhead. The light was painful and made him nauseous, so he closed his eyes again.

Next time he opened his eyes it was dark. He looked weakly to his left and right. Unmoving figures sat on either side of him. The cart he was in was no longer moving. No sound of cobbles. What had happened to him? He remembered going into an alehouse... They must have sold a potent brew.

A leering face with a cast eye appeared between him and the dark sky.

‘You woken up, lad?’ the face asked. Its voice had a sort of Scouse accent.

Brian frowned up at him in puzzlement. The stench of unwashed bodies emanated from his companions, adding to his nausea. Cast Eye grinned, showing a mouth that had never seen a dentist. That struck a chord of memory.

‘Wiggins put a bit of a dent in your head with his cosh,’ Cast Eye added. ‘But why take the king’s shilling and then struggle? Are you a wittol?’

Brian tried to get up. The cart around him seemed to lurch and before he knew it, he was vomiting over the boots of one of his companions, who gave a squawk of dismay. For a while, Brian knew no more.

He came round to noise. A confusion of clattering hoofs, thundering cart wheels, shouts and calls. He tried to sit up again, and this time succeeded. He found himself face to face with the man whose boots he had vomited on, an unshaven lout who reeked more than most.

‘You puked on my boots,’ the man growled.

Brian gave him a feeble, conciliatory grin, and looked around him.

The cart was going downhill between high buildings. It was still dark, but for a moment, Brian had a feeling of familiarity. The place looked less rundown than he was accustomed to, but in places, the road reminded him of Hanover Street in Liverpool. For a second, he thought he was back in his own time.

But then the illusion was dispelled when he saw that where it opened out up ahead, instead seeing of the ultra modern buildings of Liverpool One, he saw ships standing at anchor in a large pool surrounded by wharves. On the far side, a channel led towards a wider stretch of water. It looked nothing like the Liverpool he knew.

‘Yeah, sorry about that, mate,’ Brian told the man. ‘Someone hit me over the head.’

‘Mate?’ the man said. ‘Aye, we’re all going to be shipmates now. Thought you were a landlubber.’

‘Shipmates?’ Brian asked in horror.

As he spoke, the cart came to a halt. He turned to see men in old fashioned soldiers’ uniforms swarming up. They had fixed bayonets and they were training them on the men in the cart.

‘On yer feet!’ a sergeant barked.

The troopers hustled Brian and his new friends off the cart, across a short stretch of wharf and towards a three-masted sailing ship whose sides bristled with cannon. A

gangplank led up onto the ship's deck.

'But where are we going?' Brian demanded. His head ached and he felt woozy and confused. What was going on in this crazy century?

'The young gentleman's goin' onna cruise!' Cast Eye bellowed, lurching up to Brian. 'A pleasure cruise, paid for by 'is Majesty's Navy! Finest grub, finest rum, plenty of exercise...' He leered. 'And bedmates of the finest, I'll warrant. Har har!'

He rolled off back towards the cart. A trooper menaced Brian with his bayonet. Brian and the rest of the impressed sailors began to ascend the gangplank. He realised that he had inadvertently joined the Royal Navy. He didn't know much about conditions at sea in this period, but he had heard something about rum, sodomy and the lash. Well, he couldn't stand spirits, and as for the rest!

Still, it did mean one thing. For the first time in his life, Brian actually had a job.

His old mum would be so proud.

Meanwhile, Ada was sitting beside a guttering campfire out in the wilds of Rudheath, in the lonelier part of eastern Cheshire. Canvas tents flapped in the night wind, standing in neat rows as if it was a military encampment. Across the fire from Ada sat Ludlam and a few others, while Will sat beside her.

Ada had been surprised, though pleasantly so, by the degree of organisation she had seen in this secret camp. Most of the men had flintlock rifles and cutlasses, and they had been drilling when Ludlam and his companions reached them. The camp was sizeable, and it seemed to Ada that her newfound allies had all they needed to become a serious band of hardened revolutionaries. It occurred to her to wonder why the Luddites – if they were Luddites, they didn't seem to like the name – why the Luddites hadn't taken over the country.

'We don't want to tek over, lass,' Ludlam told her gently. 'We may look very fierce to a young girl like you, and we're ready to tek action against our oppressors. But we're not like the mob in France. We're not going to guillotine King George.'

'Why not?' asked Weaver, one of the Lancashire men. 'France has been all the better for giving their king the chop. I don't see why we shouldn't take over.'

Ludlam looked pained. 'All us wants is our rights, lad,' he told Weaver. 'Too long have deceitful men in the Government passed Acts against us's sort, with their factories and their enclosures.' He indicated the spit roast rabbits that had been their supper. 'Laws that say honest workingmen like us can't hunt to keep ourselves alive, that even rabbits belong to some idle landowner who's never dirtied his lily-white hands with work, who agitates in Parliament to free blacks in the Caribbean while he works his own folk worse than any plantation overseer worked his slaves. While folk like us starve, unable to find work, or are forced into servitude in the factories or the

mines or overseas, fighting the French. Us only wants us's rights, lad.'

'And that's what we'll never get as long as we have a madman for a king!' Weaver argued. 'We've been slaves ever since the Norman Conquest. I say it's time we rose up against the Normans and slaughter them, take England back for the Saxons. Like Cromwell should have done!'

Ada sighed. Weaver's picture of history was romantic to say the least. If she didn't know perfectly well that Scott hadn't written it yet, she would have suspected him of being a big fan of *Ivanhoe*. What was more, all this was irrelevant.

'I don't disagree with Comrade Weaver that the Government is oppressive,' she said, 'but there are more urgent factors. You are at the very beginning of a time in which machines will rob you of your jobs.'

'We know that, lass,' said Ludlam. 'The stocking frames...'

'Aye,' said Weaver, for once in agreement with Ludlam. 'The new looms have put many a man in the poorhouse. That's why we smash 'em! Right, Ned?'

Ludlam looked uncomfortable. 'Machines are one of us's enemies, so are the inventors who mek 'em and the manufacturers who use them to put us out of work. But tell us about this man Babbage, lass. I've never heard of him.'

'You won't have done, yet,' she said impatiently, ignoring the confused looks on her listeners' faces. 'Maybe you never will do. But if he isn't stopped, he'll unleash the worst machines of all, machines that think like people. Machines that will replace Will...'

'Will they replace us workers, though?' Weaver asked with a snort. 'Who needs computers and office clerks; all respect to Ned's brother-in-law, mind.'

Ada nodded. 'They will replace workers, too. Mechanical computers, automation, robots... These are things you've never heard of, but this is what Babbage is planning, or what will result from his inventions.'

'Then he must be stopped!' Will said.

Ludlam looked around at the others. He smiled sadly at Ada.

'Babbage is a villain like all inventors,' he said, 'but he's not yet doing anything to take the bread from workingmen's mouths. There are men out there, villains mekkin' fraudulent and deceitful manufactures to the discredit and utter ruin of our trade. Wreck machines when you find them, I say, and if it's best to kill men who grind us into the dust, then we're prepared to do it. But why go to Cambridge to kill one man when we can do so much more in the North and the Midlands?'

'If we're going to kill anyone, kill the king,' Weaver persisted.

'Or lock 'im in Bedlam,' another man suggested, to laughter from everyone.

‘Kill the Prince Regent or even the prime minister,’ Will suggested. ‘The king’s a madman, he’s not in control. It’s the government that passes these laws and does nothing to stop the inventors and the factory owners. That’s where we should strike.’

Ludlam smiled quietly. ‘Not everyone in government’s deceived by inventors. Reckon we ‘ave our allies. There’s been speeches in the ‘ouse of Lords in our favour. I know of one lord who supports our cause...’ He paused then, taking a look at Weaver, who was listening intently. ‘But I’ll say no more reet now,’ he added.

Ada punched the ground in frustration as the talk turned to other plans, plans of sabotage, of riot, of assassination. They were all idiots. The problem wasn’t the king or the prime minister or the tyrannical mill owners; the problem was Charles Babbage. They should concentrate on dealing with him!

But she couldn’t get it into their thick heads. They didn’t see the bigger picture. Had she made a mistake trying to enlist Ludlam and his men to the cause? The Luddites had seemed like ideal allies at first, but she was having second thoughts.

There was only one man in this century who wanted to help her. And by now, Brian was over the hills and far away; in Liverpool if he was lucky. If not he was already aboard a ship of the Royal Navy.

Would she ever see him again?

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The Dark Place

Chapter 4

As Isobel left her shop in Chester, she decided to have a coffee and a sandwich before she started the drive back to Liverpool. She went to the coffee bar in Browns the department store because she liked the décor and the intimate surroundings much more than the bland corporate image of Costa Coffee or Starbucks. As she sat and ate her lunch Isobel thought about last night and the car crash, which she knew from the local radio, had involved Anne and Tony McGuire. They were only in the shop an hour or so before they were killed, she thought. It just goes to show, you never know

what's round the corner. Isobel finished her sandwich and her coffee and walked back to her car.

The Chester shop was doing well and Jane seemed to be doing a great job of looking after the business. Jane Delaney was an American who had come over to England to study history and never gone home. She had just finished her Master's degree in European History at Liverpool University when she saw Isobel's advert for a shop manager with knowledge of antiques. At the interview, Jane had impressed Isobel with her enthusiasm for history and how much knowledge she had about antiques.

'My father has an antiques shop in Manhattan,' she had told Isobel. 'It's in the Arts and Antiques centre and there's around a hundred shops in there so I've grown up with antiques all my life.'

Eighteen months later and Jane was still working at the Chester shop and it was going from strength to strength. The visiting American tourists loved being served by one of their own and the English customers delighted in being served by an American with so much knowledge of history and antiques.

'It's a win-win situation,' thought Isobel to herself, smiling as she drove out of Chester towards Liverpool.

As Isobel was leaving Chester, Martin was in Paul Mason's office at the hospital discussing what had happened when he saw Robert that morning.

'Children with autism sometimes become fixated on things,' said Paul. 'That could explain the staring.'

'I know,' said Martin, 'but it was the intensity of his stare and the coldness in his eyes that worried me.'

'Well, all we can do is monitor the situation and if anything has changed drastically, I'm sure his parents will let us know,' said Paul. 'Now what was the other thing you wanted to see me about?'

'I'm going to take your advice about having a couple of days off,' said Martin. 'I'll work tomorrow as we agreed and cover the late shift but if it's OK, with you I'll take Thursday and Friday off, so with the weekend it should give me a bit of a break.'

Paul consulted a calendar on the screen of his computer. 'Yes, that will be OK,' he said after a few seconds, 'but do me a favour; keep your mobile near. We may need you at some point.'

'OK,' said Martin, 'Thanks, Paul. I appreciate that.'

Paul looked serious as he said, 'Martin, is everything alright?'

Martin looked out of the window thoughtfully before turning to Paul and replying. 'There have been a couple of odd things that have happened over the last few days and I had a bizarre nightmare last night. I haven't had a nightmare since I was a kid

and I can't help thinking all this is connected somehow.'

'Even experienced doctors are affected by things sometimes, you know,' said Paul. 'That accident yesterday must have been difficult. Unfortunately, sometimes we can't do what we're trained to do and we lose patients. There was nothing you could have done, Martin,' said Paul kindly.

'I know,' Martin replied, 'and I appreciate everything you said yesterday.'

'Take the couple of days off, relax enjoy yourself,' said Paul.

When he got back to his office Martin decided to give Isobel a call. He rang the number of the shop and smiled when he heard, 'Hello, Stevens' Antiques, Karen speaking, how can I help you?'

'Hello Karen. It's Martin Davies. Can I speak to Isobel, please?'

'I'm afraid she's not back from Chester yet. Can I get her to call you?' asked Karen.

'I'll be out of the office for a little while,' said Martin, 'so I'll ring back later. Can you tell her I called, please?'

'Certainly,' said Karen. 'I'll tell her when she gets in.'

'Thanks, bye,' said Martin. As he hung up he felt disappointed he wouldn't be able to speak to Isobel. He had hoped that as he now had some time off they could have arranged to have lunch on Thursday or Friday.

Karen replaced the receiver. She looked thoughtful as she picked up the cloth she had been using to dust some of the brass lamp holders. She knew from experience that if you didn't keep them clean they soon began to tarnish. As she looked at the space where the occasional table had stood yesterday she wondered about how funny life could be. The morning radio news had confirmed that the occupants of the four by four involved in the motorway accident had been Anne and Tony McGuire.

Their car had left the motorway at high speed before bursting through a fence and colliding head on with a tree. Anne and Tony had been confirmed dead at the scene but as yet the police had no idea how the accident had happened and were appealing for anyone who had been travelling on the motorway the previous evening and may have seen something to get in touch. Tony McGuire had been a barrister with his own practice in Liverpool and he and his wife had been returning from Liverpool to their home in Cheshire.

'You just never know the minute,' thought Karen. 'Isobel and I had been wondering what he did for a living but I never thought we'd find out like this.'

Karen thought back to last night and her phone call to Isobel when she had realised what she was watching on the news. Both women had been shocked by what they had seen.

‘They must have been on their way home from the shop,’ said Isobel.

‘That’s what I was thinking,’ replied Karen. ‘I wonder what happened to them.’ They discussed the day’s events and spoke for several minutes before Karen hung up.

‘What happened?’ said Tom when Karen sat down.

‘The people in that car crash were the ones who bought the occasional table this afternoon,’ said Karen. ‘That black four by four on the news was the one I was telling you about.’

Tom looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, ‘There’s nothing you can do about it though, is there?’

‘I know,’ said Karen, ‘but I was only talking to them a couple of hours ago and saying to Isobel how nice the inside of the car was.’

Tom put his arms round Karen’s shoulders, comforting her. ‘Let’s just relax and have something to eat, then an early night,’ said Tom. ‘I know you’re upset about what’s happened but there’s absolutely nothing you could have done, is there?’

Karen seemed to shake herself out of her melancholy. ‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘We’ve got each other and that’s what counts.’ She gave Tom’s hand a squeeze then picked up her glass of wine.

‘Cheers,’ she said to Tom as they touched glasses.

Later, Tom and Karen had finished their meal and were sitting on the settee watching the TV and sipping wine. Tom had cleared away the dishes and stacked them in the dishwasher before returning to the lounge with two fresh glasses of wine.

‘Are you trying to get me drunk?’ Karen asked.

‘I might be,’ replied Tom.

‘Well, it’s working,’ said Karen smiling as she slipped her hand into Tom’s giving it a squeeze. Karen turned her head towards Tom and they kissed. Karen felt her excitement building but she didn’t want to push things. Tom hadn’t been interested in weeks and him kissing her like this was a real step forward. Karen put her empty glass down on the table and let her hand rest on Tom’s thigh.

‘Fancy another?’ said Tom.

‘No, I think I’ve had enough,’ said Karen as she began to stroke Tom’s inner thigh. Karen leant against Tom’s chest and as his arm circled her shoulders she allowed her hand to brush against his crotch. Karen raised her head and began to gently kiss Tom’s neck, then placed her hand on the rapidly growing bulge in Tom’s jeans.

‘Well, what have we got here?’ said Karen as she rubbed her hand over Tom’s erection.

Karen slowly pulled the zip of Tom's jeans down before freeing his erection from his shorts. As she stroked Tom's penis he moaned in pleasure. Tom's hand had moved down from her shoulders and cupped her breast and as his fingers stroked her Karen felt, her nipples stiffen as they pushed against the fabric of her bra. She leaned forward and gently kissed Tom's penis before opening her lips and taking the head into her mouth. Karen pulled Tom's foreskin back and felt him quiver as she gently moved her tongue over the exposed head of his penis.

Karen got to her feet and slipped her skirt to the floor before taking off her t-shirt. Tom meanwhile had quickly stood up, removed his jeans and shorts, and was frantically trying to unbutton his shirt before giving up and dragging it over his head. Karen pushed Tom back onto the settee before turning her back on him and bending over so that Tom could run his hands over her bottom and the backs of her thighs. Karen hooked her fingers under the waistband of her thong and pulled the flimsy piece of pink cotton over her buttocks and down her thighs before letting it fall to the floor.

This left her exposed labia facing Tom and she opened her legs as he leaned forward and ran his tongue over her outer lips. Tom leaned back on the settee and pulled Karen towards him so she was forced to sit on his lap and as she sat down she felt Tom's penis penetrate her and she moaned loudly. Tom supported Karen's buttocks as she started to move up and down. As the pace increased, Karen felt her orgasm start to build and she slipped her hand between her legs to rub her clitoris as Tom thrust into her. The friction on her clitoris was too much and she felt her legs shaking as her orgasm took over her. As she felt her legs, start to buckle and she fell forward to her knees Tom stayed with her. Karen was now on her hands and knees, Tom was thrusting more urgently into her, and as he ejaculated deep inside her Karen felt another orgasm build and wash over her.

'You look happy about something,' Isobel said to Karen as she walked into the shop.

'I was just thinking about how last night turned out,' said Karen. 'Tom was in a great mood. He'd cooked a meal, bought a bottle of wine and after I'd spoken to you about poor Mr and Mrs McGuire he really did his best to cheer me up and take my mind off it.'

'Well, it obviously worked,' said Isobel, smiling. Her face then clouded over as she said, 'Shame about Anne and Tony McGuire though; I wonder how they managed to crash the car like that.'

'I imagine the police will be working on that,' said Karen. 'Oh, by the way, Martin called. I told him you weren't here. He said he'd be out of the office for a while so he'll ring back later.'

'Thanks, Karen,' said Isobel. 'Have you had a chance to get anything to eat yet?'

'I thought I'd wait till you got back and then go and get a sandwich or something,' Karen replied.

‘Well, why don’t you go now?’ said Isobel. ‘I had a coffee and something to eat before I left Chester, so I’ll look after the shop while you get some lunch.’ Karen got her coat and said she wouldn’t be long as she left the shop.

After Karen had gone, Isobel checked the morning’s post and her emails. The shop website had received a number of email enquiries from potential customers some from as far afield as America, Canada, and one email from Japan. There was also an email from the shipping company to let her know that the pieces she ordered from her supplier would be delivered to her house on Friday.

As Isobel was closing down the email, she looked up from the computer as someone came into the shop. A man in a crumpled grey suit was looking round the shop as he politely waited for her to finish what she was doing.

‘Can I help you?’ asked Isobel.

‘Perhaps,’ said the man ‘I’m looking for’ - he consulted a small notebook which he had in his hand - ‘Isobel Stevens,’ he said as he looked towards Isobel hopefully.

‘That’s me,’ she said. ‘How can I help you Mr...?’ Isobel paused, hoping the man in the grey suit would volunteer his name.

‘I’m sorry,’ said the man flipping open a black wallet to show his warrant card. ‘I’m Detective Constable Jones, Mike Jones. I’m just trying to tie up a few loose ends concerning Anne and Tony McGuire.’

‘How can I help you?’ said Isobel. ‘We found a receipt for £630 in Mr McGuire’s wallet and the time on the receipt was 17.10pm, so we think this was probably the last place they stopped before the accident. Can you confirm that, Miss Stevens?’

‘Yes, they bought a Georgian occasional table and a lamp,’ said Isobel. ‘Anne McGuire saw the table earlier in the day and she brought Tony McGuire back to see it at around five o’clock. They decided to buy it and Tony McGuire paid for it with his Visa. After I’d processed the sale, my manager Karen and I wrapped the lamp and the table and helped the McGuires load them into a black Range Rover. They must have left here around twenty past five,’ concluded Isobel.

‘This must have been their last stop on the way home then,’ said Jones.

‘Have you any idea what happened?’ said Isobel.

‘We’ve got a few ideas,’ said the detective, ‘but nothing conclusive.’

‘Is your manager here today?’

‘She’s just gone out for lunch,’ replied Isobel.

‘I’ll try and call back later then,’ said the detective. He thanked Isobel for her help and left the shop.

A quarter of an hour later Karen returned to the shop with a sandwich and bottle of water. 'Did I miss anything?' she asked Isobel as she came into the shop.

'Not really,' said Isobel. 'A detective constable was here asking some questions about Anne and Tony McGuire. He said he may call back later to speak to you, but that's all.'

'What would they want to speak to me about?' asked Karen.

'I'm not sure,' said Isobel. 'I told them everything I could remember but it seems we were the last people to see them before they were involved in that accident.'

'How did they work that out?' asked Karen.

'The receipt for the table and the lamp was in Tony McGuire's wallet and it had the shop name and time I processed the sale on it,' replied Isobel. 'So they came here to see if we had any information.'

'I don't suppose there's anything else I could tell them, is there?' said Karen thoughtfully. 'Did they have any idea how the accident happened?'

'He didn't really say,' said Isobel. 'He did say they had a few ideas but I suppose that could mean anything, couldn't it?' Both women were lost in thought as they each went over the events of the previous evening in their minds.

'I wonder what happened to the table,' said Karen. 'I hope it wasn't damaged. It seems a shame to think it's lasted for over two hundred years and then it gets ruined in a car accident.'

'I don't suppose we'll ever find out what happened to it,' Isobel replied, 'but I hope it's OK, and somebody gets to appreciate it.'

Martin got back to his office just before three o'clock in the afternoon. By the time he'd finished listening to the patient observations he'd made on his digital voice recorder and completed his case notes it was almost 4.30. He dialled the number for Isobel's shop, hoping he'd be able to talk to her this time.

After three rings a familiar voice said, 'Hello, Stevens' Antiques. Isobel speaking. How can I help you?'

Martin immediately felt his spirits rise and he was smiling as he said, 'Hi Isobel. It's Martin.'

'Hi Martin,' said Isobel. 'I saw your photograph in the Echo last night. I tried to ring you but you must have still been at the hospital. That must have been an awful thing to happen yesterday, were you on your way to the hospital?'

'Yes, I was,' replied Martin. 'It was difficult because there was nothing I could do at the scene. Her best chance was at the hospital but unfortunately they couldn't save

her.’

‘That’s so sad,’ said Isobel as she felt herself filling up with tears. ‘That young girl hadn’t had any life really had she? Her poor parents must have been devastated.’

‘Yes, it is sad,’ said Martin, ‘but really there was nothing at all we could do. I spoke to the doctor who was in A&E when the girl was admitted and she said they did all they could.’ Isobel wiped her eyes on a tissue and composed herself.

‘I’m sorry for getting upset,’ she said. ‘It must have been so much worse for you.’

‘It’s never easy when you lose a patient,’ said Martin, ‘but we have to try to rationalise things. Otherwise we’d never be able to learn from these things and move forward.’

‘I suppose you’re right,’ said Isobel. ‘Look,’ said Martin. ‘I’ve got a couple of day’s holiday on Thursday and Friday, so would you like to meet for lunch on Thursday?’

‘That would be lovely,’ said Isobel excitedly. ‘I’m really looking forward to that already.’

Martin and Isobel chatted for another ten minutes and Martin said he’d pick Isobel up at the shop at 12.30 on Thursday. Reluctantly they said goodbye and each of them felt a little sad and lonely when they ended the call.

Martin sat in his office staring into space and thinking about how he felt about Isobel.

‘I’ve only known her for a few days so why do I feel so strongly about her?’ he thought. ‘It’s as though I’ve known her for ages and I just want to be with her.’

Martin didn’t believe in love at first sight, at least that was what he told himself, but he couldn’t explain the way he felt. ‘What if it’s just you though?’ his inner voice countered. ‘She might not feel the same as you, so you’ll just be making a fool of yourself, won’t you?’ Martin’s self-doubt and inner turmoil continued until his phone rang bringing him crashing back to reality.

‘Hello, Martin Davies,’ he said as he picked up the phone.

‘Alright mate, it’s Steve,’ said Steve Jones cheerily. ‘How’s things? I thought you were going to let Jess and I know how Sunday went.’

‘Sorry, mate,’ said Martin. ‘I meant to ring you on Monday but a few things happened and I just never got round to it.’ Martin quickly went through what had happened on Monday and when he was finished, Steve was quiet for a second before he said, ‘that must have been a bad day, mate. Is everything OK, now?’

‘Yes, I’m fine,’ said Martin before going on to tell Steve about Sunday and how he was seeing Isobel for lunch on Thursday. ‘Sounds to me as though you really like this woman,’ said Steve. ‘I do,’ replied Martin. ‘I can’t stop thinking about her. I can’t remember ever feeling like this about anyone and to be honest it frightens me a bit.’

‘Why?’ asked Steve.

‘Well, I only met her on Friday and I’ve only really spent a few hours with her, haven’t I? I don’t even know anything about her, she could be married, single, divorced or anything,’ Martin replied.

‘If she didn’t like you or didn’t want to see you again she wouldn’t be going for lunch with you, would she?’ said Steve patiently. ‘I know what happened with Jane was painful for you but you decided to call it off, it was your decision. You said you didn’t feel ready and the whole commitment thing worried you. Maybe feeling like this is just a replay of all the self-doubt you spoke about then, do you think?’ continued Steve.

‘I honestly don’t know,’ said Martin, ‘but I hope you’re right.’

‘Have you got anything planned for the weekend?’ asked Steve.

‘Not yet,’ said Martin. ‘I’ve got a couple of days off this week and I’d like to think I’ll be seeing Isobel over the weekend but I’ll have to see what she’s got planned, why?’

‘Well, on Saturday Jess and I thought we’d go into town and have a few drinks and maybe a bite to eat. If you and Isobel fancy it, we’ll meet up somewhere?’ replied Steve.

‘I’ll ask her on Thursday,’ said Martin, ‘and I’ll let you know. Is that OK?’

‘No worries, mate,’ said Steve. ‘We’ll be going anyway, so just let us know what you fancy doing.’

‘OK,’ said Martin. ‘I’ll give you a ring before Saturday night and we can sort something out.’

‘Great. Speak to you soon then, mate. Take it easy,’ said Steve before he hung up.

As Steve put the phone back in its stand, Jess shouted, ‘Hello,’ from the front door.

‘Hi babe,’ shouted Steve. ‘I’m in the lounge.’

Jess was unbuttoning her coat as she came into the lounge. ‘You’re home early,’ she said to Steve as she put her arms round him and kissed him.

‘The meeting finished early so I thought I’d leave for the day,’ said Steve.

‘Well, it’s nice to have you home before six o’clock for a change,’ said Jess as she made her way back out to the hall to hang up her coat.

Steve sat down in the armchair and thought about the conversation he had just had with Martin. Jess walked back into the room and sat opposite Steve.

‘What’s the matter, Ste, something bothering you?’ she asked.

‘No, there’s nothing wrong with me, I’m fine,’ replied Steve. ‘I was just talking to Martin and he’s had a rough couple of days.’ Steve quickly told Jess about what had happened on Monday and about Martin’s day with Isobel on Sunday. Jess was quiet for a few moments.

‘What a terrible thing to happen,’ she said. ‘That poor little girl, her parents must have been so upset.’

‘I know,’ said Steve. ‘It’s hard to imagine how it feels to have something like that happen, isn’t it?’ Jess crossed the room, sat on the arm of Steve’s chair and then circled her arms round his shoulders holding him close.

‘When you hear about people losing someone they love it makes you think about what you’ve got and who you love doesn’t it?’ said Jess. Steve put his arms round Jess’s hips and hugged her.

Later that evening after they’d finished their evening meal Steve and Jess were sitting at the table in the kitchen talking. A half finished bottle of red wine was in the centre of the table.

‘Martin really seems to like this Isobel,’ said Steve. ‘He was telling me how he can’t stop thinking about her.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’ enquired Jess. ‘I’d hope you feel like that about me.’

‘We have been married for a few years and I’ve known you for a lot longer, so it’s slightly different,’ said Steve, laughing. ‘Martin hasn’t even known Isobel for a week yet.’

‘When we started going out you used to ring me and text me all the time,’ teased Jess. ‘You wouldn’t leave me alone, would you?’

‘Maybe you’re right,’ said Steve, smiling. ‘Martin hasn’t been seeing anyone for ages, has he? So perhaps that explains it.’

Steve had known Martin since they were in secondary school and they had remained close friends since. Both had completed their ‘A’ levels and gone on to study at Liverpool University. Martin had excelled at science in school and had decided he wanted to be a doctor but Steve had been undecided. He’d eventually opted for English and Politics at university and while Martin was working through the final two years of his medicine degree, Steve had graduated and was following a fast track manager’s course with a commercial bank. Steve was now managing a section of the bank that dealt with foreign investment. He’d found the further exams he’d had to take on the fast track course easy and had progressed rapidly.

He’d met Jess at a house party organised by a friend from university and they’d quickly become an item and had married less than two years later. Jess worked for a large insurance company and was, as she described herself, an office manager, PA

and general dogsbody. They had bought their house before they were married and had changed the inside of it so much it would have been unrecognisable to the previous owners. Jess had carefully planned and managed the changes. The dark wallpaper and sombre colours of the interior had been replaced with bright modern colours and furnishings and they both loved the house and the surrounding area.

Isobel hung up the phone and thought about how much she was looking forward to meeting Martin for lunch on Thursday.

‘So aren’t you supposed to look pleased after you’ve spoken to the new man in your life?’ asked Karen.

Isobel smiled at Karen. ‘Was I that obvious?’ she said quietly.

‘Well, I can understand if there’s a problem but you’ve just arranged to see him again, haven’t you? So why do you look so sad?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Isobel. ‘Thursday seems a long way off at the moment.’

Karen put her hands on her hips and tilted her head to one side as she said, ‘Are you falling for him already, Isobel?’

Isobel thought about what Karen had just said. She’d known Martin since Friday night and it was only Tuesday now. What if Martin didn’t feel the same way that she did?

‘You’ll just be making a total fool of yourself, won’t you?’ she thought. ‘Don’t be silly,’ Isobel replied. ‘I only met him on Friday night and I’ve only been out with him once.’

Karen looked sceptical as she said, ‘You looked like a little lost puppy. All doe-eyed and vulnerable.’ Karen’s comments broke the spell and Isobel couldn’t help herself as she doubled up with laughter.

‘Doe-eyed and vulnerable?’ she said through the laughter. ‘How do you manage to look like that?’

‘Like this,’ said Karen as she lowered her chin, pouted her lips and opened her eyes wide while raising her eyebrows. Both women collapsed with laughter and when they got their breath back, Karen asked, ‘So are you falling for him then?’

‘I can’t stop thinking about him but it’s all so new at the moment. Maybe it’s just that,’ said Isobel.

Karen took Isobel’s hands in hers and looked into her eyes. ‘If it’s right for you, don’t fight it,’ she said.

Isobel was still thinking about what Karen had said when she got home that night. Tom had picked Karen up from the shop and he seemed really cheerful and talkative. He’d hugged Karen and kissed her when he arrived at the shop and it seemed as though he didn’t have a care in the world. Isobel wondered what had happened to

make everything right between him and Karen.

‘Maybe that’s all part of marriage,’ Isobel thought. ‘You go through low points and high points all the time.’

Isobel opened the fridge and looked inside trying to decide what she would eat. All that was in the fridge was the remains of the loaf she had bought the previous night and some milk and cheese. Isobel decided to have some cheese later after she’d had a shower. As she made her way upstairs Isobel wondered what Martin was doing at the hospital tonight. She smiled to herself as she thought about him.

‘Maybe I am falling for him,’ she thought as she went through the bedroom and into the en suite bathroom.

Isobel turned on the shower to allow the water to warm up as she removed her clothes and tied her hair back to avoid it getting too wet. As she stepped into the shower and the water cascaded over her breasts Isobel felt her nipples erect. She shivered as she ran her palms over her nipples and imagined that it was Martin caressing her. She let her hands slide down her body and over her stomach until her fingers were running through the small triangle of hair that led to her labia.

As her fingers slipped between her outer lips and began to stroke her clitoris Isobel parted her legs and leant back against the wall of the shower cubicle. As the warm water poured over her breasts and ran down her body Isobel’s fingers moved quicker and her breathing became faster as she brought herself to a shuddering climax. Slowly Isobel’s breathing returned to normal and her body relaxed as she finished her shower.

Half an hour later Isobel was sitting on the large settee in front of the fire with her legs curled under her. She was wrapped in a large white dressing gown and she had wound a towel round her damp hair. A glass of red wine stood on the coffee table in front of her next to a small plate of cheese. The radio was playing softly in the background as Isobel sipped her wine and nibbled on the cheese. She was filled with a pleasing lassitude and she felt relaxed but tired. The only illumination came from the two small table lamps at either end of the settee and the gas fire, which cast an amber glow round the room and made shadows dance in the corners.

Martin was sitting in his office staring out at the window at the night sky. He had just finished a cup of coffee and a sandwich and was looking forward to going home.

‘It’s been a long day today,’ he thought. Martin stood up and stretched. ‘I hope I sleep OK, tonight. I could do without being up from three o’clock in the morning again.’ It was now 8.30 and Martin wondered what Isobel was doing. He thought again about how much he was looking forward to seeing her on Thursday and he hoped they would be able to spend some time together over the weekend.

Martin returned to his desk and looked at his computer monitor. He had been catching up on the news on the Reuters UK webpage and it made dismal reading. The currencies of the world were fluctuating, there was continual unrest in the Middle East and there had been more terrorist attacks. Martin wondered at the mindset of the people who perpetrated such acts of barbarism.

‘Most of the time it’s innocent people who suffer,’ he thought. ‘Zealots killing in the name of religion, prepared to die for their cause. Vainly imagining that their name will be remembered with pride rather than horror and disgust.’

Martin turned off his computer and left the office. He had a couple of patients he wanted to check on before he left for the night. On the bottom of the Reuters page, the World News section carried the usual stories of bombings and murder in Bagdad as well as political unrest and the sabre rattling of new Eastern European regimes. In smaller type at the bottom of the section was the headline *Local Police Baffled By Multiple Homicides*. The report went on to detail how in a remote part of Estonia twelve exsanguinated corpses had been found in an isolated manor house twenty miles outside the village of Kallaste on the western shores of Lake Peipsi.

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Varney the Vampire

CHAPTER XXXI.

SIR FRANCIS VARNEY AND HIS MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.—THE STRANGE CONFERENCE.

Sir Francis Varney is in what he calls his own apartment. It is night, and a dim and uncertain light from a candle which has been long neglected, only serves to render obscurity more perplexing. The room is a costly one. One replete with all the appliances of refinement and luxury which the spirit and the genius of the age could possibly supply him with, but there is upon his brow the marks of corroding care, and

little does that most mysterious being seem to care for all the rich furnishing of that apartment in which he sits.

His cadaverous-looking face is even paler and more death-like-looking than usual; and, if it can be conceived possible that such an one can feel largely interested in human affairs, to look at him, we could well suppose that some interest of no common magnitude was at stake.

Occasionally, too, he muttered some unconnected words, no doubt mentally filling up the gaps, which rendered the sentences incomplete, and being unconscious, perhaps, that he was giving audible utterance to any of his dark and secret meditations.

At length he rose, and with an anxious expression of countenance, he went to the window, and looked out into the darkness of the night. All was still, and not an object was visible. It was that pitchy darkness without, which, for some hours, when the moon is late in lending her reflected beams, comes over the earth's surface.

"It is near the hour," he muttered. "It is now very near the hour; surely he will come, and yet I know not why I should fear him, although I seem to tremble at the thought of his approach. He will surely come. Once a year—only once does he visit me, and then 'tis but to take the price which he has compelled me to pay for that existence, which but for him had been long since terminated. Sometimes I devoutly wish it were."

With a shudder he returned to the seat he had so recently left, and there for some time he appeared to meditate in silence.

Suddenly now, a clock, which was in the hall of that mansion he had purchased, sounded the hour loudly.

"The time has come," said Sir Francis. "The time has come. He will surely soon be here. Hark! hark!"

Slowly and distinctly he counted the strokes of the clock, and, when they had ceased, he exclaimed, with sudden surprise—

"Eleven! But eleven! How have I been deceived. I thought the hour of midnight was at hand."

He hastily consulted the watch he wore, and then he indeed found, that whatever he had been looking forward to with dread for some time past, as certain to ensue, at or about twelve o'clock, had yet another hour in which to prey upon his imagination.

"How could I have made so grievous an error?" he exclaimed. "Another hour of suspense and wonder as to whether that man be among the living or the dead. I have thought of raising my hand against his life, but some strange mysterious feeling has always staid me; and I have let him come and go freely, while an opportunity might well have served me to put such a design into execution. He is old, too—very old, and yet he keeps death at a distance. He looked pale, but far from unwell or failing, when

last I saw him. Alas! a whole hour yet to wait. I would that this interview were over."

That extremely well known and popular disease called the fidgets, now began, indeed, to torment Sir Francis Varney. He could not sit—he could not walk, and, somehow or another, he never once seemed to imagine that from the wine cup he should experience any relief, although, upon a side table, there stood refreshments of that character. And thus some more time passed away, and he strove to cheat it of its weariness by thinking of a variety of subjects; but as the fates would have it, there seemed not one agreeable reminiscence in the mind of that most inexplicable man, and the more he plunged into the recesses of memory the more uneasy, not to say almost terrified, he looked and became. A shuddering nervousness came across him, and, for a few moments, he sat as if he were upon the point of fainting. By a vigorous effort, however, he shook this off, and then placing before him the watch, which now indicated about the quarter past eleven, he strove with a calmer aspect to wait the coming of him whose presence, when he did come, would really be a great terror, since the very thought beforehand produced so much hesitation and apparent dismay.

In order too, if possible, then to further withdraw himself from a too painful consideration of those terrors, which in due time the reader will be acquainted with the cause of, he took up a book, and plunging at random into its contents, he amused his mind for a time with the following brief narrative:—

The wind howled round the gable ends of Bridport House in sudden and furious gusts, while the inmates sat by the fire-side, gazing in silence upon the blazing embers of the huge fire that shed a red and bright light all over the immense apartment in which they all sat.

It was an ancient looking place, very large, and capable of containing a number of guests. Several were present.

An aged couple were seated in tall high straight-backed chairs. They were the owners of that lordly mansion, and near them sat two young maidens of surpassing beauty; they were dissimilar, and yet there was a slight likeness, but of totally different complexions.

The one had tresses of raven black; eyebrows, eyelashes, and eyes were all of the same hue; she was a beautiful and proud-looking girl, her complexion clear, with the hue of health upon her cheeks, while a smile played around her lips. The glance of the eye was sufficient to thrill through the whole soul.

The other maiden was altogether different; her complexion altogether fairer—her hair of sunny chestnut, and her beautiful hazel eyes were shaded by long brown eyelashes, while a playful smile also lit up her countenance. She was the younger of the two.

The attention of the two young maidens had been directed to the words of the aged owner of the house, for he had been speaking a few moments before.

There were several other persons present, and at some little distance were many of the domestics who were not denied the privilege of warmth and rest in the presence of

their master.

These were not the times, when, if servants sat down, they were deemed idle; but the daily task done, then the evening hour was spent by the fire-side.

"The wind howls and moans," said an aged domestic, "in an awful manner. I never heard the like."

"It seems as though some imprisoned spirit was waiting for the repose that had been denied on earth," said the old lady as she shifted her seat and gazed steadily on the fire.

"Ay," said her aged companion, "it is a windy night, and there will be a storm before long, or I'm mistaken."

"It was just such a night as that my son Henry left his home," said Mrs. Bradley, "just such another—only it had the addition of sleet and rain."

The old man sighed at the mention of his son's name, a tear stood in the eyes of the maidens, while one looked silently at the other, and seemed to exchange glances.

"I would that I might again see him before my body seeks its final home in the cold remorseless grave."

"Mother," said the fairest of the two maidens, "do not talk thus, let us hope that we yet may have many years of happiness together."

"Many, Emma?"

"Yes, mamma, many."

"Do you know that I am very old, Emma, very old indeed, considering what I have suffered, such a life of sorrow and ill health is at least equal to thirty years added to my life."

"You may have deceived yourself, aunt," said the other maiden; "at all events, you cannot count upon life as certain, for the strongest often go first, while those who seem much more likely to fall, by care, as often live in peace and happiness."

"But I lead no life of peace and happiness, while Henry Bradley is not here; besides, my life might be passed without me seeing him again."

"It is now two years since he was here last," said the old man,

"This night two years was the night on which he left."

"This night two years?"

"Yes."

"It was this night two years," said one of the servant men, "because old Dame Poutlet had twins on that night."

"A memorable circumstance."

"And one died at a twelvemonth old," said the man; "and she had a dream which foretold the event."

"Ay, ay."

"Yes, and moreover she's had the same dream again last Wednesday was a week," said the man.

"And lost the other twin?"

"Yes sir, this morning."

"Omens multiply," said the aged man; "I would that it would seem to indicate the return of Henry to his home."

"I wonder where he can have gone to, or what he could have done all this time; probably he may not be in the land of the living."

"Poor Henry," said Emma.

"Alas, poor boy! We may never see him again—it was a mistaken act of his, and yet he knew not otherwise how to act or escape his father's displeasure."

"Say no more—say no more upon that subject; I dare not listen to it. God knows I know quite enough," said Mr. Bradley; "I knew not he would have taken my words so to heart as he did."

"Why," said the old woman, "he thought you meant what you said."

There was a long pause, during which all gazed at the blazing fire, seemingly wrapt in their own meditation.

Henry Bradley, the son of the apparently aged couple, had left that day two years, and wherefore had he left the home of his childhood? wherefore had he, the heir to large estates, done this?

He had dared to love without his father's leave, and had refused the offer his father made him of marrying a young lady whom he had chosen for him, but whom he could not love.

It was as much a matter of surprise to the father that the son should refuse, as it was to the son that his father should contemplate such a match.

"Henry," said the father, "you have been thought of by me, I have made proposals for

marrying you to the daughter of our neighbour, Sir Arthur Onslow."

"Indeed, father!"

"Yes; I wish you to go there with me to see the young lady."

"In the character of a suitor?"

"Yes," replied the father, "certainly; it's high time you were settled."

"Indeed, I would rather not go, father; I have no intention of marrying just yet. I do not desire to do so."

This was an opposition that Mr. Bradley had not expected from his son, and which his imperious temper could ill brook, and with a darkened brow he said,—

"It is not much, Henry, that I trespass upon your obedience; but when I do so, I expect that you will obey me."

"But, father, this matter affects me for my whole life."

"That is why I have deliberated so long and carefully over it."

"But it is not unreasonable that I should have a voice in the affair, father, since it may render me miserable."

"You shall have a voice."

"Then I say no to the whole regulation," said Henry, decisively.

"If you do so you forfeit my protection, much more favour; but you had better consider over what you have said. Forget it, and come with me."

"I cannot."

"You will not?"

"No, father; I cannot do as you wish me; my mind is fully made up upon that matter."

"And so is mine. You either do as I would have you, or you leave the house, and seek your own living, and you are a beggar."

"I should prefer being such," said Henry, "than to marry any young lady, and be unable to love her."

"That is not required."

"No! I am astonished! Not necessary to love the woman you marry!"

"Not at all; if you act justly towards her she ought to be grateful; and it is all that is requisite in the marriage state. Gratitude will beget love, and love in one begets love in the other."

"I will not argue with you, father, upon the matter. You are a better judge than I; you have had more experience."

"I have."

"And it would be useless to speak upon the subject; but of this I can speak—my own resolve—that I will not marry the lady in question."

The son had all the stern resolve of the father, but he had also very good reasons for what he did. He loved, and was beloved in return; and hence he would not break his faith with her whom he loved.

To have explained this to his father would have been to gain nothing except an accession of anger, and he would have made a new demand upon his (the son's) obedience, by ordering him to discard from his bosom the image that was there indelibly engraven.

"You will not marry her whom I have chosen for your bride?"

"I cannot."

"Do not talk to me of can and can't, when I speak of will and wont. It is useless to disguise the fact. You have your free will in the matter. I shall take no answer but yes or no."

"Then, no, father."

"Good, sir; and now we are strangers."

With that Mr. Bradley turned abruptly from his son, and left him to himself.

It was the first time they had any words or difference together, and it was sudden and soon terminated.

Henry Bradley was indignant at what had happened; he did not think his father would have acted as he had done in this instance; but he was too much interested in the fate of another to hesitate for a moment. Then came the consideration as to what he should do, now that he had arrived at such a climax.

His first thoughts turned to his mother and sister. He could not leave the house without bidding them good-bye. He determined to see his mother, for his father had left the Hall upon a visit.

Mrs. Bradley and Emma were alone when he entered their apartment, and to them he related all that had passed between himself and father.

They besought him to stay, to remain there, or at least in the neighbourhood; but he was resolved to quit the place altogether for a time, as he could do nothing there, and he might chance to do something elsewhere.

Upon this, they got together all the money and such jewels as they could spare, which in all amounted to a considerable sum; then taking an affectionate leave of his mother and sister, Henry left the Hall—not before he had taken a long and affectionate farewell of one other who lived within those walls.

This was no other than the raven-eyed maiden who sat by the fire side, and listened attentively to the conversation that was going on. She was his love—she, a poor cousin. For her sake he had braved all his father's anger, and attempted to seek his fortune abroad.

This done, he quietly left the Hall, without giving any one any intimation of where he was going.

Old Mr. Bradley, when he had said so much to his son, was highly incensed at what he deemed his obstinacy; and he thought the threat hanging over him would have had a good effect; but he was amazed when he discovered that Henry had indeed left the Hall, and he knew not whither.

For some time he comforted himself with the assurance that he would, he must return, but, alas! he came not, and this was the second anniversary of that melancholy day, which no one more repented of and grieved for, than did poor Mr. Bradley.

"Surely, surely he will return, or let us know where he is," he said; "he cannot be in need, else he would have written to us for aid."

"No, no," said Mrs. Bradley; "it is, I fear, because he has not written, that he is in want; he would never write if he was in poverty, lest he should cause us unhappiness at his fate. Were he doing well, we should hear of it, for he would be proud of the result of his own unaided exertions."

"Well, well," said Mr. Bradley, "I can say no more; if I was hasty, so was he; but it is passed. I would forgive all the past, if I could but see him once again—once again!"

"How the wind howls," added the aged man; "and it's getting worse and worse."

"Yes, and the snow is coming down now in style," said one of the servants, who brought in some fresh logs which were piled up on the fire, and he shook the white flakes off his clothes.

"It will be a heavy fall before morning," said one of the men.

"Yes, it has been gathering for some days; it will be much warmer than it has been when it is all down."

"So it will—so it will."

At that moment there was a knocking at the gate, and the dogs burst into a dreadful uproar from their kennels.

"Go, Robert," said Mr. Bradley, "and see who it is that knocks such a night as this; it is not fit or safe that a dog should be out in it."

The man went out, and shortly returned, saying,—

"So please you, sir, there is a traveller that has missed his way, and desires to know if he can obtain shelter here, or if any one can be found to guide him to the nearest inn."

"Bid him come in; we shall lose no warmth because there is one more before the fire."

The stranger entered, and said,—"I have missed my way, and the snow comes down so thick and fast, and is whirled in such eddies, that I fear, by myself, I should fall into some drift, and perish before morning."

"Do not speak of it, sir," said Mr. Bradley; "such a night as this is a sufficient apology for the request you make, and an inducement to me to grant it most willingly."

"Thanks," replied the stranger; "the welcome is most seasonable."

"Be seated, sir; take your seat by the ingle; it is warm."

The stranger seated himself, and seemed lost in reflection, as he gazed intently on the blazing logs. He was a robust man, with great whiskers and beard, and, to judge from his outward habiliments, he was a stout man.

"Have you travelled far?"

"I have, sir."

"You appear to belong to the army, if I mistake not?"

"I do, sir."

There was a pause; the stranger seemed not inclined to speak of himself much; but Mr. Bradley continued,—

"Have you come from foreign service, sir? I presume you have."

"Yes; I have not been in this country more than six days."

"Indeed; shall we have peace think you?"

"I do so, and I hope it may be so, for the sake of many who desire to return to their native land, and to those they love best."

Mr. Bradley heaved a deep sigh, which was echoed softly by all present, and the stranger looked from one to another, with a hasty glance, and then turned his gaze

upon the fire.

"May I ask, sir, if you have any person whom you regard in the army—any relative?"

"Alas! I have—perhaps, I ought to say I had a son. I know not, however, where he is gone."

"Oh! a runaway; I see."

"Oh, no; he left because there were some family differences, and now, I would, that he were once more here."

"Oh!" said the stranger, softly, "differences and mistakes will happen now and then, when least desired."

At this moment, an old hound who had lain beside Ellen Mowbray, she who wore the coal-black tresses, lifted his head at the difference in sound that was noticed in the stranger's voice. He got up and slowly walked up to him, and began to smell around him, and, in another moment, he rushed at him with a cry of joy, and began to lick and caress him in the most extravagant manner. This was followed by a cry of joy in all present.

"It is Henry!" exclaimed Ellen Mowbray, rising and rushing into his arms.

It was Henry, and he threw off the several coats he had on, as well as the large beard he wore to disguise himself.

The meeting was a happy one; there was not a more joyful house than that within many miles around. Henry was restored to the arms of those who loved him, and, in a month, a wedding was celebrated between him and his cousin Ellen.

Sir Francis Varney glanced at his watch. It indicated but five minutes to twelve o'clock, and he sprang to his feet. Even as he did so, a loud knocking at the principal entrance to his house awakened every echo within its walls.

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The Pendragon Inheritance

Chapter Six: Arthur Advances

‘Halt!’ Arthur shouted. ‘Halt!’

He leapt back down into the tank and seized the radio mike. ‘Halt! Cease the advance! They’ve mined the track ahead. Infantry, disembark. Five of you get the mine detectors and sweep the area ahead. The rest of you, keep them covered...’ He broke off as he heard gunfire from outside.

Peering cautiously from the turret, Arthur saw a group of enemy infantry firing from the trees. His own men were returning fire. He knew that there was no

chance of advancing until the track had been checked for mines; this would be impossible until the attackers had been forced back or killed.

He told the tank commander and the gunner to join him. They followed him as he left the tank and made his way closer to the gunfight. Arthur found the officer in charge of the infantry.

‘Your majesty!’ the man said in awe.

‘Get me five of your best men and tell them to follow me,’ Arthur said. ‘I’m going to try flanking them.’

‘But your majesty,’ the officer began.

‘That’s an order!’ Arthur snapped. Reluctantly the officer withdrew five of his men from the skirmish and told them to follow their king.

‘This way,’ Arthur told them, and they followed him off the track and into the trees.

The trees in this part of the forest were conifers, planted in long rows that stretched over the dips and rises of the landscape. This created the effect of long, narrow, pillared tunnels roofed with tree branches and carpeted with dry old pine needles. As Arthur and his troops moved away from the road, the silence deadened the firecracker rattle of gunfire. Bending almost double, weighed down by weapons and webbing, they forced their way through the musty labyrinth.

Their progress was slowed by the need to scan their path ahead for any signs of mines or traps, but it soon became apparent that Lot’s forces had not expected their foes to leave the track. Arthur began to bear left, until the track was on his left hand. Through the gloom of the pines, muzzle flashes were visible, lighting up the murk like fireworks.

They began to curve round, sometimes having to struggle to get through the tangle of low-lying branches. Soon the enemy position was visible through the trees ahead, and Arthur signalled his men to find cover. He crouched behind a tree and knelt down in a soft drift of pine needles.

The gunfight continued, although there had been few casualties on either side. Arthur looked around at his men. The insurgents seemed unaware that their enemy was so close.

He weighed up their chances. From here, the trees still created a barrier between his position and that of the enemy, grouped on either side of the track. It was difficult to assess their strength even from two hundred metres away. He signalled to his men to advance cautiously, and led them towards trees on the edge of the trackway. Here about twenty metres of bracken-covered slope led down to the track. The insurgents were clearly visible; they were concealed from further up the track by bushes, but not from Arthur and his men at the edge of the trees. But the main disadvantage of their position became instantly apparent.

One of the enemy soldiers glanced up and caught sight of them. He yelled wordlessly and opened fire at Arthur’s position.

‘Fire at will!’ Arthur cried, throwing himself behind a tree and firing at the soldier with his pistol. Lot’s soldiers began blazing away at them. Two of Arthur’s men fell. The rest found cover and fired back.

Far down the track, Arthur’s main force took advantage of the enemy’s confusion and began picking them off. Arthur shot another soldier down before the remaining men surrendered.

Arthur led his troops out of cover and surrounded the surviving enemy soldiers. He walked up to a man in captain’s uniform.

‘How many landmines did you put on the track?’

The insurgent captain looked at him stolidly. 'Who are you, lad?' he asked. He only looked five or six years older than Arthur. One of Arthur's men, a sergeant, whacked him with the butt of his rifle and he staggered.

'Show respect,' the sergeant bellowed. 'This is his majesty, King Arthur.'

Arthur lifted a hand to forestall any more brutality. 'That's enough, sergeant,' he said. He turned to the insurgent captain.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Captain DeRevel,' he replied. He had a Warwickshire accent. Most of Lot's followers were northerners, or from the Celtic fringe. 'You're the boy-king? The pretender? Lord Lothian will soon defeat you.'

'That's enough,' Arthur replied. He saw that the sergeant was about to hit the captain again. 'No need for that,' he said. 'Captain DeRevel will answer the question of his own free will.'

He didn't want to be responsible for human rights abuses; he was perfectly willing to leave that kind of thing to Lot, or the heathen. But it was imperative he got his tanks through the forest as soon as possible. That would be difficult if they still had a minefield to get through.

'My men have mine detecting equipment, captain,' he explained. 'They'll get through your minefield sooner or later. I'd prefer it if it were sooner. All you have to tell me is how many mines you've got out there.'

Captain DeRevel smiled. 'What's in it for me?' he asked. 'Your majesty,' he added, sarcastically.

'I'm bound to win,' Arthur began with a confidence he did not feel. 'I have the support of the people; providence has proved my claim to the throne; and my army is larger than Lord Lothian's...'

'Not according to our intelligence,' the captain replied. 'You entered Castle Bedegraine with a force half the size of ours.'

Arthur laughed. In the distance, the main battle rumbled on like a thunderstorm, and explosions flared beyond the trees. 'I have reinforcements coming to my aid any hour.'

'Lord Cameliard is busy fighting Rience...' the captain began.

'Lord Cameliard's situation is irrelevant,' Arthur replied. 'We have an army coming from Brittany to reinforce us.' He was lying, of course. Or was he? They had heard nothing from Kay... But it didn't matter. What mattered was that Captain DeRevel told them what they wanted to know. 'Defeat is inevitable for you, captain,' he said. 'But if you help me, I'll accept you and your men into my forces.'

Captain DeRevel looked down at Arthur suspiciously. Arthur looked away, down the track to where his men were sweeping the track with mine detectors.

Captain DeRevel sighed. 'They're wasting their time,' he said. 'We didn't have any more mines. We thought that would be enough to keep you busy.'

Arthur clapped him on the shoulder. 'Good man,' he said. He walked away, down the track, and halted.

'The captain tells us the way is clear,' he called. 'Send one land rover forwards to my position. One driver; no passengers.' He looked back at the captain. 'Just in case,' he explained.

The land rover reached them without incident, and Arthur ordered the rest of the column to advance. He had the prisoners disarmed and taken away from the battle zone before returning to his tank.

'Advance!' he ordered, and the column began finally to crest the rise.

As the trees began to thin, the tanks began to fan out on either side of the road,

crushing bushes and undergrowth beneath their tracks in the process. Beyond them lay a stretch of grass at the edge of which was the fence leading to the motorway. Beyond it, the dark eaves of Bedegraine Forest loomed gloomily. But as Arthur's tank crew manoeuvred to take up a position on the left wing and the motorway came into sight, what caught his attention most was the battle in progress below.

Lot's forces were attacking the road block that blocked the motorway; a line of bombed-out trucks covering all lanes. To Arthur's right, his own forces were massed; artillery, infantry and tanks. To the left, the insurgents were bombarding the roadblock from cover while infantry tried to storm the barricade. Bodies lay unmoving on either side of the roadblock.

Arthur's infantry had disembarked from their land rovers and were lined up in troops between the two wings of tanks. He looked at his tank commander.

'Give the order to attack,' he said tersely.

The commander barked into his mike. Slowly, with a rumbling, grinding sound, the tanks began to move forward again. Arthur watched from the turret as they came closer and closer to the fence at the edge of the motorway. A barrage of shells from Lot's artillery bombarded the grass and Arthur saw one tank hit and grind to a halt with black smoke billowing from its hull.

Still the tanks lumbered onwards as shot and shell filled the air. The infantrymen reached the fence and began to scramble over. The first tanks came up on either side. They unleashed a barrage in the direction of Lot's forces. Arthur's own tank was near the forefront as they smashed through the motorway fence and rolled down the grassy slope.

Anti-tank missiles and rocket propelled grenades flew at them. Arthur leapt down inside the tank, catching his head on a rung of the ladder as he did so. Rubbing his bruise, the only wound he'd received so far, he clung on for dear life.

'Return fire!' he ordered. 'Fire at will!'

The big gun boomed. The air was filled with the roar of battle. Peering through a periscope, Arthur saw that they had reached the bottom of the motorway cutting and were bearing down on Lot's forces. Infantrymen were scrambling up the grassy slope on the far side, turning at times to open fire on their opponents.

Arthur's picture of the battle came in a series of confused, chaotic glimpses. Soldiers from both sides were shot down, tanks lost tracks or had their guns destroyed. The retreating infantry reached the rise where they began to fire down on Arthur's position.

He realised that the enemy had been prepared. Now the motorway cutting was a trap. He should have retained the high ground and attacked Lot from above. In the heat of the action, it was impossible to get a clear view of the situation.

'This must be why most generals stay out of the fighting,' he muttered, but his words went unheard as an explosion shook the tank. The tank commander turned desperately to Arthur.

'Your majesty!' he bellowed. A rocket propelled grenade had struck them dead on. 'We must evacuate immediately. We're immobilised!'

'After you,' Arthur said, indicating the hatch.

The tank commander gritted his teeth. 'Your majesty,' he said. 'I must insist.'

'Just get up the ladder!' the gunner bellowed impatiently. Arthur threw him a scared glance and swarmed up the ladder. His principles could wait. It looked like the tank crew weren't willing to accept his idealism.

He came out into the open air to find it electric with tension and roaring with the noise of combat. Up ahead, on the motorway bank, insurgent soldiers were firing

mortars from cover. The front end of the tank, beneath Arthur's nose, was billowing with smoke. Directly to his right, an advancing tank went up in smoke and flames as a rocket propelled grenade scored a direct hit. Arthur saw a small group of skirmishers running towards his disabled vehicle, bayonets fixed on their assault rifles.

He grabbed the machine gun on the turret and raked the attackers with gunfire. The deafening chatter drowned out even the deep basso booming of nearby explosions. The skirmishers dropped to the asphalt surface of the motorway, several of them unmoving. The rest rolled away into the ditch and came up to open fire on Arthur. He fired back.

Feeling a touch on his shoulder he turned round to see the tank commander behind him.

'Come on!' the man was mouthing. 'No time to fight. I'll cover you.'

Arthur relinquished the gun and scrambled down the far side of the tank, followed by the rest of the crew as the commander blazed away at the small group of skirmishers. As Arthur reached the ground, the roar of the machine gun cut out. He looked up to see the commander lying slackly against the side of the hatch, blood oozing from his forehead. Arthur moved forward to offer assistance but the gunner grabbed him.

'He's done for,' the man bawled. 'Get your royal arse moving, your majesty.'

Together, the survivors of the disabled tank fled across the battlefield as missiles and gunfire whizzed through the air around them. The gunner seemed to have taken command.

'Where are we going?' Arthur demanded. They crouched in a shell crater that had once been part of the central reservation. 'What's your name?'

'Corporal Dinadan, your majesty,' the gunner replied. He grinned wryly. 'If his majesty wants me to suggest, I think we better scarper.'

'I won't leave my men,' Arthur said firmly. Another tank exploded nearby, showering the area with shrapnel. When the noise had died away, Arthur lifted his head and added softly: 'After all, I got you all into this.'

'You certainly did, Mr King, sir,' Dinadan replied. 'And how are you going to get us out?'

The hatch of a passing tank flew back and the tank commander shouted:

'Your majesty! Is that you?'

Shortly afterwards, Arthur stood in the turret of the tank while Dinadan and the others clung to the side. The tank commander had directed his driver to drive in the direction of the roadblock, and the army's main position, where Ulfin and Brastias were overseeing the main defence.

The attack on the roadblock had lessened somewhat due to Arthur's flanking manoeuvre, and now the main centre of the battle lay further up the motorway. Lot's forces had given some ground, as Arthur discovered shortly after his tank was allowed through the roadblock.

'Your attack gave them something to think about, your majesty,' Brastias said, looking wearily around his command post, 'but we lost many men and several tanks. We desperately need reinforcements.'

'Has there been any news from Leodegrance?' Arthur asked despondently. He realised that nothing beat weight of numbers. If only Merlin were here to advise him...

‘Lord Cameliard is still pinned down by Rience’s forces,’ Ulfin reported, entering the command post. ‘The warlord has seized Carohaise, and Lord Cameliard is fighting to regain it.’

Arthur remembered Carohaise from childhood visits. He had liked the town, a quiet place that retained its medieval wall and half timbered buildings. The idea of mechanised warfare in a place like that distressed him.

‘We have to defeat Lot,’ he said. ‘Then go to Leodegrance’s aid.’

‘Easier said than done,’ said Brastias grimly.

The tide of war turned again over the next half an hour, as Lot reinforced his frontline troops and drove them on in another push that threatened to overrun the roadblock. Choppers swept over Arthur’s lines, gunning down all in their path. Arthur had his own air forces scrambled again and soon the battle on the ground was mirrored by a struggle in the skies. Soon he realised that the troops loyal to him would face imminent defeat unless they could find a way of changing the balance. They could not hope for reinforcements; Arthur’s attempts to flank the enemy had ended in disaster. What other options remained?

‘We can retreat and regroup to fight elsewhere, or we could throw all our forces into one last desperate push,’ Brastias shouted over the roar of another air raid.

‘A tactical withdrawal?’ Arthur asked. ‘But that would mean giving ground to Lot, and he’s already halfway to London. If he takes the capital then we’ll lose any advantage we have.’

He watched as explosions bloomed on the skyline, and choppers hurtled flaming from the skies. Men were dying out there; for him or against him, but all were dying.

All his efforts had been fruitless. Should he retreat? Should he push forward? Either option seemed suicidal. He could always surrender. After all, even Merlin, who had sponsored his rise to power, had deserted the cause. Why shouldn’t he accept Lot’s supremacy?

Apart from the fact that Lot would almost certainly have him disposed of – shot while trying to escape – Arthur couldn’t let his country suffer under the warlords any longer. The slightest hope, the slightest chance of ending Lord Lothian’s insurgency must be seized upon.

Decisively, he turned to Ulfin and Brastias. ‘Ready the tanks. Prepare the infantry reserves. We charge.’

‘A forlorn hope?’ Ulfin asked. ‘Lord Lothian still outnumbers us.’

Arthur pounded the camp table. ‘There’s no other way,’ he shouted. ‘We have to do all we can to stop him, even if it means throwing away all our lives.’

‘Will your majesty accompany us?’ Brastias asked wearily.

Arthur looked at the older man. His previous appearances on the battlefield had not been well-omened. But he could not send men out to risk their lives for him if his own life was safe.

‘I’ll lead the attack,’ he said.

Once the words were spoken there was no turning back. He felt a constriction in his throat, knew a terrible premonition that he would fall on the field of battle.

Shortly after, two divisions of tanks were heading down the ruinous motorway, one on either side of the central reservation, while the infantry advanced in the centre. They had passed through the roadblock and were heading straight for the fight still continuing between Lot’s forces and Arthur’s men. As they advanced, enemy guns boomed and rained them with shells. From his position in the lead tank, Arthur could see the infantry ducking into cover, firing back at the attackers from

cover.

Arthur gave the order for the tanks to charge.

The lumbering land-leviathans speeded up as they advanced on the enemy position. Arthur could see the remains of men and tanks from the first attack littering the motorway. His driver had to swerve several times to avoid immobilised tanks. Explosions tore up the tarmac on either side and soon it became almost impossible to see as the smoke created an impenetrable fog of war.

Arthur kept his eye to the periscope. They must be almost at the enemy position. All they had to do was smash through, scatter them, maybe take out a few of Lord Lothian's cronies. All they had to do was show the insurgents that he was not to be daunted, not to be defeated. They just needed to buy time, long enough for Leodegrance to reinforce them.

A massive explosion rocked Arthur's tank. The cabin seemed to flip over and Arthur was sent flying. The tank came to an abrupt halt at a thirty degree angle. Arthur got to his feet and looked wildly around the claustrophobic confines. The tank commander was out cold, blood trickling from a cut in his forehead. The gunner looked up at Arthur.

'We must have hit a mine,' he said.

'Good thing we didn't go straight up,' the loader added.

'We're immobilised,' the driver reported. 'We'd better get out of here.'

Arthur cursed inwardly. Was he a jinx? Was he bringing his men nothing but bad luck?

'Remember, it's a minefield out there,' he said as they scrambled out into the roar of battle, the driver and the loader carrying the commander between them.

Smoke and dust still swirled around them but it was possible to see the advancing forces on either side. Infantry fired at infantry, tank at tank. Rockets and grenades whizzed through the air. Arthur stared out from the top of his disabled tank to see the massed forces of Lot driving towards them through the chaos. His tanks had halted on reaching the minefield, and were firing volley after volley at the advancing forces, but seemingly to no avail.

'We're outnumbered,' the gunner muttered. 'Time to retreat, your majesty.'

Arthur saw that it was true. His gamble had not paid off. He had led his men into their final defeat. He was useless, hopeless. He was only a boy. He cursed Merlin for dragging him into this.

The sun flashed through the clouds of smoke. Planes roared through the air above, dropping bomb after bomb. A line of tanks issued from the forest. Fluttering from their turrets was the black and white flag of Independent Brittany.

The Bretons had finally arrived. [Return to Top](#)

Brigands of the Moon

VII

"But, Miss Prince, why are you and your brother going to Ferrok-Shahn? His business—"

Even as I voiced it, I hated myself for such a question. So nimble in the humble mind that mingled with my rhapsodies of love, was my need for information of George Prince.

"Oh," she said. "This is pleasure, not business, for George." It seemed to me that a

shadow crossed her face. But it was gone in an instant, and she smiled. "We have always wanted to travel. We are alone in the world, you know—our parents died when we were children."

I filled in her pause. "You will like Mars. So many interesting things to see."

She nodded. "Yes, I understand so. Our Earth is so much the same all over, cast all in one mould."

"But a hundred or more years ago, it was not, Miss Prince. I have read how the picturesque Orient, differing from ... well, Greater New York or London, for instance—"

"Transportation did that," she interrupted eagerly. "Made everything the same—the people all look alike ... dress alike."

We discussed it. She had an alert, eager mind, childlike with its curiosity, yet strangely matured. And her manner was naïvely earnest. Yet this was no clinging vine, this Anita Prince. There was a firmness, a hint of masculine strength in her chin and in her manner.

"If I were a man, what wonders I could achieve in this marvelous age!" Her sense of humor made her laugh at herself. "Easy for a girl to say that," she added.

"You have greater wonders to achieve, Miss Prince," I said impulsively.

"Yes? What are they?" She had a very frank and level gaze, devoid of coquetry.

My heart was pounding. "The wonders of the next generation. A little son, cast in your own gentle image—"

What madness, this clumsy, brash talk! I choked it off.

But she took no offense. The dark rose-petals of her cheeks were mantled deeper red, but she laughed.

"That is true." She turned abruptly serious. "I should not laugh. The wonders of the next generation—conquering humans marching on...." Her voice trailed away. My hand went to her arm. Strange tingling something which poets call love! It burned and surged through my trembling fingers into the flesh of her forearm.

The starlight glowed in her eyes. She seemed to be gazing, not at the silver-lit deck, but away into distant reaches of the future.

Our moment. Just a breathless moment given us as we sat there with my hand burning her arm, as though we both might be seeing ourselves joined in a new individual—a little son, cast in his mother's gentle image and with the strength of his father. Our moment, and then it was over. A step sounded. I sat back. The giant gray figure of Miko came past, his great cloak swaying, with his clanking sword ornament beneath it. His bullet head, with its close-clipped hair, was hatless. He gazed at us, swaggering

past, and turned the deck corner.

Our moment was gone. Anita said conventionally, "It has been pleasant to talk with you, Mr. Haljan."

"But we'll have many more," I said. "Ten days—"

"You think we'll reach Ferrok-Shahn on schedule?"

"Yes. I think so.... As I was saying, Miss Prince, you'll enjoy Mars. A strange, aggressively forward-looking people."

An oppression seemed on her. She stirred in her chair.

"Yes they are," she said vaguely. "My brother and I know many Martians in Greater New York." She checked herself abruptly. Was she sorry she had said that? It seemed so.

Miko was coming back. He stopped this time. "Your brother would see you, Anita. He sent me to bring you to his room."

The glance he shot me had a touch of insolence. I stood up and he towered a head over me.

Anita said, "Oh yes. I'll come."

I bowed. "I will see you again, Miss Prince. I thank you for a pleasant half-hour."

The Martian led her away. Her little figure was like a child with a giant. It seemed, as they passed the length of the deck, with me staring after them, that he took her arm roughly. And that she shrank from him in fear.

And they did not go inside. As though to show me that he had merely taken her from me, he stopped at a distant deck window and stood talking to her. Once he picked her up as one would pick up a child to show it some distant object through the window.

Was Anita afraid of this Martian's wooing? Yet was held to him by some power he might have over her brother? The vagrant thought struck me. [Return to Top](#)

Witches and Barbarians

Part Four

But the two were amicable again when they and Nick found Professor Higgins in his rooms at Westchester University the next morning. The old-fashioned academic opened his door at Eloise's knock with an irritated scowl on his face.

'I'm sorry; I'm in a hurry to get to my first lecture...'

He broke off as he caught sight of his visitors, his gaze lingering on Eloise.

'What an unexpected surprise!' he said, beaming. 'Have you finally come to your senses and decided to take up my offer? Tired of sleeping out in the cold wet woods?' When they had returned to Westchester with him, he had offered to put them

up. There was plenty of room, he'd told them, his gaze returning to Eloise again and again, since his recently divorced wife had taken half the furniture. Hamish had met the attention he gave to Eloise with rather less ire than he had with Osborne.

Eloise smiled back. 'Not exactly,' she replied. 'We're hoping you could help us with some research. But if you're busy, we'll come back later.'

'Not at all, not at all,' Higgins replied, ushering them in. 'I'm glad to see at least some of your generation take an interest in the mysteries of the past. I'm sure it will do my incurious students good to realise that sitting on their posteriors is even less interesting than the archaeology of Ming Dynasty China.'

They sat down on his sofa. Nick, as ever, was trying not to laugh at Higgins' mannerisms. Hamish grinned broadly, as if at a performing animal. But Eloise's smile was as soft as her eyes as the professor offered her a water biscuit.

'Tea or coffee?' he added.

Eloise sat back on the sofa nursing a cup of coffee.

'Professor,' she said - she'd always drawn the line at calling him Jack - 'what do you know about the history of this area?'

Higgins sat down.

'Well, I'm an archaeologist of course,' he replied. 'History is not my strongest point, it's grubbing around in the soil that keeps me happy. And I'm not too familiar with the area - I moved here as a student and I've lived here ever since, but sometimes I feel something of an outsider, you know? People round here have a tendency to close ranks - especially about local history, for some curious reason. But what I've uncovered presents a pretty grim picture.'

Eloise raised an eyebrow and the professor nodded. He got up and indicated the window, which presented a view of the Tudor and Regency rooftops of central Westchester. 'You'd never have thought it, considering this beautiful town,' he went on. 'But in ancient times, this was one of the most feared cities in the land. On one occasion, Penda, the pagan king of the Mercians, ordered it to be razed to the ground for unnamed crimes committed by its citizens. A Viking shieldmaiden once agreed to sack it while working for a Christian Saxon king; the Normans ravaged the area and burnt down the cathedral; heretics were executed here in numbers rivalled only by the Spanish Inquisition; half the citizens were hanged for witchcraft during the seventeenth century...

'Throughout its history, outsiders have found some reason for slaughtering the inhabitants. But whoever took over soon found themselves being persecuted by others; as if whatever it was that offended outsiders was passed on to the citizens' successors. Of course, there doesn't seem to be much to offend the sensibilities today, although I believe the people in outlying areas still believe the strangest of things about Westchester-folk.'

Eloise nodded.

'I've heard about some of this,' she said. 'Ingunn the Red, the Viking shieldmaiden, when she attacked the city. There was something about human sacrifice...'

'Yes!' replied Higgins excitedly. 'There's always something about that. Seventeenth century records speak of a house of ill-repute supposedly used as a front for gathering victims intended for unmentionable rites. And before that, in the middle ages, there's a ballad about Guy of Warwick, which tells a similar story. The two are separated by hundreds of years and the first one is fictional while the other comes from a legal document, but both tell exactly the same story. And there's a variant on it that tells of how the city watchman used to supply witches with victims taken from

the lock-up, out-of-town people who had caused a disturbance and who no one would miss...'

The hair prickled on the back of Eloise's neck. She glanced at her two friends. They returned her look grimly. She turned to the professor.

'Well, thank you for your information,' she said coolly. 'It really has been most interesting. But I'm afraid we'd better let you get to your students now. And we have other things to do. But it has been... fascinating.'

The professor led them out, looking a little disappointed.

'Well, my dear, I hadn't realised we had so much in common,' he told her. 'Maybe we could renew the chat at some later date. I know a pleasant little restaurant in the centre of town, run by a friend of mine... Are you doing anything this Saturday evening?'

Eloise returned his gaze and patted him on the arm.

'I'm not too sure what I'll be up to,' she replied. 'But if I am free, I'd love to accompany you.'

Higgins swallowed and replied in a croak.

'That would be divine, my dear...'

Smiling, Eloise led her two companions away.

'Och, Ah wish you wouldn't be such a slut, Eloise!' Hamish growled with his usual tact and delicacy. 'Leading the auld keech on like that!'

Eloise stopped short in the middle of the street.

'Just what is your problem, Hamish Wallis?' she demanded. 'You won't let me have any life of my own! Anyone would think we were married! Well, let me tell you - we're not even going out. You're just my friend. And if you carry on like this, I don't think even that will be the case...'

'Look, hold on, hold on,' said Nick placatingly, as Hamish opened his mouth to reply in kind. 'I know the pair of you fancy the arse off each other but are too frightened to make a move, but look! We've got more important things to do.'

Eloise and Hamish stared at each other as Nick's words sank in.

'Is that true?' whispered Hamish hoarsely.

Eloise looked confused. Hamish's face fell.

'I don't know,' the girl said. 'I... don't know.'

Nick folded his arms. He sighed.

'Hey, forget I ever said anything,' he said. 'I told you, we've got other things to do. Now we know that there definitely could be something going on, like Eric reckoned, we need to know when and where.'

'That's easy,' said Eloise. 'Imbolc; Candlemas; 2nd February. And presumably in this temple you discovered.'

'Can we be sure?' asked Hamish. 'Couldn't they do it somewhere else?'

'I saw Mary before you returned to the brothel,' said Eloise, 'and I told her what we'd learnt, you know, about her headmistress being the brothel-keeper and I asked her to poke around and see what she could find out.' She glanced at her watch. 'She won't be out of lessons for half an hour,' she said thoughtfully. 'But if we head down to our camp and wait for her... She'll probably turn up.'

'If she disnae turn up, we're fucked,' Hamish said. 'Ah've just realised. Today is February 1st.'

Eloise nodded. 'What we could do before her first break,' she said, 'is take a look around the castle. It's open to the public, but they don't let people in the temple for some reason. But the rest...'

'We could suss the place out?' suggested Nick.

‘Yes,’ Eloise replied. ‘And it’ll make a nice trip, anyway. Come on.’

They got back to the woods half an hour later.

‘Informative,’ Eloise remarked. ‘We now know where Osborne will be held.’

Nick nodded as he followed her through the trees. Their visit to the castle had included a guided tour around the law-courts, which were situated within the outer bailey in a Gothic folly that Eloise had condemned as the epitome of Victorian bad taste. This had included a trip around the custody suite in which they held prisoners awaiting trial. Eloise had sneaked a look at a register and found Osborne’s name at the top; it seemed that he was to be shipped to the court the next night. Unusual procedure, Eloise had thought, especially considering the nature of his offence; it wasn’t as if he’d murdered anyone or anything. But it seemed to confirm her suspicions concerning the city fathers of Westchester.

‘You know, it’s all adding up,’ Nick said. ‘What the professor said, what the bloke at the courts said... What you found, Eloise. It all fits. But I can’t believe that a place like Westchester could be hiding this kind of thing.’

‘What about awe the other things we’ve found?’ Hamish demanded from the rear. ‘Nazi mole-people, vampires in Brighton, Christian fundamentalist psychopaths in Strathclyde... There’s awe kindsa crazy stuff gaun on right under people’s noses that no one notices. Awe kindsa weird keech...’

He broke off. They had reached the bender. Sitting outside with her back to them was Mary. She was sobbing.

‘Mary!’ called Eloise. They hurried up to her.

She turned round and stared at them. At first it looked like she was wearing Gothic eye-shadow. But then Nick realised she had two black eyes.

‘Mary, what’s happened?’ Eloise asked softly, crouching down and putting an arm round her friend’s shoulders. Mary looked up at her.

‘It was Judith,’ she sobbed. ‘The head girl!’

‘She beat you up?’ demanded Eloise. ‘Just let me get my hands on the cow! But why?’

‘I did what you asked,’ Mary replied, still sobbing. Gods, she was wet, thought Eloise ruefully. ‘I sneaked into the headmistress’s office at night and I’d just found something interesting, when Judith and two of her friends came barging in. They caught me with this big book, “A Book of Shadows”, it was called; they dragged me outside and beat me up.’

‘Fuck!’ Hamish growled. ‘You should’ve twatted the bitches.’

‘There were three of them,’ Mary replied. ‘And anyway, I can’t fight.’ She burst into tears again. ‘And when I came here and you weren’t here, I thought you’d gone and left me, Eloise!’ she wailed.

Her stomach churning with guilt, Eloise hugged the girl to her. ‘Of course we hadn’t,’ she replied. ‘We were... somewhere else.’ She didn’t think now was the time to relate their adventures with the bikers. ‘But what did you say you’d found? A Book of Shadows?’

Mary looked up, snuffling.

‘Yes, I think so. What is it?’

Eloise bit her lip. ‘It’s the name given to the book where a witch keeps records of all her rituals and findings,’ she replied. ‘It looks like your headmistress is a witch.’

‘But aren’t you a witch, Eloise?’ asked Hamish.

Eloise turned to him. ‘Yes, but I’m a white witch,’ she replied. ‘I think Miss Heath is a follower of the Dark Goddess.’

‘This Sacalasta bint,’ suggested Nick. Eloise nodded.

‘But what about the head girl?’ asked Hamish. ‘Why did she beat up poor Mary here?’

Eloise frowned. ‘You said the girls in the brothel were pretty young, didn’t you?’ she murmured.

Nick stared at her in horror.

‘You mean this cow’s prostituting her own girls?’ he asked. ‘That’s... sick!’

‘Judith and her cronies are all really chummy with Miss Heath,’ Mary said slowly. She was calmer now, though her eyes were still wet. ‘And there’s a whole lot of girls in every year who are the same.’

‘How many?’ Eloise asked urgently.

‘Eleven, twelve,’ Mary shrugged.

‘Plus Miss Heath equals thirteen!’ Eloise exclaimed. ‘That’s it! A coven! Are the girls boarders, or do they come from round here?’

‘They’re all day-girls, I think,’ Mary replied.

Eloise sprang to her feet and began to pace up and down. ‘That’s it!’ she said, excitedly. ‘The headmistress has a coven of girls and she prostitutes them - they do it willingly! They’re all locals, so they’re in on it, the Sacalasta cult! It probably goes back to the Dark Ages. And tonight is Imbolc, one of the greatest witchcraft festivals of the year. Tonight is the night they’ll sacrifice Osborne to Sacalasta!’

‘We don’t know that for certain,’ Hamish started, but Eloise turned on him.

‘It must be!’ she exclaimed. ‘Even if it isn’t, we’ve got to do something!’

‘Back to the house,’ Nick suggested. ‘Talk it over with the bikers.’

‘Right. Mary - you come with us. You’ll be safer,’ Eloise said commandingly.

‘But what about my brother?’ Mary asked. Eloise looked at her tenderly.

‘We’ll find him,’ she said reassuringly.

After Eloise had gabbled out her theory to the bikers, Eric said ‘We’ve been making some enquiries ourselves,’ ‘Last night, Thora here managed to get chatty with one of the Pigs, one of the motor-cyclists who drinks at a biker pub in town. She got him drunk and he said more than he should’ve done.’ He paused.

‘What was that?’ Eloise asked.

‘It pretty much confirms your suspicions,’ Eric replied. ‘Although there was no reference to child prostitution. He said something that suggests they’ll be shipping Osborne from the police station in the outskirts to the custody suite in the courthouse tonight, before the witching hours, he said - about half past eleven? There’s a passage that leads from there into the temple under the castle and we think they’ll take him through that to be sacrificed, at 12:00, with twelve other victims who they’ve netted during the previous year.’

Mary looked up at this and Eloise smiled at her.

‘Mark!’ she cried. Eloise leaned over and squeezed her hand.

‘But what are we gonna do?’ asked Hamish. ‘Me, Ah don’t care if they cut Osborne’s heart out and throw him to the sacred crocodiles, but we’ve got to save Mary’s brother, if they’re gonna sacrifice him.’

‘Here’s the plan,’ said Eric. He unfolded a map of the castle. ‘Here we have the courthouse and here we have the entrance to the temple. The official entrance. Here’s the Castle Sauna Massage Parlour, where we know there’s another entrance to the temple and we now know there’s a third from the cells. Here’s the access road along which comes the Group 3 security van which takes the prisoners to the custody suite. Here’s the city wall, which crosses the access road here, round the corner from the entrance to the detention area. We know that the security van will be approaching just before half eleven. What I suggest we do is get up onto the wall from the backyard,

get down to this arch, ambush the security van, rescue Osborne, then use the van as a Trojan horse to gain entry into the courthouse and try to rescue the other sacrifices.'

'Where will they be?' asked Mary.

Eric shrugged. 'I couldn't say. Maybe we'll have to enter the temple to get them.'

'How the fuck are we going to ambush a Group 3 van?' Nick asked. 'Cool fucking idea, but I don't see how we can put it into practice.'

Eric sighed. 'I'll explain,' he said.

That night, the bikers and the travellers assembled in the back yard, in the shadows of the city wall. Unlike other old towns such as Chester or York, the walls had not been rebuilt as a walkway for tourists; they were still more or less traversable, but the city council had posted 'DANGER' signs wherever it was possible to ascend.

One by one, the bikers swarmed up the crumbling walls. Once most of the bikers had all reached the top of the wall and were crouching down behind the crenellations, Eric helped Eloise follow, then Mary, then Hamish, who was lugging with him his spear, which he had brought from their camp. Then he turned to Nick.

'It's alright,' the Scouser replied. 'I may not be some kind of paramilitary pagan biker, but I can climb walls.' He took hold of a nearby outcrop and heaved himself up to the walkway. Once they were all up there, Eric scrambled up to the head of the party. From here they could see the roofs of Westchester stretching away across to the far walls of the small city; the cathedral spires rose near the centre and visible near them was the castle.

Eric pointed towards it. 'If we follow the walls round to the left, we'll reach the point where they merge with the castle walls in about five minutes.'

Eloise glanced at her watch. 11:20. That would give them five minutes to get in position.

Bert whistled to himself as he drove the van through the outskirts of Westchester. He glanced over at his mate, Rich. The tall Warwickshireman was always a morose bastard and had been even more so since Group 3 took over the privatised prison service. He seemed to worry that their protocol for prisoners was somehow immoral.

'Soon be there,' he grinned. 'Then it's back home to the wife for tea.'

'I don't have a wife,' Rich said sullenly.

'Never surprised me, that.' Bert laughed. 'You know why you don't? Cause you're so fuckin' gloomy. No woman would want a gloomy sod like you, you bring everyone down! You should be like me.' Rich gave him a sour look. 'And you've got worse,' Bert continued, 'ever since we took over the prison service. What's the matter with you?'

Rich shook his head and indicated the back of the van.

'Have you ever really looked at the conditions back there?'

Bert shrugged. 'Nah, not really. Not my job, is it? Fuckers deserve it, anyway.'

'Tiny, cramped cells, no room to move - they can't even talk to anyone! We have to open the things ourselves before they've got a chance to do anything!'

'Cost effective, though. Anyway, the fuckers shouldn't break the law.' Bert grinned. 'Shouldn't get caught, anyway,' he added slyly. He turned a corner and started to drive up the access road to Westchester Castle.

'How do we know any of them have done?' Rich demanded. 'They're not convicted yet! They could all be innocent.'

‘Nah.’ Bert laughed. ‘No one is innocent, mate - *Fuck me!*’ He broke off and jammed on the brakes. The left hand front tyre had blown, sending the van lurching forward at an ungainly angle. Rich cracked his complaining head against the door and fell silent.

Bert flung open the door and glanced down. His eyes widened.

He glanced back at Rich. ‘We’ve just run over a load of broken glass! It’s sliced open the tyres! Rich?’

Rich looked up woosily. ‘What happened?’

‘We ran over a load of broken glass. It’s burst the front tyre. Better get it blown up,’ Bert said. Suddenly, he was no longer laughing. Some fucker was going to pay for this; he’d be late getting the prisoners to the custody suite - what idiot wanted them shipped in at this time of night, anyway? There were weird in Westchester. And he’d be late getting home. Fuck!

‘Come on!’ he said and they set about getting the tyre replaced.

Eloise crouched at the edge of the parapet, Nick and Mary on one side and Hamish on the other, surrounded by bikers. They stared down at the scene.

Fifteen feet below them, the two security guards were replacing the van’s tyre. When were they going to make a move? Eloise wondered. She glanced up and caught Eric’s eye. She mouthed a question. Eric shook his head. He watched the security guards a moment longer, until they had finished replacing the tyre. Then he turned to Roald.

‘Now!’ he hissed. Roald and Eric stood up, took tire-irons from beneath their jackets and leapt over the edge.

The fight was brief. Roald and Eric landed lithely on the tarmac beside the two guards and grabbed them. One struggled, a tall, dark haired man, but his smaller, fatter, older companion made no attempt to fight as Roald cracked the tire-iron over his head. Eric despatched the taller man with less ease, but soon the two men lay unconscious by the roadside.

Eric glanced up and nodded for the others to come down. Eloise followed her friends climb down the side of the crumbling, medieval wall, feeling a little ill. No doubt the guards were heartless reactionaries, spineless lackeys of an oppressive state, but she kept away from their stunned bodies once she had reached terra firma. Mary stared around her with wide eyes and Eloise kept her close, ready to grab her if she fainted.

‘Right,’ Eric hissed. A brief search had located the keys to the van on the older man’s belt. ‘Everyone into the van except... Who will look most convincing as a guard? We want two people in the guard’s uniforms to drive the van. Everyone else will be hiding in the back.’

Hamish stepped forward.

‘Ah’m the only one with short hair,’ he growled. ‘None of you hippies will look right.’

Eric nodded. ‘And who will accompany you?’ he asked. Hamish glanced around.

‘No one else will look right,’ he said. ‘Chuck one of them in the passenger’s seat. It’ll be dark and Ah don’t think they’ll be coming round for a while. Should fool the others.’

Eloise swallowed. Quickly, Hamish stripped the taller security guard and put on his clothes. Two bikers heaved the other unconscious guard into the passenger seat.

Eric unlocked the van doors and turned to the rest.

‘In here,’ he ordered. They filed inside to squat in the cramped gangway between the rows of cells.

‘Can’t we let Osborne out?’ asked Eloise. Eric shook his head.

‘We’re late enough as it is.’ He poked his head out. ‘Hamish, lad! drive!’

Then he slammed the door shut and darkness fell inside the van.

After a couple of easy mistakes (he failed to take the clutch out and forgot all about turning the ignition key), Hamish got the van moving. Well, no one had stopped to ask him whether he could drive or not. He was the one who looked the part and the fact that back in Govan he’d never had the money to afford driving lessons was irrelevant. He’d gone on plenty of racing games in amusement arcades and done a bit of joyriding every summer. But this was serious.

The van crashed into the wall and scraped along it, then lurched back onto the road to turn a corner perfectly. Hamish jammed on the brakes with disappointment when he saw the back of the courthouse in front of him and the entrance to the detention area. As he screeched to a halt, the doors opened and two security guards came out. One of them, the most senior it seemed, walked up to the cab. Hamish rolled down the window.

‘What happened to you?’ he demanded. ‘You’re late!’

‘Oh!’ said Hamish in what he hoped sounded like an English accent. ‘Well, Ah got in a bit of a crash, dontcha know. Back in the city centre. This chap with me banged his head and has been woozy ever since, haven’t you, auld man?’ He indicated the man beside him and grinned at the security guard, who was staring at him suspiciously. ‘Well, aren’t you gaun to take ma prisoners off me, dammit?’ Hamish added. Shaking his head, the guard moved round the other side of the van.

‘They’re coming!’ hissed Eric. ‘Get ready, now....’

Eloise was petrified. They’d heard Hamish’s atrocious attempt to fool the guards; she was expecting them to burst in at any moment and tell them that the game was up. Then she heard a key in the lock. The door swung open and two security guards were startled to find themselves being borne to the floor by a gang of bikers.

These guards put up even less of a struggle. Clearly, this was an utterly unexpected event; Group 3 had given them no guidelines for how to deal with attack.

Once they were overpowered, Eric sent a division of bikers to secure the entrance, while he unlocked the cramped cells one by one. Eloise followed him down the van, wincing at the conditions the prisoners were kept in; a tiny room, not large enough to do more than stand up or crouch down. They found three other prisoners in the van before Osborne. Eric told them to get moving before the police turned up. Then they found Osborne.

‘Hey!’ he shouted. ‘All I was hoping for was bail! What did you do, mount a full scale attack? Bloody hell!’ He followed them out of the van and glanced around the courtyard.

‘The Westchester authorities have some kind of cult thing going down and we reckon they sacrifice prisoners to Sacalasta,’ Eric said succinctly. ‘You would have been one of them. Now we’re going to save the rest.’

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Carmilla

V

A Wonderful Likeness

This evening there arrived from Gratz the grave, dark-faced son of the picture cleaner, with a horse and cart laden with two large packing cases, having many pictures in each. It was a journey of ten leagues, and whenever a messenger arrived at the schloss from our little capital of Gratz, we used to crowd about him in the hall, to hear the news.

This arrival created in our secluded quarters quite a sensation. The cases remained in the hall, and the messenger was taken charge of by the servants till he had eaten his supper. Then with assistants, and armed with hammer, ripping chisel, and turnscrew, he met us in the hall, where we had assembled to witness the unpacking of the cases.

Carmilla sat looking listlessly on, while one after the other the old pictures, nearly all portraits, which had undergone the process of renovation, were brought to light. My mother was of an old Hungarian family, and most of these pictures, which were about to be restored to their places, had come to us through her.

My father had a list in his hand, from which he read, as the artist rummaged out the corresponding numbers. I don't know that the pictures were very good, but they were, undoubtedly, very old, and some of them very curious also. They had, for the most part, the merit of being now seen by me, I may say, for the first time; for the smoke and dust of time had all but obliterated them.

"There is a picture that I have not seen yet," said my father. "In one corner, at the top of it, is the name, as well as I could read, 'Marcia Karnstein,' and the date '1698'; and I am curious to see how it has turned out."

I remembered it; it was a small picture, about a foot and a half high, and nearly square, without a frame; but it was so blackened by age that I could not make it out.

The artist now produced it, with evident pride. It was quite beautiful; it was startling; it seemed to live. It was the effigy of Carmilla!

"Carmilla, dear, here is an absolute miracle. Here you are, living, smiling, ready to speak, in this picture. Isn't it beautiful, Papa? And see, even the little mole on her throat."

My father laughed, and said "Certainly it is a wonderful likeness," but he looked away, and to my surprise seemed but little struck by it, and went on talking to the picture cleaner, who was also something of an artist, and discoursed with intelligence about the portraits or other works, which his art had just brought into light and color, while I was more and more lost in wonder the more I looked at the picture.

"Will you let me hang this picture in my room, papa?" I asked.

"Certainly, dear," said he, smiling, "I'm very glad you think it so like.

It must be prettier even than I thought it, if it is."

The young lady did not acknowledge this pretty speech, did not seem to hear it. She was leaning back in her seat, her fine eyes under their long lashes gazing on me in contemplation, and she smiled in a kind of rapture.

"And now you can read quite plainly the name that is written in the corner. It is not Marcia; it looks as if it was done in gold. The name is Mircalla, Countess Karnstein, and this is a little coronet over and underneath A.D. 1698. I am descended from the

Karnsteins; that is, mamma was."

"Ah!" said the lady, languidly, "so am I, I think, a very long descent, very ancient. Are there any Karnsteins living now?"

"None who bear the name, I believe. The family were ruined, I believe, in some civil wars, long ago, but the ruins of the castle are only about three miles away."

"How interesting!" she said, languidly. "But see what beautiful moonlight!" She glanced through the hall door, which stood a little open. "Suppose you take a little ramble round the court, and look down at the road and river."

"It is so like the night you came to us," I said.

She sighed; smiling.

She rose, and each with her arm about the other's waist, we walked out upon the pavement.

In silence, slowly we walked down to the drawbridge, where the beautiful landscape opened before us.

"And so you were thinking of the night I came here?" she almost whispered.

"Are you glad I came?"

"Delighted, dear Carmilla," I answered.

"And you asked for the picture you think like me, to hang in your room," she murmured with a sigh, as she drew her arm closer about my waist, and let her pretty head sink upon my shoulder. "How romantic you are, Carmilla," I said. "Whenever you tell me your story, it will be made up chiefly of some one great romance."

She kissed me silently.

"I am sure, Carmilla, you have been in love; that there is, at this moment, an affair of the heart going on."

"I have been in love with no one, and never shall," she whispered, "unless it should be with you."

How beautiful she looked in the moonlight!

Shy and strange was the look with which she quickly hid her face in my neck and hair, with tumultuous sighs, that seemed almost to sob, and pressed in mine a hand that trembled.

Her soft cheek was glowing against mine. "Darling, darling," she murmured, "I live in you; and you would die for me, I love you so."

I started from her.

She was gazing on me with eyes from which all fire, all meaning had flown, and a face colorless and apathetic.

"Is there a chill in the air, dear?" she said drowsily. "I almost shiver; have I been dreaming? Let us come in. Come; come; come in."

"You look ill, Carmilla; a little faint. You certainly must take some wine," I said.

"Yes. I will. I'm better now. I shall be quite well in a few minutes. Yes, do give me a little wine," answered Carmilla, as we approached the door.

"Let us look again for a moment; it is the last time, perhaps, I shall see the moonlight with you."

"How do you feel now, dear Carmilla? Are you really better?" I asked.

I was beginning to take alarm, lest she should have been stricken with the strange epidemic that they said had invaded the country about us.

"Papa would be grieved beyond measure," I added, "if he thought you were ever so little ill, without immediately letting us know. We have a very skilful doctor near us, the physician who was with papa today."

"I'm sure he is. I know how kind you all are; but, dear child, I am quite well again. There is nothing ever wrong with me, but a little weakness. People say I am languid; I am incapable of exertion; I can scarcely walk as far as a child of three years old: and every now and then the little strength I have falters, and I become as you have just seen me. But after all I am very easily set up again; in a moment I am perfectly myself. See how I have recovered."

So, indeed, she had; and she and I talked a great deal, and very animated she was; and the remainder of that evening passed without any recurrence of what I called her infatuations. I mean her crazy talk and looks, which embarrassed, and even frightened me.

But there occurred that night an event which gave my thoughts quite a new turn, and seemed to startle even Carmilla's languid nature into momentary energy.

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