
EXPEDITION TO THE
MOUNTAINS
OF THE MOON

MARK HODDER

PRESENTS

BURTON & SWINBURNE

in

EXPEDITION TO THE MOUNTAINS OF THE MOON

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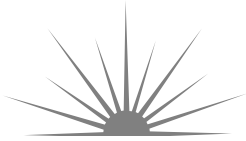

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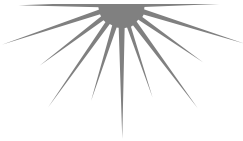

"Time discovers truth."
—Seneca

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I began writing these tales of Burton & Swinburne, I couldn't help but worry that I might be insulting the memory of men and women who, by virtue of their hard work and astonishing talents, had made their mark on history.

My concerns were assuaged when enthusiastic readers told me that, while reading my novels, they repeatedly consulted *Wikipedia* and other sources to learn more about the real lives of the people I had "hijacked."

This delights me. It means, for example, that PC53 William Trounce might now be recognised by a few more as the hero who stepped up to the mark when John Francis tried to assassinate Queen Victoria in 1842 (and yes, I meddled with that historical fact). It means a greater awareness of Richard Spruce, who, despite being treated as a villain in these works, was in truth a quiet and unassuming man possessed of sheer genius in the subject of botany. It means more people turning to Swinburne's astonishing poetry, more people marvelling at Lord Palmerston's political astuteness, more people wondering whether Samuel Gooch really existed, then finding out that he did, and that he was amazing.

This, I hope, will be considered by any descendants of the characters herein who might feel offended by my treatment of them. Please note that these novels are *very obviously* flights of utter fancy and very definitely *not* biography. My alternative histories are places where individuals have encountered different challenges and opportunities to those met in real life, and have thus developed into very, very different people. They should not be in any way regarded as accurate depictions of those who actually lived.

In this volume, my account of Africa circa 1863 follows closely the descriptions left to us by Sir Richard Francis Burton himself. His *The Lake Regions of Central Africa* (1860) is, in my opinion, by far the most fascinating journal of any of the Victorian explorers. Burton tended to adopt his own

spelling for villages, towns, and regions, and throughout the African chapters I've retained his version of place-names.

Finally, my thanks and deepest appreciation to Lou Anders, Emma Barnes, and Jon Sullivan.

THE VOYAGE TO AFRICA

"One of the gladdest moments in human life, methinks, is the departure upon a distant journey to unknown lands. Shaking off with one mighty effort the fetters of Habit, the leaden weight of Routine, the cloak of many Cares and the Slavery of Home, man feels once more happy. The blood flows with the fast circulation of childhood... afresh dawns the morn of life...."

—Sir Richard Francis Burton's journal,
2nd December, 1856.

CHAPTER 1

MURDER AT FRYSTON

"The future influences the present just as much as the past."
—Friedrich Nietzsche

Sir Richard Francis Burton wriggled beneath a bush at the edge of a thicket in the top western corner of Green Park, London, and cursed himself for a fool. He should have realised that he'd lose consciousness. He should have arrived earlier to compensate. Now the whole mission was in jeopardy.

He lay flat for a moment, until the pain in his side abated, then hefted his rifle and propped himself up on his elbows, aiming the weapon at the crowd below. He glanced at the inscription on its stock. It read: *Lee–Enfield Mk III. Manufactured in Tabora, Africa, 1918.*

Squinting through the telescopic sight, he examined the faces of the people gathering around the path at the bottom of the slope.

Where was his target?

His eyes blurred. He shook his head slightly, trying to dispel an odd sense of dislocation, the horrible feeling that he was divided into two separate identities. He'd first experienced this illusion during fevered bouts of malaria in Africa back in '57, then again four years later, when he was made the king's agent. He thought he'd conquered it. Perhaps he had. After all, this time there really were two of him.

It was the afternoon of the 10th of June, 1840, and a much younger Richard Burton was currently travelling from Italy through Europe, on his way to enrol at Trinity College, Oxford.

Recalling that wayward, opinionated, and ill-disciplined youngster, he whispered, "Time changed me, thank goodness. The question is, can I return the favour?"

He aimed from face to face, seeking the man he'd come to shoot.

It was a mild day. The gentlemen sported light coats and top hats, and carried canes. The ladies were adorned in bonnets and dainty gloves and held parasols. They were all waiting to see Queen Victoria ride past in her carriage.

He levelled the crosshairs at one person after another. Young Edward Oxford was somewhere among the crowd, an insane eighteen-year-old with two flintlock pistols under his frock coat and murder on his mind. But Burton was not here to gun down the queen's would-be assassin.

"Damnation!" His hands were shaking. Lying stretched out like this would have been uncomfortable for any man his age—he was forty-seven years old—but it was made far worse by the two ribs the prime minister's man, Gregory Hare, had broken. They felt like a knife in his side.

He shifted cautiously, trying not to disturb the bush. It was vital that he remain concealed.

A face caught his attention. It was round, decorated with a large moustache, and possessed a palpable air of arrogance. Burton had never seen the individual before—at least not with this appearance—but he knew him: Henry de La Poer Beresford, 3rd Marquess of Waterford, called by many the "Mad Marquess." The man was the founder of the Libertines, a politically influential movement that preached freedom from social shackles and which passionately opposed technological progress. Three years from now, Beresford was going to lead a breakaway group of radicals, the Rakes, whose anarchic philosophy would challenge social propriety. The marquess believed that the human species was restricting its own evolution; that each individual had the potential to become a *trans-natural man*, a being entirely free of restraint, with no conscience or self-doubt, a thing that did whatever it wanted, whenever it wanted. It was a dangerous idea—the Great War had proved that to Burton—but not one that concerned him at this particular moment.

"I'll be dealing with you twenty-one years from now," he murmured.

A distant cheer echoed across the park. The gates of Buckingham Palace had opened and the royal carriage was steering out onto the path.

"Come on!" Burton whispered. "Where are you?"

Where was the man he'd come to kill?

Where was Spring Heeled Jack?

He peered through the 'scope. The scene he saw through its lens was incomprehensible. Shapes, movement, shadows, deep colours; they refused to coalesce into anything of substance. The world had shattered, and he was splintered and scattered among its debris.

Dead. Obviously, he was dead.

No. Stop it. This won't do. Don't submit to it. Not again.

He closed his eyes, dug his fingernails into his palms, and pulled his lips back over his teeth. By sheer force of will, he located the disparate pieces of himself and drew them together, until:

Frank Baker. My name is Frank Baker.

Good. That felt familiar.

He smelled cordite. Noise assaulted his ears. The air was hot.

Frank Baker. Yes. The name had slipped from his mouth in response to a medic's query.

"And what are you, Mr. Baker?"

A strange question.

"An observer."

An equally strange answer. Like the name, it had come out of nowhere, but the overworked medics were perfectly satisfied with it.

Spells of nothingness had followed. Fevers. Hallucinations. Then recovery. They'd assumed he was with the civilian Observer Corps, and placed him under the charge of the short squeaky-voiced individual currently standing at his side.

What else? What else? What were those things I was looking at?

He opened his eyes. There wasn't much light.

He became aware of something crushed in his fist, opened his hand, looked down at it, and found that he was holding a red poppy. It felt important. He didn't know why. He slipped it into his pocket.

Pushing the brim of his tin helmet back, he wiped sweat from his forehead, then lifted the top of his periscope over the lip of the trench and peered through its viewfinder again. To his left, the crest of a bloated sun was melting into a horizon that quivered in the heat, and ahead, in the gathering gloom, seven towering, long-legged arachnids were picking their way through the red weed that clogged no-man's-land. Steam was billowing from their exhaust funnels, pluming stark white against the darkening purple sky.

Harvestmen, he thought. *Those things are harvestmen spiders bred to a phenomenal size by the Technologists' Eugenicist faction. No, wait, not Eugenicists—they're the enemy—our lot are called Geneticists. The arachnids are grown and killed and gutted and engineers fit out their carapaces with steam-driven machinery.*

He examined the contraptions more closely and noted details that struck him as different—but different from what? There were, for instance, Gatling guns slung beneath their small bodies, where Baker expected to see cargo nets. They swivelled and glinted and flashed as they sent a hail of bullets into the German trenches, and their metallic clattering almost drowned out the chug of

the vehicles' engines. The harvestmen were armour-plated, too, and each driver, rather than sitting on a seat fitted inside the hollowed-out body, was mounted on a sort of saddle on top of it, which suggested that the space inside the carapace was filled with bigger, more powerful machinery than—than—

What am I comparing them with?

"Quite a sight, isn't it?" came a high-pitched voice.

Baker cleared his throat. He wasn't ready to communicate, despite a vague suspicion that he'd already done so—that he and the small man beside him had made small talk not too many minutes ago.

He opened his mouth to speak, but his companion went on: "If I were a poet, I might do it justice, but it's too much of a challenge for a mere journalist. How the devil am I to describe such an unearthly scene? Anyone who hasn't actually witnessed it would think I'm writing a scientific romance. Perhaps they'll call me the new Jules Verne."

Think! Come on! String together the man's words. Break the back of the language. Glean meaning from it.

He sucked in a breath as a memory flowered. He was on a bed in the field hospital. There was a newspaper in his hands. He was reading a report, and it had been written by this short, plump little fellow.

Yes, that's it. Now speak, Baker. Open your mouth and speak!

"You'll manage," he said. "I read one of your articles the other day. You have a rare talent. Who's Jules Verne?"

He saw the little man narrow his eyes and examine him through the twilight, trying to make out his features.

"A French novelist. He was killed during the fall of Paris. You haven't heard of him?"

"I may have," Baker answered, "but I must confess, I remember so little about anything that I'm barely functional."

"Ah, of course. It's not an uncommon symptom of shell shock, or of fever, for that matter, and you suffered both severely by all accounts. Do you know why you were in the Lake Regions?"

The Lake Regions? They are in—they are in Africa! This is Africa!

"I haven't the foggiest notion. My first recollection is of being borne along on a litter. The next thing I knew, I was here, being poked at by the medical staff."

The journalist grunted and said, "I did some asking around. The men from the Survey Corps found you near the western shore of the Ukerewe Lake, on the outskirts of the Blood Jungle. A dangerous place to be—always swarming with Germans. You were unarmed, that odd glittering hieroglyph appeared to have been freshly tattooed into your head, and you were ranting like a madman."

Hieroglyph?

Baker reached up, pushed his hand beneath his helmet, and ran his fingers through his short hair. There were hard ridges in his scalp.

"I don't remember any of that."

I don't remember. I don't remember. I don't remember.

"The surveyors wanted to take you to Tabora but the route south was crawling with lurchers, so they legged it east until they hooked up with the battalions gathering here. You were in and out of consciousness throughout the hike but never lucid enough to explain yourself."

The correspondent was suddenly interrupted by the loud "Ulla! Ulla!" of a siren. It was a harvestman spider signalling its distress. He turned his attention back to his periscope and Baker followed suit.

One of the gigantic vehicles had become entangled. Scarlet tendrils were coiling around its stilt-like legs, snaking up toward the driver perched high above the ground. The man was desperately yanking at the control levers in an attempt to shake the writhing plant from his machine. He failed. The harvestman leaned farther and farther to its left, then toppled over, dragged down by the carnivorous weed. The siren gurgled and died. The driver rolled from his saddle, tried to stand, fell, and started to thrash about. He screeched as plant pods burst beneath his weight and sprayed him with acidic sap. His uniform erupted into flames and the flesh bubbled and fizzled from his bones. It took less than a minute for the weed to reduce him to a naked skeleton.

"Poor sod," the little man muttered. He lowered his surveillance instrument and shook dust from his right hand. "Did you see the weed arrive yesterday? I missed it. I was sleeping."

"No."

"Apparently a thin ribbon of cloud, like a snake, blew in from the sea and rained the seeds. The plant sprouted overnight and it's been growing ever since. It appears quite impassable. I tell you, Baker, those blasted Hun sorcerers know their stuff when it comes to weather and plants. It's how they still drum hundreds of thousands more Africans into the military than we do. The tribes are so superstitious, they'll do anything you say if they believe you can summon or prevent rain and grow them a good crop. Colonel Crowley is having a tough time opposing them—the sorcerers, I mean."

Baker struggled to process all this. Sorcerers? Plants? Weather control?

"Crowley?" he asked.

The shorter man raised his eyebrows. "Good lord! Your brain really is shot through! Colonel Aleister Crowley. Our chief medium. The wizard of wizards!"

Baker said nothing.

The correspondent shrugged in bafflement, pressed up against the side of

the trench as a line of troops pushed past, chuckled as a sergeant said, with a grin and a wink, "Keep your heads down, gents, I don't want holes in those expensive helmets," then turned back to his 'scope. Baker watched this and struggled to overcome his sense of detachment.

I don't belong here. I don't understand any of it.

He wiped his sleeve across his mouth—the atmosphere was thick with humidity and he was sweating profusely—then put his eye to his periscope's lens.

Two more of the harvestmen were being pulled down into the wriggling flora. He said, "How many men must die before someone orders the blasted vehicles to pull back?"

"We won't retreat," came the answer. "This is our last chance. If we can capture German resources in Africa, we might be able to launch some sort of counterattack in Europe. If not, we're done for. So we'll do whatever it takes, even if it means pursuing forlorn hopes. Look! Another one has gone down!"

The three remaining harvestmen set their sirens screaming: "Ulla! Ulla! Ulla! Ulla!"

The journalist continued, "Terrible racket. One could almost believe the damned spiders are alive and terrified."

Baker shook his head slightly. "Strictly speaking, they're not spiders. Spiders are of the order *Aranaea*, whereas harvestmen are *Opiliones*."

How do I know that?

The war correspondent snorted. "They're not of any order now—not since our Technologists scraped 'em out!"

All along the British trenches, men started to blow on whistles.

"Damn! Here comes our daily dose of spores. Get your mask on."

Baker moved without thinking about it. His hands went to his belt, opened a canvas container, pulled out a thick rubber mask, and slid it over his face. He and his companion looked at each other through circular glass eyepieces.

"I hate the smell of these things," the smaller man said, his voice muffled. "And they make me claustrophobic. Far too stifling an item to wear in this infernal climate. What say we go back to the dugout for a brew? It's getting too dark for us to see much more here anyway. Time for a cuppa! Come on!"

Baker took a last glance through his periscope. His mask's eyepieces blurred the scene, and Africa's fast-descending night obscured it even further, but he could just make out that on the far side of the weed a thick yellow cloud was advancing, appearing luminescent against the inky sky. He shivered, turned, and followed the other along the front-line trench, into a communications ditch, and back to one of the dugouts. They passed masked soldiers—mostly Askari, African recruits, many of them barely out of childhood—who sat despondently, waiting to go over the top.

The two men arrived at a doorway, pushed a heavy curtain aside, and entered. They removed their helmets and face gear.

"Make sure the curtain is hooked back into place, it'll keep the spores out. I'll get us some light," the journalist said.

Moments later, a hurricane lamp illuminated the small underground bunker. It was sparsely furnished with two wooden beds, two tables, three chairs, and a couple of storage chests.

"Ugh!" Baker grunted. "Rats!"

"Nothing we can do about 'em. The little blighters are everywhere. They're the least of your problems. In a couple of days, that nice clean uniform of yours will be infested with lice and you'll feel like you're being eaten alive. Where's the bloody kettle? Ah, here!"

The little man got to work with a portable stove. In the light, his eyes were revealed to be a startling blue.

Baker stepped to the smaller of the two tables, which stood against the wall. There was a washbasin on it and a square mirror hanging on a nail just above. He sought his reflection but for some reason couldn't focus on it. Either his eyes wouldn't let him see himself, or he wasn't really there.

He moved to the other table, in the middle of the dugout, and sat down.

"The spores," he said. "What are they? Where do they come from?"

"They're more properly called A-Spores. The Hun propagate giant mushrooms, a eugenically altered version of the variety commonly known as the Destroying Angel, or *Amanita bisporigera*, if you prefer your botany, like your entomology, in Latin. It's deadly, and so are its spores. Breathe them in and within seconds you'll experience vomiting, cramps, delirium, convulsions, and diarrhoea. You'll be dead in less than ten minutes."

"Botanical weapons? The weed and now the mushroom spores. How horribly ingenious!"

The other man looked back at Baker with an expression of puzzlement. "It's common knowledge that the Germans use mostly plant-based armaments, surely? And occasional animal adaptations."

"Is it? I'm sorry. As I said, my amnesia is near total. You mentioned something called *lurchers*?"

"Ah. Hum. Yes. Carnivorous plants. They were one of the first weapons the Germans developed. Originally they were battle vehicles, used throughout Africa. Then one day they spontaneously mutated and consumed their drivers, which somehow resulted in them gaining a rudimentary intelligence. After that they spread rapidly and are now a danger to both sides. If you see one, and there isn't a flamethrower handy, run for your life. They're particularly prevalent in the Lake Regions, where you were found." The

journalist paused, then added, "I didn't realise your memory was quite so defective. What about physically? How are you feeling?"

"Weak, but improving, and the ophthalmia has cleared up. I was half-blind when I regained consciousness in the hospital. That confounded ailment has plagued me on and off ever since India."

"You were in India?"

Baker frowned and rubbed his chin. "I don't know. That just popped into my head. Yes, I feel I may have been."

"India, by crikey! You should have stayed there. It might turn out to be the last bastion of civilisation on the whole bloody planet! Is that where you joined the Corps?"

"I suppose so."

There came a distant boom, then another, and another. The ground shook. The journalist glanced at the ceiling.

"Artillery. Peashooters. Firing from the outskirts of Dar es Salaam."

Baker muttered to himself, "Derived from *bandar es-salaam*, I should think. Ironic. It means *harbour of peace*." Aloud, he said: "The landscape and climate feel familiar to me. Are we south of Zanzibar? Is there a village in the area called Mzizima?"

"Hah! Mzizima and Dar es Salaam are one and the same, Baker! Incredible, isn't it, that the death of the British Empire had its origins in such an insignificant little place, and now we're back here."

"What do you mean?"

"It's generally believed that this is where the Great War began. Have you forgotten even that?"

"Yes, I fear I have. It began in Mzizima? How is that possible? As you say, it's an insignificant little place!"

"So you recall what Dar es Salaam used to be, at least?"

"I remember that it was once nothing more than a huddle of beehive huts."

"Quite so. But that huddle was visited by a group of German surveyors a little over fifty years ago. No one knows why they came, or what occurred, but for some reason, fighting broke out between them and Al-Manat."

"The pre-Islamic goddess of fate?"

"Is she, by gum! Not the same one, old chap. Al-Manat was the leader of a band of female guerrilla fighters. It's rumoured she was British but her true identity is shrouded in mystery. She's one of history's great enigmas. Anyway, the fighting escalated, Britain and Germany both sent more troops here, and Mzizima became the German East Africa Company's stronghold. The *Schutztruppe*—the Protection Force—formed there some forty years ago and

rapidly expanded the settlement. It was renamed Dar es Salaam and the place has been thriving ever since. A situation our lads will reverse this weekend."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, my friend, that on Saturday, HMA *Pegasus* and HMA *Astraea* are going to bomb the city to smithereens."

More explosions thumped outside. They were increasing in frequency. Everything shook. Baker glanced around nervously.

"Green peas," his companion noted.

"You can tell just from the noise?"

"Yes. Straightforward impact strikes, like big cannonballs. The yellow variety explode when they hit and send poisonous shrapnel flying everywhere. They annihilated millions of our lads in Europe, but, fortunately, the plants don't thrive in Africa."

Baker's fingers were gripping the edge of the table. The other man noticed, and reassured him: "We'll be all right. They take an age to get the range. Plus, of course, we're noncombatants, which means we're permitted to shelter in here, unlike the enlisted men. We'll be safe unless one of the blighters lands right on top of us, and the chances of that happening are very slim indeed."

He got the kettle going and they sat wordlessly, listening to the barrage until the water boiled, then he spooned tea leaves into a metal pot and grumbled, "Rations are low."

Baker noticed that his companion kept glancing back at him. He felt an inexplicable urge to duck out of the light, but there was no refuge from it. He looked on helplessly as the other man's face suddenly displayed a range of emotions in sequence: curiosity, perplexity, realisation, incredulity, shock.

The smaller man remained silent until the tea had brewed, then filled two tin mugs, added milk and sugar, handed one to Baker, sat down, blew the steam from his drink, and, raising his voice above the sound of pounding shells, asked: "I say, old chap, when did you last shave?"

Baker sighed. He murmured, "I wish I had a cigar," put a hand into his pocket, and pulled out the poppy. He stared at it and said, absently, "What?"

"Your most recent shave. When was it?"

"I don't know. Maybe three days ago? Why do you ask?"

"Because, my dear fellow, that stubble entirely ruins your disguise. Once bearded or moustachioed, your features become instantly recognisable. They are every bit as forceful as reported, every bit as ruthless and masterful! By golly, those sullen eyes! That iron jaw! The savage scar on your cheek!"

Baker snapped, "What the devil are you blathering about?"

"I'm talking of the completely impossible and utterly incredible—but also of the perfectly obvious and indisputable!" The journalist grinned. He had to

shout now—the barrage was battering violently at their ears. "Come come! I'll brook no denial, sir! I'm no fool. It's out of the question that you could be anyone else, even though it makes no sense at all that you are who you are."

Baker glowered at him.

The other shouted, "Perhaps you'd care to explain? I assure you, I'm unusually open-minded, and I can keep a secret, if you want to impose that as a condition. My editor would never believe me anyway."

There was a detonation just outside. The room jerked. The tea slopped. Baker started, recovered himself, and said loudly, "I really don't know what you're talking about."

"Then allow me to make it clear. Frank Baker is most assuredly not your name."

"Isn't it?"

"Ha-ha! So you admit that you may not be who you say you are?"

"The name occurred to me when I was asked, but I'm by no means certain that it's correct."

Baker flinched as another impact rocked the room.

"Fair enough," the journalist shouted. "Well then, let us make proper introductions. I was presented to you as Mr. Wells. Drop it. No need for such formality. My name is Herbert. Herbert George. War Correspondent for the *Tabora Times*. Most people call me Bertie, so please feel free to do the same. And, believe me, I am both astonished and very happy to meet you." He held out his hand and it was duly clasped and shaken. "Really, don't worry about the shelling, we are much safer in here than it feels. The Hun artillery is trying for the support trenches rather than the front line. They'll gain more by destroying our supplies than by knocking off a few of the Askaris."

Baker gave a curt nod. His mouth worked silently for a moment. He kept glancing at the poppy in his hand, then he cleared his throat and said, "You know me, then? My actual name?"

"Yes, I know you," Wells replied. "I've read the biographies. I've seen the photographs. I know all about you. You are Sir Richard Francis Burton, the famous explorer and scholar. I cannot be mistaken." He took a sip of his tea. "It makes no sense, though."

"Why not?"

"Because, my dear fellow, you appear to be in your mid-forties, this is 1914, and I happen to know that you died of old age in 1890!"

Baker—Burton—shook his head. "Then I can't be who you think I am," he said, "for I'm neither old nor dead."

At which point, with a terrible blast, the world came to an end.

The world came to an end for Thomas Bendyshe on New Year's Day, 1863. He was dressed as the Grim Reaper when he died. A committed and outspoken atheist, his final words were: "Oh God! Oh, sweet Jesus! Please, Mary mother of God, save me!"

His fellow members of the Cannibal Club later blamed this uncharacteristic outburst on the fact that strychnine poisoning is an extremely painful way to go.

They were gathered at Fryston—Richard Monckton Milnes's Yorkshire manor house—for a combined New Year and farewell fancy dress party. The farewell wasn't intended for Bendyshe—his demise was utterly unforeseen—but for Sir Richard Francis Burton and his expedition, which was leaving en route for Africa later in the week.

Fryston, which dated from the Elizabethan Age, lacked a ballroom but behind its stone-mullioned windows there were many spacious oak-panelled chambers, warmed by inglenook fireplaces, and these were filled with costumed guests. They included the Pre-Raphaelite artists, leading Technologists, authors and poets and actors, government ministers, Scotland Yard officials, and members of the Royal Geographical Society. A number of high-ranking officers from His Majesty's Airship *Orpheus* were in attendance, and among the female notables were Miss Isabella Mayson, Sister Sadhvi Raghavendra, Mrs. Iris Angell, and the famous Eugenicist—now Geneticist—Nurse Florence Nightingale, making for a very well-attended soiree, such as Monckton Milnes was famous for.

In the smoking room, Bendyshe, in a black hooded cloak and a skull mask, spent the minutes leading up to his death happily pranking the Greek god Apollo. The diminutive flame-haired Olympian, actually the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, dressed in a toga, with a laurel wreath upon his head and the gold-tipped arrow of Eros pushed through his waistband, was standing near a bay window with the Persian King Shahryār, Oliver Cromwell, Harlequin, and a cavalier; otherwise Sir Richard Francis Burton, the Secretary for War Sir George Cornewall Lewis, Monckton Milnes, and the Technologist captain of the *Orpheus*, Nathaniel Lawless.

Swinburne had just received a full glass of brandy from a passing waiter, who, like all the staff, was dressed in a Venetian *Medico Della Peste* costume, complete with its long-beaked bird mask. The poet took a gulp, placed the glass on an occasional table at his side, and turned back to Captain Lawless, saying: "But isn't it rather a large crew? I was under the impression that rotorships are flown by seven or eight, not—how many?"

"Counting myself," the captain replied, "there are twenty-six, and that's not even a full complement."

"My hat! How on earth do you keep yourselves occupied?"

Lawless laughed, his pale-grey eyes twinkling, his straight teeth whiter even than his snowy, tightly clipped beard. "I don't think you've quite grasped the size of the *Orpheus*," he said. "She's Mr. Brunel's biggest flying machine. A veritable titan. When you see her tomorrow, I'll wager she'll take your breath away."

The Technologist Daniel Gooch joined the group. As always, he was wearing a harness from which two extra mechanical arms extended. Swinburne had already expressed the opinion that the engineer should have outfitted himself as a giant insect. As a matter of fact, though, Gooch was dressed as a Russian Cossack. He said, "She's magnificent, Mr. Swinburne. Luxurious, too. Designed for passenger cruises. She'll carry the expedition, the supplies, and both your vehicles, with plenty of room to spare."

Bendyshe, standing just behind the poet, with his back to him and conversing with Charles Bradlaugh—who was done up as Dick Turpin—surreptitiously took the brandy glass from the table. He slipped it beneath his mask, drained it in a single gulp, put it back, and winked at Bradlaugh through his mask's right eye socket.

"Are all the crew positions filled, Captain?" Burton asked. "I hear you had some problems."

Lawless nodded. "The two funnel scrubbers supplied to us by the League of Chimney Sweeps proved rather too young and undisciplined for the job. They were playing silly beggars in the ventilation pipes and caused some considerable damage. I dismissed them at once." He addressed Gooch, who was serving as chief engineer aboard the vessel: "I understand the replacements will join us at Battersea?"

"Yes, sir, and they'll bring with them a new length of pipe from the League." One of his mechanical hands dipped into his jacket pocket and withdrew a notebook. He consulted it and said, "Their names are William Cornish and Tobias Threadneedle."

"Nippers?"

"Cornish is a youngster, sir. Apparently Mr. Threadneedle is considerably older, though I expect he'll prove childishly small in stature, like all his kind."

Unable to stop himself, Gooch glanced down at Swinburne, who poked out his tongue in response.

"A master sweep, no doubt," Burton offered. "I believe the Beetle is attempting to incorporate their Brotherhood into the League." He paused, then said, "Where have I heard the name William Cornish before?"

"From me," Swinburne answered, in his high, piping voice. "I know him. And a fine young scamp he is, too, though rather too eager to spend his

evenings setting traps in graveyards in the hope of catching a resurrectionist or two!" He reached for his glass, raised it to his lips, started, looked at it ruefully, and muttered, "Blast!" He signalled to a waiter.

"Resurrectionists? The Beetle? Pipes? What in heaven's name are we talking about?" Cornewall Lewis exclaimed.

Burton answered, "The Beetle is the rather mysterious head of the sweeps' organisation. A boy. Very intelligent and well read. He lives in a factory chimney."

"Good Lord!"

Swinburne took another glass of brandy from the waiter, sipped it, and placed it on the table.

"I never met the Beetle," he said, "but I worked with Willy Cornish when I served under a master sweep named Vincent Sneed during Richard's investigation of the Spring Heeled Jack affair. Sneed was a vicious big-nosed lout whom I had the misfortune to bump into again during last summer's riots. I knocked the wind out of the swine."

"You fell on top of him," Burton corrected.

Unseen, Bendyshe took the poet's glass, swallowed almost all of its contents, and slid it back into position.

Bradlaugh whispered to him, "Are you sure that's wise, old man? You'll end up sloshed if you're not careful!"

"Nonshence," Bendyshe slurred. "I'm jober as a sudge."

Monckton Milnes turned to Lawless. "What exactly does a funnel scrubber do?"

"Normally, he'll be based at a landing field," the aeronaut answered, "and is responsible for keeping a ship's smoke and steam outlets clean and free of obstruction. However, in the bigger vessels, which fly at a higher altitude, extensive internal pipe systems circulate warm air to ensure that a comfortable temperature is maintained in every cabin. The pipes are wide enough for a nipper to crawl through, and it's a funnel scrubber's job to do just that, cleaning out the dust and moisture that accrues."

"That sounds like dashed hot and uncomfortable work!"

"Indeed. But not compared to cleaning chimneys." Lawless addressed Swinburne: "As you obviously know from personal experience, sweeps lead a dreadful existence. Those that get work as funnel scrubbers are considered the fortunate few."

"I hardly think that such a promotion completely justifies the word 'fortunate,'" put in Burton. "Funnel scrubbers are still emotionally and physically scarred by their years of poverty and brutality. The Beetle does what he can to protect his lads but he can't change the social order. To improve the

lives of sweeps, we'd need to instigate a fundamental shift in the way wealth is distributed. We'd have to raise the masses out of the sucking quagmire of poverty into which the Empire's foundations are sunk."

He looked at Cornewall Lewis, who shrugged and stated, "I'm the secretary for war, Sir Richard. My job is to protect the Empire, not right its wrongs."

"Protect it, or expand it, along with its iniquities, sir?"

Monckton Milnes cleared his throat. "Now, now, Richard," he said, softly. "This isn't really the occasion, is it?"

Burton bit his lip and nodded. "My apologies, Sir George—I spoke out of turn. I've been rather sensitive to such matters since the Tichborne riots."

Cornewall Lewis opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by Swinburne, who suddenly screeched: "What? What? Has the world gone giddy? How can I possibly be guzzling my drinks at this rate? I swear I've barely tasted a drop!"

Burton frowned down at his assistant. "Algy, please remember that you are Apollo, not Dionysus," he advised. "Try to regulate your imbibing."

"Regulate? Regulate? What in blue blazes are you jabbering about, Richard? Nobody drinks more regularly than me!"

The poet gazed at his empty glass with an expression of bemusement, then signalled to another waiter. Behind him, Bendyshe and Bradlaugh smothered their chuckles.

"Anyway," said Gooch, "when the nippers arrive, the crew will be complete." He produced a slip of paper from between the pages of his notebook. "I have the complete roster here, sir."

Lawless took the note, read it through, and nodded his approval.

"May I see that, Captain?" Burton asked.

"Certainly."

The king's agent took the list and scrutinised it. He read:

Commanding Officer: Captain Nathaniel Lawless
First Officer: William Samuel Henson
Second Officer: Wordsworth Pryce
Helmsman: Francis H. Wenham
Assistant Helmsman: Walter D'Aubigny
Navigator: Cedric Playfair
Meteorologist: Arthur Bingham
Chief Engineer: Daniel Gooch
Engineer: Harold Bloodmann
Engineer: Charles Henderson
Engineer: Cyril Goodenough

Engineer: James Bolling
Chief Rigger: Gordon Champion
Rigger: Alexander Priestley
Rigger: Winford Doe
Fireman: Walter Gerrard
Fireman: Peter Etheridge
Stoker: Thomas Beadle
Stoker: Gwyn Reece-Jones
Funnel Scrubber: ~~Ronald Welbergen~~ William Cornish
Funnel Scrubber: ~~Michael Drake~~ Tobias Threadneedle
Steward/Surgeon: Doctor Barnaby Quaint
Assistant Steward/Surgeon: Sister Sadhvi Raghavendra
Quartermaster: Frederick Butler
Assistant Quartermaster: Isabella Mayson
Cabin Boy: Oscar Wilde

"I trust Quips is living up to my recommendation?" Burton asked the captain.

"Quips?"

"Young Master Wilde."

"Ah. An appropriate nickname—he's a very witty young man. How old is he? Twelve-ish?"

"He celebrated his ninth birthday a couple of months ago."

"Good Lord! That young? And an orphan?"

"Yes. He lost his entire family to the Irish famine. He stowed away aboard a ship to Liverpool, made his way to London, and has been working there as a paperboy ever since."

"Well, I must say, I'm impressed by his industry. There's an unpleasant amount of bureaucracy associated with the captaincy of a rotorship and the youngster picked up the paperwork in a flash and keeps it better organised and up to date than I could ever hope to. Furthermore, I find that whenever I say 'hop to it,' he's already hopped. I wouldn't be at all surprised if Oscar Wilde captains his own ship one day." Lawless ran his fingers over his beard. "Sir Richard, what about these young ladies? Having women serving as crew isn't entirely without precedent, but are you sure it's wise to take the Sister with you on your expedition? Africa is harsh enough on a man, isn't it? And what about all that dashed cannibalism? Won't she be considered too dainty a morsel to resist?"

"It is indeed a cruel environment, as I know to my cost," Burton answered. "However, Sister Raghavendra is from India and possesses a natural

immunity to many of the ills that assail a European in Africa. Furthermore, her medical skills are exceptional. I wish she'd been with me on my previous excursions. I assure you she'll be well looked after all the way to Kazeh, where she'll remain with our Arabian hosts while the rest of us hike north to the supposed position of the Mountains of the Moon."

"And the cannibals?"

The corners of Burton's mouth twitched slightly. "Those few tribes that feast on human flesh do so in a ritualistic fashion to mark their victory in battle. It's not as common a phenomenon as the storybooks would have you believe. For a daily meal of arm or leg, you'll have to go to the other side of the world, to Koluwai, a small island to the southeast of Papua New Guinea. There they will very happily have European visitors for dinner—and I don't mean as guests. Apparently, we taste like pork."

"Oof! I'm rather more in favour of lamb chops!" Lawless responded.

Cornewall Lewis interrupted: "You'll leave her with Arabians? Can they be trusted with the fair sex?"

Burton clicked his tongue impatiently. "Sir, if you choose to believe the lies propagated by your own government, that is up to you, but despite the calumnies that are circulated in the corridors of parliament, I have never found the Arabian race to be anything less than extraordinarily benevolent, courteous, and entirely honourable."

"I meant only to suggest that there might be a risk in leaving a woman of the Empire in non-Christian hands, Sir Richard."

"Christian? Do you then stand in opposition to Darwin's findings? Do you also believe that your God favours some races over others?"

"I use the word merely out of habit, as a synonym for civilised," Cornewall Lewis protested.

"Then I'm to take it you don't consider the Arabians civilised, despite that they invented modern mathematics, surgical instruments, soap and perfume, the windmill, the crankshaft, and a great many other things; despite that they realised the Earth is a sphere that circles the sun five hundred years before Galileo was tortured by your Christian church for supporting the same notion?"

The secretary for war pursed his lips uneasily.

"That reminds me," said Monckton Milnes. "Richard, I have the manuscript we discussed—the Persian treatise."

"The what?"

"The translation you were looking for." He stepped forward and hooked his arm through Burton's. "It's in the library. Come, I'll show you. Excuse us please, gentlemen, we shan't be long."

Before Burton could object he was pulled from the group and propelled through the guests toward the door.

"What blessed treatise?" he spluttered.

"A necessary fiction to remove you from the battlefield," Monckton Milnes hissed. "What the blazes has got into you? Why are you snapping like a rabid dog at Cornewall Lewis?"

They left the room, steered across a parlour, past a small gathering in the reception hall, entered a corridor, and stopped at a carved oak door. Monckton Milnes drew a key from a pocket in his costume, turned it in the lock, and, after they had entered into the room beyond, secured the door behind them.

They were in his famous and somewhat notorious library.

He pointed to big studded leather armchairs near the fireplace and snapped: "Go. Sit."

Burton obeyed.

Monckton Milnes went to a cabinet, retrieved a bottle and glasses from it, and poured two drinks. He joined Burton and handed one to him.

"Vintage *Touriga Nacional*, 1822, one of the finest ports ever produced," he murmured. "It cost me a bloody fortune. Don't gulp it down. Savour it."

Burton put the glass to his nose and inhaled the aroma. He took a taste, smacked his lips, then leaned back in his chair and considered his friend.

"My apologies, dear fellow."

"Spare me. I don't want 'em. I want an explanation. By God, Richard, I've seen you angry, I've seen you defeated, I've seen you wild with enthusiasm, and I've seen you drunk as a fiddler's bitch, but I've never before seen you jittery. What's the matter?"

Burton gazed into his drink and remained silent for a moment, then looked up and met his friend's eyes.

"They are making a puppet of me."

"Who are? How?"

"The bloody politicians. Sending me to Africa."

Monckton Milnes's face registered his surprise. "But it's what you've wanted!"

"Not under these circumstances."

"What circumstances? Stone me, man, if you haven't been handed a rare opportunity! The Royal Geographical Society was dead set against you going, but Palmerston—the prime minister himself!—forced their hand. You have another chance at the Nile, and no expedition has ever been so well funded and supported, not even Henry Stanley's! Why do you grumble so and flash those moody eyes of yours? Explain!"

Burton looked away, glanced around at the book-lined walls, and at the erotic statuettes that stood on plinths in various niches, pulled at his jacket and brushed lint from his sleeve, took another sip from his glass, and, reluctantly, returned his attention to Monckton Milnes.

"It's true, I have long wanted to return to Africa to finish what I began back in fifty-seven," he said. "To locate, once and for all, the source of the River Nile. Instead, I'm being dispatched to find and bring back a damned weapon!"

"A weapon?"

"A black diamond. An Eye of Nāga."

"What is that? How is a diamond a weapon? I don't understand."

Burton suddenly leaned forward and gripped his friend's wrist. A flame ignited in his dark eyes.

"You and I have known each other for a long time," he said, a slight hoarseness creeping into his voice. "I can trust you to keep a confidence, yes?"

"Of course you can. You have my word."

Burton sat back. "Do you remember once recommending to me the cheiromantist Countess Sabina?"

Monckton Milnes grunted an affirmation.

"These past weeks, she's been employing her talent as a seer for Palmerston. Her abilities are prodigious. She's able to catch astoundingly clear glimpses of the future—but not our future."

His friend frowned, took a swallow from his glass then laid it aside and rubbed a hand across his cheek, accidentally smudging the red harlequin makeup that surrounded his left eye.

"Whose, then?"

"No, you misunderstand. I mean, not the future you and I and everyone else in the world will experience."

"What other future is there?" Monckton Milnes asked in bewilderment.

Burton held his gaze, then said quietly, "This world, this time we live in, it is not as it should be."

"Not as—You're speaking in blessed riddles, Richard!"

"Do you recall all the hysteria eighteen months or so ago when people started to see Spring Heeled Jack left, right, and centre?"

"Yes, of course."

"It wasn't newspaper sensationalism. He was real."

"A prankster?"

"Far from it. He was a man from the future. He travelled back from the year 2202 to 1840 to prevent his ancestor, with whom he shared the name of Edward Oxford, from shooting at Queen Victoria. His mission went terribly wrong. What should have been a botched assassination attempt succeeded

thanks to his interference. It altered everything his history had recorded and, what's more, it wiped him out of his own time."

Monckton Milnes sat motionless, his eyes widening.

"While he was trying to escape from the scene of the assassination," Burton continued, "Oxford's strange costume, which contained the machinery that enabled him to move through time, was damaged by a young constable with whom we are both acquainted. In fact, he's here tonight."

"Wh—who?"

"William Trounce. He was just eighteen years old. His intervention caused Oxford to be thrown back to the year 1837, where he was taken in and looked after by Henry de La Poer Beresford."

"The Mad Marquess?"

"Yes. While in his care, Oxford dropped vague hints about the shape and nature of the future. Those hints led directly to the establishment of the Technologist and Libertine castes and their offshoots, and sent us down a road entirely divorced from that which we were meant to tread. History altered dramatically, and so did people, for they were now offered opportunities and challenges they would not have otherwise encountered."

Monckton Milnes shook his head wonderingly. "Are—are—are you spinning one of your Arabian Night yarns?" he asked. "You're not in earnest, surely?"

"Entirely. I'm telling you the absolute truth."

"Very well. I shall—I shall attempt to suspend my incredulity and hear you out. Pray continue."

"Trapped in what, for him, was the distant past, Oxford began to lose his mind. He and the marquess, who himself was a near lunatic, cooked up a scheme by which Oxford might be able to reestablish his future existence by restoring his family lineage. This involved making short hops into the future to locate one of his ancestors, which he managed to do despite that his suit's mechanism was rapidly failing. One of those hops brought him to 1861. Beresford had, by this time, formed an alliance with Charles Darwin and Francis Galton. They intended to trap Oxford, steal his suit, and use it to create separate histories, moulding each one as they saw fit, manipulating us all. I had to kill them, and Oxford, to protect the world from their insane plans."

Monckton Milnes stared at Burton in shock. His mouth worked silently, then he managed to splutter: "This—this is beyond the realms of fantasy, Richard. Everyone knows that Darwin was murdered by religious extremists!"

"False information issued by the government. You'd better take another swallow of this fine port. There's a great deal more to the tale."

Monckton Milnes, forgetting his earlier directive to Burton, downed his drink in a single swig. He looked at the empty glass, stood up, paced over to the cabinet, and returned with the bottle.

"Go on," he said, pouring refills.

"Countess Sabina can see far more clearly into the other history—the original one—than she can into ours, perhaps because none of the decisions we make here can have an effect there. The histories are quite different, but there is one thing common to both. There is a war coming. A terrible war that will encompass the world and decimate an entire generation of men. That is why the prime minister wants the African diamond."

"War? My God. So what is it, this diamond? Why is it so important? What's it got to do with Spring Heeled Jack?"

"Are you familiar with the fabled Nāga?" Burton asked.

Monckton Milnes furrowed his brow. "I—yes—I believe—I believe I've come across references to them in various occult texts. Weren't they some sort of pre-human race?"

"Yes. There are carvings of them at Angkor Wat. They are portrayed as seven- or five-headed reptiles."

"So?"

"When this planet was young, an aerolite—a huge black diamond—broke into three pieces in its atmosphere. One piece fell to Earth in what became South America, another in Africa, and the last in the Far East. The Nāga built civilisations around the impact sites. They discovered that the diamonds possessed a very special property: they could store and maintain even the most subtle of electrical fields, such as those generated by a living brain. The Nāga used them to fuse their minds, to form a sort of unified intelligence."

"If any of that is true, how can you possibly know it?"

"That will become apparent," Burton responded. He went on speaking in a low and urgent tone: "The human race waged war on the Nāga, and the reptiles became extinct. The diamonds were lost until, in 1796, Sir Henry Tichborne discovered one—the South American stone."

"Tichborne!"

"Indeed. He brought it home and hid it beneath his estate. In the history that was meant to be, it remained there until just prior to the future Edward Oxford's time, when it was discovered after Tichborne House was demolished. Oxford cut small shards from it and used them in the machinery of his time suit. When he arrived in the past, those shards suddenly existed in two places at once. They were in his suit and they were also still a part of the diamond under the estate. This paradox caused a strange resonance between them, which extended even to the two as yet undiscovered Nāga diamonds. It caused

them all to emit a low, almost inaudible musical drone. This led to the recovery of the Far Eastern stone, in Cambodia, which had been shattered into seven pieces when the humans conquered the Nāga many millennia ago."

"My head is spinning," Monckton Milnes murmured.

"Not just yours," Burton said. "The resonance also awoke a hitherto dormant part of the human mind. It made mediumistic abilities possible. Thus Countess Sabina, and thus a Russian named Helena Blavatsky."

"The woman they say destroyed the Rakes last year?"

"Quite so. She stole two of the Cambodian stones and used them to peer into the future."

"Which future—ours or the other one?"

"Ours. And in that future, in the year 1914, another Russian, a clairvoyant named Grigori Rasputin, was gazing back at us."

"Why?"

"Because he foresaw that the Great War, which was in his time raging, would lead to his assassination and the decimation of his beloved Russia. He came looking for the events that sparked off the conflict, and he found them here, in the 1860s."

Monckton Milnes regarded his friend through slitted eyes. "Are you referring to our role in the American hostilities?"

"No. The world war will pitch us against united German states, so I'm of the opinion that the recent Eugenicist exodus to Prussia, which was led by the botanist Richard Spruce and my former partner John Speke, might be the spark that lights the flame."

"So this Rasputin fellow observed the defectors at work? To what end?"

"He did much more than that. He possessed Blavatsky and used her to steal the rest of the Cambodian stones and recover the South American diamond from the Tichborne estate, thus changing history again. He then employed them to magnify and transmit his mesmeric influence, causing the working classes to riot. He intended nothing less than the wholesale destruction of the British Empire, so that United Germany might win the war against us without Russian assistance. Once that heinous outcome was achieved, Russia would swoop upon a weakened Germany and defeat her."

"Bloody hell!"

"Blavatsky didn't survive and the plot failed," Burton said. "I caused Rasputin to die in 1914, two years before his assassination, meaning that history has diverged yet again, although that particular bifurcation won't occur for another fifty-one years."

Monckton Milnes flexed his jaw. He clenched his fists. He blew out a breath, reached for his glass, emptied it, and refilled it again. He was trem-

bling. "By thunder!" he muttered. "I actually believe all this! Where are the Cambodian and South American diamonds now?"

"The South American stone was broken into seven fragments when I defeated Rasputin. They are in Palmerston's possession. The Cambodian stones are embedded in a babbage probability calculator."

"They are? For what purpose?"

"During the Tichborne riots I was assisted by a philosopher named Herbert Spencer. He died with the stones in his pocket and his mind was imprinted onto them. Charles Babbage had designed a device to process just such an imprint. We fitted the diamonds into it and placed the mechanism in my clockwork valet. Herbert Spencer thus lives on, albeit in the form of a mechanical contraption. That is how I know the history of the Nāga, for the reptile intelligence remains in the stones, and Herbert can sense it. Actually, so can I, in a vague way. The Nāga came to me in a dream and left me with the phrase 'Only equivalence can lead to destruction or a final transcendence.' It was that which guided me in the final ruination of Rasputin."

Monckton Milnes again rubbed his face and again smudged his Harlequin makeup.

"So only the African diamond remains undiscovered and Palmerston is sending you to find it?"

"Precisely. As the last remaining unbroken stone, it will be more powerful than its splintered counterparts. He means to use the Eyes to wage a clandestine war on Prussia through clairvoyance, prophecy, and mediumistic assassinations. He intends that Bismarck will never unite the Germanic states. Do you see now why I'm wishing this expedition had never been commissioned?"

He received a weak nod of understanding. "Yes," came the whispered response. "You can't possibly allow Palmerston that kind of power. By God, he could manipulate the whole world!"

"Just as Darwin and Galton and their cronies would have done."

Monckton Milnes gazed at his friend a moment. "By James, I wouldn't be in your shoes for anything, Richard. What are you going to do?"

Burton shrugged. "I have to retrieve the stone if only to prevent it from falling into Prussian hands. I feel certain that my erstwhile partner is going after it, with Bismarck's sponsorship. As to what I'll do with it once I have it—I don't know. There's a further complication: it was the African Eye that Rasputin employed in 1914 to probe into the past. So I already know I'm fated to find it, and, after I do, it will somehow, eventually, be transported to Russia."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, then Burton muttered, "I feel like a bloody pawn in a game of chess."

Monckton Milnes roused himself from the reverie he'd fallen into. "I have every faith in you, Richard," he said. "Go to Africa. Do whatever you must. You'll find an answer, of that I'm certain."

Burton sighed and gave a slight jerk of his head. He became conscious of the buzz of conversation and merriment that filled Fryston. He looked down at himself, then at his friend, and suddenly chuckled. "Bismillah! King Shahryār of *A Thousand Nights and a Night* discussing fantastic notions with Harlequin! What a confounded joke!"

Monckton Milnes smiled. "Go back to the party. Relax. Enjoy yourself. I'll join you in a few minutes. I want to sit here a little longer."

Burton rose and crossed to the door. He looked back and said, "If Palmerston learns that we had this conversation, I'll be thrown into the Tower."

"Bedlam, more like," Monckton Milnes murmured.

"No. The government keeps secret rooms, including prison cells, beneath the Tower of London."

His friend held up his hands as if to ward off the king's agent. "Have mercy! No more, I beg of you!" he cried. "My capacity for revelations is all used up!"

Burton unlocked the door and left the room. He made his way back across the entrance hall, through the parlour, and into the smoking room.

"I say, Captain," Humpty Dumpty called as he entered. "Where's that wonderful housekeeper of yours?"

Burton turned to the rotund fairy-tale figure. "Is that you in there, Trounce?"

"Yes, and I feel an absolute ass, but it was Mrs. Trounce's idea and I thought it wise not to kick up a fuss, seeing as I'm abandoning her for the next few months. It's blasted awkward, I can tell you. I'm having dashed difficulty in steering food and wine lipwards, so to speak."

"I shouldn't complain. It looks like you could stand to lose a pound or two."

"That's quite enough of that, if you don't mind! You know full well that my current circumference is all padding!"

"If you say so. Who has the esteemed Mrs. Trounce come as?"

"Old Mother Hubbard, which, admittedly, didn't require much by way of dressing up. She's eager for a gossip with Mrs. Angell but what with all these fancy getups she can't locate the dear lady. So where is she and who, or what, has she come as?"

"She's a rather too matronly Queen Boadicea, and is off doing your wife's job, I think."

"What do you mean?"

"She's gone to give a dog a bone."

"Eh?"

"She's down in the kitchen procuring a morsel for Fidget, though I sus-

pect she's actually seeking refuge from all these lords and ladies. She feels a little out of place, but I insisted upon her attendance. She deserves a taste of the high life after all I've put her through recently."

"You brought your confounded basset hound as well?"

"She made him a part of her costume—harnessed him to a toy war chariot and had him trotting along beside her. He was most indignant about it."

A loud high-pitched howl rose above the general hubbub.

"Would you excuse me?" Burton said. "It sounds like Algy needs to be reined in."

He moved back toward the bay window. As he reached the group gathered there, a waiter pushed a glass of port into his hand. Absently, Burton placed it on the table, his attention on Swinburne, who was hopping up and down, waving his arms like a madman.

"I'm not in the slightest bit tipsy!" the poet was protesting vociferously. "What an utter disaster! I've become immune to alcohol!"

"Through overfamiliarity, perhaps?" Cornewall Lewis offered.

"Nonsense! We meet frequently, I'll admit, but we're naught but nodding acquaintances!"

Doctor James Hunt, a Cannibal Club member, joined the group just in time to hear this. He roared with laughter and declared: "Hah! I rather think there's a great deal more intimacy than that, Algy! You and alcohol are practically wedded!"

"Tosh and piffle!" Swinburne objected. "Claptrap, balderdash, cobblers, and bunkum!"

Someone spoke quietly at Burton's side: "I should have you arrested."

The explorer turned and found himself facing Sir Richard Mayne, the lean-faced chief commissioner of Scotland Yard.

"Something to do with me whisking four of your men off to Africa?" he asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes," Mayne answered, glancing disapprovingly at Swinburne's histrionics. "Trounce and Honesty are among my best detectives, Krishnamurthy commands my Flying Squad, and Constable Bhatti is in line for promotion. I can hardly afford to have them all gallivanting around the Dark Continent for a year. I can only conclude that you're in league with London's criminal underclasses. Am I right, Sir Richard? Are you getting my men out of the way prior to some villainous coup? Perhaps plotting to have them consumed by lions and tigers so you can break into the Tower of London and steal the Crown jewels?"

Burton smiled. "Funny, I was just talking about the Tower. But no, and there are no tigers in Africa, sir. Did Lord Palmerston explain the situation?"

"He delivered to me some vague waffle about it being a matter of national security."

"It is."

"And he ordered me in no uncertain terms to provide you with whatever you want. I shall do so, of course."

"Thank you. I ask only that the men receive extended leave and that their families are looked after."

"Have no worries on that account." The commissioner took a sip of his wine. He sighed. "Keep them safe, won't you?"

"I'll do my best."

They shook hands. Mayne wandered away. Burton reached for his drink and was surprised to find that his glass had mysteriously emptied itself. He pursed his lips and looked at his assistant, who was still stamping his feet and protesting his sobriety. He concluded that Swinburne was either in the midst of one of his infamous drinking sprees or he was the victim of mischief. Then he noticed the Grim Reaper hovering behind the little poet and, though he quickly recognised Thomas Bendyshe—which explained everything, for the anthropologist and atheist was Swinburne's most dedicated tormenter—he nevertheless felt a momentary chill needling at his spine.

"Richard!" Swinburne screeched. "You've seen me in my cups more than most. Do I seem inebriated to you?"

"Of all people, Algy, you are the one in whom it's hardest to tell the difference," Burton answered.

The poet gave a shriek of despair. He yelled for a waiter.

Time passed, the party continued, and the king's agent moved from group to group, chatting with some, debating with others, joking with a few.

At a quarter-past eleven, Monckton Milnes reappeared, with makeup restored, and herded his guests into the music room, where Florence Nightingale surprised Burton by demonstrating an unexpected proficiency on the piano as she accompanied Sister Raghavendra, whose singing voice proved equally impressive. They entertained the gathering until close on midnight, at which point everyone fell silent and listened to the chimes of the grandfather clock. As the final note clanged, they hooked their arms, Nightingale started playing, and the Sister sang:

> "Should old acquaintance be forgot,
> and never brought to mind?
> Should old acquaintance be forgot,
> and old lang syne?"

The guests happily launched into the chorus:

"For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
we'll take a cup of kindness yet,
for auld lang syne!"

"And surely you'll buy your pint cup," the young singer trilled. "And surely I'll buy mine—"

"Oh God!" someone yelled.

"And we'll take a cup o' kindness yet, for auld lang syne."

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" came the agonised voice.

Burton peered around the room as the crowd launched into the chorus again.

"For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
we'll take a cup of—"

The song tailed off and the music stopped as someone screamed: "Please, Mary mother of God, save me!"

The explorer unhooked his arms from his neighbours, pushed people aside, and hurried toward a commotion near the fireplace. Men were kneeling beside a prone figure. It was Bendyshe. His skull mask had been removed and his face was contorted into a ghastly expression, eyes wide and glassy, mouth stretched into a hideous rictus grin. His whole body was convulsing with such ferocity that it required four men to hold him down. He writhed and jerked, his backbone arching, his heels drumming on the floor.

Detective Inspector Honesty—a slight, wiry man with a flamboyantly wide moustache that curled upward at the ends, who normally sported lacquered-flat hair, parted in the middle, and displayed a fussy dress sense, but who was currently outfitted as one of the Three Musketeers—appeared at Burton's side and muttered, "Fit. Overdoing it. Excessive indulgence."

"No," Burton said. "This is something else." He pushed forward until he reached Monckton Milnes's side and hissed, "Get the crowd out of here."

The host of the party looked at him and said, "Gad, what am I thinking? Of course."

Monckton Milnes turned and, in a loud voice, announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, unfortunately one of our fellows has been taken ill. Would you mind moving into the other rooms, please? We should give the poor chap space to breathe."

With utterances of sympathy, people started to wander away.

A hand gripped Burton by the elbow. It belonged to Doctor James Hunt.

"Come here," he whispered, and dragged the king's agent over to the window, away from everyone else.

"What is it, Jim? Is Bendyshe going to be all right?"

"No. Quite the opposite." Hunt caught his lower lip between his teeth. There was a sheen of sweat on his brow. "I'd recognise the symptoms anywhere," he hissed. "Bloody strychnine. The poor devil's been poisoned!"

Burton momentarily fought for balance as his knees buckled. "*What?*"

"Poisoned. Purposely. A man doesn't get strychnine in his system by accident."

"Can you save him?"

"Not a chance. He'll be dead within the hour."

"No! Please, Jim, work with Nurse Nightingale and Sister Raghavendra. Do whatever you can for him."

Hunt gave Burton's arm a squeeze and returned to the dying man. The king's agent saw Trounce standing by the doorway and moved over to him.

"Get out of that ridiculous costume. There's trouble."

"What's happened?"

"Murder, Trounce. Someone has poisoned Tom Bendyshe."

"Great heavens! I—um—I'll round up the troops at once. Damn this bloody padding! Help me out of it, would you?"

Some minutes later, Trounce, Sir Richard Mayne, and Detective Inspector Honesty ushered the guests and staff upstairs, while Commander Krishnamurthy and Constable Bhatti guarded Fryston's front and back doors to ensure no one slipped out.

Bendyshe was now frothing at the mouth and thrashing even more wildly.

Charles Bradlaugh, sitting on his friend's legs and being bucked about as they spasmed beneath him, looked at Burton as the explorer squatted beside the dying man. "I can't believe it," he croaked, his eyes filling with tears. "Hunt says it's poison. Who would do this to poor Tom? He never hurt a soul!"

"I don't know, Charles. What was he up to before he was taken ill?"

"Singing along with the rest of us. He was rather sloshed—he's been stealing Algy's drinks all night."

Burton turned to James Hunt. "Could strychnine have been in one of the glasses?"

"Yes." The doctor nodded. "It's an incredibly bitter poison but if he was blotto enough he might have swallowed it without noticing the taste."

"He was half-cut, to be sure," Bradlaugh put in.

Burton reached past Nurse Nightingale, who was mopping Bendyshe's brow, and placed a hand on the man's chest. He could feel the muscles jumping beneath his palm.

"Tom," he whispered.

He cleared his throat, stood, and gestured for Hunt to follow him. The two men left the music room and went into the smoking room, crossing to the table near the bay window.

"The poison was probably in one of these glasses," Burton said, indicating the various empty vessels.

"If so, it won't be difficult to find out which one," the doctor answered. He picked up a glass, sniffed it, muttered, "Brandy," then dipped his index finger into the dregs at the bottom. He touched the finger to his tongue. "Not that one."

"You won't poison yourself?"

"Strychnine is occasionally used in small amounts as medical treatment. The merest dab won't harm me."

Hunt tested another glass, then a third and fourth. The fifth made him screw up his face.

"Bitter. The port would have gone some way to disguising it, but the taste is strong, nevertheless."

"The drink is port?"

"Yes."

Burton went through the other glasses one by one. As their shapes suggested, they had all contained either brandy or wine.

"Damnation," he muttered. "Get back to Tom. I'll talk to you later."

He strode off and made his way to the entrance hall where he found Richard Monckton Milnes, Algernon Swinburne, and Chief Commissioner Mayne in quiet conversation at the bottom of the staircase.

Mayne's expression was grim. "Are you certain it's attempted murder?" he said as Burton joined them.

"Not attempted. Successful. There's no antidote."

"But why kill Tom?" Swinburne asked, miserably.

"It was a mistake," Burton answered. "He wasn't the intended victim. I was."