

WORKING STIFFS

by

Nathan Long

“A dead gentleman to see you, sir.”

“What? Dead? Oh, very well, show him in. And make some tea, would you, Leech? Er, do the dead take tea?”

“I could not say, sir.”

“Hmmm, well, just to be safe, eh?”

“As you say, sir.”

As Leech shimmered off into the entry hall, I folded up *The Times*, more than happy to put the blighted thing away. It just made me cross. Every article another bit of bad news. Why was it that Parliament seemed to come down on the wrong side of every issue going? They had just defeated the Home Rule Bill once again, leaving the poor Irish -- our British brothers -- no better than a bally colony. And here was an article about more poor-houses being built, and over-crowding in the debtors' prisons. Didn't the powers-that-be see that punishing the poor for being poor wasn't going to get them back on their feet? The only story in the whole edition that hadn't made me curse out loud was a piece about a string of murdered prostitutes in Whitehall that had about it a pleasing whiff of the otherworldly.

However, there was no sense chasing work when it was walking through the door. The brass plate outside my apartments reads, 'Reginald Asteroth Phipps, Consulting Occultist -- 221-A Baker Street.' It appeared that my vulgar advertizing had paid off. I had a client.

Leech returned, ushering in what he had rightly surmised was an animate corpse. The poor fellow was in a terrible state. It looked like he had been recently drowned. So recently, in fact, that he was dripping on the carpet. His face was spongy and shredded, the skin a moist, greyish blue. His coat was wringing wet and ripped to pieces, as was his stomach. A long loop of intestines swung obscenely back and forth like a watch chain as he shambled in.

Of course it wasn't necessary to see him to guess his condition. The smell of him hit one like a mile-long freight train. It just kept coming.

Leech unhappily eyed the puddle forming around the dead man's feet.

“If sir will wait a moment, I will bring a cloth for the chair.”

The corpse grunted. Leech hurried off.

I stood. If my guest was forced to stand, etiquette forbade me remaining seated.

“Sorry, old man, Leech is a bit touchy about the old family heirlooms. Won’t be a minute. How can I help you?”

And then I realized that I knew the poor chap. It had taken a minute to recognize him. He wasn’t exactly looking the way I remembered him; but despite the puffy, rotting flesh and filmy, flaccid eyeballs, there was no mistaking that bristly moustache or that empire-building jaw.

“Good Lord! Ollie Rowbotham? Is that you? Gosh, what a time it’s been. Absolutely ages. How have you been, old chap?”

“Dead.”

“Oh, er, yes. Well, one heard rumors. But, er, wasn’t that some time ago?”

Leech returned with an old horse blanket and an oilskin and draped them over one of the wing chairs. Ollie sat. Leech hovered.

“Do you require anything else, sir?”

Ollie’s corpse grunted and waved Leech away. Even alive he’d been short with the servants. Bit of a boor actually was old Ollie. No friend of mine, by any means. I knew him from the club, and he’d been a year ahead of me at Oxford, but we’d never been what you might call close, and on the whole I’d preferred it that way.

Ollie had been one of those stern, rugged men of adventure it is so much more pleasant to read about than to actually meet in person. He was the sort of fellow who tells you that ‘your type’ wouldn’t last a day in the Gobi desert. He’d biffed off east with the army after Oxford, and had never really cared to stay in England for any length of time since. A perfect state of affairs as far as I was concerned.

Of course, seeing him in such horrible shape had the old empathy flowing fairly strong, and I was willing to let bygones be bygones for the time being.

“Didn’t you die in Spain last month?”

Ollie harrumphed.

“Ran with bulls at Pamplona. Dirty foreigner tripped me.”

He toyed with his external intestine.

“Gored.”

His voice was like mud going down a drain.

“Er, quite. But then what are you doing drowned in England?”

“That what I want you to find out. Some blighters wake me up. Want to go back. In my will. Must be buried on Kilimanjaro.”

Being dead seemed to have played hell with his articles and pronouns. Though now that I think of it, he talked like that when he was alive as well. A man of few words, unlike myself.

“Certainly. Certainly. Only too glad to help. The sooner you rest in peace, the happier I’ll be. But who did this? Do you have any idea?”

“No. Masked. Two men. Woke us up in mortuary.”

“In Spain?”

“England. Mother had to have funeral here.”

“Oh yes, of course. Sorry to interrupt. Go on. Two men resurrected you in a mortuary.”

“Woke the whole place. Led us out. Had to follow them. Couldn’t stop.”

“Mind control, eh? How very interesting.”

“Bring us to Thames. Send us in. We search river bottom.”

“How very ingenious. The dead need no breathing apparatus, eh what? Jolly smart. But what were you searching for?”

Ollie shrugged.

“Once we go down they... shove me aside. See through my eyes. I see nothing. Know nothing.”

That also hadn’t changed much from his previous incarnation. I kept that opinion to myself.

“So once you’re in the Thames they take over your mind entirely and search the bottom for something using your eyes.”

Ollie nodded.

“How long has this been going on?”

Ollie frowned and tried to count on his fingers. His putrefying brain was overwhelmed. He growled in frustration.

“Long time. Many nights. Only nights.”

“Er, but listen, Ollie. If they’re controlling your brain, how did you get away?”

Ollie held up his loop of intestine again.

“In river. Got caught on old anchor. Hard to get free. When I got to shore, all gone. Masked men out of my head.”

I nodded.

“Ah, their mind control only works at short range. But how was it that you thought to come and see me?”

“Knew you were barmy for hocus-pocus rubbish. Only person I can think of.”

I smirked. Time to get a bit of my own back.

“Well, you see it’s not all rubbish after all, eh?”

“May not be rubbish. Still bloody nuisance.”

Leech arrived with the tea. I beamed.

“Ah, lovely. Tea. Fancy a splash of the old Ceylon, Ollie?”

Ollie shook his head and shuddered.

“Brains. Want brains. Terrible hunger. Hard to resist.”

I swallowed, nervous. Not the sort of thing you want to hear from a close associate.

“Well, fight the urge, old thing. My cerebellum wouldn’t be much use to you in your gullet, now would it?”

Ollie just growled.

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I could have turned old Ollie down if I'd wanted to. I certainly don't need to work. The Asteroth-Phippses are old money -- practically pre-human on the Asteroth side -- and I'm simply rolling in the stuff. But my family also has a long history of dabbling in the mystic arts. A lot of my ancestors went by such charming nick-names as 'The Dark One' and 'Weird Anne' and 'He Who Must Not be Named.' The blood has thinned a bit since those times of course, and you'll find nothing scarier in the current generation than the occasional Member of Parliament or Archbishop of Canterbury. In fact I seem to be the only member of the family now living with any interest in the old ways at all.

Typical second son, I hear you say, and I dare say you're right. My poor older brother Desmond has all the headache and worry of running Bloodmoor, the family's ridiculously large country estate, while I fritter away my life in London with too much time on my hands and not enough to fill it. To the family's embarrassment I've amused myself by collecting old volumes of arcane lore, learning a smattering of useful spells, and generally investigating any mystery that comes along which has even a hint of the occult attached to it. So, old Ollie, though by no means one of my favorite people -- living or dead -- was an enigma impossible for me to ignore, even sans fee.

It had just gone for noon when Ollie had dragged himself into my morning room, and we had to wait until evening before any business would occur, so there was a bit of a pause.

At Ollie's request, Leech and I locked him up in the wine cellar until it was time to go.

"Don't want to eat your brains by accident," he said.

Damned decent of him I thought.

* * *

Once the sun was well and truly down, Ollie and I took a hansom to the Thames and strolled along the Chelsea Embankment, scanning the water. Well, I strolled. The best Ollie could manage was a sort of lurching stagger. Leech did not accompany us. A fine gentleman's gentleman in many ways, but he rather disapproves of my "escapades," as he calls them, and would rather stay at home and press my trousers.

Five minutes later Ollie raised his head like he was sniffing the wind.

"Picked up the scent, have you?" I asked.

He shuddered.

"Feel them. In my brain."

"Ah. Bit cramped in there, what?"

He limped off west. I followed.

“Yoiks! Tally ho!”

He ignored me.

I’d bundled Ollie up with a big muffler and a pair of tinted lenses so his flensed face wouldn’t cause a panic on the promenade. We still got our share of attention, though thankfully, mostly of the pitying kind. Mayfair matrons would turn to their solid, city husbands and whisper,

“Oh, the poor man.”

To which the male half of the act would rumble something about

“Our fallen heroes.”

Were I a more enterprising chap, I might have pinned a few medals on Ollie’s chest and done a brisk trade in the begging line.

Ollie stumbled to a stop. He turned toward the water like a heliotrope toward the sun. He was shaking again, harder now.

“There. Out there.”

I stepped to the stone balustrade and squinted into the darkness. Out in the middle of the river was a black shape, hard to make out against the general blackness, but it eventually resolved into the sort of small river barge the younger set are always throwing parties on, and then falling off.

“The barge? They’re on the barge?”

“Out there.”

“Oh. Well, probably on the barge then, eh?”

Ollie clutched his temples like the hero in a bad melodrama.

“Head. Full of snakes.”

“Steady on, old thing. Almost there.”

There were stone stairs leading down to a narrow dock just a little ways off. Burly rivermen stood smoking on it, standing by their punts and dinghies, waiting for trade. I signaled one.

“I say, my good man, how much to hire your coracle?”

He gave me a fishy eye.

“You leave me coracle out of this, guv’nor. I’m an honest boatman, I am. I’ll have no truck with that sort of business.”

I sighed.

“Terribly sorry, forgive me for using the Queen’s English. It is your boat I wish to hire.”

“Oh, well why didn’t you say so? A single silver shilling, sir. Come aboard.”

I guided Ollie down the steps, and with the riverman’s help, struggled him onto the boat.

“Everything all right with your friend, Squire?”

“Had one too many at the Bull and Gate.”

“Erm, well, just keep his head over the side. Don’t want any in the boat.”

“Don’t worry, my man. He’s past anything like that now. Pull for that barge out there.”

“Some sort of party, is it? You swells have all the fun.”

“I expect it’ll be a dead bore actually.”

The boatman rowed for the barge while I steadied Ollie on the bench. Ollie’s grumblings were getting worse. He jerked his head back and forth like a man with his hands tied trying to escape the attentions of a mosquito. I was starting to realize that it would have been smarter to leave the poor soul on the shore.

I opened my mouth to tell the boatman to turn around, when suddenly I saw that we had come close enough that I could pick out individual figures moving around on the barge. I couldn’t resist taking a peek before heading back. One was standing apart from the others, stock still. Another was running around, pointing and shouting. The rest were hauling at ropes and pulleys and whatnot.

I stood to get a better look. The ropes went down into the water.

“Do you know, Ollie, I believe they may have found whatever it was they were after.”

There was a big splash behind me, and a startled ‘Hoy!’ from the riverman.

I turned. Ollie was no longer with us. A spreading circle of ripples lapped at the gunwales of the boat. The boatman was in a panic.

“He jumped, Squire! I didn’t do nothing. I swear.”

He waved one of his oars at me.

“Take this, sir. Hurry. Maybe we can fish him out.”

“Not necessary, my good man.”

After my initial surprise it came to me pretty quickly the reason for Ollie’s plunge. We were now not a hundred yards from the mysterious barge. We had obviously come within range of his masters’ unearthly influence and he had heeded the call. Taking my third best muffler and my only pair of tinted lenses with him, by the by. The difficulty was explaining all this to the boatman.

“Not necessary, guv’nor? But he’ll drown!”

“Not at all, not at all. My friend is an excellent swimmer. He merely wishes to surprise our companions on yonder barge. His idea of a jest, you see. Carry on.”

“But he’s drunk as a lord -- er, begging your pardon, m’lord -- and fully clothed.”

“That’s nothing to Ollie. He once swam the Hellespont on three bottles of Madeira and a beaker of absinthe. He may drink like a fish, but he also swims like one. Now let us continue.”

“Lord sir, I don’t know. I don’t like to think I left a man to die in the Thames.”

“Trust me, honest boatman, there is absolutely no way Ollie will die here tonight. Now please, if we don’t hurry, we’ll ruin the surprise.”

The boatman gave me an uncertain look and reluctantly sat down again.

“As you say, m’lord, but I’ll not answer for the consequences.”

He pulled on his oars and started again for the barge, but I noticed he continued to search the water around the boat. Needless to say there was no sign of Ollie.

I had the boatman come at the barge from the back, behind the wheelhouse, so as to remain inconspicuous for as long as possible. Fortunately, the crew remained so intent on their task that our approach went unnoticed. Unfortunately, when my sturdy boatman got a better look at that crew and what they were up to he nearly turned tail and ran.

The motionless fellow and his order-giving companion were well-dressed coves, with domino masks they had apparently worn last at the Beaux Arts Ball covering the top halves of their faces. The poor toilers who were doing all the heavy work were obviously Ollie's companions in living death; a ragged work gang of rotting, waterlogged corpses, some with staved-in heads or missing limbs, or great chunks of flesh taken out of them.

There were more of them bobbing in the water next to the barge, helping to steady what looked to me to be a packing crate large enough to hold a parlor piano.

Our boat stopped about twenty feet from the barge's stern. I turned. My boatman was staring ahead, oars hanging listless in the water.

"That's bad business, that is, guv'nor. I'm a good Christian, I am. I won't have nothing to do with such goings on."

"And I don't blame you one bit, my man. Unfortunately, I'm obliged to have something to do with it. Now take me in."

"No, sir. I go no farther, sir."

"What if I make that shilling a pound?"

"Not for a million pounds, sir."

"How about five, and five more to stay until I'm ready to leave?"

"Done."

He picked up his oars again and rowed closer. He didn't like it -- his eyes were as round as billiard balls -- but, ten pounds, I mean to say. I'd kick the devil in the hindquarters for ten pounds and I'm dripping with money.

We pulled up against the stern and I crawled over the rail onto the aft deck. A dim lantern on the main deck threw the narrow walkways that ran alongside of the wheelhouse into deep shadow. I crouched down and inched forward.

The dead men were just now getting the big crate over the side. It teetered precariously on the rail, held by ropes and surrounded by the shuffling workmen. The active masked man, who was the chubbier of the two, ran around like a mother hen, squawking and flapping his arms, while his thinner companion stood off to one side and muttered to himself.

The corpses grabbed all around the edges of the crate and tried to lift it down to the deck, all the while slipping and sliding on the mud and ooze that dripped from it and themselves.

“Be careful, you imbeciles!” screamed Chubby. “Don’t hold it like that, you’ll...”

The dead men stopped holding it. The lead corner hit the deck with a thudding crack. The rest of the crate dropped right on the toes of the dead men. I winced in sympathy, but they didn’t require any. They didn’t feel a thing. They stood there with their feet as flat as a bobby’s, faces as expressionless as ever. Strange, but that made me shiver more than anything I’d seen that day.

The thin gent ceased his muttering for a moment.

“I say, old bean, you have to be careful what you tell them, what?”

“Terribly sorry, old top. It’s just that they’re so beastly stupid.”

“Well, they are dead, you know.”

“Yes yes, I know.” Chubby turned back to the dead men. “Right then, you ill-bred plebs, pick up the crate.”

The corpses lifted the crate with all the grace of puppets manipulated by a school-boy.

“Now put it back down again. Not on your feet!”

The dead men set it back down again, flat on the deck this time.

“Open it.”

I held my breath. Now we’d see what this was all about. The dead men pried at the wet planks of the crate with unnaturally strong bare hands. The wood cracked and split. A plank popped off, and another. I peered through the crowd of tattered bodies and splintering pine, but couldn’t get a clear look at what was showing through the gaps.

Finally, with a screeching of rusty nails, dead hands pulled a lid up and away. It spun over the side.

Chubby pushed in.

“Back, you vermin! Don’t touch it!”

The corpses stumbled back, revealing some kind of glistening black box. Ah, it is a piano, I thought, but no, too squat for that, and no legs. And it was made of marble. Not much call for marble pianos, not even in these decadent times. They’re hard enough to move as it is.

I took another squint. A coffin. A black marble coffin, with veins of red running through it. I might have guessed. It wasn't likely to have been a tea table with matching chairs for four, was it? Not the right sort of atmosphere for that sort of thing at all.

"Intruder! Masters!"

I turned. Ollie was half over the rail behind me, dripping wet and pointing at me like a tyke at a birthday party who's just won at 'Hunt the Slipper.' I'd been so engrossed with the goings on on deck that I hadn't heard him. Embarrassing, what? I felt a bit of a fool, I don't mind telling you.

The two masked gents turned and glared. They didn't seem happy to see me. I wasn't happy to be seen. One is never sure just what to say in these situations.

"Er... nice night for it, what?"

Apparently that wasn't it.

"Get him!" Chubby screamed.

Beanpole redoubled his muttering. He sounded like a cocaine addict preaching Latin mass in reverse. The dead men lumbered forward. Ollie embraced me from behind, pinning my arms in an iron grip.

"Oh, Ollie, you know not what thou hast done."

I said, quoting scripture, or Shakespeare or somebody. It was true enough. Within the masked mutterer's sphere of influence, Ollie was no longer his own man, or corpse, or whatever it was he was.

I laid about behind me with my stick, but what with the awkward angle, and my hands being pinned to my side, and the fact that Ollie was impervious to pain, it didn't do much good. Ollie's fellows were closing fast. Actually they were slower than an act of parliament, but caught as I was, that was plenty fast enough.

Ollie had advantages of supernatural strength and stoicism, but I should hope that I'm at least a touch more agile than a corpse. I surged forward, then quickly threw myself backward before Ollie could re-adjust. He fell back heavily, all my weight slamming into his chest. It didn't knock the wind out of him, for he had no wind to knock, but the impact did throw his arms apart.

I rolled away from him just as his comrades in death clustered around us. It was child's play to avoid them. It was like playing blind man's bluff with opium eaters. I dodged, I ducked, I pirouetted, I slipped on the slick smears of bottom muck they had tramped all over the deck and fell painfully on my nether regions.

Hands like stone claws grabbed my arms and legs. I struggled. It was useless. They held me fast and shuffled me into the presence of the chinless twins. They goggled at me from behind their domino masks.

Chubby spoke.

“Good Lord, Evelyn, it’s a gent!”

“Less of it, Aubrey, we mustn’t use our names. Incognito, what?”

“Oh! Yes, right. Terrible sorry. Slipped my mind. What do you suppose he’s up to, eh?”

“Well, why don’t you ask him?”

“Eh? Oh, yes. Jolly good.” Chubby -- that is Aubrey -- turned on me, scowling. “Right, then, you. What are you up to?”

I shrugged as best I could in the clutches of my decaying captors.

“Oh, er, just, you know, fooling about. Punting on the river. Came aboard to see if you chaps could spare a spot of plonk. Ran dry, don’t you know. Looked like a party.”

Beanpole -- Evelyn -- sneered.

“Punting, at this time of night? And where’s your boat?”

I tilted my head toward the back of the barge. I could just see my boatman disappearing into the darkness, rowing like the hounds of hell were after him. I cursed under my breath. Was this the Bulldog Spirit that had built the Empire? Was this the sturdy yeoman courage that had won the day at Agincourt? Was this what ten bob bought these days?

“Er, they must be trying the boat next door. Or, ah, going for the police.”

Aubrey laughed, causing his chin to recede into his neck even more than it already did. I was shocked. I wouldn’t have thought it was possible.

“We’ll be long gone before the police get here, old boy. We’ve got what we’ve come for. That which was lost has been recovered. The reign of blood shall begin anew.”

Evelyn coughed.

“Aubrey.”

“The time of the quickening is soon upon us.”

“Aubrey.”

“The age of the dark empire...”

“Aubrey!”

“You spoke, old thing?”

“Button it.”

“Oh, er, jolly good.”

Evelyn turned a baleful blue eye on me. Unbelievably he seemed to be wearing a monocle under his mask. It winked in the lamp light. Proof positive that class and taste don't necessarily walk hand in hand.

“Now tell these thickheads to kill him and let's be off home. We have work to do.”

“Right ho.”

Aubrey turned to the dead men.

“Okay, you lot. Kill him.”

“Oh, I say!” I yelped. “That's a bit much.”

Aubrey and Evelyn ignored me. Aubrey turned to the coffin. Evelyn began chanting again. Until that moment, the dead men had stood stock still, even less animated than they had appeared so far, but as Evelyn chanted they groaned and began to obey Aubrey's command. Fortunately for me they all seemed to have a different idea about how to kill me. Some attempted to throw me off the boat, others tried to punch me, while still others seemed to be doing their best to throttle me. This wasn't comfortable to say the least, but it wasn't deadly either. The various murder factions got in each other's way to such a degree that none of them was able to do much throwing, throttling or punching. This gave me a moment to think.

It seemed to me that Evelyn's chanting was a motivating force of some kind. It couldn't be what got them moving, or Ollie would never have come to see me. He would have been stuck at the bottom of the Thames. Maybe it was a way to focus them and keep them from thinking about eating brains long enough to obey Aubrey's orders. Maybe it made them suggestible. What ever it was, it would be better for me if I could make it stop.

I'm not the most accomplished of warlocks -- I certainly couldn't raise the dead like dear old E and A had done -- but being born with the old Asteroth blood running through my veins, no matter how weakly, does bring some advantages. The few spells and incantations I do know I can put across with a certain flair.

I racked my brain for something appropriate. Hair growth? Amusing, but not helpful. Mist? Cupid's Arrow? Wasting sickness? Very effective if one has a few months to spare, but not so efficacious here. Forget me not?

“Aubrey, you damned fool,” Evelyn shouted. “What the devil did you tell them?”

“I told them to kill him, like you said.”

“But you must be more specific. They're all in a muddle.”

“Well, if you can do it better, why don't you give them the orders?”

“Because I'm chanting the bloody incantation, aren't I?”

Aubrey pouted.

That was it. Cain and Abel, an enchantment of brotherly hate. As my old mentor Von Stuck told me time and time again, a mind is easier bent with the wind than against it. In other words, if they're fighting already, feed their fury.

I started rattling off the little Sanskrit ditty that would turn the trick. I only hoped I wouldn't be too late, for Aubrey had finished pouting and turned to the dead men.

“Fine. Tear him limb from limb. Is that specific enough for you?”

I finished the spell as the dead men started to pull at me from every angle. I felt like a cowhide being stretched on a drying rack. My joints popped. I made some undignified noises.

“You imbecile!” Barked Evelyn. “If they tear him limb from limb they'll get blood all over the boat. That's evidence.”

He turned to the dead men.

“Break his neck and throw him overboard.”

Then he quickly went back to chanting.

One of the corpses started to turn my head in an unnatural direction, but Aubrey shouted at him to stop.

“No! Don't!”

He rounded on Evelyn.

“What do you mean giving them orders? I was the one who was to give them orders.”

“And you’re a total failure at it.”

“I wouldn’t be if you’d just leave me be.”

The dead man had stopped twisting my neck, but remained frozen still holding my head at a rather alarming and painful angle. It made it difficult to concentrate on A and E’s conversation. It was difficult to concentrate on much of anything really. You would have thought the novel experience of looking down my own spine would have held the old interest, but the horrible, grinding pain rather got in the way.

Evelyn snapped at Aubrey.

“Well then, order them!”

“If you’re sure I’m good enough.”

Was this my spell working, or just A and E’s natural snottiness asserting itself? Its often hard to tell with the subtler enchantments. That’s why your better class of sorcerer is rarely found out. It’s only stage magicians who disappear in great puffs of smoke or blow things to flinders.

Evelyn was turning pink with fury.

“Would you get on with it and leave me to my chanting, you great fat oaf? This is all your fault in the first place!”

“My fault?” Aubrey bleated. “It wasn’t me who knocked the damn crate overboard!”

“It wouldn’t have fallen off if you’d secured it properly!”

“It was perfectly secured until someone I won’t mention went plowing into other boats.”

“You were the lookout!”

“I had trouble looking around that great conk of yours.”

“Blubber guts!”

“Weather vane.”

“Pig.”

“Stork.”

Ah, now this was the spell. They’d been reduced to the schoolyard in seconds flat. I could feel Evelyn’s concentration slipping away in the relaxation of the dead men’s hands. As A and E continued to trade nursery insults I pulled tentatively away from the fellows holding my arms, legs and head. They offered no resistance. They just stood there like cattle sleeping on their feet. I lowered myself quickly to the deck.

“It’s the fat in your head that’s the trouble,” Evelyn was screeching.

“I don’t know why I let you in on this in the first place.”

That was too high for Aubrey. He advanced on Evelyn, head down and shoulders hunched, like a rugby forward about to do his opposite number a bit of no good.

“You let me in? Who’s the one who went to Bohemia? Who’s the one who found the castle?”

He was shaking Evelyn by the lapels. Evelyn responded with a slap. Aubrey countered with a punch to the breadbasket.

Around me the dead men’s hands dropped to their sides. Their jaws hung slack. Now was my chance.

I tiptoed through the somnambulant corpses looking about for something heavy. A wood-and-iron pulley lay in a tangle of rope; debris from the dead men’s recent labors. I swiftly pulled the rope through until it was free. I hefted it. Awkward, but it would do.

E and A were staggering around like drunk dancers at a Croydon ballroom. I crept up on them. I might as well have marched, followed by a hundred piece brass band, for all the notice they took of me. The spell had done its work. They had eyes for no one but each other, and hands for nothing but each other’s throats.

I cocked the block and tackle back by my shoulder like a batsman waiting for the ball. Suddenly Evelyn stopped and looked at the aimless, milling corpses.

“My god, can’t you feel it? He’s glamoured us. A discord spell. We’ve got to...”

But his revelation came just a second too late. I swung at his occiput and the pulley connected with a satisfying thunk. Evelyn sagged in Aubrey’s arms. Aubrey looked up, the spell broken.

“You!”

“Forgot about me, did you?”

“You’re... you’re ruining it!”

He reached into his greatcoat and started to draw a pistol. I swatted it out of his hand with my sword cane, not bothering to draw.

“Careful, Aubrey, old boy. Those contraptions have moving parts. Leave that sort of thing to the higher---”

Someone said

“Brains.”

How rude. I resented being interrupted in the middle of a witticism. I glanced around, prepared to give someone a piece of my mind.

And that’s exactly what they wanted. Released from Evelyn’s mental shackles by my well-placed pulley, the dead men were getting lively. They stumbled toward us, arms outstretched.

Aubrey shrieked and backed away.

“You blithering madman, you’ve doomed us all!”

I drew my blade from my stick.

“Nonsense. You raised them. You must know how to put them down again.”

“Only the one who cast the spell can reverse it. We’re doomed, I tell you.”

I looked down at Evelyn. He wouldn’t be rejoining the ebb and flow of current events any time in the near future. He was lucky he was breathing.

“Any other way to dispatch them?”

“Cut off their heads. The heads control the bodies. Separate them and only the heads are animate.”

“And they won’t get far on their own, right. Well. Find yourself a head lopper and join me in the harvest.”

“Er, yes. Right with you.”

I stepped forward to meet the first wave. They weren't exactly Heidelberg material. There may have been deadly blades among them, but their skills had died with them and had not been resurrected along with their bodies. Strictly duffers, clawing and groping around like sleepwalking bears.

I slipped through them like the jolly old wind, slashing left and right, parting tete from corpse as neatly as Madame Guillotine herself. I felt almost guilty. Not quite sporting, is it? Like shooting a sitting bird, or challenging an American to a game of cricket. On the other hand they were trying to eat our brains, and they were already long dead. It wasn't as if I was committing murder.

The same could not be said for Aubrey. I had just decapitated a gentleman who may in life have been a country parson, or possibly a racetrack tout, and was winding up for a backhand shot at the neck of a fellow in the uniform of the Eighth Hussars, when I felt a savage shove from behind.

“You've got brain enough for all of them, you dirty swot.”

Aubrey. I stumbled forward, balance lost, blade flying out of my hand, and stumbled into the arms of one of the creatures. It grabbed me around the neck and shook me. I looked into its eyes, hoping for some remaining spark of humanity, some...

“Ollie!”

There was no light of recognition in those dead orbs.

“Brains!”

He didn't know me. His hunger had crowded out all other thought.

“Ollie, old man. It's me, Reggie. I'm here to help you, remember? To return you to the peace of the grave?”

Ollie growled. His fingers tightened on my neck, cutting off my wind. His mouth opened to bite.

“Ollie... please. Try to... remember. Kil... i... man... jaro.”

Ollie hesitated. His eyes focused. His fingers loosened. I breathed again.

“That's it, old fellow. You remember. You...”

He grunted and threw me aside with inhuman strength. I hit the rail and crashed to the deck, landing painfully on the pommel of my cane sword.

The dead men trooped by, following like carnivorous sheep in Ollie's wake. They caught up with Aubrey as he was trying to drag the unconscious Evelyn into the wheelhouse.

I couldn't see the end, and glad of it. The gangway that ran alongside the wheelhouse was narrow and filled with broad backs. All I saw were working shoulders and hands rising and falling as Aubrey's bellows turned to schoolgirl shrieks, and the groans of the living dead turned to roars of blood lust.

All at once there was a piercing wail. Evelyn -- a different key and timbre than Aubrey -- waking up to horror. But as quick as it started, the wail was cut off, like the closing of a stone door. And as the echoes died, so did the walking dead. They dropped where they stood, as if their strings had been cut, which in a way, they had. With Evelyn's death, their short, faux life had come to an end.

I stood wearily, retrieving my blade, and surveyed the pile of bodies with a mixture of disgust, pity and satisfaction. Disgust at the arrogance that had dared toy with the laws of death, pity for the poor souls that had to endure this vile parody of life, and satisfaction that Aubrey and Evelyn had been hoisted by their own petard.

"And that," I said, "Is jolly well that."

There was a sound of marble sliding across marble behind me. The black coffin was opening. The heavy lid screeched to the side and tipped. The edge hit the deck with a hollow thud.

"Oh damn."

That wasn't that after all. In all the excitement I'd forgotten about the coffin. I'd been so concerned about Ollie and his living dead companions that I'd lost sight of the fact that the dead men had merely been tools to find this gleaming ebon sarcophagus. This, at least as far as the late Evelyn and Aubrey had been concerned, was the whole and entire point of the evening.

Having experienced E and A's bungling attempts at evil, I hoped against hope that whatever it was that rose out of that coffin would be as feckless and ineffectual as they had been. Like so many of my hopes, this one turned belly up and rolled its eyes into its head at the first whiff of reality.

She stood from the stone box, swaying slightly, face covered with her hand, the very picture of a Bloomsbury morning after. She was dressed in a military-cut riding habit of black, with green and silver accents. She was whip thin, and when she dropped her hand and looked bleakly around, her face continued that simile, for it was as cruel and sharp and exquisite as a whip cut: dark, arched brows, wide set green eyes, a full mouth and a strong chin, all as pale as the face of a playing card queen.

I shivered. I had never encountered one before, but there could be no doubt what she was: a vampire. She was as yet weak -- vampires are not at their best crossing water, and this one had been, until recently, entombed in it-- but she was strengthening quickly. If she was allowed to reach the shore she might be unstoppable.

Her eyes fell on Aubrey and Evelyn, bits of whom were sticking out from under the pile of the newly dead undead. She sneered.

“Ach. They bungled it, yes?”

Her accent was German, or some variety of Teuton.

I drew my sword.

“I’m afraid so, fräulein. The best laid plans, and all that.”

She shrugged.

“No matter. They were fools. Mere implements to bring me here. There will be other consorts, stronger, more fit to rule.”

Her eyes focused on me for the first time.

“You, perhaps. Are you the one they spoke of?”

“I doubt it. We’d only just met.”

“Well, you will do. I can see already that you are less of an idiot than these poor idiots. Go. Pilot this craft to shore. I dislike the water and my hunger rises.”

I pointed my sword at her chest.

“Sorry old girl. I’m afraid that’s not on the agenda.”

She purred, something I didn’t think was possible with a German accent.

“Ah, a hero. How quaint.”

She stepped out of the coffin and crossed to me until the tip of my blade touched her black velvet pelisse, just below the sternum. Her eyes never left mine. They were mesmerizing; endless pools of green, like drowning in absinthe.

“I love heroes. Only the brave deserve the fair. Only the strong deserve the beautiful. I can see your strength, feel it through your blade. Are you brave as well? Will you conquer your fear and allow your desire? Will you have the courage to impale me?”

As she said it, she stepped forward again, and my steel sank into her abdomen. She shuddered as if in the grip of some intimate passion and licked her lips.

“Come to me, champion. Let me show you eternal love. Let me show you the night everlasting. What you know of love is nothing to the ecstasies of the intercourse of blood and souls.”

She took another step, gliding down my blade like an enraptured rope walker. No blood seeped from her wound.

“Kiss me and become a god.”

Her lips were inches from mine. Her scent, which should have been redolent of graves and the bottom of the Thames, was instead a heady mix of jasmine and vanilla. My heart pounded to my fingertips. It was with some effort that I shook my head.

“I say, old girl, that does sound frightfully exciting, but I’m afraid I’ll have to say a polite no thank you.”

Her eyes widened.

“You would refuse immortality?”

“Well, as I said, it’s awfully tempting, and I do admit to being something of a night owl. Many’s the time I’ve said good morning to the butter-and-egg man on the way home from some club or another, but to never see the day again? That’s a bit much, eh? I’m still partial to the occasional sunset, don’t you know? And afternoon tea just wouldn’t be afternoon tea at midnight, now would it? And, good lord! Racing season! I mean to say, it’s Derby Day, not Derby Night, what?”

The vampire laughed lightly. It sounded like glass chimes.

“Ah yes, the famous British humor. The understatement. But I see what is behind it. I have that power.”

She placed her finger on my chest.

“You British. You are like the flagellants of old. You deny the body for the enrichment of the soul. You resist me, for you believe that lust will cloud your mind and you will fail to defend your homeland. Admirable. A true hero. No mere swashbuckler, but an idealist, a lover of your country, of justice and your fellow man.”

All this with my blade buried a full two feet into her belly, mind you. She smiled as if we were discussing philosophy over cognac at the Savoy.

“I approve of this. My ancestors were just such heroes. Wrestling conquered lands back from the debauched Romans, carving a noble kingdom out of a chaos of tribes and blood feuds. Heroes want to change the world. Reshape it in their own image. Just as I do.”

“I hardly think our images of the world would coincide, madam.”

“Are you so sure?” Her voice was silk. “Why do you think I came to England? Because it’s a nation of shopkeepers, a flock of sheep waiting for the slaughter?”

“That was my general impression, yes.”

She ignored my interruption.

“England is a nation at peace. I come here as a refugee, fleeing from a war-torn land, and also, if you let me, as a savior, a ruler who can shape the world as no human queen can.”

I don’t know why I didn’t attack her right then and there, taking a swipe at dear old Vickie like that, but her voice was so soothing, so warm, I didn’t want her to stop talking.

She smiled.

“Tell me your vision. Don’t you thirst to right the wrongs of your land? Don’t you want to make England a better place? Rule by my side and it is yours to shape as a potter molds his clay. There is nothing you can’t do. Tell me.”

By Jove, I thought, she’s right. Think of the things I could do. I’d make those fools in parliament see sense. I could throw open the doors of the debtors’ prisons, close down the poorhouses, and give the underprivileged the jobs, homes and dignity they deserved. I could force the Home Rule Bill through Parliament and give Ireland back to the Irish at last.

And if that pack of petrified old skeletons didn’t like it, well, the new Queen would take care of that, wouldn’t she? She wouldn’t ask for much. Her title of blood would call for only a single sacrifice a day. A small price to pay for peace and stability, what? And parliament would be the first on the block. The old criminals, standing in the way of human decency and benevolent reform. Anybody who opposed that deserved to give their life for the greater good. That was the trouble with democracy; nothing ever got done. There were always a few old carcasses blocking the road of progress. It took a single man, a man of vision. A man...

I stopped and shook myself, as if waking from a dream. I raised an eyebrow at the vampire, trying to hide how shaken I was.

“I see you are an accomplished seducer, madam, but I still think I’ll give it a miss.”

“You’ll what?”

Her purr had turned into a bark.

“I know you now,” I said. “I know what you are. All your trappings of cosmopolitan elegance are just the thinnest veneer over your savage, skin-wearing Visigoth heart. You want the world bleeding at your feet like your kind always have. No matter what you say about righting wrongs and changing the world for the better, one sip from your poisoned cup and I’d become just the same as you, drowning my enemies in their own blood.”

Her eye flashed. She grinned, showing long white canines.

“Glorious, is it not?”

And with that she lunged at me, twisting her torso so that it wrenched my blade from my hand, and snapping at my neck with her razor-sharp teeth. Her strength, even in her relatively weakened state, was incredible. Only a fortuitous and totally involuntary flinch saved me from a shredded jugular. In my surprise I had thrown up the wooden sheath of my sword cane and it came between us. Her teeth clacked a hair’s-breadth from their target.

I shoved at her in terror. It was like pushing at an iron statue. I didn’t succeed in moving her an inch, but fortunately that meant that I pushed myself away from her. I staggered back, tripping over various bits of nautical debris.

She raised a classically sculpted brow and pulled my sword from her abdomen as if drawing it from a sheath.

“I have lived a long time, hero, and learned many things an Englishman might think unsuitable for a woman, but which I find absolutely imperative in the education of an empress. Engarde!”

She extended her arm and dropped into a perfect Italian guard.

I stuck out my hollow stick, feeling wholly inadequate.

“Madam, you have me at a disadvantage.”

“Was it I who drew on an unarmed woman?”

She leapt. She was blindingly fast and abominably strong. I have trained in the finest fencing schools in Europe, but it was all I could do to fend off her attacks. Attempting an attack of my own would have been suicide. I was immediately cut in three places and the scent of my blood seemed to arouse her even more.

My stick was battered and splintered with each brutal parry. If I hadn't managed to angle it at each touch she would have cut it in half as easily as scissors cut paper.

The thought germinated an idea. There was a way to win, but I only had one chance at it. The trick wouldn't work twice, for I would most likely be dead even if it succeeded.

She slashed at my head. I blocked with the stick, but not at as shallow an angle as I had previously. The blade bit into the wood and sheared off the lower third of the stick, leaving a long sharp shard of raw oak.

I could see the light of understanding spark in her eyes as she realized what I intended. I thrust, leaving myself wide open for her counter attack. It was the only way of being sure I'd strike home, but also certain death. The sharpened end of the cane plunged into her heart and I waited to be killed by my own sword.

I was not. The surprise of it must have jarred her aim. The blade bit deep into my arm.

She sagged. She bled. Blood welled from her wound and spilled from her mouth. In answer, my sleeve became sodden with my blood.

Her head lifted. She sneered at me, eyes half closed.

“Verdammt English. Always so damned clever.”

She slid wetly off the broken cane and flopped to the deck, her supernatural grace gone in this final, true death.

I looked down at her, ridiculously overcome with regret.

“Damn shame, a looker like that. Ah well, probably too old for me anyway.”

I retrieved my blade from her limp fingers, then bound my wound with strips from my shirt. I was just about to enter the wheelhouse and make an attempt to decipher the mysteries of the boiler and the wheel when there was a cry from the dark water.

“Ahoy, the barge!”

I looked out over the rail. It was my cowardly river man, come back for his second five pounds.

“Everything alright, squire? All squared away?”

“Craven recreant, you were told to stay by the barge.”

“Some strong currents out here, guv’nor. I was carried away, like.”

“As fast as your oars could take you. Never mind. Never mind. Pull alongside there, but don’t come up. There’s nothing here your faint heart would care to see.”

“No fear of that, sir.”

While he angled himself parallel to the barge I extracted Ollie from the pile of bodies and dragged him across the deck. Even alive it would have been a task to lift him. Now he gave new meaning to the words dead weight. I struggled him up onto the rail.

“Here. Ease him down.”

The boatman blanched.

“But... but he’s dead, sir.”

“No more dead than he was before. At least now he won’t jump over the side.”

“No sir.”

Between the two of us we got Ollie down into the little boat. I left the others as they were. The authorities would come along sometime after sun-up to see what was amiss. Why not leave them a little mystery? Do them good to realize that not everything can be solved with fingerprints and evidence.

I doubted they would find my deadly Bohemian beauty, or not much of her anyway. I didn’t think she’d last much past sunrise.

I looked down at Ollie.

“There you are, old boy. Case closed. Or nearly.”

The riverman eyed Ollie’s body uneasily.

“Where to, squire?”

“Hmmm? Oh, yes. I’ll be going back to the Chelsea Embankment, but old Ollie here will be checked through to Kilimanjaro.”

“Kill-a-man-who, sir?”

“Never mind, never mind. Carry on.”