

The RETURN of the
DISCONTINUED
MAN

ALSO BY MARK HODDER

The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack

The Curious Case of the Clockwork Man

Expedition to the Mountains of the Moon

The Secret of Abdu El Yezdi

A Red Sun Also Rises

A BURTON & SWINBURNE ADVENTURE

MARK HODDER

The RETURN of the
DISCONTINUED
MAN



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Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228
VOICE: 716-691-0133
FAX: 716-691-0137
WWW.PYRSE.COM

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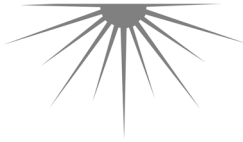
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This one is for

MICK FARREN
(1943–2013)





THE FIRST PART

THE VISIONS

You can never plan the future by the past.
—Edmund Burke

AN APPARITION IN LEICESTER SQUARE

He fragmented. Decisions taken were unmade and became choices. Successes and failures reverted to opportunities and challenges. Characteristics disengaged and withdrew to become influences. He lost cohesion until nothing of him remained except potential. Yet, set apart from this strange process, something observed and wailed and grieved as it watched itself disintegrate into ever smaller components. Who was he? Where was he? Why was he here? What must he do?

There was a name: Edward Oxford.

And an enemy: Burton.

—*The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack*

“**Y**ou’re a drooling, bulge-eyed drug addict!”

The accusation, which Algernon Charles Swinburne screeched in his characteristically high-pitched and excitable tones, caused the entire saloon bar to fall momentarily silent.

Sir Richard Francis Burton glowered at his diminutive friend. “A little less volume, if you please.”

“You’re hooked! An addle head! What next for you, hey? The gutters, perhaps? Bedlam lunatic asylum? A Limehouse opium den?”

“Limehouse doesn’t exist. It burned to the ground last year, as you well know.”

“Pah! And I’ll say it again! Pah! In fact, once more for good measure! Pah to you, sir!”

Burton sighed, raised his glass, and took a gulp of ale.

Around them, the Black Toad’s other customers—a slovenly crowd of thieves, dollymops, and chancers—returned their attention to their beers, gins, whiskies, and absinthes.

Burton and Swinburne had occupied a table in a dark corner of the disreputable drinking den, there to wet their whistles for a couple of hours prior to a gathering of the Cannibal Club, during which their whistles would no doubt become thoroughly sodden, as they usually did when the pair joined with their friends ostensibly to discuss issues of anthropological and atheistic interest but, more often than not, to instead carouse a night away.

Of these Cannibals, there was no more dedicated a roisterer than Swinburne. His tiny, slope-shouldered body—with its oversized head made all the bigger by the mop of long carrot-red hair curling almost horizontally from it—could hold astonishing quantities of alcohol. The excess of electric vitality that coursed through the young poet’s system, making him constantly twitch and jerk, endowing him with such a skittish nature that many thought him either possessed or crazed, appeared to burn off the effects of his overindulgences at a prodigious rate, so that one moment he might be a slurring, staggering mess, and the next so perfectly clear-eyed and *compos mentis* that he could, on the spot, compose a sonnet of astonishing beauty and technical grace.

Swinburne was an eccentric, a drunkard, and an absolute genius.

He was also, at this particular moment, thoroughly peeved.

He slapped a hand down onto the table and squealed, “Three months! For three whole months you’ve been off with the fairies. Have you achieved anything in that time? No! Have you worked on your books? No! Have you planned any new expeditions? No! And look at you. Your eyes are hollow. Your cheeks are sunken. You’ve become a shadow of the man I met last year. It has to stop. No more Saltzmann’s, Richard! No more!”

Burton drew his lips back tightly over his teeth, a snarling expression that exposed his long canines and made him appear so barbaric that most men would have fled from him at once. Not so Swinburne, who

was by now accustomed to the famous explorer's savage countenance and fully cognisant that Burton often took advantage of it to intimidate when challenged.

"It's not the bloody Saltzmann's Tincture," Burton countered. "The stuff is perfectly harmless."

"Sadhvi Raghavendra doesn't share your opinion. She says it contains cocaine."

"She theorises that it does. She doesn't know it. I think otherwise."

"Based on what?"

"Based on the fact that I'm thoroughly familiar with the effects of cocaine and Saltzmann's doesn't share them."

"That doesn't mean it's not addictive."

"I repeat: it's not the Saltzmann's, Algy."

Swinburne curled the fingers of his right hand into a fist and considered it, as if deciding whether to swing it into his friend's nose. He clicked his tongue, picked up his glass, and swallowed the contents in a single gulp. "Then explain your bedraggled mien."

Burton looked down at the stained tabletop. His mouth moved, trying to frame words that wouldn't come. His eyes flicked evasively from side to side.

Swinburne watched him. Softly, he said, "Isabel?"

Dumbly, Burton nodded. He rubbed a hand across his forehead, wiping away perspiration that wasn't there. "I can't eat, Algy. I can't sleep. I feel like one of Babbage's clockwork men, going through the motions, hardly alive. I was never meant to exist without her."

"I sympathise, Richard. Really, I do. But you'll not escape your loss by obliterating your senses. Put the Saltzmann's aside. Get out and confront the world. Allow it to distract you."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Ha!" Swinburne said. "I'm thankful that you are, too, though getting thoroughly sozzled isn't quite what I meant." He grinned mischievously. "Though one must start somewhere, what!" He slapped the table again and yelled, "Pot boy! Another couple of ales over here, lad!"

The beer was duly served, and the poet made a solemn toast:

*And grief shall endure not forever, I know.
As things that are not shall these things be;
We shall live through seasons of sun and of snow,
And none be grievous as this to me.
We shall bear, as one in a trance that bears,
The sound of time, the rhyme of the years;
Wrecked hope and passionate pain will grow
As tender things of a spring-tide sea.*

The moment of crisis passed. Burton knew his friend wouldn't challenge him again. In some matters—just some—Swinburne knew where to draw the line. Instead, the poet would put his advice into practice by providing diversions, entertainments, and intellectual stimulation. No doubt, after they'd got sloshed with the Cannibals, he'd suggest a visit to Verbena Lodge, his favourite brothel. At that point, Burton would go home. He didn't share the poet's taste for the lash, as distracting as it might be.

They drank and, around them, men and women flirted coarsely and squabbled loudly and cackled obscenely and shouted incoherently. The air was thick with tobacco smoke and heavy with the vinegary odour of cheap wine, souring beer, and unwashed bodies. A startling contrast, then, that amid this unrefined pandemonium, Swinburne talked of his affinity with the Pre-Raphaelite artists and his hopes for the forthcoming publication of his poem, *Rosamond*; of his summer holidays at his grandfather's house, Capheaton Hall, in Northumberland; and of his love for that wild and romantic northern county.

Despite his odd sense of detachment, Burton couldn't help but be fascinated. Swinburne's ability to hold an audience was astonishing. When performing—and Burton had no doubt that his friend was purposely putting on a performance for him—the tempo and cadence of his voice was spellbinding, his choice of words ingenious, and his gestures extravagantly expressive.

Automatically, Burton found himself responding. He described his childhood, during which he'd been dragged around Europe by his restless father and long-suffering mother; spoke of his subsequent inability to fit

in at Oxford University, where he was scorned as a thoroughly un-English ruffian; described his explorations of Arabia; and confessed his ambivalent feelings about his current commission as the king's agent.

While he spoke, a separate part of him observed Swinburne watching and judging.

He thinks my manner is all wrong. I'm making an unconvincing show of it.

After a while, the poet consulted his pocket watch and declared it to be a minute past nine. "Shall we be off? The Cannibals await, hurrah, hurrah!"

He's eager to consult with Monckton Milnes. He thinks my oldest friend will know how to bring me out of this confounded funk.

They stood, donned their coats and hats, and took up their walking canes, the contrast between them attracting the amused attention of the saloon's clientele, for where Swinburne barely scraped five feet, Burton was just an inch below six and looked considerably taller by virtue of his broad shoulders, deep chest, and imposing presence. Were it not for the famous explorer's infernal physiognomy and challenging gaze, the pair might have invited catcalls as they crossed the room. None were forthcoming. There occurred, instead, a slight hush accompanied by sly grins and exchanged winks. One muscle-bound lout spat into the floor's sawdust as if to show that were Burton to challenge him there'd be no contest, but he averted his eyes when the king's agent glanced at him and thus revealed it to be nothing but empty *braggadocio*.

Perhaps I should pick a fight with him. Perhaps the violence would snap me back into myself.

Swinburne pushed open the door, and they stepped out onto Baker Street.

Frigid air hit them.

They stopped dead.

"My hat!" Swinburne cried out. "The sky is bleeding."

The atmosphere was thick with falling snow, and it was bright red, a near opaque cloak of vermilion, falling vertically, the variations in its density making the illumination from the street's gas lamps pulsate, causing the length of the thoroughfare to resemble the interior of a throbbing artery.

Burton scraped his heel across the pavement. "Thin," he observed. "I'll wager it just started, but if it keeps going at this rate London will soon be half buried." Curiously, he held out his right hand then withdrew it and examined his powdered palm. "Remarkable. Can you see? It has seeds mixed in with it, like those from dandelions, but red."

Swinburne exclaimed, "It's winter! Quite apart from them falling out of the sky in such profusion and being a startling colour, how can there be seeds floating about at this time of year?"

"Blown across the globe at a high altitude, I suppose," Burton mused. "I don't know what species of plant, though. The effect is rather uncanny, don't you think?"

The poet shivered and turned up his collar. "And rather penetrating, too. I shall require a brandy to warm my cockles."

They trudged southward for a few yards, the scarlet snow crunching beneath their feet, until they heard the chugging engine of a steam cabriolet. Swinburne put fingers to his lips and emitted a piercing whistle. The vehicle emerged from the cascading curtain and drew to a halt beside them, its furnace hissing like a box of angry serpents.

"Bloomin' well bonkers, ain't it?" the driver said, his voice filled with wonder. "I've not seen nuffink like it in all me born days. Red snow! Cor blimey! Whatever next? Where to, gents?"

"Leicester Square, please," Burton directed as they climbed in. They brushed cigar butts from the seat, settled, and the cab jerked into motion.

The king's agent said, "As it happens, I've experienced stranger weather phenomena than this."

"Last year's aurora borealis, you mean?" Swinburne said.

"I'm referring to my time in Sindh, when it one day rained fish during the monsoon."

"Flying fish?"

"Falling fish. They're lifted from the sea by tornadoes, thrown into the upper atmosphere, and carried over the land, onto which they descend."

Their carriage rocked and bumped southward, and by the time it reached Leicester Square, the red snow had given way to the normal white which, still falling thickly, was rapidly turning the ground from blood-red to a sickly bright pink.

“Hallo! What’s all that kerfuffle about?” the driver commented as they disembarked and Burton paid him. They followed the man’s gaze and saw, half obscured, a commotion on the western side of the square. A crowd was milling about outside Bartolini’s Dining Rooms, where Burton and Swinburne were due to meet their friends.

“Is that Trounce?” Swinburne asked, pointing.

Burton spotted the burly detective inspector, gave a grunt of confirmation, and set off with his companion in tow. As they traipsed closer to the throng, he saw members of the Cannibal Club among it—Richard Monckton Milnes, Thomas Bendyshe, Henry Murray, Doctor James Hunt, Sir Edward Brabrooke, and Charles Bradlaugh.

The restaurateur, Signor Bartolini, was shouting at William Trounce and gesticulating wildly.

Trounce saw them approaching and bellowed, “By Jove! Thank the almighty you’re here! I can’t get any sense out of this fellow. He’s utterly unhinged.”

“He’s utterly Italian,” Swinburne corrected.

“The same bloody difference, if you ask me.”

“Has something occurred?” Burton asked.

Trounce, thickset and blunt in features, with a wide snow-speckled brown moustache and bright-blue eyes, threw out his hands. “I’ve not been here ten minutes. My mind is still befuddled by this freakish red stuff. Now it appears I have to deal with a costumed intruder playing silly beggars, too.”

Bartolini shook a fist at Burton and cried out, “*Hanno esagerato*, Signor Burton! I can have no more of this! Your trick, it scare my customers! Your Club Cannibal, it not welcome here no more. *Non più! Non più!*”

Burton glanced beyond Bartolini and waved for Monckton Milnes to come over. He then held up his palms at the dark and slightly built Italian and said, “*Per favore, signore, fidati di me*—trust me—whatever has happened, I had nothing to do with it. Tell me. An intruder?”

“*Un fantasma!* It crash into my *ristorante*. It call for you! Smash! Smash! Throwing the tables and the chairs, and it shouting all the time, Where is Burton? Where is Burton? Through the *sala da pranzo* it run, and up the stairs to your friends. Where is Burton? Where is Burton? Then back down again and—*meno male!*—out and away!”

“Fantasma?”

Monckton Milnes arrived, took Burton by the arm, and said to the others, “Pardon me, gentlemen.” He pulled the king’s agent aside and murmured, “It was Spring Heeled Jack, Richard. No doubt about it. The hellish thing burst in on us and demanded to know where you were, then bounced away on its stilts. It frightened us all witless.”

For a moment, Burton’s mind froze. It wasn’t possible! He coughed to clear his throat. “Just now?”

“About forty minutes ago. We called a constable, and he gathered some of his fellows. They’re scouring the area in search of the monster.”

Burton frowned, took off his top hat, banged snow from its brim, and put it back on. “Spring Heeled Jack? Are you certain? Describe it.”

“It resembled a naked man, tall and rangy in build, but it was entirely white and featureless. No hair, eyes, nose, ears, or mouth. No fingernails. No genitals.”

“Helmet and cloak?”

“Not at all.”

“A disk on its chest?”

“No adornments or clothes to speak of.”

“But it was raised on spring-loaded stilts? So it was wearing boots?”

“No. The stilts appeared to grow straight out its heels, an extension of them.”

Burton raised his fingers to his chin, feeling the tuft of hair that grew in its cleft. “Yet, despite the lack of a mouth, it spoke?”

“Shouted like a madman. Bradlaugh practically fainted with the shock of it.”

“Why did Bartolini think it was me?”

“Tom Bendyshe’s fault. You know how he enjoys a good jape. His first assumption was that you’d decided to put the wind up us, and Bartolini cottoned onto it. He can’t decide whether it was you dressed up or a ghost.”

Burton gazed into the gradually thinning snow, his thoughts turning over, searching for a workable theory to explain the bizarre visitation. He couldn’t find one.

He briefly gripped Monckton Milnes by the elbow before striding

back to Bartolini. "Signor, please accept that this was none of my doing nor, I am sure, that of anyone with whom I'm acquainted."

The Italian gave a wide, exaggerated shrug. "If you say it, I believe it. But what was it? Why have the *neve rossa* bring it here?"

"The red snow?"

"*Sì!* It start to fall and, *immediatamente, il fantasma* come crash crash crash into my *ristorante!*"

"Wait. What? The snow and the intruder arrived simultaneously?"

"*Sì! Sì!*"

"I'm at a loss, but I shall endeavour to get to the bottom of it." Burton touched two fingers to his hat and returned to where Monckton Milnes had joined Swinburne and Trounce. "Both at nine o'clock! Scarlet snow and Spring Heeled Jack."

The detective inspector cupped his hands and blew into them to warm his fingers. "Lord help me, are we faced with another of your damnable affairs?"

"My affairs, Trounce?"

"More king's agent ballyhoo."

"Ah, I see. I don't know, but if Bartolini's was really invaded by Spring Heeled Jack, then I fear we might be."

They joined the other Cannibals.

"The devil himself was among us!" Bendyshe trumpeted. His voice was never less than stentorian. "Gad, what a horror!"

"You should have seen it, Richard," Henry Murray said. "A ghost? A mechanism? I'm utterly flummoxed."

"I thought it was a man in a costume," Sir Charles Bradlaugh added. He put a finger to his right cheek, which was darkly bruised. "But when the thing shoved me aside—the feel of it!"

"What do you mean?" Burton asked.

"Like fish skin but solid and waxy." Bradlaugh shuddered. "Hard. Not clothing at all."

And calling for me. Why?

As if reading his thoughts, Bendyshe cried out, "I say, old horse, we all know you've been up to your devilish eyebrows in some bizarre business recently, but this takes the biscuit! Care to explain?"

“I can’t, Tom,” Burton responded. “I have no notion what the apparition was or why it was searching for me. Would you excuse me for a moment?” He addressed Trounce. “I need to know where it went.”

Trounce pointed to a constable who was moving among the gathered crowd. “There’s Honesty. He was with the men who chased after it.”

Burton, Swinburne, and Trounce strode over to P. C. Thomas Honesty, a wiry and dapper man with immaculately trimmed eyebrows and an extravagantly curled moustache. Only a few months previously, he’d been the groundsman at New Wardour Castle, the seat of Isabel Arundell’s family. After the events that led to her death, he’d joined the Police Force and, on government orders, had been rushed through training.

Burton hailed him. “Hallo, Tom!”

Honesty saluted. “Sir! Strange night. Snow. Stilt man.”

“Strange is the word. It’s been a while since I saw you, old fellow. Has your wife joined you in London? Are you settled?”

“We are. Nice little place in Hammersmith. Baby on the way.”

“My good man! Congratulations!”

Honesty accepted a handshake then pointed to the side of the square opposite Bartolini’s. “Consensus is, the phantom jumped down from the rooftops over there.”

“Phantom?” Swinburne queried.

“Or whatever it was.”

Burton said, “Judging by the mark on Bradlaugh’s cheek, it was rather too substantial to qualify as a spook.”

As if it had been adjusted via a control, the snowfall suddenly slowed and thinned until only a few stray flakes were left drifting down.

The men surveyed the square.

“Looks like an iced cake,” Trounce murmured.

Honesty nodded his helmeted head in the direction of Charing Cross Road. “Made off in that direction. We chased. Too fast. Lost it.” His eyes widened. He gave out a strangled yelp and pointed. “There! It’s back!”

Burton whirled in time to see a figure apparently falling from the sky. Its stilts hit the ground and slipped from beneath it. The apparition crashed down onto its side, scrabbling wildly in the snow, limbs flailing. It howled—its voice filled with despair.

Someone shouted, “Bloody hell! What is it?”

The creature gained its feet, shrieked wordlessly, then cried out, “Prime Minister, where are you? Please! Where are you? Guide me! Guide me!”

The crowd outside Bartolini’s screamed and scattered.

Shaking its head as if to clear it, the stilted man raised its featureless face to the sky and yelled, “Burton! Burton!”

“Here!” the king’s agent called, striding forward. He drew the rapier from his silver-handled swordstick.

Spring Heeled Jack—Burton couldn’t think of it as anything else—crouched and turned toward him. “Sir Richard Francis bloody Burton.”

“You’ve inserted one name too many, my friend, but I shall overlook that. Now be so kind as to introduce yourself and explain what you want with me.”

“I don’t know.”

Burton stopped in front of the creature and examined it. The description given by Monckton Milnes was accurate; it was totally lacking in any human detail.

“You don’t know?”

“Perhaps—”

“Perhaps what?”

“Perhaps I have to—”

Without warning, it pounced.

“Kill you!”

A swinging fist knocked the point of Burton’s blade aside. He felt himself grabbed by the upper arms, solid fingers gouging into his biceps, and was lifted high into the air as if he weighed nothing at all. With tremendous strength, Spring Heeled Jack dashed him viciously to the ground. Even through the padding of snow, Burton’s head cracked with such force against the paving that his senses reeled.

“Got you!” his assailant shouted. “Stop interfering! Leave me alone! Tell me why I’m here!”

A shrill scream of outrage echoed through the square, and Swinburne came racing to his fallen friend’s assistance. The poet swiped at Spring Heeled Jack with his cane. It impacted against a broad shoulder and

snapped in half, its lower end spinning away. “Get off him, you brute! Scat! Scat!”

The stilted figure turned and swatted the poet. Swinburne cartwheeled and landed in a tangled heap.

Tom Honesty put his whistle to his mouth and blew.

Jack squatted over Burton. “What am I supposed to do? Where is the prime minister? What is your significance? What happened at nine o’clock?”

Flat on his back, the king’s agent looked up at the blank countenance.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

His attacker reached down, clasped the front of his coat, yanked him upright, and threw him. Burton saw the black night sky and the pink ground of Leicester Square alternating around him as—with shock slowing everything to a crawl and causing him to feel like a dispassionate observer—he pirouetted through the air. He passed over Trounce and the members of the Cannibal Club and glimpsed them looking up at him with expressions of sheer horror. Then he impacted against a plate glass window. Fragments exploded around him. They glinted and flashed. They rained like a thousand jewels.

This surely hurts, yet I don't feel a thing.

He crashed down onto a table. It collapsed beneath him. Cutlery and broken crockery danced up, colliding with the showering glass. A symphony of clatters and smashes and bangs and clangs sounded from afar. Distant voices ululated. Everything was dreamlike.

Of its own accord, his right hand rose into his line of sight, and he was fascinated to find that it still held his rapier. He watched as the weapon’s point lowered toward his feet until it was directed at the jagged rectangular hole where the window had been.

Poor Bartolini. He's having a bad evening. His restaurant is wrecked.

Spring Heeled Jack bounded in and dived forward. Burton’s sword adjusted itself and struck the apparition in the middle of its chest. The blade bent, scraped across to the left, gouged a scratch in the hard white skin, but didn’t penetrate it.

Jack snatched the weapon, wrenched it from Burton’s hand, and cast it aside. Planting a stilt to either side of the fallen man, it looked down and gave vent to an agonised whine.

Burton whispered, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I must serve Queen Victoria," it responded. "But I've forgotten how."

Trounce came pounding into the restaurant. Bellowing, he thudded into the creature, wrapped his arms around it, and declared, "You're bloody well nicked, old son!"

Jack staggered. Burton quickly pushed himself out from between its legs and dragged himself backward through splintered wood and glass.

Trounce's grip broke as his captive flung out its arms. A solid elbow smacked into the detective's face, sending him tottering backward with blood spurting from his nose. His legs hit the ledge of the window, and he toppled out into the snow.

Burton heaved himself to his feet. He lunged at his opponent. They locked arms and grappled, twisting this way and that, thudding into tables, knocking them flying.

The king's agent was no match for the other. Sent reeling, he plummeted out through the doorway and went slipping and sliding outside, somehow maintaining his footing, though he possessed hardly any sense of what he was doing.

Spring Heeled Jack followed and laid into him with its fists. It wailed, "Where am I? What must I do, Prime Minister? I'm alone! I'm alone!"

Blood splattered the snow. Burton fell and was hauled up again. He became vaguely aware that constables were running toward him.

"Please!" his opponent screamed. "Help me!"

Swinburne suddenly came cannoning from one side and dived at its ankles, locking his arms around them. Caught off balance, Spring Heeled Jack pitched face-first into the snow. Immediately, Burton delivered a vicious kick to the side of its head before he, too, lost his footing and fell.

Trounce blundered back into the melee. He stepped over the king's agent and thudded down knees first onto Jack's back. Honesty and three other constables swooped in and grabbed at the creature's arms. The detective inspector had a pistol in his hand. He raised it and cracked it down onto Jack's head. The white cranium split, and a bolt of blue electrical energy sizzled across its surface. A transparent skin detached itself from the prone figure and began to expand outward.

Burton knew what would happen next. “Get away from it!” he roared, as the world snapped back to normal speed. “Move! Move!”

He scrambled across the ground on all fours, grabbed Trounce by the back of his coat and heaved him aside, then gripped Swinburne’s ankle and, dragging the poet with him, slithered backward. The constables rolled aside just as the transparency swelled into a bubble and popped with a thunderously echoing retort.

Spring Heeled Jack vanished, taking with it a bowl-shaped section of Leicester Square’s paving.

Trounce sat up, fished a handkerchief from his pocket, and applied it to his bleeding nose. “By Jobe! Whad a monstrosidy!”

Flat on his back, with cold moisture soaking into his clothes, Burton lay panting, his mind awl, his body finally starting to register the pain.

Beside him, Swinburne said, “Is it as bad as it looks?”

Burton moved his tongue around, feeling his teeth to check they were all present. They were. After a few moments’ preparation, he managed to croak, “What?”

“Your condition.”

As reality continued to reestablish itself, the king’s agent struggled to his feet and stood swaying. His clothes were hanging in tatters. Blood dribbled inside his ragged sleeves and slowly dripped from his fingertips.

After a little exploration, he discovered that the left side of his chin bore the most serious of his many lacerations—it was small but through to the bone—and there was another, longer and more painful cut at the side of his left elbow. None were incapacitating.

“I’m an atheist, Algy,” he murmured, “but I must confess, the fact that I went through a window and can still stand strikes me as somewhat miraculous.”

“You must have hit it head first. Broke it with solid bone before the rest of you passed through.”

The poet rose from the ground and helped Trounce up. The detective inspector drew a second handkerchief—clean—from his pocket and passed it to Burton, who uttered a grunt of thanks, wiped his hands on it, then pressed it to his chin.

The king’s agent said, “For certain, that was not a man in a suit.”

“A clockwork device, then?” Trounce asked.

“More sophisticated.”

Thomas Honesty and his fellow constables had risen and brushed themselves down. Honesty looked at Burton, who, seeing that Monckton Milnes and the Cannibals were poised to rush over, said to him, “Would you hold everyone back for a minute, Tom? Just while I gather my wits.”

Honesty nodded and got to work.

Burton put his left hand to the back of his head. His scalp was ridged with scars—gained last year when he’d narrowly missed being killed by an explosion—and had now acquired an egg-sized bump.

Pain was beginning to overtake him. His legs were shaking.

The snow all around was gouged with broad furrows, cutting through to the bright red beneath. Leicester Square—flesh-coloured and mutilated—appeared to reflect his own injuries, as if he and the world he perceived were a single, wounded being.

He shivered, fumbled for—and failed to locate—a cigar, and said, “I want to find my topper and swordstick, Algy. We should then make our way to Battersea Power Station. We need to consult with Brunel and Babbage. They know all there is to know about mechanical men.”

Swinburne gave a small and reluctant grunt of agreement.

Burton’s fingers, still absently in search of a cheroot, encountered a solid object and withdrew it from his coat pocket. It was a small, ornately labelled bottle. Saltzmann’s Tincture. Incredulous, he whispered, “Good Lord! It didn’t break.”

“I wish it had,” Swinburne grumbled. “Put it away.”

“My head is thumping. It’ll help.”

“So will Sadhvi Raghavendra. We’ll send a lad to summon her to the station. She’ll treat your wounds better than that stuff can.”

Burton hesitated, nodded, and slipped the bottle back into his pocket.

“Humph!” Trounce muttered. “I’d better get to work. There’s a crowd that requires dispersing. I’ll post a guard outside the restaurant. See you later. Keep me informed, will you?”

He stamped away.

Limping slightly, Burton started off toward the Cannibals. They hurried forward to meet him.

“God in Heaven!” Monckton Milnes exclaimed. “Are you all right? I’ve never seen such a scrap! How can you even walk?”

“I hurt all over,” Burton said. “But I’ll survive.”

“He wants to gulp down a bottle of Saltzmann’s,” Swinburne revealed. “So obviously his brain has been bruised, despite its small size and the thick layers that surround it.”

For an instant, Monckton Milnes locked eyes with the king’s agent. Both men knew that Swinburne operated in a very peculiar manner, often experiencing and expressing the opposite of what would be expected from any normal individual. When the poet felt pain, he considered it pleasure. When he was deeply concerned, he most often articulated it as humour or sarcasm.

“Lay off the confounded mixture, Richard,” Monckton Milnes advised. “I’ve told you before.”

“Enough! Enough!” Burton protested. “Will you both please give it a rest? I shan’t touch the stuff, I give you my word.”

Monckton Milnes responded with a brusque nod. He stepped aside as the other Cannibals crowded forward to voice their consternation and amazement. Burton endured their attentions. He was aware that Monckton Milnes and Swinburne were both watching and assessing him, and it irritated him that they considered themselves better judges of his condition than he. At the same time, he was touched, and cursed himself for a fool that he harboured such an idiotic spark of resentment.

Too much self-sufficiency. Why be so contained? Few men have such loyal friends. Swinburne, Monckton Milnes, Bendyshe, Bradlaugh—all of them. They are not attached to you. They are integral.

He felt the void that marked Isabel’s absence.

Bendyshe was hollering, “Bartolini will never forgive you, old thing! You went straight through his bloomin’ window! The restaurant is wrecked! Why aren’t you dead?”

Burton thought, *I might as well be.*