

Schlock! webzine

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**Issue 1, Volume 10**

**11 June 2011**

Schlock! is an exciting new weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels and novellas within the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of schlock fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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**Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, reviews and art. Feel free to submit fiction, articles, art or links to your own site to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk).**

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The logo for Schlock! Publishing features the text "Schlock! Publishing" in a bold, black, serif font. The text is set against a solid red rectangular background. The exclamation mark in "Schlock!" is notably large and stylized.

## This Edition

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

[Babbage Must Die - Part Four](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - Brian is startled to encounter a computer in the nineteenth century...

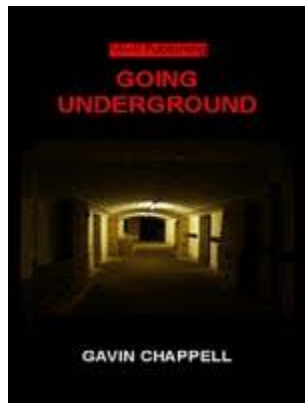
[The Dark Place : Part One](#) by [James Talbot](#) - boy meets girl, little suspecting what horrors await them both.

[Super Duper : Part Seven](#) by [James Rhodes](#) - a needlessly pedantic policeman and the possibility of Monster Munch.

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

[The Pendragon Inheritance : Chapter Three](#) by Rex Mundy - Lord Lothian expresses his disapproval.

**Schlock! Classic Serial:** [Brigands of the Moon \(Part 4\)](#) by [Ray Cummings](#) - *Miko, absorbed in attacking his meal, inadvertently pushed back his robe to bare his forearm. An instant only, then it dropped to his wrist. But in that instant I had seen, upon the gray flesh, a thin sear turned red. A very recent burn—as though a pencil ray of heat had caught his arm.*



[Witches and Barbarians - Part One](#) by [Gavin Chappell](#) - the three runaways investigate the murky truth behind Westchester's Middle England facade. *Sixth in the [Going Underground](#) series.*

**Schlock! Classic Serial:** [Carmilla - Part Two](#) by J. Sheridan LeFanu - a mysterious tragedy near the schloss...

# Babbage Must Die

## Chapter Four

Brian and Ada stood beneath the wormhole projector. Brian stared up at it in trepidation. It was glowing brightly and throbbing. Percy flicked a switch and suddenly the light was impossibly bright, burning into Brian's brain. Everything around him seemed to shimmer and distort and he felt his temples throb and his blood pound and his stomach lurch as everything seemed to shimmer in a monochrome kaleidoscope. He hadn't felt this bad since dropping acid when he was a youngster. Gradually, helplessly, he fainted.

He awoke in darkness. His head was throbbing, his tongue was dry, and there was a strange coppery smell in his nostrils. For a while, he lay there listening to a distant groaning sound. Eventually he realised that it was him.

'Who's that?' came Ada's voice.

'Ada?' he said. 'What happened? Are we still in the cellar? What's happened to the light?'

'You were right about not planning this through,' Ada said, chagrined. 'Have you got a light?'

Brian had only ever really smoked dope, and he'd given up on it years ago. Still, he carried a Zippo about with him because he thought it made him look cool. He scrabbled in his frock coat pockets, into which he had transferred his belongings, and his fingers closed on the cold smooth metal of the lighter.

He took it out and flicked it on. A long wavering flame illuminated the bare walls of the cellar. Ada was lying on the floor beside him, looking at him groggily.

Brian looked about him. 'Where's Percy?' he asked. 'What's happened to all his junk?'

Ada sighed deeply, and pushed herself up into a sitting position.

'Isn't it obvious?' she asked. 'We made it.'

Brian couldn't understand what she was saying. It was something to do with the booming sound in his head and the fact that he wanted to throw up. 'Made what?' he croaked.

Ada gestured around her. 'Welcome to 1812, Brian,' she said.

Against his better judgement, Brian sat up. The room seemed to sway around him as he did so. He leant against the nearby wall and put his hands to his head.

'1812?' he asked. 'We're where we were before. It's just Percy's vamoosed and taken

all his gadgets with him.'

Ada shook her head. She got up, dusted off her gown and went over to the door.

'We're in 1812, Brian,' she said dogmatically, and tried the door handle. It turned out that the door was locked. Brian got up and joined her, looking about him in bafflement.

'I wonder who lives in your house, if we *are* in 1812,' he said. He lifted his lighter higher and scanned the cellar, noticing a few piles of junk in the corners. 'Something else you didn't think about,' he added. 'How do we get out of here? Don't you reckon people will be a bit surprised to find us in their cellar?'

Ada gave him a panicked look. 'We've got to get out of here,' she said, and rattled the doorknob. Brian put his hand on hers.

'Don't do that,' he said. 'You'll attract attention.'

'I want to attract attention,' she said. 'I want to get out of here. We've got to get out of here, track down Babbage and assassinate him and then get back here for this time next year.'

'We've got to get back here as well as get out?' Brian asked.

'Yes, if we want to get back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century,' Ada replied. 'Percy will reopen the wormhole at that point. Weren't you listening?'

'Look, love,' said Brian, 'we're going to have problems getting out of here. We'll have even more trouble getting back in. Even if we can get out, I don't reckon that whoever owns this house will be too chuffed to find us trying to get back in his cellar a year later. Why did Percy have to set up the time machine in a cellar anyway?'

'You're supposed to be the burglar,' Ada said. 'Can't you get us in and out of here? Security systems must be a lot simpler in the early nineteenth century.'

'Hold this,' said Brian, handing her his lighter. 'Careful, it's getting hot,' he said. 'And it might be an idea to see if you can't find some candles or something. The fuel won't last much longer.' Already the flame was beginning to flicker.

He crouched down and looked at the keyhole, while Ada went rooting in the piles of junk. As far as he could see, it was an old fashioned lock, pre-Yale kind of thing. Not that he was any kind of locksmith, but he was pretty sure he could pick it, given a piece of wire.

'See if you can find some wire over there, while you're at it,' he added. Quite what they'd do once they got through the door was another matter, but at least this problem had a solution. He didn't fancy their chances once they'd got past the door. Then things would get a lot more complicated....

Ada couldn't find any candles, but she managed to rig up a lantern with a small dish,

some of the remaining lighter fluid and a wick made from a piece of cloth. She also found a piece of rusty wire, which Brian inspected with some misgivings before poking into the lock and feeling around.

‘I might be some time,’ he said, kneeling at the door and probing the keyhole inexpertly. Ada held her lamp up and waited patiently.

A quarter of an hour later, the wick of the lantern fizzed out and the cellar went black. Brian was sweating despite the cellar’s cold and he had got no closer to picking the lock.

‘Here, let me try,’ Ada said impatiently, pushing him to one side and snatching the wire from his hand. But as she did so, Brian heard footsteps from the other side of the door, as if someone was coming down the steps. Then voices, and a line of flickering light appeared at the bottom of the door. Then a key scraped in the lock and the door was flung open.

Ada and Brian stood in the light of a candle lantern held by a tall, ruddy-faced man wearing dark breeches and a baggy white shirt. Behind him was a younger man whose face held a family resemblance, and a third man in shabby clothes. On the faces of all three men were expressions of shock and bewilderment.

‘You were right, son!’ the ruddy-faced man exclaimed. ‘Not rats, indeed! A dandy, and a bluestocking! What be you doing in my cellar, sir?’

Brian felt his mouth flopped open. It would be difficult enough to explain under normal circumstances, but he doubted people in 1812 had even heard of time machines. He looked to Ada for help.

She stepped forward coolly.

‘I realise that our presence must seem incongruous, but there is an explanation. My colleague and I are on a mission of vital importance for the future of the universe...’

Brian groaned. She wasn’t going to tell the truth, was she? But the ruddy-faced man interrupted suddenly.

‘French!’ he shouted. ‘French spies! Talking their own dirty lingo in my cellar! Call the constable!’ The shabbily-clad man turned and raced up the steps.

‘I assure you, we are not French,’ Ada began. ‘I am speaking English...’

‘You must be spies,’ the younger man said. ‘Why else are you in our cellar?’

‘Oh, come on!’ Brian said. ‘Where’s the logic in that? Why should we be spies, just because we’re in your cellar?’

‘Well, what are you, if you’re not spies?’ the older man demanded. ‘Why are you in my cellar, speaking French, if you’re not spies?’

‘Ada wasn’t speaking French,’ Brian explained. ‘She just talks like that. What comes of having a proper education.’

‘Oh, she’s an educated miss, is she?’ the ruddy-faced man said, looking suspiciously at her. ‘I thought she looked like a bluestocking. In the pay of the French, then.’

‘Look,’ Brian said, ‘I promise you we’re nothing to do with the French. I’m sorry we turned up in your cellar; we won’t do it again, well, not for a few months anyway. Why don’t you just let us go and we won’t trouble you again. Well, not for a while...’

There was a clatter from the cellar steps and Brian looked up to see the shabby man returning with another man who wore a tall hat and carried a long pole in one hand. He swaggered up to Brian and Ada.

‘I’m the parish constable,’ he announced. ‘Benjamin Pagnell’s the name. What are you doing trespassing in Oates’s cellar? How did you get in here?’

‘The explanation would only perplex you, officer,’ Ada told him. He drew back and looked at the ruddy-faced man, Oates, presumably.

Oates nodded meaningfully. ‘Young lady’s been talking French like that since we found them. This overdressed dandy chap speaks English, but speaks it funny though.’

‘You can talk!’ Brian said.

‘Now now,’ said the constable. ‘I hope we won’t be getting any trouble from you, young fellow. You’d better come quietly down to the lockup. The magistrate can decide what to do about you in the morning, what to do about both of you.’ He grabbed Brian’s arm. Brian gagged at the smell of unwashed body overlaid with cheap scent that emanated from the man.

Brian shook him off and stepped back. ‘Bloody pigs!’ he shouted. ‘Get your hands off me!’

Ada turned to him. ‘Brian, I think we should do what they say. The magistrate will be more intelligent than these yokels. We can explain the situation to him and then he’ll let us go.’

Brian stared at her incredulously. Then he looked round the cellar and regarded the single exit, where four men were now clustered, all eager to drag them out. Really, there wasn’t much he could do.

‘Alright officer,’ he said. ‘It’s a fair cop.’

With the aid of Oates, his son, and the man Brian assumed was a servant, the constable dragged them out of the cellar, up the steps, through a dark, grubby, smoky, candle-lit house that Brian hardly recognised as Ada’s place, where women and children stared at them in horror, then out into the road.

It was night, just as it had been in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But the tarmac had vanished from the road and it looked like a farm track, packed earth scarred with wheel tracks. Very few of the houses that had been there in the future were standing, and something Brian found even stranger, there were no trees. Oates and his household helped the constable hustle them down the track in the direction of where the supermarket would be in Brian's day. A strange bell-shaped building not much bigger than a bus shelter stood against the wall on the left hand side. There was a heavy oak door in it, and as they approached, Constable Pagnell took out a huge ring of keys. After propping his staff against the wall, he put one in the lock and opened the door.

Something stirred within, and Pagnell shouted, 'Stay in there! Not time for you to leave, my fine gentleman. We've got some guests for you. French spies!'

He turned to Brian and Ada and jerked his head towards the interior of the lockup. 'In,' he barked.

Brian and Ada entered the small space, and Pagnell slammed the door behind them. Seconds later, Brian heard the key in the lock.

'Who's that?' came a frightened voice, and someone moved in the darkness. Brian gagged at the smell. Pagnell and the others had all been pretty pungent, but they'd worn some kind of scent to mask it. This guy just stank. 'French spies?'

'We're not French spies,' Brian said tiredly. 'We're English, same as you. Why's everyone got a problem with the French all of a sudden?'

'Brian,' said Ada testily. 'We're in the middle of the Napoleonic Wars.' Even now, she couldn't resist the chance to lecture him. 'England is at war with France.'

'Everyone knows we're at war with the French,' said their companions. 'Where've you been, not to know that? We've been fighting the French as long as I can remember, apart from a few truces.'

'Okay, okay,' Brian said sulkily. 'I didn't do well in history at school.'

He heard their companion moving again, and the man's face came into the dim light that fell from the doorway. Long and thin, clean shaven; it was the face of a man in his early thirties.

'Who are you?' the man asked.

Brian introduced himself and Ada. 'Who are you, then?' he asked. 'And what are you in here for?'

'My name is Will Yates,' the man replied. 'I'm afraid I'm in here for vagrancy. I lost my job and I've been looking for another position. But there aren't any jobs to be found.'

'I know how you feel, mate,' Brian told him gloomily.



‘Why are you two in here?’ Will asked.

Brian looked at Ada. ‘It’s difficult to explain,’ he said.

‘We’re from the future,’ Ada said. ‘We’ve travelled back in time to save the human race from destruction.’

‘From the future?’ Will laughed. ‘You’re from the future? How is that possible? Why have you come here, then?’

‘In our time,’ Brian explained, ‘no one can find a job. Unemployment is worse than it is in your time. Machines have put everyone out of work. Ada here reckons it was back in your time that it all started.’

Will looked searchingly at them both. ‘Machines have put everyone out of work?’ he said. ‘You sound like my brother-in-law. Are you a Luddite?’

Brian grinned. ‘Yeah, you could say so,’ he replied. ‘I hate computers.’

Will’s face fell. He looked confused. ‘What’s that got to do with it?’ he asked. ‘I thought you hated machines. What do you have against computers?’

Brian could see he had offended the man. He remembered they were back in the past, before computers had been invented. Did the word have some other meaning in 1812?

‘Sorry, mate,’ he said. ‘Have I said something wrong?’

Will shrugged. ‘It’s just that... I’m a computer,’ he said.

Brian stared at him in utter confusion.

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# The Dark Place

## Chapter 1

*I gave you my heart & remembering hurts so much  
Now I don't know how I'll survive living alone*

Isobel Stevens was an antique dealer with shops in Liverpool and Chester. She dealt almost exclusively in Victorian and Georgian artefacts and was an expert in the field. Dr Martin Davies was a paediatrician at Alder Hey Children's Hospital and was one of the hospital's rising stars. They met in a crowded Liverpool bar on a Friday night.

Both had been out with groups of people they felt they had little in common with and both hoped the night would be over soon. Martin had seen Isobel as soon as he walked into the bar, but conceded later that she was hard to miss. At five feet ten in her bare feet, with her heels on she was well over six feet tall and was easy to spot. At six feet two, Martin easily made eye contact with Isobel and smiled at her as he made his way through the crowded bar.

Standing with his back to the wall and a pint of lager in his hand Martin was trying to listen to the joke that his friend Steve Jones was telling. He had just about given up trying when Steve obviously reached the punch line as the rest of the group began laughing. Martin laughed along although he had no idea what the joke had been about, let alone the punchline. As the laughter died down and people started talking loudly amongst themselves again Martin glanced over toward the bar just in time to catch Isobel looking at him.

She smiled and Martin thought, 'What the hell! I may as well go and say hello.'

He excused himself from the group and managed to weave his way over to where Isobel was standing. She too was on the edge of the group of people she was with and seemed to be taking only a small part in the conversation.

'Hello,' said Martin, extending his hand towards Isobel. 'My name's Martin. Can I buy you a drink?'

'Hello Martin,' said Isobel taking his hand. 'I'm Isobel.'

Martin felt a little jolt run up his arm as he shook hands with Isobel and he wondered if she had also felt it. Her fingers were long and cool with red painted fingernails, and Martin noticed that she was not wearing any rings.

'A handshake's a very formal way to introduce yourself, Martin,' said Isobel, smiling. Martin had to lean closer to Isobel to hear what she was saying and as he did, he caught a brief hint of her perfume, which he found intoxicating.

'I may be from Liverpool but my Dad always insisted we had good manners, and I suppose it just rubbed off,' replied Martin.

'I wasn't being critical,' said Isobel. 'It made a nice change from alright love, how's it

going,' she teased, putting on a strong Liverpool accent.

Martin went to the bar to get a glass of wine for Isobel and a bottle of water for himself. After three pints over the last hour and a half, he felt he'd had enough. He returned with the drinks only to find Isobel had disappeared. He was hugely disappointed wondering what he had said wrong and where she had gone. As Martin looked forlornly around the bar, Isobel appeared at his side and her slender hand closed over his wrist.

'Looking for me? I had to go and powder my nose,' said Isobel as she took the glass of wine Martin offered her.

An hour later, they were still deep in conversation and both groups of friends they had been with had left for other bars. Martin looked at his watch and couldn't believe the time was 1.15am. He motioned to Isobel to look at the time on his watch and they both laughed.

'I suppose I had better be getting home,' said Isobel. 'I've got a shop to open and an inventory of some new stock to do tomorrow.'

'Do you want to share a cab?' asked Martin.

They were both going in the same direction; Martin had a modest detached house in West Derby while Isobel, on the other hand, lived in a large detached house in the more exclusive suburb of Sandfield Park. They managed to hail a passing cab as they walked along Castle Street and Martin asked the taxi driver to go to Isobel's address first. Isobel protested that they should stop at Martin's house first as it was on the way but Martin insisted.

As they drove into Sandfield Park Martin was wondering how some people could afford to live in such big houses in Liverpool. At the junction between South Drive and Central Drive Isobel asked the taxi driver to stop. She pushed her business card into Martin's hand along with a £5 note and said, 'Call me soon,' then gave Martin a quick peck on the cheek, jumped out of the taxi and disappeared into the darkness. There was no time for Martin to protest about the money, Isobel had vanished.

'Where to now, mate?' asked the driver.

'Haymans Green,' replied Martin.

'Just off Mill Lane?' asked the driver.

'Yeah, that's right,' said Martin.

Ten minutes later Martin was opening his front door and walking into his house thinking about the nights events. He glanced absently at the card Isobel had pushed into his hand as she left the taxi Isobel Stevens; Dealer in Fine arts & Antiques, (Branches in Liverpool & Chester) said the legend on the card. Martin put the card on the kitchen table as he made his way into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. A large blue grey Persian cat jumped off the chair and rubbed itself round Martin's ankles,

purring loudly.

‘Hello Spook,’ said Martin to the cat. ‘You hungry?’ The cat meowed loudly and regarded him with its bright amber coloured eyes. ‘I’ll take that as a yes then,’ said Martin as he took a pouch of cat food out of the cupboard and emptied it into the cat’s dish. As Spook was contentedly eating his food Martin was stirring his coffee while staring absently into space and wondering when would be the best time to phone Isobel.

The next day, being Saturday, meant Martin had the day off. He was up reasonably early given the fact that it had been quite a late night. The phone rang at lunchtime and it was Martin’s friend Steve Jones.

‘Hello, lover boy,’ said Steve. ‘What time did you get home?’

‘Oh, I was in by about two,’ said Martin.

‘That was a good looking woman you were chatting up last night. Did you take her home?’ asked Steve suggestively.

‘I dropped her off in Sandfield Park and came home, you filthy minded bugger,’ laughed Martin.

‘Sandfield Park,’ said Steve whistling appreciatively. ‘She’s got some money then? Or her family, or her husband.’

Steve left the last comment hanging and Martin thought to himself that Steve could be right. Neither Martin nor Isobel had asked each other what their marital status was and even though she hadn’t been wearing any rings perhaps Isobel was married.

‘Well, she gave me her card and asked me to call her soon so she’s unlikely to do that if she’s married is she? You never know,’ said Steve. ‘Are you going to call her?’

‘I was going to give her a ring later. She said she was working today so I thought I might call her later this afternoon and ask her if she’d like to go out for a drink or something.’

‘Well don’t leave it too long,’ said Steve. ‘Women that good looking don’t come along that often you know.’

‘I’ll give her a call later,’ said Martin. ‘What are you up to today anyway?’

‘Jess has gone into Liverpool One to do some shopping with her Mum,’ replied Steve ‘so I’m going to tidy the garden and then probably make something for tea. If you don’t arrange anything with your mystery woman.’

‘Her name’s Isobel,’ interrupted Martin.

‘If you don’t arrange anything with Isobel,’ said Steve, laughing, ‘give us a ring, you could come over here for a bite to eat and a glass of wine.’

‘I can look after myself you know, Steve,’ said Martin.

‘I know,’ replied Steve, ‘but that’s what mates are for.’

‘Ok, I might give you a call later, but don’t hold your breath,’ said Martin. They said their goodbyes and Martin sat in the lounge watching the television, wondering if he should call Isobel.

A few hours later Martin woke up with Spook sitting on his chest and licking his cheek. Martin looked quizzically at the cat.

‘Phew, your breath stinks, cat,’ he said. Spook meowed in agreement and carried on licking Martin’s face. Martin caught Spook under the belly as he sat up and placed the cat gently on the floor. Spook immediately started purring and rubbing himself round Martin’s ankles. ‘I’ll feed you in a minute,’ said Martin as he looked at his watch and realised that it was now nearly four o’clock in the afternoon. ‘I must have been more tired than I realised,’ thought Martin to himself. Martin walked into the kitchen with Spook running in front of him towards the cupboard where the cat knew its food was kept. As Martin walked past the table Isobel’s card caught his eye, ‘I’ll call her in a minute,’ he thought.

Martin fed Spook and went back into lounge carrying Isobel’s card. ‘Oh well, here goes,’ he thought as he picked up the phone and keyed in the numbers.

The phone rang a couple of times then a woman’s voice answered, ‘Hello, Steven’s antiques, Karen speaking. How can I help you?’

‘Hello,’ said Martin ‘can I speak to Isobel Stevens?’

‘I’m afraid she’s just nipped out,’ replied Karen. ‘Can I take a message?’

Martin was disappointed and found the feeling very strange considering he’d only met Isobel last night. ‘Can you tell her Martin called, please?’

‘Certainly,’ said Karen. ‘has she got your number?’ Martin gave Karen his number before ending the call and wandering into the kitchen with the vague thought that he might make a cup of coffee.

Half an hour later Martin was sitting in the lounge. An untouched cup of barely warm coffee was on the low table in front of him. The TV was on but he had muted the sound. On the screen, the Child Catcher in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang was prowling round the city square before searching the toy makers shop looking for children. Martin glanced over at the screen and thought to himself how the Child Catcher looked like a spider in human form. He shivered at the thought of being captured by such a thing. In his imagination, he saw the Child Catcher hanging his bound child captives by their feet so he could feed on them at his leisure.

Martin forced his thoughts away from such macabre imagery and tried to think about what he was going to say to Isobel. ‘If she bothers to call, that is,’ he thought to

himself. At that moment, the phone rang startling Martin with its shrill insistence.

‘Hello,’ said Martin hoping it would be Isobel.

‘Hi Martin, it’s Isobel,’ said the familiar voice. ‘Sorry I was out when you called. I’d just nipped over to the florists to get some flowers for the house.’ Martin suddenly imagined Isobel walking towards him naked but with a large bouquet of white lilies cupped in her arms.

‘Hello Martin, are you there?’ said Isobel.

‘Hi Isobel,’ said Martin. ‘Sorry I was just thinking about something.’

‘Well I hope it was something nice,’ said Isobel.

‘I was just wondering if you’d like to go out and get something to eat tonight or maybe just go for a drink’ replied Martin.

‘I’m sorry, Martin, but I’ve already got plans for tonight,’ said Isobel. ‘I’ve got to meet one of my suppliers who has some pieces he thinks I might be interested in and tonight’s the only night he’s going to be in the area.’

Martin tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice as he replied ‘Oh well, never mind. maybe we could make it another time?’

‘I’m not doing anything tomorrow,’ said Isobel. ‘We could go for a walk round the shops in town in the afternoon and then have an early evening meal, if you like?’

Martin felt his mood suddenly lifting as he said, ‘That would be great. Where do you want to meet? Or shall I pick you up?’

Isobel was quiet for a couple of seconds and then said, ‘How about picking me up about one?’

‘Alright,’ said Martin ‘where do I pick you up from?’

‘Number 6 Central Drive,’ said Isobel.

As he replaced the cordless phone in its holder, Martin was filled with anticipation about the next day. He had butterflies in his stomach and the feeling felt as though he was going up and down in a very fast elevator. He’d never felt like this about a woman before and wondered why it was so different this time.

Martin’s previous relationships had all been relatively short, ‘Except for Jane,’ Martin corrected himself. Martin had met Jane just before he finished Medical School and she was studying for a PhD in contemporary literature. They’d met in the Gilmore Bar, one of Liverpool University’s ‘on campus’ bars and had gone out with each other for nearly four years. That had all ended just over three years ago when Martin had ‘cold feet’ over their impending marriage.

'I never felt like this with Jane or anyone else,' thought Martin. 'I wonder what's so different.'

At 32 years old, Martin was beginning to think he'd never meet anyone with whom he wanted to settle down. He was financially secure, he had his own home and was reasonably good looking; at least he hoped he was. Martin decided he didn't want to be on his own that night and needed some company. He called Steve and asked if it was ok if he came round that evening.

'Sure,' said Steve. 'come round about eight. We can have something to eat and a glass or two of wine.'

After he had spoken to Steve, Martin had gone out to the local supermarket and bought a decent bottle of wine and some flowers for Jess. Martin left his house at seven thirty and managed to hail a passing taxi about ten minutes later. At £12 the taxi to Aigburth hadn't been as expensive as he thought it was going to be and he knew it was better than taking the chance of drinking and driving. At just after eight Martin rang the doorbell at Steve's house. Jess answered the door and threw her arms around Martin before giving him a kiss. 'Hello stranger,' she said. 'Come in.'

'These are for you,' said Martin handing the flowers to Jess. 'They're lovely,' said Jess as she guided him into the kitchen.

As Martin walked into the kitchen, Steve shouted, 'Hello,' over his shoulder as he turned to lower the volume on the iPod that was playing in the corner. Steve came over to Martin with his hand outstretched. 'All right, mate,' he said, grasping Martin's hand firmly.

'Hi Steve,' Martin replied. 'What are you cooking?'

'Spaghetti Bolognese,' replied Steve. 'The meat's done. I just need to do the pasta.'

'Sounds great,' said Martin, handing Steve the bottle of wine. Steve laughed as he took the wine from Martin.

'Great minds think alike,' said Steve holding up an open bottle of the same wine Martin had brought.

Jess came into the kitchen with a large glass vase and the flowers Martin had brought.

'Look at these, Ste,' she said. 'Aren't they lovely?'

Without waiting for a reply, she unwrapped the flowers then separated them before cutting the bottom couple of inches off each stem. She then removed most of the lower leaves and after filling the vase, half-full with water she added the flower feed, which was attached to the wrapping and started to arrange the flowers in the vase.

'There! Don't they look lovely?' she said to the two men as she took the vase of flowers into the dining room. Steve poured a couple of glasses of wine and handed one to Martin. 'Let's go and sit down for five minutes before I cook the spaghetti,'

suggested Steve. Martin followed Steve into the next room where Jess was placing the vase on a large oak sideboard. Her back was toward Martin and Steve as they came into the dining room. Martin noticed he could see the outline of a thong underneath Jess's black dress. It rose above the curve of her bottom as she leant over the sideboard. Martin looked quickly away wondering just what was wrong with him, why was he noticing things like that. He'd known Steve and Jess for years and had never before had a thought about Jess in a sexual way, she was a mate. Martin and Steve continued through the dining room and into the large comfortable lounge

Martin was still struggling with his conscience and an image of Jess leaning over the sideboard in just a thong and wearing high heels that had popped into his mind when he noticed the outline of her underwear. 'You all right mate?' asked Steve. 'Oh yeah, I'm fine,' said Martin. 'Cheers,' he said clinking glasses with Steve before sitting down. 'So no Isobel tonight then?' enquired Steve smiling. 'We're going out to have a look at the shops and then have an early evening meal tomorrow,' replied Martin. 'That's good news,' said Steve. 'Hey babe,' he called through to Jess in the other room. 'Martin's taking that stunning girl he met last night out for a meal tomorrow.'

'Well, Martin Davies,' said Jess coming into the lounge with a glass of wine in her hand, 'I hope this one lasts longer than some of the others have.' She sat in a large arm chair opposite Martin and Steve before lifting her glass towards them both. 'cheers' she said and sipped her wine. They chatted for a little while then Steve went into the kitchen to cook the pasta.

'So what's she like then?' enquired Jess. 'I only met her last night,' said Martin defensively, 'so I don't really know. She's an antique dealer and according to her card she's got shops in Liverpool and Chester.'

'Steve tells me she lives in Sandfield Park, so she must have some money,' continued Jess. 'I suppose so,' said Martin. 'or her parents,' said Jess laughing. 'I never got round to asking her anything like that,' said Martin. 'we talked for ages about all kinds of stuff like books and music. We just seemed to have loads in common and the time just got away from us.'

'Steve told me they left you talking to a gorgeous, tall girl,' said Jess. 'He said there was no way you were leaving with them when they went on to another bar.'

'I suppose he was right,' said Martin smiling. 'I didn't want to go to another bar; I was enjoying myself where I was.' Just then, Steve called through from the dining room. 'Ok, the food's ready.'

The food was lovely and Martin, Steve and Jess sat at the table for well over three hours chatting and drinking wine. Martin looked at his watch and said, 'That was a great meal, Steve, but it's nearly eleven thirty. I suppose I'd better be going, otherwise I'll be waiting ages for a cab.'

'You can stay if you want,' said Jess but Martin insisted he had to get home.

'I've got to feed the cat as well,' he said. Steve phoned for a cab and fifteen minutes later Martin was heading through the outskirts of the city centre on the way to West



Derby. He'd said his good byes to Steve and Jess and they'd made him promise to let them know how the day with Isobel turned out.

Steve closed the front door and he and Jess made their way back into the lounge.

'He seems really excited about meeting Isobel tomorrow,' said Jess.

'It's been a while since he was seeing anybody so let's hope they hit it off,' replied Steve. 'Do you want another glass of wine or would you like a coffee?'

'I think I'd like a brandy,' Jess replied. 'and it's gone a bit chilly so I'm going to light the fire.'

'Ok babe,' said Steve as he went to get a brandy for Jess. As he poured the dark brown brandy into the glass, Steve thought, 'I'll have some of that myself.' Steve walked back into the lounge with the two drinks. Jess had turned the lights in the lounge off, removed her dress and was standing silhouetted in the light of the gas fire. As Steve came into the room, Jess moved towards him and circled her arms around his neck as she kissed him passionately on the mouth. Jess slowly brought the kiss to an end. As their lips parted, she moved away from Steve, took both of the glasses, and put them on the coffee table. Turning back towards Steve she gently pushed him backwards towards the settee. As the back of Steve's legs reached the edge of the settee, he was forced to sit down and this brought his face level with Jess's crotch. Jess pushed her hips forward and slowly moved her hands over her belly and inside her thong giving a low moan as her fingers found her labia. Steve slid his hands up the back of Jess's legs and slowly pulled her thong over her hips and down her legs until it lay like a puddle of darkness on the floor. Steve quickly loosened his jeans and pushed them to the floor and Jess stepped onto the settee before slowly lowering herself onto Steve's erect penis.

'Is that better?' asked Steve.

'Its lovely,' replied Jess throatily as she began to move up and down.

Martin arrived home just after twelve and decided to treat himself to a nightcap. 'I've probably had more than enough to drink this weekend,' he thought, 'but what the hell, I feel like a nice glass of whiskey.' Martin went into the kitchen to be greeted by a floor full of black feathers and the headless body of a blackbird. Spook jumped down from his chair and started rubbing himself round Martin's ankles, purring loudly. 'Shit,' thought Martin. 'Just what I need.'

'I suppose you think you're clever,' Martin admonished Spook, who sat looking at Martin before turning away and walking over to his bowl where he sat looking expectantly at Martin. 'You'll have to wait, you bloody nuisance,' said Martin as he began to clean up the mess. Twenty minutes later Martin finished disinfecting the kitchen floor and drying it. The body of the blackbird, along with all its feathers had been wrapped tightly in a plastic bag before being consigned to the rubbish bin. 'I hope it doesn't smell too bad,' thought Martin knowing that it would be nearly another two weeks before the bin was emptied again. Martin went back into the house and put a packet of food in Spooks dish. 'You're a bad cat' Martin said as he

scratched Spook between the ears, Spook was too busy eating and just purred.

Martin poured himself a glass of whiskey, went into the lounge, and sat down. He flicked the CD player on and the music of The Blue Nile began playing. The swirling synthesisers and chiming guitars married with the beautifully melodic voice of Paul Buchanan filled the room and Martin turned up the volume. As the 'Downtown Lights' built towards the crescendo Martin closed his eyes and drifted with the music. Almost without him realising it the CD was nearly at its end. The final track on the CD was 'Saturday Night' and Martin smiled to himself as he listened to the lyrics. The parts about an ordinary girl making the world seem alright on a Saturday night struck a chord with him. As the CD finished Martin checked his watch. It was after one in the morning. 'I think it's time I was in bed,' he thought to himself. 'I'll just finish this nightcap and then I'll go,' Martin re-assured himself.

Martin sipped his whiskey and wondered at the way his imagination had been working all day. He thought about the way he'd imagined Isobel walking towards him naked and clutching a bouquet of lilies and then the image of Jess bending over the sideboard with her high heels on and wearing only a thong. 'I must be overloaded with testosterone,' thought Martin to himself and he began to smile as he tried to remember the last time he had sex with a woman. After thinking about it he realised it was over ten months ago following a drunken Christmas party. The party had been a raucous affair with medical staff, both doctors and nurses, drinking and dancing until the early hours. It was in a house belonging to a group of doctors and somehow Martin had ended up in a bedroom with one of the female doctors who lived in the house. The sex had been satisfying and both of them had made all the right noises during it. Martin had managed to slip away an hour or so later, he didn't want an embarrassing scene the next day and it turned out to be the right thing to do. The woman was engaged to one of the other male doctors who shared the house who happened to be working that night. When Martin found this out a week or so later he realised it could have caused some serious problems and he resolved not to get involved with work colleagues again.

Martin finished his whiskey and made his way upstairs to the bedroom. He'd invested some time and money into decorating his house on the premise that he might as well be comfortable and have things the way he wanted them. Downstairs had been done in relaxing pastel colours and the bedrooms had something that Jess had described as 'hotel chic' to them. The master bedroom had rice paper coloured walls, a real wood floor and a large oriental style sliding door wardrobe all along one wall. The light coloured walls and wooden floors in the bedrooms were contrasted with dark bedside tables and picture frames. Martin went into his bedroom, through into the en-suite and turned on the shower. He hung up his jeans and threw his shirt and underclothes into the washing basket. Half an hour later after showering and drying himself Martin was laying in the king sized bed staring at the ceiling. His felt like his mind was in overdrive and sleep seemed far away.

Martin woke at nine thirty in the morning feeling rested and wondered just when sleep had overtaken him. He swung his legs out of bed and as he stood up he looked down at his erection.

'Well,' thought Martin, 'at least it still works.' He put on his thick cotton bathrobe

and went downstairs into the kitchen half-expecting Spook to have repeated last night's blackbird execution. Thankfully, the kitchen was devoid of feathers and Spook was still curled up on his chair. 'Morning, Spook,' said Martin as he raised the blinds before filling the kettle and switching it on to boil. Spook opened one eye and looked at Martin before closing it and going back to sleep. 'Obviously not hungry' thought Martin as he made himself some tea and toast. As he sat in the kitchen, eating his toast Martin thought about the day ahead. He wondered what type of food Isobel liked and where he should take her. 'I suppose somewhere reasonably close to the shops would be best,' he thought. 'maybe we could go to the Japanese place behind James Street.' Martin got the yellow pages from the cupboard and searched under restaurants. After finding the number for Etsu Martin gave them a call and was pleasantly surprised when someone answered the phone even though it was only just after ten o'clock in the morning. The restaurant opened at four so he reserved a table for five thirty. Martin finished his tea and toast and stacked the dishes in the dishwasher. He did think about washing them but decided he may as well wait until the dishwasher was full and do all the dishes at once.

Martin went into the lounge and read the Sunday paper until eleven thirty before going upstairs to get ready; once again, he had butterflies in his stomach as he thought about seeing Isobel. Martin shaved and showered before dressing in slightly faded blue jeans, a crisp light blue cotton shirt and brown loafers. Taking his leather jacket from the coat stand Martin went out to the garage to get his car. As he climbed into the Mercedes SLK roadster, he couldn't help but smile. The car always made him happy and was one of his most prized possessions, and was, apart from his house, his most extravagant purchase. The 2 litre turbo charged engine purred into life and Martin eased the car out of the double garage and onto the drive.

At just before one pm Martin stopped the car outside number 6 Central Drive and whistled appreciatively as he looked at the house. It was an imposing Georgian house situated in its own grounds behind a high wrought iron fence. As Martin drove towards the large gate it opened silently and he proceeded up the drive towards the front of the house. The gravel crunched under the car's tyres as he stopped outside the large front door. As he was getting out of the car, the front door opened and Isobel came out of the house. She was wearing a long elegant grey coat, which was unfastened. Beneath the coat, Isobel wore a black 'V' neck jumper beneath which Martin could see the lace of a white vest top. A wide belt was fastened around Isobel's waist, she also wore blue jeans, black high heel shoes, and her dark hair was tied back in a ponytail. Martin thought she looked lovely and as Isobel walked over to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek, he thought the butterflies in his stomach must have been doing some extreme aerial acrobatics. 'Hi Martin,' said Isobel squeezing his hand.

'Hi,' said Martin 'you look lovely.'

'Thank you,' replied Isobel, smiling. 'are you always so gallant?'

'Only with beautiful women,' laughed Martin as he walked round the car to open the passenger door. Isobel got into the car and as Martin slid in behind the wheel, she said, 'This is a nice car.'

'I like it,' said Martin fastening his seat belt and then turning the ignition key. The car moved smoothly away from the house and around the short circular drive. Isobel pointed a small electronic sender towards the gate, which had closed behind Martin as he came up the drive. The gate opened and as they moved out onto Central Drive closed soundlessly behind them.

'How did you know that was me coming up the drive?' asked Martin as they drove towards the town centre.

'I wasn't expecting anyone else,' replied Isobel, 'and when I saw the car stop outside, then drive towards the gate I just assumed it was you.' Martin glanced over at Isobel and was struck by just how beautiful she was. She had only a small amount of make up on which emphasised her high cheekbones and almost classical features. Isobel turned and smiled and as Martin looked at her striking green eyes, the butterflies once again began turning barrel rolls in his stomach

Martin parked the car in the multi story car park attached to the John Lewis store in Liverpool's new multi-million pound flagship shopping development 'Liverpool-One' They left the car and strolled through the car park and into the warm interior of the shop.

'What do you want to look at first?' Martin asked.

'Oh I thought I might get a new pair of jeans and maybe some shoes. I need some more clothes for work, as well,' Isobel replied.

'That reminds me,' said Martin, 'how did the meeting go last night? Did you get any new pieces from the dealer you were meeting?'

Isobel looked thoughtful before replying. 'He had some really interesting pieces which he'd brought from central Europe. Some of them I didn't bother with but I took one or two pieces of stock from him. I don't know if I plan to sell them just yet though, I think they will look nice in my house. They're being delivered next week so I'll decide what I'm going to do with them when I see them properly.'

'So you didn't physically see them last night then?' asked Martin.

'No, they were too big. So it was via a laptop and some photographs' replied Isobel

Martin and Isobel spent the afternoon happily chatting and wandering round the various shops in the complex. Isobel bought black jeans and a pair of comfortable looking shoes, which she said, would be good for work. She also bought two grey skirts a white blouse and a fitted black jacket, which she also planned to wear for work. Martin, on the other hand, only bought a couple of CD's and a pair of jeans. They'd chatted about what food they liked and Isobel had been delighted with Martin's choice of Japanese for their evening meal. As they left the shops and walked up Lord Street Isobel stopped and turned towards Martin. She put her arms around his shoulders and pulled him close before kissing him gently on the lips 'thank you for a lovely afternoon' she said as she moved away from Martin. As they continued, up Lord Street then turned right, and began walked along Castle Street Isobel slipped her

hand into Martin's and they continued hand in hand until they reached the restaurant.

The meal was wonderfully tasty and both Martin and Isobel had really enjoyed the food. They'd had a mixture of Ohitashi, rolled spinach, Niku Gyoza, pork and vegetable dumplings to start and Maguro, fresh tuna loin with a teriyaki sauce and rice for the main course. They were sipping their Asahi beers and chatting while they waited for their coffee to arrive. Isobel asked Martin what he had done the previous night.

'I just went to visit some friends and we had a nice meal and a couple of glasses of wine,' Martin replied. 'Then when I got home I had to clean up the kitchen as the cat had brought a trophy home for me.'

Isobel grimaced as Martin recounted what Spook had done.

'Sounds lovely,' Isobel said, laughing, 'but he does sound like a real character. Have you had him long?'

Martin thought for a while and then said, 'You know, I've had him for nearly five years. I didn't realise it had been that long.' Martin and Jane had bought Spook between them but when the relationship had ended, Jane hadn't wanted Spook so he had stayed with Martin. 'He's into his thirties now, in cat years of course,' said Martin 'but I suppose he's got an easy life hasn't he, all he does all day is sleep then eats something and goes back to sleep again.' Martin and Isobel finished their coffees and Martin paid the bill. Isobel had tried to get Martin to let her pay half but Martin insisted on paying.

They left the restaurant and Isobel's hand found Martin's as they walked back to the car. It felt so natural to him to be strolling hand in hand with her even though he had only met her two nights ago. When they got back to the car, Martin unlocked it with the remote and opened the door for Isobel. As he turned to face her, he looked into her eyes and the next second they were kissing. After a few seconds they parted but remained close holding hands, Martin leant forward and kissed Isobel gently on the lips and neither said a word as they parted and got into the car. Martin turned towards Isobel but before he could speak, she placed her index finger on his lips.

'You don't need to apologise Martin,' she said, 'if that's what you were going to do. If I hadn't wanted to kiss you I wouldn't have done.'

Martin looked at Isobel and said, 'I wasn't going to apologise, I was just going to say thank you for a perfect day.'

Isobel took hold of Martin's hand and squeezed it before replying.

'I've had a lovely day today, Martin,' she said. 'It's been so nice just being with you.'

Neither of them said much as they drove out of the city centre towards West Derby and Sandfield Park. Their route took them past the Grafton Ball Rooms and the Imperial tobacco factory before passing through Tuebrook and heading towards Queens Drive. They turned into Sandfield Park and all too soon, Martin was stopping

the car outside Isobel's house. Martin opened the car door for Isobel before retrieving her shopping from the boot. They walked up the steps to Isobel's front door where they turned to face each other. Isobel put her arms round Martin and pulled him close. Martin was still holding Isobel's shopping bags and he awkwardly put his arms round her as they kissed. Slowly they parted and Isobel took her key from her handbag and opened the front door before taking the shopping bags from Martin.

'So, Martin,' began Isobel. 'Will I see you again after today?'

'Of course,' said Martin. 'If you want to of course' he added hopefully.

'I'd really like that,' said Isobel smiling.

'How about the cinema or something next week?' said Martin. 'I've got to cover some late shifts till Wednesday but we could do something on Thursday or Friday night if you want.'

'That would be great,' said Isobel. 'will you call me?'

'Yes,' said Martin as he cupped Isobel's face in his hands and kissed her gently. 'I'll give you a ring on Wednesday night when I get home but it may not be before ten pm. Will that be too late?'

'I'll look forward to that,' said Isobel. They kissed again before Martin got into his car and drove back down the drive towards the gate. Isobel opened the gate with the electronic key and watched Martin drive away. The gate closed soundlessly and Isobel turned and went into the house.

Isobel hung up her coat, went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of red wine. She sipped the wine then decided to have a shower and sit and relax for an hour or so before she went to bed. Leaving the glass of wine in the lounge Isobel went upstairs to her bedroom. She switched on the lights, went through into the en-suite bathroom, and turned the shower on before she started to take off her clothes. Isobel caught sight of herself in the large mirror as she took off her jeans and examined herself critically. As she stood there in her matching maroon coloured bra and panties, she thought she looked pretty good. Isobel removed her bra and cupped her breasts as she looked at herself in the mirror and struck what she thought was a provocative pose before laughing.

'I'll never make a model,' Isobel thought as she pulled off her panties and stepped into the shower. As the warm water ran over her body Isobel thought about the day she had spent with Martin.

'I wonder how long he'll want to see me for,' she thought to herself as she washed. Ten minutes later Isobel was wrapped in her cotton bath robe and sitting curled on the sofa in front of a warming gas fire sipping her wine. The radio was playing quietly in the background and Isobel had to concentrate to hear the song that she was listening to. As she focussed her hearing the lyrics of the song seemed to crystallise in her head. She too had wished for someone to be in her life forever and have no thought of leaving. The song was sung by a woman and the vocals were haunting and full of

passion. The song brought tears to Isobel's eyes and she wondered at the emotions that must have gone into writing such a song.

Martin parked the car in the garage before making his way into his house. He felt like he was walking on air and all his senses seemed to be heightened. As he hung up his coat, he could hear Spook meowing loudly in the kitchen. Looking at his watch Martin realised it was after eight o'clock and Spook hadn't eaten since the morning. Martin opened the door to the kitchen and Spook looked at him with an air of injured pride. The cats amber eyes regarded Martin disdainfully as he apologised for the lack of food during the day. Martin put food in Spooks dish before making himself a coffee and walking through to the lounge. He sat down, sipped his coffee, and wondered how Isobel was feeling right now. As he was staring at the ceiling, the telephone rang. Martin was thinking about ignoring it but answered it anyway.

'Hello' he said as he held the phone to his ear.

'Hello Martin,' said Isobel 'I just wanted to say goodnight.' They chatted for nearly an hour before saying goodnight.

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# Super Duper

## Chapter Seven

The face at the window that beamed with anticipation made it very difficult for the two friends to discuss any plan of action. Hit by sudden inspiration, Smith thought he'd try his luck; he waved a finger mysteriously at the policeman.

"Walton Dale is a trading company," Smith calmly declared. He waved his finger again. "You can go about your business, move along."

"Can you two gentlemen accompany me to my car, whilst I radio in your details."

"It's OK officer, we're coming," The Don was trying to sound more than usually rational to make up for Smith.

They went without complaining to the side of the police car, as they got closer to the car they could not pretend to ignore the second police officer, slumped forward in his seat.

"Is your friend OK?"

"He's been a little sleepy, that's all."

The second that Smith opened the back door of the car the smell hit them. It was so strong that even The Don, who had been surrounded by foul scents for the greater bulk of the day, was forced to take a step backwards.

"He's not, sleepy officer, he's either dead or dying."

"The condition of PC Summers is no concern of yours, and as long as he's on duty he'll remain in the car with me."

"Have you done nothing to help him?"

"I am the only officer on duty."

"And you're wasting time on bureaucracy, whilst this man rots away in your car." The Don gestured to the rows and rows of corpse filled vehicles. "Do you honestly think any of these people are going to bother filing charges if our vehicle strikes them?"

"If you don't get in the car I'll charge you with refusing to co-operate."

"You should take care of your friend first," The Don's voice dropped its usual academic tone. "Then we'll come with you."

"Get in the car," screamed the police man.

The Don started to walk backwards. He extended both his arms to indicate that he didn't intend to start any trouble and to keep Smith safely behind him. The policeman unbuttoned his baton, and swung towards the side of The Don's head. The Don slipped backwards and the blow just grazed the tip of his nose. The policeman tried again, this time aiming for The Don's kneecap. The Don lifted his leg to block the blow and the baton cracked grazed his shin. Without a thought, he front-kicked the policeman hard in the stomach, his foot sinking deep in to the doughy shell that puffed out from underneath the stab jacket. The policeman sank to his knees, and the second they touched the ground, The Don followed up with a roundhouse off his back leg that shook the man's entire frame. He sank to the ground. He wasn't unconscious but neither was he in any particular hurry to get back up again.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry," said The Don, "that just really hurt."

The policeman leant his back against his car for support.

"Walton Dale is a trading insurer," he said. "You can go about your business, move along."



The hard shoulder remained clear for another five miles or so but then the sporadic occurrence of cars draped across their path became rather denser until they finally sprawled out as far as the eye could see, bumper to bumper, just like the rest of the motorway. Reluctantly, the two friends abandoned The Don's mother's car and continued on foot. The only available walking space on the motorway was the ditch at the side of the hard shoulder, which just allowed them to make their way single file.

The abandoned cars were rather more daunting on foot. Having to see every face up close was too much for either of them to bear and so they fixed their eyes on the road ahead, thanking the traffic flow for facing the bodies with their backs to them.

Smith was managing to keep his complaints to a minimum as he didn't think The Don would be in any mood to hear any of them, but he tabulated them in his mind to revisit in anecdotal form at a later time. *We walked so far*, he thought to himself, *that I began to imagine I was a...* he struggled to think of anything witty to follow it up with. *Ah well*, he reflected. *I've plenty of time to think about it as I walk.* He was very glad that The Don couldn't see him smiling to himself. He tried singing a sad song in his head to keep his face straight. It was a bleak tune from the early nineties when music was at its bleakest, but it did little to dampen his spirits.

*Why the fuck am I so happy?* Smith mused. *I've never been happy before and now that I actually have plenty of stuff to be sad about I feel like I've always imagined everyone else to feel. There's no explaining me. Hey; I'm a wonder.*

Then he noticed something else that made him happy. It was a sign reading: NEXT SERVICES 1 MILE.

He pointed it out to The Don.

"How cool is that? I hope the arcades and Johnny machines are still working."

"As long as there's some form of savoury produce comprised almost entirely of dehydrogenated fats, I'll be content with the place."

"Don't forget novelty crisps either, over-flavoured ones."

"I can't believe that's actually making me feel hungry."

The Don actually turned around and smiled. Everything was perfect; there was an optimistic chance of Monster Munch.

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# Varney the Vampire

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

MR. MARCHDALE'S EXCULPATION OF HIMSELF.—THE SEARCH THROUGH THE GARDENS.—THE SPOT OF THE DEADLY STRUGGLE.—THE MYSTERIOUS PAPER.

It was, perhaps, very natural that, with her feelings towards Charles Holland, Flora should shrink from every one who seemed to be of a directly contrary impression, and when Mr. Marchdale now spoke, she showed but little inclination to hear what he had to say in explanation.

The genuine and unaffected manner, however, in which he spoke, could not but have its effect upon her, and she found herself compelled to listen, as well as, to a great extent, approve of the sentiments that fell from his lips.

“Flora,” he said, “I beg that you will here, in the presence of your mother, give me a patient hearing. You fancy that, because I cannot join so glibly as the admiral in believing that these letters are forgeries, I must be your enemy.”

“Those letters,” said Flora, “were not written by Charles Holland.”

“That is your opinion.”

“It is more than an opinion. He could not write them.”

“Well, then, of course, if I felt inclined, which Heaven alone knows I do not, I could not hope successfully to argue against such a conviction. But I do not wish to do so. All I want to impress upon you is, that I am not to be blamed for doubting his innocence; and, at the same time, I wish to assure you that no one in this house would feel more exquisite satisfaction than I in seeing it established.”

“I thank you for so much,” said Flora; “but as, to my mind, his innocence has never

been doubted, it needs to me no establishing.”

“Very good. You believe these letters forgeries?”

“I do.”

“And that the disappearance of Charles Holland is enforced, and not of his own free will?”

“I do.”

“Then you may rely upon my unremitting exertions night and day to find him and any suggestion you can make, which is likely to aid in the search, shall, I pledge myself, be fully carried out.”

“I thank you, Mr. Marchdale.”

“My dear,” said the mother, “rely on Mr. Marchdale.”

“I will rely on any one who believe Charles Holland innocent of writing those odious letters, mother—I rely upon the admiral. He will aid me heart and hand.”

“And so will Mr. Marchdale.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“And yet doubt it, Flora,” said Marchdale, dejectedly. “I am very sorry that such should be the case; I will not, however, trouble you any further, nor, give me leave to

assure you, will I relax in my honest endeavours to clear up this mystery.”

So saying, Mr. Marchdale bowed, and left the room, apparently more vexed than he cared to express at the misconstruction which had been put upon his conduct and motives. He at once sought Henry and the admiral, to whom he expressed his most earnest desire to aid in attempting to unravel the mysterious circumstances which had occurred.

“This strongly-expressed opinion of Flora,” he remarked, “is of course amply sufficient to induce us to pause before we say one word more that shall in any way sound like a condemnation of Mr. Holland. Heaven forbid that I should.”

“No,” said the admiral; “don’t.”

“I do not intend.”

“I would not advise anybody.”

“Sir, if you use that as a threat—”

“A threat?”

“Yes; I must say, it sounded marvellously like one.”

“Oh, dear, no—quite a mistake. I consider that every man has a fair right to the enjoyment of his opinion. All I have to remark is, that I shall, after what has occurred, feel myself called upon to fight anybody who says those letters were written by my nephew.”

“Indeed, sir!”

“Ah, indeed.”

“You will permit me to say such is a strange mode of allowing every one the free enjoyment of his opinion.”

“Not at all.”

“Whatever pains and penalties may be the result, Admiral Bell, of differing with so infallible authority as yourself, I shall do so whenever my judgment induces me.”

“You will?”

“Indeed I will.”

“Very good. You know the consequences.”

“As to fighting you, I should refuse to do so.”

“Refuse?”

“Yes; most certainly.”

“Upon what ground?”

“Upon the ground that you were a madman.”

“Come,” now interposed Henry, “let me hope that, for my sake as well as for Flora’s, this dispute will proceed no further.”

“I have not courted it,” said Marchdale. “I have much temper, but I am not a stick or a stone.”

“D——e, if I don’t think,” said the admiral, “you are a bit of both.”

“Mr. Henry Bannerworth,” said Marchdale, “I am your guest, and but for the duty I feel in assisting in the search for Mr. Charles Holland, I should at once leave your house.”

“You need not trouble yourself on my account,” said the admiral; “if I find no clue to him in the neighbourhood for two or three days, I shall be off myself.”

“I am going,” said Henry, rising, “to search the garden and adjoining meadows; if you two gentlemen choose to come with me, I shall of course be happy of your company; if, however, you prefer remaining here to wrangle, you can do so.”

This had the effect, at all events, of putting a stop to the dispute for the present, and both the admiral and Mr. Marchdale accompanied Henry on his search. That search was commenced immediately under the balcony of Charles Holland’s window, from which the admiral had seen him emerge.

There was nothing particular found there, or in the garden. Admiral Bell pointed out accurately the route he had seen Charles take across the grass plot just before he himself left his chamber to seek Henry.

Accordingly, this route was now taken, and it led to a low part of the garden wall,

which any one of ordinary vigour could easily have surmounted.

“My impression is,” said the admiral, “that he got over here.”

“The ivy appears to be disturbed,” remarked Henry.

“Suppose we mark the spot, and then go round to it on the outer side?” suggested George.

This was agreed to; for, although the young man might have chosen rather to clamber over the wall than go round, it was doubtful if the old admiral could accomplish such a feat.

The distance round, however, was not great, and as they had cast over the wall a handful of flowers from the garden to mark the precise spot, it was easily discoverable.

The moment they reached it, they were panic-stricken by the appearances which it presented. The grass was for some yards round about completely trodden up, and converted into mud. There were deep indentations of feet-marks in all directions, and such abundance of evidence that some most desperate struggle had recently taken place there, that the most sceptical person in the world could not have entertained any doubt upon the subject.

Henry was the first to break the silence with which they each regarded the broken ground.

“This is conclusive to my mind,” he said, with a deep sigh. “Here has poor Charles been attacked.”

“God keep him!” exclaimed Marchdale, “and pardon me my doubts—I am now

convinced.”

The old admiral gazed about him like one distracted. Suddenly he cried—

“They have murdered him. Some fiends in the shape of men have murdered him, and Heaven only knows for what.”

“It seems but too probable,” said Henry. “Let us endeavour to trace the footsteps. Oh! Flora, Flora, what terrible news this will be to you.”

“A horrible supposition comes across my mind,” said George. “What if he met the vampyre?”

“It may have been so,” said Marchdale, with a shudder. “It is a point which we should endeavour to ascertain, and I think we may do so.”

“How!”

“By some inquiry as to whether Sir Francis Varney was from home at midnight last night.”

“True; that might be done.”

“The question, suddenly put to one of his servants, would, most probably, be answered as a thing of course.”

“It would.”



“Then that shall be decided upon. And now, my friends, since you have some of you thought me luke-warm in this business, I pledge myself that, should it be ascertained that Varney was from home at midnight last evening, I will defy him personally, and meet him hand to hand.”

“Nay, nay,” said Henry, “leave that course to younger hands.”

“Why so?”

“It more befits me to be his challenger.”

“No, Henry. You are differently situated to what I am.”

“How so?”

“Remember, that I am in the world a lone man; without ties or connexions. If I lose my life, I compromise no one by my death; but you have a mother and a bereaved sister to look to who will deserve your care.”

“Hilloa,” cried the admiral, “what’s this?”

“What?” cried each, eagerly, and they pressed forward to where the admiral was stooping to the ground to pick up something which was nearly completely trodden into the grass.

He with some difficulty raised it. It was a small slip of paper, on which was some writing, but it was so much covered with mud as not to be legible.

“If this be washed,” said Henry, “I think we shall be able to read it clearly.”

“We can soon try that experiment,” said George. “And as the footsteps, by some mysterious means, show themselves nowhere else but in this one particular spot, any further pursuit of inquiry about here appears useless.”

“Then we will return to the house,” said Henry, “and wash the mud from this paper.”

“There is one important point,” remarked Marchdale, “which it appears to me we have all overlooked.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes.”

“What may that be?”

“It is this. Is any one here sufficiently acquainted with the handwriting of Mr. Charles Holland to come to an opinion upon the letters?”

“I have some letters from him,” said Henry, “which we received while on the continent, and I dare say Flora has likewise.”

“Then they should be compared with the alleged forgeries.”

“I know his handwriting well,” said the admiral. “The letters bear so strong a resemblance to it that they would deceive anybody.”

“Then you may depend,” remarked Henry, “some most deep-laid and desperate plot is

going on.”

“I begin,” added Marchdale, “to dread that such must be the case. What say you to claiming the assistance of the authorities, as well as offering a large reward for any information regarding Mr. Charles Holland?”

“No plan shall be left untried, you may depend.”

They had now reached the house, and Henry having procured some clean water, carefully washed the paper which had been found among the trodden grass. When freed from the mixture of clay and mud which had obscured it, they made out the following words,—

“—it be so well. At the next full moon seek a convenient spot, and it can be done. The signature is, to my apprehension, perfect. The money which I hold, in my opinion, is much more in amount than you imagine, must be ours; and as for—”

Here the paper was torn across, and no further words were visible upon it.

Mystery seemed now to be accumulating upon mystery; each one, as it showed itself darkly, seeming to bear some remote relation to what preceded it; and yet only confusing it the more.

That this apparent scrap of a letter had dropped from some one’s pocket during the fearful struggle, of which there were such ample evidences, was extremely probable; but what it related to, by whom it was written, or by whom dropped, were unfathomable mysteries.

In fact, no one could give an opinion upon these matters at all; and after a further series of conjectures, it could only be decided, that unimportant as the scrap of paper appeared now to be, it should be preserved, in case it should, as there was a dim possibility that it might become a connecting link in some chain of evidence at another time.

“And here we are,” said Henry, “completely at fault, and knowing not what to do.”

“Well, it is a hard case,” said the admiral, “that, with all the will in the world to be up and doing something, we are lying here like a fleet of ships in a calm, as idle as possible.”

“You perceive we have no evidence to connect Sir Francis Varney with this affair, either nearly or remotely,” said Marchdale.

“Certainly not,” replied Henry.

“But yet, I hope you will not lose sight of the suggestion I proposed, to the effect of ascertaining if he were from home last night.”

“But how is that to be carried out?”

“Boldly.”

“How boldly?”

“By going at once, I should advise, to his house, and asking the first one of his domestics you may happen to see.”

“I will go over,” cried George; “on such occasions as these one cannot act upon ceremony.”

He seized his hat, and without waiting for a word from any one approving or

condemning his going, off he went.

“If,” said Henry, “we find that Varney has nothing to do with the matter, we are completely at fault.”

“Completely,” echoed Marchdale.

“In that case, admiral, I think we ought to defer to your feelings upon the subject, and do whatever you suggest should be done.”

“I shall offer a hundred pounds reward to any one who can and will bring any news of Charles.”

“A hundred pounds is too much,” said Marchdale.

“Not at all; and while I am about it, since the amount is made a subject of discussion, I shall make it two hundred, and that may benefit some rascal who is not so well paid for keeping the secret as I will pay him for disclosing it.”

“Perhaps you are right,” said Marchdale.

“I know I am, as I always am.”

Marchdale could not forbear a smile at the opinionated old man, who thought no one’s opinion upon any subject at all equal to his own; but he made no remark, and only waited, as did Henry, with evident anxiety for the return of George.

The distance was not great, and George certainly performed his errand quickly, for he was back in less time than they had thought he could return in. The moment he came

into the room, he said, without waiting for any inquiry to be made of him,—

“We are at fault again. I am assured that Sir Francis Varney never stirred from home after eight o’clock last evening.”

“D—n it, then,” said the admiral, “let us give the devil his due. He could not have had any hand in this business.”

“Certainly not.”

“From whom, George, did you get your information?” asked Henry, in a desponding tone.

“From, first of all, one of his servants, whom I met away from the house, and then from one whom I saw at the house.”

“There can be no mistake, then?”

“Certainly none. The servants answered me at once, and so frankly that I cannot doubt it.”

The door of the room was slowly opened, and Flora came in. She looked almost the shadow of what she had been but a few weeks before. She was beautiful, but she almost realised the poet’s description of one who had suffered much, and was sinking into an early grave, the victim of a broken heart:—

“She was more beautiful than death,

And yet as sad to look upon.”

Her face was of a marble paleness, and as she clasped her hands, and glanced from face to face, to see if she could gather hope and consolation from the expression of any one, she might have been taken for some exquisite statue of despair.

“Have you found him?” she said. Have you found Charles?”

“Flora, Flora,” said Henry, as he approached her.

“Nay, answer me; have you found him? You went to seek him. Dead or alive, have you found him?”

“We have not, Flora.”

“Then I must seek him myself. None will search for him as I will search; I must myself seek him. ‘Tis true affection that can alone be successful in such a search.”

“Believe me, dear Flora, that all has been done which the shortness of the time that has elapsed would permit. Further measures will now immediately be taken. Rest assured, dear sister, that all will be done that the utmost zeal can suggest.”

“They have killed him! they have killed him!” she said, mournfully. “Oh, God, they have killed him! I am not now mad, but the time will come when I must surely be maddened. The vampyre has killed Charles Holland—the dreadful vampyre!”

“Nay, now, Flora, this is frenzy.”

“Because he loved me has he been destroyed. I know it, I know it. The vampyre has doomed me to destruction. I am lost, and all who loved me will be involved in one common ruin on my account. Leave me all of you to perish. If, for iniquities done in our family, some one must suffer to appease the divine vengeance, let that one be me, and only me.”

“Hush, sister, hush!” cried Henry. “I expected not this from you. The expressions you use are not your expressions. I know you better. There is abundance of divine mercy, but no divine vengeance. Be calm, I pray you.”

“Calm! calm!”

“Yes. Make an exertion of that intellect we all know you to possess. It is too common a thing with human nature, when misfortune overtakes it, to imagine that such a state of things is specially arranged. We quarrel with Providence because it does not interfere with some special miracle in our favour; forgetting that, being denizens of this earth, and members of a great social system; We must be subject occasionally to the accidents which will disturb its efficient working.”

“Oh, brother, brother!” she exclaimed, as she dropped into a seat, “you have never loved.”

“Indeed!”

“No; you have never felt what it was to hold your being upon the breath of another. You can reason calmly, because you cannot know the extent of feeling you are vainly endeavouring to combat.”

“Flora, you do me less than justice. All I wish to impress upon your mind is, that you are not in any way picked out by Providence to be specially unhappy—that there is no perversion of nature on your account.”

“Call you that hideous vampyre form that haunts me no perversion of ordinary nature?”

“What is is natural,” said Marchdale.



“Cold reasoning to one who suffers as I suffer. I cannot argue with you; I can only know that I am most unhappy—most miserable.”

“But that will pass away, sister, and the sun of your happiness may smile again.”

“Oh, if I could but hope!”

“And wherefore should you deprive yourself of that poorest privilege of the most unhappy?”

“Because my heart tells me to despair.”

“Tell it you won’t, then,” cried Admiral Bell. “If you had been at sea as long as I have, Miss Bannerworth, you would never despair of anything at all.”

“Providence guarded you,” said Marchdale.

“Yes, that’s true enough, I dare say, I was in a storm once off Cape Ushant, and it was only through Providence, and cutting away the mainmast myself, that we succeeded in getting into port.”

“You have one hope,” said Marchdale to Flora, as he looked in her wan face.

“One hope?”

“Yes. Recollect you have one hope.”

“What is that?”

“You think that, by removing from this place, you may find that peace which is here denied you.”

“No, no, no.”

“Indeed. I thought that such was your firm conviction.”

“It was; but circumstances have altered.”

“How?”

“Charles Holland has disappeared here, and here must I remain to seek for him.”

“True he may have disappeared here,” remarked Marchdale; “and yet that may be no argument for supposing him still here.”

“Where, then, is he?”

“God knows how rejoiced I should be if I were able to answer your question. I must seek him, dead or alive! I must see him yet before I bid adieu to this world, which has now lost all its charms for me.”

“Do not despair,” said Henry; “I will go to the town now at once, to make known our suspicions that he has met with some foul play. I will set every means in operation that I possibly can to discover him. Mr. Chillingworth will aid me, too; and I hope that not many days will elapse, Flora, before some intelligence of a most satisfactory

nature shall be brought to you on Charles Holland's account."

"Go, go, brother; go at once."

"I go now at once."

"Shall I accompany you?" said Marchdale.

"No. Remain here to keep watch over Flora's safety while I am gone; I can alone do all that can be done."

"And don't forget to offer the two hundred pounds reward," said the admiral, "to any one who can bring us news of Charles, on which we can rely."

"I will not."

"Surely—surely something must result from that," said Flora, as she looked in the admiral's face, as if to gather encouragement in her dawning hopes from its expression.

"Of course it will, my dear," he said. "Don't you be downhearted; you and I are of one mind in this affair, and of one mind we will keep. We won't give up our opinions for anybody."

"Our opinions," she said, "of the honour and honesty of Charles Holland. That is what we will adhere to."

"Of course we will."

“Ah, sir, it joys me, even in the midst of this, my affliction, to find one at least who is determined to do him full justice. We cannot find such contradictions in nature as that a mind, full of noble impulses, should stoop to such a sudden act of selfishness as those letters would attribute to Charles Holland. It cannot—cannot be.”

“You are right, my dear. And now, Master Henry, you be off, will you, if you please.”

“I am off now. Farewell, Flora, for a brief space.”

“Farewell, brother; and Heaven speed you on your errand.”

“Amen to that,” cried the admiral; “and now, my dear, if you have got half an hour to spare, just tuck your arm under mine, and take a walk with me in the garden, for I want to say something to you.”

“Most willingly,” said Flora.

“I would not advise you to stray far from the house, Miss Bannerworth,” said Marchdale.

“Nobody asked you for advice,” said the admiral. “D——e, do you want to make out that I ain’t capable of taking care of her?”

“No, no; but—”

“Oh, nonsense! Come along, my dear; and if all the vampyres and odd fish that were ever created were to come across our path, we would settle them somehow or another. Come along, and don’t listen to anybody’s croaking.”

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# The Pendragon Inheritance

## Chapter Three: Lords Spiritual and Temporal

The old man smiled.

‘Yes, it is I,’ he said. He smiled at Archbishop Brice, gave Arthur a cursory examination, and turned to confront Lot.

‘Where’s your faith, Lord Protector?’ he asked. ‘By a miracle, this lad drew the sword from the stone. You couldn’t do it. Neither could the rest of the Lords. Face the facts, Lot. Your power, such as it was, is over.’

Lot’s eyes narrowed, and his face went crimson. He turned to face the Lords.

‘Are we to listen to some crazy academic?’ he demanded. ‘No doubt this conjuror worked out the whole trick with his accomplice, this poor lad.’ Arthur realised Lot was indicating him. ‘We don’t need some New Age quack to tell us who rules the country. I am Lord Protector, until the succession is legally worked out. Lawyers have been debating this for years. Will Professor Merlin Sylvester decide it by a magic trick...?’

‘Oh, come on, Lot,’ one of the Lords cried, a man younger than his peers, though balding and hard-faced. ‘We all know the country needs a leader. Your reign has achieved nothing. I say this lad is a better bet than you and your cronies.’

‘That’s Leodegrance, Lord Cameliard,’ Ector muttered. ‘At least someone supports you, Arthur.’

‘We’ve run this country without a king well enough,’ said a lord with a Welsh accent. ‘Do we need another king?’

‘You’ve run it to your own satisfaction,’ said Leodegrance. ‘To your own profit. Yet the country is lawless, full of armed robbers and bandits. We need a government. Parliament hasn’t been called in years. We need a king to call it. Only a general election and a firm hand will save us from the mess we’re in; crime within, and invasions from outside.’

Lot shook his head. ‘Politicians brought the heathen into our land,’ he sneered. ‘Now you want to see a teenager as king? He’ll be your puppet!’

‘Or Merlin’s,’ said Lord Urien quietly.

At his name, Merlin, who had apparently been dozing through the debate, looked up.

‘Have we finished?’ he demanded, his quiet voice cutting through the hubbub. He indicated the film crews. ‘My, what a fine picture of unity you’re showing to the people of this country. We must face the facts, my lords. Providence has revealed the true king. He will call Parliament; he will bring about the general election that will rid us of corrupt warlords. Democracy, yes, that’s what this country needs; once it’s rid

of fools and heathens and self-serving fat cats such as you, Lord Protector!’

Arthur felt this was his opportunity to speak. His heart trembling in his chest, he asked, ‘Could I say something?’

Lot sneered at him. Leodegrance smiled. Merlin turned and gazed appraisingly into his eyes.

‘Very well; let us hear what our king has to say,’ he said. The Lords grumbled, but Arthur faced the grizzled old men bravely.

‘I’ve drawn the sword from the stone,’ he said. ‘I thought anyone could do it; it was easy. But none of you can. That means none of you can be king, right?’ The Lords continued to growl among themselves. ‘But maybe I’m not the only one who can do it. Let’s see if there’s anyone else. Why don’t we open it up to everyone who wants? That would be fair?’ He caught Merlin’s eye. ‘Wouldn’t it?’ he added. ‘Wouldn’t that be democratic? Isn’t that what we want?’

Silence fell. Merlin looked nonplussed. Lot stepped forward, smiling craftily.

‘A good idea, lad,’ he said. ‘Let’s make it an event! Next Candlemas, we’ll open it up to anyone.’ He turned to the camera. ‘Whoever fancies themselves as king, let them come to London next February and draw the sword from the stone! Whoever succeeds shall be the successor to King Uther!’

Arthur was startled to find Merlin bearing down on him. ‘A good trick, Arthur,’ the old man murmured. ‘You’ve bought some time. But compromises won’t win you the crown. Let’s go somewhere we can talk.’

He turned, and nodded to the Archbishop. That eminent churchman followed him like a dog as Arthur and his supporters strode from the churchyard. Brice seemed entirely under Merlin’s spell.

‘You will need protection,’ said Merlin, addressing Arthur as they sat around a table in the main room of the Archbishop’s palace. ‘You pose a threat to Lot’s power. He’ll have you killed if he can.’

‘But I thought that the Lord Protector had very little power,’ Arthur said, examining the old man’s lined face. ‘Why is he going to cling on to it now? Even go as far as’ – he shuddered – ‘have me murdered?’

Merlin scowled. ‘He and his cronies have kept the country in disarray so no one can challenge their own power. They treat the people in the lands they hold as little more than slaves; that way they’ve grown richer than ever they were under King Uther’s government. They’ve let gangsters and criminals rampage unchecked in return for regular payments. People had to live in armed compounds to stand any chance of freedom.’

‘So I found,’ Ector interrupted. ‘As far as protection goes, I employ a security firm to protect myself and my family. Bedivere here is their leader.’ Bedivere nodded

unsmilingly.

‘Good,’ said Merlin, returning Bedivere’s nod. ‘But Arthur will need more than them to keep him safe from the warlords of the entire country. Your grace,’ he said, turning to the Archbishop. ‘Can you spare any of your men?’

The Archbishop nodded. ‘I have men who once worked for the late king,’ he said. ‘Ex-soldiers. They include Ulfin, the late king’s personal bodyguard, and Brastias, who was once the Duke of Cornwall’s man.’

‘What do you think will make Lot and the other Lords accept me?’ Arthur asked.

‘The support of the Commons is vital,’ Merlin replied. ‘I sincerely hope they will accept you on the strength of the sword alone. It took a lot of campaigning by Brice here before Lot was willing to accept this gathering in London. Even then, I don’t think he expected there’d be a king to open it. That’s how he’s kept the country in the state it’s been in for years. He’s exploited a legality to keep the country in a state of anarchy. By law, no Parliament can be called without a king. Without Parliament there can be no government. In the meantime, the warlords can do what they want. Lot’s perpetuated the power vacuum for his own ends.’

‘Once Parliament is opened we can call a general election,’ said the Archbishop. ‘That will challenge the power of the warlords. But first we need Parliament – and for that we need a king.’

Arthur and the others remained in the Archbishop’s palace for the next few weeks, although Merlin vanished on an errand of his own shortly after New Year. For his own safety, the security guards wouldn’t let Arthur leave the building, and by the end of January he was beginning to grow pale-faced and cranky, and to start at shadows. No attempt had been made on his life, but on several nights he received reports of intruders in the grounds. A car had been permanently parked across the street from the main entrance, containing two burly men in plain clothes, no doubt in the employ of the Lord Protector.

Kay and Ector shared Arthur’s imprisonment, but they were allowed out occasionally, since there was no immediate threat to their own safety. Bedivere liaised with the Archbishop’s religious police concerning Arthur’s security, and they were very firm that he could not leave, even by car. Arthur found himself developing a siege mentality.

February came and at last Arthur could walk under the grey winter sky again, and see the weak sun. He was taken to St Paul’s under heavy guard, where he waited while a log line of hopeful aspirants tried to draw the sword.

Arthur entered the churchyard with an expression of resolve that hid a quaking heart. All those weeks cooped up in the archbishop’s palace had eaten away at his confidence, and he could barely confront those hard-faced hard men who watched him place his hand on the sword. He drew it as easily as ever, and turned to Lot.

‘You’ve seen that I’m the only one who can draw the sword,’ he said. ‘Everyone else

who has tried has failed. No scientific explanation can be found; it is the working of providence. Providence accepts me as king. It's time you did.'

Lot smiled. 'The Lords will debate it,' he said.

Arthur shook his head. 'This country was a democracy once,' he said. 'There's still a House of Commons. Let them tell the country what they think.'

Lot conferred with his peers. Finally, he returned to Arthur with a grim smile. 'Very well,' he said.

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The more Arthur hated the pomp and palaver of his coronation, the more the people of London seemed to love it. He hated the ermine robes, he hated the rituals, and he was petrified of taking the Coronation Oath in front of so many people.

Weighed down by more than just his robe of state, Arthur was driven from his new residence of Buckingham Palace towards Westminster Abbey, waving graciously at the crowds that lined the streets, waving flags and cheering. He sat in the back of the car as security men on motorcycles zipped back and forth. The car ahead was crewed by security men; behind was another car containing Bedivere, who Arthur had appointed as Lord High Constable, and Ulfen, who was Lord Great Chamberlain. In Arthur's own car were Kay, who he had appointed as Lord High Steward, his foster father Ector, and Merlin himself.

Arthur didn't know quite what to make of Merlin. He didn't seem to be the crazy Welsh wizard of tabloid rumour; he was a sober-seeming, reserved man when not disguised as a homeless alcoholic: prone to mysterious comings and goings, and fulfilling a function that Arthur felt to be ambiguous, to say the least. The old man seemed to have all the answers, seemed intent on controlling the political situation from behind the scenes. But his flair for the dramatic had made him famous, or notorious, and it was an open secret that he was stage managing Arthur's rise to power.

Not that Arthur didn't owe the old man something for his advice and his political nous. Merlin had schooled him in the facts of the complex situation that faced them: a country dominated by warlords who had a vested interest in preserve the chaos and disunity of recent years. With sufficient popular support and military backing Arthur could establish a government that would return Britain to the peace and prosperity of former days, put an end to factions and infighting, corruption and chaos.

'Remember that it is the ceremony where you will be at your most vulnerable,' Merlin said. 'The Archbishop has ensured that security will be tight but we can't be sure Lot's people won't try to halt the proceedings.'

Arthur smiled grimly, and tapped his ermine-clad chest. 'I'm ready for any attempt on my life,' he said. 'It's afterwards that worries me. How will Lot react to being stripped of his position?'



But then they were entering the Abbey grounds where they parked. Surrounded by security men, Arthur entered the Abbey to find the immense space within crowded with people; some he recognised as members of the House of Lords and the Commons, others as celebrities and dignitaries; even a few heathen community leaders were visible. The Archbishop stood at the far end of the nave, with a small entourage of clergy. Arthur began the long walk up the nave towards the Chair of Estate. It was almost like a marriage, he reflected; and in a way it was: his marriage to Mother Church.

Kay walked before him, holding the sword from the stone, which was to take the place of the Sword of State. Ector and Merlin walked immediately behind him, while Bedivere, Ulfin, Brastias and the rest brought up the rear.

The Archbishop greeted Arthur as he reached the end of the nave, and led him to the steps of the throne. Flushing nervously, Arthur mounted the steps and sat down upon the cold hard throne. He looked out and across Westminster Abbey, seeing the Lords in their ermine, the bishops and archbishops, the Commons... There was no sign of Lot, and indeed the Lords seemed to be under-represented.

When he had gained the assent of everyone assembled, the Archbishop returned to the Chair of Estate where Arthur sat, and said: 'Will you solemnly promise and swear to govern the peoples of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, according to their respective laws and customs?'

'I solemnly promise so to do,' Arthur replied.

The Archbishop of Canterbury added: 'Will you to your power cause law and justice, in mercy, to be executed in all your judgments?'

'I solemnly promise so to do.'

The Coronation Oath went on, and Arthur made the correct responses as audibly as he could. 'All this I promise to do,' he concluded. 'The things which I have here before promised, I will perform, and keep. So help me God.'

After Holy Communion was celebrated, Arthur's robe was taken from him and he made his way to the throne, where he sat under the gaze of all. The Archbishop anointed him, and Ulfin, as Lord High Chamberlain, presented him with a pair of spurs. The Archbishop presented Arthur with an embarrassment of crown jewels, until eventually he found himself holding two sceptres while the Archbishop placed the crown upon his head.

One by one, the archbishops and bishops, followed by the peers of the realm, came forward to swear fealty. There was definitely no sign of Lot, and several others were absent. Arthur realised that a distant noise was growing louder and louder. One of the peers broke off in the midst of his speech as the thudding of rotor blades from outside began to drown out what he was saying.

Arthur looked about him uncertainly. Consternation was on the faces of Merlin and the Archbishop. The crowd began to murmur. What idiot was flying past in a

helicopter?

Then Arthur heard the shooting begin.

The sharp crack of small arms fire came from outside, followed by a staccato roar of sub machine guns. Bedivere produced a gun from beneath his robes of state, which he quickly shrugged out of, and he ran towards the entrance, followed by several security men. People in the audience screamed, and rushed around. Arthur rose from the throne.

‘Kay, Ulfin, follow me,’ he ordered. Merlin followed them as they raced down the nave towards the sound of gunfire. By now Bedivere and his security men had vanished from sight.

‘Wait, Arthur,’ Merlin called, seizing Arthur by the shoulder. Arthur turned to stare at him. ‘Where d’you thin you’re going?’ the old man added.

‘I’m king, aren’t I?’ Arthur cried. ‘My people need me.’ He broke free and ran for the doors.

‘It’s too dangerous...!’ Merlin broke off as the youthful monarch left the abbey.

‘Who do you suppose it is?’ Ector asked as he ran with Merlin. The nave around them was a scene of confusion.

‘Lot, of course,’ Merlin snapped. ‘I expected something of the sort.’ Gunfire continued from outside, with the never-ending whirr of rotor blades.

They burst out into the sunlight to see two helicopter gunships hovering over the Abbey grounds, raking the place with gunfire, while on either side security guards returned fire with pistols. Arthur crouched in the doorway, glaring angrily up at the marauders.

‘It’s Lot and his gang,’ he muttered as Merlin and Ector joined him. Kay was up ahead, firing at the nearest gunship from the cover of a vehicle.

‘I’d gathered,’ said Merlin. ‘I knew they’d try something. I expected it to come sooner.’

‘They were too late to stop the coronation,’ Ector realised.

Dodging a fusillade of bullets from the gunships, one of the security men and joined them. It was Bedivere, a semi-automatic clutched in his single hand.

‘Brastias has radioed for reinforcements,’ he panted. ‘But it might be too late,’ He indicated the grounds ahead of them. Several bodies were sprawled in pools of blood. Arthur felt sick. ‘If they get through us, there’s the whole British Establishment in there.’

‘Lot won’t want that,’ Merlin said. ‘All he wants is to stop Arthur becoming king. He

won't want to be responsible for a massacre.'

'We need rockets,' Bedivere muttered. 'That would knock the smiles from their faces.'

Arthur gazed at the huddled bodies on the tarmac ahead with revulsion and guilt. It was because of him these men had died. He recognised some of them. They had families, children maybe. All because Lot saw him, Arthur, as a threat to his own powerbase. He got to his feet.

'What are you doing, Arthur?' Merlin demanded, tugging at his arm. Arthur shook free and stepped forward.

'Lord Lothian!' Arthur shouted, cupping his hands round his mouth. 'Stop this stupidity. 'We have to talk!' he waved his arms sternly at the hovering choppers.

The gunfire died away. A figure wearing a peaked hat and greatcoat appeared at the doors of the left-hand gunship. He clutched at the wall as the machine bobbed up and down and raised a megaphone to his mouth.

'What do we have to discuss, boy?' Lot's voice was distorted but recognisable. 'All we need to do is to get rid of you.'

'We don't need to fight,' Arthur called up at him. 'Come down here unarmed and I'll be ready to listen to your grievances. We can...'

Suddenly, with shocking speed, Lot shot Arthur down. The newly-crowned king fell to lie motionless across the Abbey steps. Ector gasped.

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## Brigands of the Moon

### IV

I did not appear at that morning meal. I was exhausted and drugged with lack of sleep. I had a moment with Snap to tell him what had occurred. Then I sought out Carter. He had his little chart room insulated. And we were cautious. I told him what Snap and I had learned: the rays from the Moon, proving that Grantline had concentrated a considerable ore body. I also told him of Grantline's message.

"We'll stop on the way back, as he directs, Gregg." He bent closer to me. "At Ferrok-Shahn I'm going to bring back a cordon of Interplanetary Police. The secret will be out, of course, when we stop at the Moon. We have no right, even now, to be flying this vessel as unguarded as it is."

He was very solemn. And he was grim when I told him of the invisible eavesdropper.

"You think he overheard Grantline's message? Who was it? You seem to feel it was George Prince?"

I told him I was convinced the prowler went into A20. When I mentioned the purser, who seemed to have been watching me earlier in the night, and again was sitting in the smoking room when the eavesdropper fled past, Carter looked startled.

"Johnson is all right, Gregg."

"Does he know anything about this Grantline affair?"

"No—no," said Carter hastily. "You haven't mentioned it, have you?"

"Of course I haven't. But why didn't Johnson hear that eavesdropper? And what was he doing there, anyway, at that hour of the morning?"

The Captain ignored my questions. "I'm going to have that Prince suite searched—we can't be too careful.... Go to bed, Gregg, you need rest."

I went to my cabin. It was located aft, on the stern deck, near the stern watch tower. A small metal room with a chair, a desk and a bunk. I made sure no one was in it. I sealed the lattice grill and the door, set the alarm trigger against any opening of them, and went to bed.

The siren for the midday meal awakened me. I had slept heavily. I felt refreshed.

I found the passengers already assembled at my table when I arrived in the dining salon. It was a low vaulted metal room with blue and yellow tube lights. At its sides the oval windows showed the deck, with its ports on the dome side, through which a vista of the starry firmament was visible. We were well on our course to Mars. The Moon had dwindled to a pin point of light beside the crescent Earth. And behind them our Sun blazed, visually the largest orb in the heavens. It was some sixty-eight million miles from the Earth to Mars. A flight, ordinarily, of some ten days.

There were five tables in the dining salon, each with eight seats. Snap and I had one of the tables. We sat at the ends, with the passengers on each of the sides.

Snap was in his seat when I arrived. He eyed me down the length of the table. In a gay mood, he introduced me to the three men already seated:

“This is our third officer, Gregg Haljan. Big, handsome fellow, isn’t he? And as pleasant as he is good-looking. Gregg, this is Sero Ob Hahn.”

I met the keen, somber gaze of a Venus man of middle age. A small, slim graceful man, with sleek black hair. His pointed face, accentuated by the pointed beard, was pallid. He wore a white and purple robe; upon his breast was a huge platinum ornament, a device like a star and cross entwined.

“I am happy to meet you, sir.” His voice was soft and deep.

“Ob Hahn,” I repeated. “I should have heard of you, no doubt, but—”

A smile plucked at his thin, gray lips. “That is an error of mine, not yours. My mission is that all the universe shall hear of me.”

“He’s preaching the religion of the Venus mystics,” Snap explained.

“And this enlightened gentleman,” said Ob Hahn ironically, nodding to the man, “has just termed it fetishism. The ignorance—”

“Oh, I say!” protested the man at Ob Hahn’s side. “I mean, you seem to think I meant something offensive. And as a matter of fact—”

“We’ve an argument, Gregg,” laughed Snap. “This is Sir Arthur Coniston, an English gentleman, lecturer and sky-trotter—that is, he will be a sky-trotter; he tells us he plans a number of voyages.”

The tall Englishman, in his white linen suit, bowed acknowledgement. “My compliments, Mr. Haljan. I hope you have no strong religious convictions, else we will make your table here very miserable!”

The third passenger had evidently kept out of the argument. Snap introduced him as Rance Rankin. An American—a quiet, blond fellow of thirty-five or forty.

I ordered my breakfast and let the argument go on.

“Won’t make me miserable,” said Snap. “I love an argument. You said, Sir Arthur—”

“I mean to say, I think I said too much. Mr. Rankin, you are more diplomatic.”

Rankin laughed. “I am a magician,” he said to me. “A theatrical entertainer. I deal in tricks—how to fool an audience—” His keen, amused gaze was on Ob Hahn. “This gentleman from Venus and I have too much in common to argue.”

“A nasty one!” the Englishman exclaimed. “By Jove! Really, Mr. Rankin, you’re a bit too cruel!”

I could see we were doomed to have turbulent meals this voyage. I like to eat in quiet; arguing passengers always annoy me. There were still three seats vacant at our table; I wondered who would occupy them. I soon learned the answer—for one seat at least. Rankin said calmly:

“Where is the little Venus girl this meal?” His glance went to the empty seat at my right hand. “The Venza, isn’t that her name? She and I are destined for the same theater in Ferrok-Shahn.”

So Venza was to sit beside me. It was good news. Ten days of a religious argument three times a day would be intolerable. But the cheerful Venza would help.

“She never eats the midday meal,” said Snap. “She’s on the deck, having orange juice. I guess it’s the old gag about diet, eh?”

My attention wandered about the salon. Most of the seats were occupied. At the Captain’s table I saw the objects of my search: George Prince and his sister, one on each side of the Captain. I saw George Prince in the life now as a man who looked hardly twenty-five. He was at this moment evidently in a gay mood. His clean-cut, handsome profile, with its poetic dark curls, was turned toward me. There seemed little of the villain about him.

And I saw Anita Prince now as a dark-haired, black-eyed little beauty, in feature resembling her brother very strongly. She presently finished her meal. She rose, with him after her. She was dressed in Earth-fashion—white blouse and dark jacket, wide, knee-length trousers of gray, with a red sash her only touch of color. She went past me, flashed me a smile.

My heart was pounding. I answered her greeting, and met George Prince’s casual gaze. He, too, smiled, as though to signify that his sister had told him of the service I had done her. Or was his smile an ironical memory of how he had eluded me this morning when I chased him?

I gazed after his small white-suited figure as he followed Anita from the salon. And thinking of her, I prayed that Carter and Halsey might be wrong. Whatever plotting against the Grantline Expedition might be going on, I hoped that George Prince was innocent of it. Yet I knew in my heart it was a futile hope. Prince had been the eavesdropper outside the radio room. I could not doubt it. But that his sister must be ignorant of what he was doing, I was sure.

My attention was brought suddenly back to the reality of our table. I heard Ob Hahn’s silky voice. “We passed quite close to the Moon last night, Mr. Dean.”

“Yes,” said Snap. “We did, didn’t we? Always do—it’s a technical problem of the exigencies of interstellar navigation. Explain it to them, Gregg. You’re an expert.”

I waved it away with a laugh. There was a brief silence. I could not help noticing Sir Arthur Coniston's queer look, and I have never seen so keen a glance as Rance Rankin shot at me. Were all three people aware of Grantline's treasure on the Moon? It suddenly seemed so. I wished fervently at that instant that the ten days of this voyage were over. Captain Carter was right. Coming back we should have a cordon of Interplanetary Police aboard.

Sir Arthur broke the awkward silence. "Magnificent sight, the Moon, from so close—though I was too much afraid of pressure sickness to be up to see it."

I had nearly finished my hasty meal when another incident shocked me. The two other passengers at our table came in and took their seats. A Martian girl and man. The girl had the seat at my left, with the man beside her. All Martians are tall. The girl was about my own height. That is, six feet, two inches. The man was seven feet or more. Both wore the Martian outer robe. The girl flung hers back. Her limbs were encased in pseudomail. She looked, as all Martians like to look, a very warlike Amazon. But she was a pretty girl. She smiled at me with a keen-eyed, direct gaze.

"Mr. Dean said at breakfast that you were big and handsome. You are."

They were brother and sister, these Martians. Snap introduced them as Set Miko and Setta Moa—the Martian equivalent of Mr. and Miss.

This Miko was, from our Earth standards, a tremendous, brawny giant. Not spindly, like most Martians, this fellow, for all his seven feet in height was almost heavy set. He wore a plaited leather jerkin beneath his robe and knee pants of leather out of which his lower legs showed as gray, hairy pillars of strength. He had come into the salon with a swagger, his sword ornament clanking.

"A pleasant voyage so far," he said to me as he started his meal. His voice had the heavy, throaty rasp characteristic of the Martian. He spoke perfect English—both Martians and Venus people are by heritage extraordinary linguists. Miko and his sister Moa, had a touch of Martian accent, worn almost away by living for some years in Greater New York.

The shock to me came within a few minutes. Miko, absorbed in attacking his meal, inadvertently pushed back his robe to bare his forearm. An instant only, then it dropped to his wrist. But in that instant I had seen, upon the gray flesh, a thin sear turned red. A very recent burn—as though a pencil ray of heat had caught his arm.

My mind flung back. Only last night in the city corridor, Snap and I had been followed by a Martian. I had shot at him with a heat ray: I thought I had hit him on the arm. Was this the mysterious Martian who had followed us from Halsey's office?

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# Witches and Barbarians

## Part One

The moon was bright.

It shone down through the interlacing branches and threw a hazy, glimmering silver light on the ground as Eloise picked her way between the trees towards the secret glade. From moon-limned shadow to shadow Eloise crept, trying to avoid the light; she didn't want to attract any attention. On her back was a rucksack that caught on clinging branches and fronds of undergrowth as she forced herself through the thickets.

The woods opened up into a clearing where the moon shone down like a fading spotlight. Eloise stepped out onto the silver-laced sward. She shivered. It was not the warmest of nights for what she was about to do, but it was imperative that the ritual be performed; there was no other way to solve the mystery that was troubling her and her friends.

She placed the rucksack down on the turf and opened it, taking out a series of objects; a sword, a wavy-bladed dagger, a small cauldron, a container of water, a couple of firelighters... She had gathered a sheaf of kindling during her ascent of the wooded hill and she piled this at the centre of the glade, surrounding the firelighters. She took out a Zippo lighter and after a few seconds work had a little blaze going. It lit up the glade, sending shadows dancing into the dark woods. Eloise felt briefly worried that she would be visible from the main road. But she quelled her fears and set the cauldron up over the growing fire. When this was complete, she emptied the water-container into the cauldron, then picked up her sword and dagger and cast the magic circle around her, intoning the mystic invocations of the elements, calling upon the spirits of Air, Fire, Water and Earth to protect her in her ritual. She placed the ritual instruments on the grass and stood motionless for a second, with the vague blaze of moonlight silvering her black clothes.

Then she slipped off her coat and laid it down beside the sword and dagger, reached up to the top button of her blouse and began to undress.

'Och, this is the place, is it?' Hamish asked, staring up at the sign. "'Castle Sauna Massage?'"

Nick shrugged and grinned at the skinhead.

'Bit corny, but what do you expect?' His nasal Scouse tones contrasted oddly with Hamish's broad Glaswegian. He ran a hand through his dreadlocks. 'Well, it doesn't look like it's open, does it?' he laughed, a little nervous. 'Maybe we'd better go back and tell Eloise...'

Hamish scowled. 'They're not gonna make it obvious, are they?' he growled. 'They don't want a visit from the vice squad. Ah suppose we just knock three times and ask for Lulu...'

Nick glanced up and down the deserted street. The orange-yellow light of the street-lamps showed no sign of the police waiting to pounce when they approached the place. He looked back at it. It looked like any of the other shops in the street, although its windows were blacked out, like a bookie's and the neon sign above was all that suggested anything sleazy.

Still, apparently this was where Eloise's friend's brother had last been seen and it was up to Hamish and him to investigate the place. With Eloise's help as well, of



course, but that was coming from a rather more unconventional source. He swallowed. 'Come on, then,' he said. 'You knock.'

Shrugging, the Scot strode up to the door and banged. They stood there for a while, Nick half turned away, ready to run as soon as anyone turned up, Hamish four-square and immovable on the step. A few seconds passed and suddenly the letter-box flapped open.

'Go round the back!' a female voice hissed. 'Don't look so suspicious.' It flapped back down.

Nick looked down the street. There was an alleyway nearby. Hamish turned to him and he nodded in its direction.

'This way, I think,' Nick replied.

The back door opened as they entered the yard at the rear of the building and a blonde, middle-aged woman stuck her head out and glanced down the grimy alley towards them.

'Hurry up,' she said. They reached the door and she ushered them inside.

They found themselves in a short corridor, its walls painted in bright reds and blues. At the far end a bead curtain hung over an archway. The passage reeked with perfume, like the woman. Nick glanced at her, curious. She looked about forty, though her make-up was doubtless intended to help her shed two decades. He gave her leather mini-skirt a queasy glance and hoped that the brothel ran to better entertainment. Not that he was intending to partake, of course. Hamish gave the woman a look of puritanical disgust.

'I'm sorry about that,' she said in an oddly upper-class voice. 'But we have to make sure we attract only the most distinguished of clients.' She stared at them, her eyes flicking from Nick's dreadlocks and ripped jeans to Hamish's grimy green jacket, clearly bought at an alternative clothes store. 'You can pay, I hope?' she added. 'My house isn't cheap. Cash only, by the way.'

'Course we can pay,' Hamish growled. 'Now cannie we tek a look at the girls?'

The madame shrugged. 'Walk this way,' she replied and minced towards the bead curtain.

'If I could walk that way...' Nick said. Hamish glared at him, evidently not in the mood for flippancy. They followed the woman through the archway.

This led to an opulently furnished room. At one end were a series of booths, curtained off from the rest of the room, while overstuffed sofas and chairs were scattered round the place, expensive-looking ornaments flowed over every available surface, drapes, curtains and similar flummery hung from the walls. A fat, middle-aged man was watching a TV in one corner.

He wasn't the only customer in the room; nor was he alone in being fat and middle-aged. Although the girls were quite frighteningly young to Nick's eyes, most of them apparently even younger than him, few of the clientele were under thirty-five and very few were not wearing suits. Both customers and prostitutes glanced up curiously as he and Hamish entered, seeming to do a double-take at the sight of the scruffy pair of urchins, then returning to their own affairs. A dark-haired girl with harsh penetrating eyes appeared from a booth, followed by a customer and the madame turned away from Nick and Hamish after indicating the nearest sofa and offering them drinks. She went to settled his account.

Nick sat down uncomfortably next to Hamish, gingerly sipping a whisky and whispered over to him.

'Do we just wait until one of the girls is free, or what? This is like the dentists.' Apart from the gaudy furnishings, the whole place was depressingly businesslike and

normal. Hamish glowered at him.

‘Don’t forget the Focus,’ he hissed.

‘Oh shit, yeah,’ Nick replied, flustered. Surreptitiously, he pulled out a small piece of crystal on a chain and let it hang down over his woolly jumper.

Deep within the crystal, it seemed as if a blue fire was burning. Nick settled back and gazed around the room.

Carefully, Eloise placed her clothes on the ground beside her and turned towards the cauldron. Raising her arms to the moon, she stood motionless, its eerie light gleaming from her soft naked skin.

*O Goddess who rides the night sky,*

she intoned, trying not to shiver, hoping desperately no one appeared from the bushes,

*I call upon thee and abjure thee to shine thy secret light  
upon my waters of scrying; grant me powers of inner sight  
and open my gaze to the happenings of another night;  
show me through the Focus-stone what I might  
know concerning Mary’s brother Mark  
and what he met in that place of the dark.*

She squatted down over the cauldron, thrusting her head into the steam and gazing into its bubbling waters. By the fire she felt warmer, though the night air was cold on her back. But she cleared her mind of these mundane thoughts and gazed into the water.

Slowly there appeared to her an opulently-furnished room in which scantily-clad women lounged and entertained bored businessmen... Her brow creased with thought as she caught sight of a group of youths. And nearby, a drunken-looking biker...

‘How long are we gonna stay here?’ Nick whispered to Hamish. ‘And what do we do if one of the women says she’s free?’

Hamish grinned back cynically. ‘If you don’t know by now...’ he laughed grimly.

Nick flushed and sat back. He frowned at the nearest woman, trying to imagine what it would be like. Though he would never admit it to any of his friends, he was still a virgin. And he didn’t much fancy losing his virtue to a whore. There was one girl he would dearly like to sleep with, but the chances of this were low. Which reminded him...

‘I don’t think Eloise would be very happy if you did that,’ he said slyly.

‘What?’ Hamish grunted. ‘Och, she disnae fancy me. Does she? Anyway, how’s she gonna find out?’

Nick waved a hand at his crystal pendant. ‘She says she’ll be able to see through this,’ he replied. ‘With her... her magic.’

Hamish shook his head. ‘Not tonight,’ he replied. ‘She cannie see what goes on tonight. It’s fixed so she will see what happened when this Mark bauchle came here, with all his hoity-toity upper-class public school friends.’

Nick was about to mention that his friend didn't seem to have the same prejudices when it came to public school-girls, like Eloise's friend Mary, but before he could say anything, he heard the thunderous roar of a motorbike engine from outside, followed instantly by a banging on the back door.

The madame looked up from her counter, where another satisfied customer was handing over a wad of used fivers. He looked pale.

'Hey, we're not being raided, are we?' he demanded, his flabby jowls shaking with forced joviality.

The madame frowned. 'I shouldn't think so,' she replied. 'Considering that's the Chief Constable over there.' Indicating an anonymous-looking man sitting with three girls, she herself disappeared through the curtain.

A few seconds later, she came back with another figure who stood out in the sleazily formal gathering even more than Nick and Hamish; a red-bearded biker dressed in leather and ripped denim, who looked round at the scene with wild eyes. Nick glanced at Hamish, who shrugged.

'If you'd like a seat,' the madame said, her voice suggesting that although the customer might be always right, perhaps he ought to wash more frequently. If she'd been cold with Nick and Hamish, she was positively frigid with this latest customer. 'And maybe a drink?'

The biker turned to her and spat on the carpet. The madame frowned, but he spoke before she could complain.

'I'm not here for a whore,' he said dangerously levelling a finger at her. He had a Yorkshire accent. 'I said that to get into this place. I want to know where my mate Karl got to!'

The madame shook her head. 'I don't know anyone of that name,' she said. 'Now, if you want one of my girls, their services start at twenty pounds for hand relief...'

'Where's Karl?' demanded the biker, cutting through her pricelist. 'He was last seen heading here, two nights ago. He hasn't been seen since. Now, either you tell me what happened, or I go to t' Pigs!'

The madame coughed sharply and suddenly two men rose from a nearby sofa. Although they wore suits like the clients, they were both solid and muscular-looking, as well-built as the biker himself.

'Now, the lady's been reasonable so far,' said one of them. 'But you're disturbing the customers now. You can get out now, or get thrown out - it's all the same to me.'

'And while you're about it, boys,' said the madame, 'you can get rid of these two troublemakers.' Nick's heart thumped suddenly as he realised that she was pointing directly at him and Hamish. 'Obviously they've got some connection with him. They're not my normal customers.'

'Och, ye've made some mistake,' Hamish protested, as one of the bouncers headed for him. 'We're nuhin' to do with this hairy keech!'

'Come along, sir,' said the first bouncer, trying to seize the biker by the arm. Before his fingers could close round the wrist, the biker spun round and sent him sprawling with an expertly-aimed kick to the groin.

'Shit!' the second bouncer said, as the biker grabbed a table and sent it flying across the room. 'Get the others!'

More bouncers poured into the room. Two charged at Hamish and Nick, who were still sitting on the sofa, but before they could reach them, Hamish leapt up and pulled out a flick-knife.

As the biker fought off three men and Hamish got to grips with another, Nick got up and waited for the bouncer's attack. He wasn't a fighter like Hamish, he didn't enjoy a scrap; but he'd been brought up on the mean streets of Liverpool and he'd learnt a few tricks to protect himself. The man came for him and he spun out of the way, cracking one thin fist across the bouncer's shaven skull.

Eloise still gazed into the cauldron. Deep within its waters, the events of another night unfolded.

As far as she could work out, two kinds of customer attended the Castle Sauna Massage parlour; the regulars and the rookies. The regulars were all solid, respectable citizen material; Eloise had only been in Westchester for a couple of weeks, but she recognised one of them as the mayor. The rookies, on the other hand, were a different matter.

The drunken biker and the public school boys - one of whom Eloise had recognised with grim satisfaction as Mary's brother Mark - were kept waiting for a long time. One by one, the boys began to slip out of the brothel, until only Mark was left. Eloise saw one of his friends shake him, but he shook his head angrily. The scrying-waters carried no sound, but Eloise could guess that Mark would have wanted to stay; this had been his birthday after all and from what Mary said, he'd never slept with anyone before. Mark's friend shrugged after a while and left him. Nearby, the biker was fidgeting.

Then one of the girls approached Mark and took him by the hand, leading him into a cubicle. Eloise stared at the curtain for a long time. Either he was naturally gifted, or he'd had more experience than Mary thought, or... or what? Well, he was certainly taking his time.

Then another girl approached the biker and led him off, wriggling playfully as he grasped her buttocks. They disappeared into another cubicle.

Mark's girl reappeared with no sign of Mark. The madame went up to her and they spoke together for a while. Then the other prostitute reappeared from the biker's booth and grinned wickedly at the madame. She turned to the rest and made some kind of announcement. Then both the customers and girls got up and made their way through the curtains....

Surrounded by bouncers, Nick had his back to the wall. Nearby, Hamish had been proving harder to deal with, but his opponents had baseball bats and were doing their best to beat him into the ground. The biker was also having a hard time of it, with bouncers swarming over him, but he seemed to pay no attention to their blows and was fighting in a berserk frenzy.

Nick dropped his main attacker with a jab to the solar plexus. Using the confusion of the others as a chance to break away from the combat, he forced his way to Hamish's side of the fray.

'Come on!' he shouted. 'Let's get out! There're too many of them!'

He wondered how the madame managed to pay so many bouncers. Business must be good, he decided, dodging a swing from a baseball bat. He grabbed Hamish by the coat and dragged him towards the bead curtain. Meanwhile, the biker had evidently also realised that he was fighting a losing battle. With a roar, he knocked one last bouncer to the ground and then rushed after them.

In the passage, Nick was desperately tugging at the door.

‘Some fucker’s locked it,’ he gasped.

‘Outa t’ way!’ snarled the biker.

With a wolf-like howl, he threw himself at the door and it splintered open with a great cracking sound. Hamish glanced at Nick as the biker disappeared into the alleyway, towards a large black motorbike.

‘Fuckin’ hell!’ he said. ‘That greaser’s hard!’

‘He’s a nutter,’ said Nick.

There was an angry rattle from the bead curtain and they turned to see the passage filling up with bouncers.

‘Run!’ Nick shouted. They sped out into the alley where the biker had leapt astride his bike and was revving it up. They ran towards him, but before they reached the biker, he was skidding off down the alley, swerving frequently to avoid the debris that littered it.

Nick glanced towards the brothel.

‘They’re not following us,’ he murmured.

‘Mad keech just rode off and left us,’ said Hamish angrily. The distant blare of sirens became audible. Hamish looked at Nick, his eyes wide with fear. ‘Now look what ye’ve got me into!’ he snarled. ‘Let’s get the fuck out!’

They rushed down the alley towards the end, where it appeared to lead into a backstreet. But before they could reach it, a patrol car skidded up onto the pavement beyond, blue lights flashing and four or five police leapt out. Nick and Hamish turned round and dashed for the other end of the alley, only to see another couple of cars at this end. The sirens wailed in the distance.

‘There must be more coming as well!’ Nick gasped. ‘It’s only a fucking knocking-shop! What’s going on?’

‘This way!’ Hamish barked, pointing to the alley that led back to Westchester High Street. Shrugging, Nick followed.

The police reached the brothel entrance.

‘Where have the little scrotes got to?’ barked the sergeant. ‘Here, Harry - where did they get to?’

He was addressing one of the bouncers, who stood in the entrance to the brothel.

‘Just cleared off, didn’t they sarge?’ the bouncer replied. ‘You’d better get after them, or Inspector McCavity won’t be happy.’

The bike roared down the country lane, its engine throbbing with life, the slipstream playing wildly with the strands of the biker’s hair and beard that poked out from under his helmet. In the distance, the walls of Westchester loomed over the rolling countryside. It was an old city; that had been what had attracted him and his mates - its antiquities and mysteries. But it was corrupt, rotten to the core - more so than most.

The Pigs were still pursuing him, but he’d left them behind as he shot out of the Eastgate, just past Castle Hill. Still, the chances of him escaping seemed low. He needed somewhere to hide. He’d deliberately driven away from the house his mates were renting, but he didn’t know where he was going to go.

He saw the woods ahead and snatched a glimpse over his shoulder. The Pigs were still on his trail, but a corner of hedge cut him off from their line of sight. This was his chance! He swung his machine towards the verge.

Eloise was startled out of her vision by the roar of a motorbike engine from nearby. She leapt up from the cauldron - it was telling her nothing now, anyway - and

grabbed at her clothes. The engine cut out. She glanced around.

The noise had been a lot closer than if it had been on the main road - from which she could hear the blare of police sirens, she realised, now that she was no longer in her trance. It sounded as if someone was trying to force their way through the woods on a motorbike. But now they'd stopped.

Her heart beating wildly, she crouched in the circle, holding the bundle of clothes to her chest and listening. There was something moving in the bushes...

A biker burst into the clearing, wheeling a large motorbike. He stopped short, seeming as surprised by her presence as she was by hers. They stared at each other for a few seconds as police sirens and flashing lights filled the darkness towards the road.

After a while, he grinned.

'Sorry if I startled you,' he said in a thick Yorkshire accent. 'But I've got t' Pigs after me. Hey, are you a witch?' Eloise crouched rigid before him. The noise of sirens receded into the distance. 'Sorry if I've screwed up your ritual,' he added.

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# Carmilla

## II

### A Guest

I am now going to tell you something so strange that it will require all your faith in my veracity to believe my story. It is not only true, nevertheless, but truth of which I have been an eyewitness.

It was a sweet summer evening, and my father asked me, as he sometimes did, to take a little ramble with him along that beautiful forest vista which I have mentioned as lying in front of the schloss.

“General Spielsdorf cannot come to us so soon as I had hoped,” said my father, as we pursued our walk.

He was to have paid us a visit of some weeks, and we had expected his arrival next day. He was to have brought with him a young lady, his niece and ward, Mademoiselle Rheinfeldt, whom I had never seen, but whom I had heard described as a very charming girl, and in whose society I had promised myself many happy days. I was more disappointed than a young lady living in a town, or a bustling neighborhood can possibly imagine. This visit, and the new acquaintance it promised, had furnished my day dream for many weeks.

“And how soon does he come?” I asked.

“Not till autumn. Not for two months, I dare say,” he answered. “And I am very glad now, dear, that you never knew Mademoiselle Rheinfeldt.”

“And why?” I asked, both mortified and curious.

“Because the poor young lady is dead,” he replied. “I quite forgot I had not told you, but you were not in the room when I received the General’s letter this evening.”

I was very much shocked. General Spielsdorf had mentioned in his first letter, six or seven weeks before, that she was not so well as he would wish her, but there was nothing to suggest the remotest suspicion of danger.

“Here is the General’s letter,” he said, handing it to me. “I am afraid he is in great affliction; the letter appears to me to have been written very nearly in distraction.”

We sat down on a rude bench, under a group of magnificent lime trees. The sun was setting with all its melancholy splendor behind the sylvan horizon, and the stream that flows beside our home, and passes under the steep old bridge I have mentioned, wound through many a group of noble trees, almost at our feet, reflecting in its current the fading crimson of the sky. General Spielsdorf’s letter was so extraordinary, so vehement, and in some places so self-contradictory, that I read it twice over--the second time aloud to my father--and was still unable to account for it, except by supposing that grief had unsettled his mind.

It said “I have lost my darling daughter, for as such I loved her. During the last days of dear Bertha’s illness I was not able to write to you.

Before then I had no idea of her danger. I have lost her, and now learn all, too late. She died in the peace of innocence, and in the glorious hope of a blessed futurity. The fiend who betrayed our infatuated hospitality has done it all. I thought I was receiving into my house innocence, gaiety, a charming companion for my lost Bertha. Heavens! what a fool have I been!

I thank God my child died without a suspicion of the cause of her sufferings. She is gone without so much as conjecturing the nature of her illness, and the accursed passion of the agent of all this misery. I devote my remaining days to tracking and extinguishing a monster. I am told I may hope to accomplish my righteous and merciful purpose. At present there is scarcely a gleam of light to guide me. I curse my conceited incredulity, my despicable affectation of superiority, my blindness, my obstinacy--all--too late. I cannot write or talk collectedly now. I am distracted. So soon as I shall have a little recovered, I mean to devote myself for a time to enquiry, which may possibly lead me as far as Vienna. Some time in the autumn, two months hence, or earlier if I live, I will see you--that is, if you permit me; I will then tell you all that I scarce dare put upon paper now. Farewell. Pray for me, dear friend.”



In these terms ended this strange letter. Though I had never seen Bertha Rheinfeldt my eyes filled with tears at the sudden intelligence; I was startled, as well as profoundly disappointed.

The sun had now set, and it was twilight by the time I had returned the General's letter to my father.

It was a soft clear evening, and we loitered, speculating upon the possible meanings of the violent and incoherent sentences which I had just been reading. We had nearly a mile to walk before reaching the road that passes the schloss in front, and by that time the moon was shining brilliantly. At the drawbridge we met Madame Perrodon and Mademoiselle De Lafontaine, who had come out, without their bonnets, to enjoy the exquisite moonlight.

We heard their voices gabbling in animated dialogue as we approached. We joined them at the drawbridge, and turned about to admire with them the beautiful scene.

The glade through which we had just walked lay before us. At our left the narrow road wound away under clumps of lordly trees, and was lost to sight amid the thickening forest. At the right the same road crosses the steep and picturesque bridge, near which stands a ruined tower which once guarded that pass; and beyond the bridge an abrupt eminence rises, covered with trees, and showing in the shadows some grey ivy-clustered rocks.

Over the sward and low grounds a thin film of mist was stealing like smoke, marking the distances with a transparent veil; and here and there we could see the river faintly flashing in the moonlight.

No softer, sweeter scene could be imagined. The news I had just heard made it melancholy; but nothing could disturb its character of profound serenity, and the enchanted glory and vagueness of the prospect.

My father, who enjoyed the picturesque, and I, stood looking in silence over the expanse beneath us. The two good governesses, standing a little way behind us,

discoursed upon the scene, and were eloquent upon the moon.

Madame Perrodon was fat, middle-aged, and romantic, and talked and sighed poetically. Mademoiselle De Lafontaine--in right of her father who was a German, assumed to be psychological, metaphysical, and something of a mystic--now declared that when the moon shone with a light so intense it was well known that it indicated a special spiritual activity. The effect of the full moon in such a state of brilliancy was manifold. It acted on dreams, it acted on lunacy, it acted on nervous people, it had marvelous physical influences connected with life. Mademoiselle related that her cousin, who was mate of a merchant ship, having taken a nap on deck on such a night, lying on his back, with his face full in the light on the moon, had wakened, after a dream of an old woman clawing him by the cheek, with his features horribly drawn to one side; and his countenance had never quite recovered its equilibrium.

“The moon, this night,” she said, “is full of idyllic and magnetic influence--and see, when you look behind you at the front of the schloss how all its windows flash and twinkle with that silvery splendor, as if unseen hands had lighted up the rooms to receive fairy guests.”

There are indolent styles of the spirits in which, indisposed to talk ourselves, the talk of others is pleasant to our listless ears; and I gazed on, pleased with the tinkle of the ladies' conversation.

“I have got into one of my moping moods tonight,” said my father, after a silence, and quoting Shakespeare, whom, by way of keeping up our English, he used to read aloud, he said:

“In truth I know not why I am so sad.

It wearies me: you say it wearies you;

But how I got it--came by it.’

“I forget the rest. But I feel as if some great misfortune were hanging over us. I suppose the poor General's afflicted letter has had something to do with it.”

At this moment the unwonted sound of carriage wheels and many hoofs upon the road, arrested our attention.

They seemed to be approaching from the high ground overlooking the bridge, and very soon the equipage emerged from that point. Two horsemen first crossed the bridge, then came a carriage drawn by four horses, and two men rode behind.

It seemed to be the traveling carriage of a person of rank; and we were all immediately absorbed in watching that very unusual spectacle. It became, in a few moments, greatly more interesting, for just as the carriage had passed the summit of the steep bridge, one of the leaders, taking fright, communicated his panic to the rest, and after a plunge or two, the whole team broke into a wild gallop together, and dashing between the horsemen who rode in front, came thundering along the road towards us with the speed of a hurricane.

The excitement of the scene was made more painful by the clear, long-drawn screams of a female voice from the carriage window.

We all advanced in curiosity and horror; me rather in silence, the rest with various ejaculations of terror.

Our suspense did not last long. Just before you reach the castle drawbridge, on the route they were coming, there stands by the roadside a magnificent lime tree, on the other stands an ancient stone cross, at sight of which the horses, now going at a pace that was perfectly frightful, swerved so as to bring the wheel over the projecting roots of the tree.

I knew what was coming. I covered my eyes, unable to see it out, and turned my head away; at the same moment I heard a cry from my lady friends, who had gone on a little.

Curiosity opened my eyes, and I saw a scene of utter confusion. Two of the horses were on the ground, the carriage lay upon its side with two wheels in the air; the men were busy removing the traces, and a lady with a commanding air and figure had got out, and stood with clasped hands, raising the handkerchief that was in them every

now and then to her eyes.

Through the carriage door was now lifted a young lady, who appeared to be lifeless. My dear old father was already beside the elder lady, with his hat in his hand, evidently tendering his aid and the resources of his schloss. The lady did not appear to hear him, or to have eyes for anything but the slender girl who was being placed against the slope of the bank.

I approached; the young lady was apparently stunned, but she was certainly not dead. My father, who piqued himself on being something of a physician, had just had his fingers on her wrist and assured the lady, who declared herself her mother, that her pulse, though faint and irregular, was undoubtedly still distinguishable. The lady clasped her hands and looked upward, as if in a momentary transport of gratitude; but immediately she broke out again in that theatrical way which is, I believe, natural to some people.

She was what is called a fine looking woman for her time of life, and must have been handsome; she was tall, but not thin, and dressed in black velvet, and looked rather pale, but with a proud and commanding countenance, though now agitated strangely.

“Who was ever being so born to calamity?” I heard her say, with clasped hands, as I came up. “Here am I, on a journey of life and death, in prosecuting which to lose an hour is possibly to lose all. My child will not have recovered sufficiently to resume her route for who can say how long. I must leave her: I cannot, dare not, delay. How far on, sir, can you tell, is the nearest village? I must leave her there; and shall not see my darling, or even hear of her till my return, three months hence.”

I plucked my father by the coat, and whispered earnestly in his ear: “Oh! papa, pray ask her to let her stay with us--it would be so delightful. Do, pray.”

“If Madame will entrust her child to the care of my daughter, and of her good gouvernante, Madame Perrodon, and permit her to remain as our guest, under my charge, until her return, it will confer a distinction and an obligation upon us, and we shall treat her with all the care and devotion which so sacred a trust deserves.”

“I cannot do that, sir, it would be to task your kindness and chivalry too cruelly,” said

the lady, distractedly.

“It would, on the contrary, be to confer on us a very great kindness at the moment when we most need it. My daughter has just been disappointed by a cruel misfortune, in a visit from which she had long anticipated a great deal of happiness. If you confide this young lady to our care it will be her best consolation. The nearest village on your route is distant, and affords no such inn as you could think of placing your daughter at; you cannot allow her to continue her journey for any considerable distance without danger. If, as you say, you cannot suspend your journey, you must part with her tonight, and nowhere could you do so with more honest assurances of care and tenderness than here.”

There was something in this lady’s air and appearance so distinguished and even imposing, and in her manner so engaging, as to impress one, quite apart from the dignity of her equipage, with a conviction that she was a person of consequence.

By this time the carriage was replaced in its upright position, and the horses, quite tractable, in the traces again.

The lady threw on her daughter a glance which I fancied was not quite so affectionate as one might have anticipated from the beginning of the scene; then she beckoned slightly to my father, and withdrew two or three steps with him out of hearing; and talked to him with a fixed and stern countenance, not at all like that with which she had hitherto spoken.

I was filled with wonder that my father did not seem to perceive the change, and also unspeakably curious to learn what it could be that she was speaking, almost in his ear, with so much earnestness and rapidity.

Two or three minutes at most I think she remained thus employed, then she turned, and a few steps brought her to where her daughter lay, supported by Madame Perrodon. She knelt beside her for a moment and whispered, as Madame supposed, a little benediction in her ear; then hastily kissing her she stepped into her carriage, the door was closed, the footmen in stately liveries jumped up behind, the outriders spurred on, the postilions cracked their whips, the horses plunged and broke suddenly into a furious canter that threatened soon again to become a gallop, and the carriage whirled away, followed at the same rapid pace by the two horsemen in the rear.

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