

The background is a dense, multi-layered composition. At the top, there are classical architectural elements like columns and a pediment. In the center, a muscular male sculpture stands prominently, holding a staff. To the left, a close-up of a man's face (Mel Keegan) is visible, looking towards the right. The right side features a complex, reddish, organic-looking structure. At the bottom, another sculpture of a child's head is visible. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by reds, oranges, and yellows, with some cooler tones in the text and the man's face.

Mel Keegan

NOCTURNE

"Unputdownable"
(HIM magazine on DEATH'S HEAD)

"A fine example of this genre"
(Gay Times on FORTUNES OF WAR)

"A powerful futuristic thriller"
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"...the MASTER of gay thrillers ... Mel Keegan's name is a byword for thrilling gay adventure in the past, present and future"
(Millivres on AQUAMARINE)

"This rip-roaring and colourful new gay thriller zooms along with a breathless enthusiasm that never flags"
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"Gripping"
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MEL KEEGAN: 20 POEMS (eBook only)

Nocturne

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

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real persons or other characters, alive or dead, is
strictly coincidental.

First published in January 2004 by DreamCraft Multimedia.

ISBN: 0-9750884-4-0

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This edition printed and bound in the USA

Nocturne

Chapter One

It was early afternoon when the steamship *Arabesque* berthed in the port of London. A stiff breeze carried the sounds and smells of the vast old city, tantalizing the senses of one who had been away too long. River waters, chimney smoke, warehouses, ale houses, horses, people and their *doings*, blended together into a heady melange to welcome home the traveler. The scent was like the smell of no other place in the world, and Vincent Bantry would have recognized it anywhere.

He leaned on the starboard rail, still waiting for a porter to take charge of his baggage. A battered steamer chest cluttered the head of the gangway, a single case containing every item Bantry possessed — his entire estate, from a man's most humble necessity to those items he accounted his 'fortune.' And it was a considerable fortune, he thought, frowning first at the chest and then at the rooftops of the voracious, unforgiving old city he hoped would make him welcome. A fortune made up of Han and Ming treasures worth a prince's ransom. They had been purchased one by one, some accepted in payment for services rendered, and each one lovingly set aside against the day when Bantry would need them, or their value in cash.

He had expected that day to be long in the future, but it overtook him with alarming speed. Fortunes of war, he thought, the roll of the dice. Bantry had seen a great deal of action, speeding him to the rank of captain while less active officers in Her Majesty's Army were still awaiting their opportunities for glory.

But glory was a boy's dream. Bantry had learned this much to his cost. Glory was a fantasy woven by newspapers for the entertainment of the public and the beguilement of young men who might be persuaded to enlist.

Reality was blood, hardship, pain, sorrow. The soldier's life was not for every man. It took a kind of resolve, a strength from within, to grapple with agony and adversity, horror and inhumanity, and not be

lessened by the experience. These were Vince Bantry's most vivid memories, yet he would have said his service in China had enriched him. He returned to England still young, a captain at thirty-two, with a pension he did not need and a military reputation that would stand him in good stead in the old country.

The war hero, the noted adventurer, was always the darling of society. Opportunity and endeavor were open doors when politicians, businessmen, academics and socialites alike were hungry for such tales of Empire as Bantry brought home.

Home? He sighed as his eyes narrowed on the bleak, gray skyline of portside London. Even after the months of the voyage, home to him was still a little house on the outskirts of bustling Peking, just outside the hurly-burly and overcrowding of the tiny, narrow streets. A little Ching palace built for some forgotten magistrate or nobleman a century before, set in its own miniature forbidden garden, its high walls shutting out the world, shutting in the peace and tranquility of sculptured nature and timeless art.

It was Bantry's home for almost eight years, and he would have been there now, had the fighting on the Pearl River estuary not ended everything in a welter of blood and cannon smoke.

The memories were so haunting, so vivid, for some moments they seemed the reality while the London docks were an outrageous, nonsensical mirage. Bantry squeezed shut his eyes, trying to blink his demons away, but they persisted.

The engagement sprang out of nowhere, between HMS *Atropos* and a pirate junk, and the irony was, Bantry was merely a passenger. On his return from business in Hong Kong and Macao, he chose to sail in a naval vessel for speed and security. The roads were treacherous, bandits were a plague that season, and the waters of the South China Sea were alive with privateers. *Atropos* carried forty guns. She was an old frigate without the bonus of steam, but she was still a potent little ship and would have been a match for the corsair junk, if her crew had stood and fought.

Bantry could still feel the horror cutting through him, ice cold, as the native crewmen — most of them boys 'levied' off the streets of Shanghai and Canton to serve in British warships — gave their aid and allegiance to the pirates instead. In minutes *Atropos's* officers went down to the long knives of their own crew. The decks ran red before a shot was fired.

Not that Bantry blamed the boys. The treatment aboard ship was harsh. Barely a day passed without some poor Chinese lad feeling the end of a whip, or being put to serve his officers in some callously

sensual manner. Bantry had heard every old story of seamen and their ways; lately he was inclined to believe them.

When the junk came out of the tangled sand banks and marshes of the estuary, *Atropos* barely had the chance to swing about and show her twenty guns before the levies mutinied. In the next minutes the pressed crew exacted a fair measure of revenge for the abuse they had endured. Bantry wondered what treatment they would receive at the hands of the privateers with whom they shipped out now, while the crippled frigate floundered on the sands and was sucked under, leaving only her masts to show she had ever been there at all.

The junk was armed with a couple of heavy cannons cut away from some British wreck, and batteries of rockets on her fore and aft decks — enough fire-power to blow away *Atropos's* mizzen and set fire to the hemp lines and their canvas. Bantry's skin still prickled at the memory of the thick, reeking smoke, the screams of men dying, the groans of the ship as she plowed into the sands and stuck fast —

Then the dizzying fall, the impact, the coolness of green river water after the dragon's breath of the fire which was swiftly consuming the ship.

A splinter of the fallen crosstree invited his desperate fingers and he clung on tight, let it carry him away with the current. The river waters were running fast, but not fast enough, and his next memories were of pain lancing through his spine. The junk's archers let go volley after volley, deliberately picking fugitives out of the water. The passengers were mostly businessmen, their wives and families, and the screams of the children were the worst. They haunted Bantry for months.

How long did he cling to the bobbing wood, carried downriver to the sea? Those hours were a haze of blood-red memory, for he carried two arrows in his back like barbarian trophies, and he was out of his mind much of the time. He remembered the sun blazing at noon, the wash of salt water, the coolness lapping at him, the hoarse cries of seabirds — and much later, the bellow of a steam horn.

The Canton ferry's paddles thrashed in reverse to slow and stop the big vessel in midwater while the human cargo of Chinese laborers and English 'box wallahs' stood along the rails, gawping and pointing at the man who clung for his life to the spar. Many hands pulled Bantry up and out, and he barely knew where he was. The frigate was gone, all souls perished with her save his own, and it was left to a mere passenger to tell the story of her destruction.

The death of the *Atropos* was far from a new tale. A levied crew could never be depended on. The vessel's Marines contingent were

aboard to control them, come between them and the officers who too often abused and took liberties with them. Cruelty only invited vengeance, it was inevitable. Bantry never blamed the poor sods, even while he was set on a dining table aboard the *Catherine Morley* and the ferry churned on, resuming her long pull up to Canton.

He lay in a feverish stupor, deeply drugged, barely breathing as a retired Cornish doctor, another passenger, cut out the arrows that had feathered his back like the spines of a hedgehog. He was far from reality then, wandering in red-hot, rancid dreams, his head full of opium.

The following weeks were hazy, and he came to rely on the drug. Soon he was using too much, too often, and he knew he was in a hell of his own making even while he lit the pipe again. He was carried first by bullock wagon, later by carriage, to the Viceroy's palace in Hong Kong. Before he saw the high gates and streaming banners his wounds were festered, rotten. The poison went deep. This time an Army surgeon delved further into his back to cut out the rot; but this time the work was adeptly done. Bantry would recover almost completely.

Six months later the scars were still ugly but he felt little real pain. He felt well, whole, but the truth was dire. A section of muscle was gone, pared away to root out the poison, and the Army soon decided to retire him on medical grounds.

They had no use for a man who could not carry a field pack, keep up with a twenty-mile route march and shoulder a heavy rifle. No doubt lingered in Bantry's mind that he was fit and strong enough to hold his own with men his own age and stature, but he did not try to appeal against Surgeon General McCulloch's decision. He'd had his fill of the fighting between the Manchus and the Foreign Powers. He had seen enough to suffice for the rest of this life: barbarity and splendor, agony and magnificence, scenes to haunt him forever while his belly for the fight, the struggle for dominance, was gone.

For months he was confined in Hong Kong until his wounds closed and the livid scars began to turn silver. The Viceregal establishment was his home until he had recovered enough to make his journey north, back to the little Ching palace where young Lin had been telegraphed to pack up his master's belongings for the voyage home. England.

Art, jade and ivory, paintings and pottery, each piece beautiful and priceless, the cache of treasures Bantry had set aside to ensure his comfort in retirement. Lin packed them with the greatest care, the scrolls, vases, carvings, porcelain and ivory, all sandwiched between sheets of plywood and cushioned with straw to protect them on the journey — home, to a place Lin had never seen, and never would.

Bantry genuinely appreciated the boy's careful work, and he gave Lin enough money to see to his comfort for a year or more, if he was careful. It was less than Bantry wanted for the lad, but the boy spoke only broken English. In London he might not even survive. His chances were best if he remained in his own country, with a set of references which should place him in good, safe work.

The parting was more painful than Bantry liked to admit. Four years before, the lad had come to him as a peasant, right off the farm, illiterate, without a single word of English. He was fifteen then, thin as a rice stalk and as eager to please as a puppy afraid of a beating. Some little grasp of English came first, along with an understanding of a how a gentleman's house was run, and the duties of a houseboy.

Bantry was never aware of the moment when Lin's feelings became more presumptuous, but he would never forget the night, after a late and inebriated banquet for officers and gentlemen of the military and Diplomatic Corps, when he was brought home by carriage, a little overcome.

The room had spun. His fingers refused their orders to undress him, and in any case the evening had been too wonderful for him to want to sleep before dawn. Lin shouldered his weight as he stumbled out of the carriage. The boy undressed him, ushered him smoothly into bed. And slid between the sheets with him. Too near drunk to mind, much too happy to complain, the captain — then a humble lieutenant with a modest income and high hopes — relished every caress.

Lin wore a frightened face next morning, fully expecting to be whipped for his sins. Bantry's first priority was a powder for his protesting head, before it exploded off his shoulders. The herbal remedy was Chinese, very old. Lin ran to the apothecary for it, dosed him, closed the blinds and rubbed his neck with jasmine oil.

Slowly the pain and sickness subsided and Bantry remembered. He had a rueful smile for Lin, a pat for his round bottom, and the houseboy began to relax. How could the lad have known, the Army was in most ways equal to the Navy, and Bantry had witnessed too many relations between men for him to be shocked or even disquieted. He had never before indulged in the sensuality of his fellows, but he was keenly aware of the trysts, the midnight rendezvous, the secret message and sultry look. On many nights thereafter, Lin was welcome to play his sensual games when the lights were dimmed at last.

As Bantry stood on the English dock, surveying the gray English sky over the cluttered rooftops of the city, he thought it was Lin he missed most of all.

The westward voyage consumed a few days under two endless

months. He took a packet of the Oriental line from Shanghai to Bombay and spent two sultry, sweltering weeks waiting for the steamer, *SS Carpenter*, which butted its way through the deep swell of the Arabian Sea, the narrow, shallow waters of the Gulf of Persia. Egypt was just as Bantry remembered — hot, dry, aromatic, and infested with flies. The *Carpenter* made her way through the canal, paused briefly at Alexandria to take aboard passengers bound for Greece and Italy and, finally, for London.

The weather worsened steadily after Gibraltar. The North Atlantic was an animated mountain range. Bantry had regained his 'sea legs' and made light of it, but most of the passengers who boarded at Alexandria were sick constantly until the steamer sighted Maplin Sands. The *SS Carpenter* was home.

The Port of London was simply drab after the chaotic, exotic fracas of Oriental ports. Deliberately, Bantry shrugged the old memories away, put them forcibly into the past where they belonged. His eyes, a blue so dark as to appear black unless the sunlight caught them, raked the dock's milling crowds. He was searching for one face he would know.

It was eight years since he had last seen David Lockwood and he reminded himself once more, the man would be sixty years old. He would surely have changed.

A surly, pock-faced porter took sixpence from him and, swearing fluently in a language bearing little in common with English, struggled away with the steamer chest. Bantry watched as it was loaded onto a dolly and trundled down onto the dockside. Carters waited there; heavy drays with unsprung wheels stood ready to carry whatever loads. He gave the wagons a shrewd look and considered the delicacy of his goods as he followed the porter down.

Then, there was David Lockwood — more seamed, more deeply creased than Bantry recalled, gray about the temples, the lines about eyes and mouth engraved by the years, but still the same man. Lockwood had never been handsome, so time could steal little from him. He was an intelligent, good humored man, big and ruddy-faced, with hair still mostly raven dark. Typical old Welsh stock, from the shores of the Severn. He was a doctor by profession, with a small clinic in the heart of the city where he treated private patients, and, in his laboratory, studied the more exotic diseases.

One year the study of unusual tropical complaints took him out to Siam and French Indochina, where by chance he had met a young countryman, an Army lieutenant carrying dispatches. Bantry smiled at the memory, a lifetime in the past, for them both.

Yet Lockwood had obviously forgotten nothing of those days. He clasped Bantry in a bearhug as the younger man appeared on the dock, and slapped his back hard enough to knock the breath out of him, paternal, jovial, genuinely delighted. His voice was well schooled, the Welsh accent almost tamed, but the vowels were still round and Celtic when he was excited.

"Vincent! The voyage did you no harm, I see. I half expected to see you sickened, what with your wounds and this infernal weather. Not the time to be at sea, I'd say."

"Not at all," Bantry argued, "it was invigorating. And the wounds hardly trouble me now. They were well doctored by the best man in the Colony. It was nothing but feather beds and foot baths for me, once I made it back to Hong Kong alive. There's many a prince wishes he lived as richly." He paused to watch the carter load his steamer chest. "Careful with that, man! The contents are delicate, I'll have the hide off you if they're broken!"

The wagoner accorded him a gap-toothed smile and touched his cloth cap, but Bantry saw mockery in the gesture. The man lectured his pox-faced lad about roughness, and the chest still slammed into place in the bed of the wagon. Bantry's teeth ground.

Lockwood chuckled rudely. "I expect you looted half the Forbidden City. Just as well. You're young, you'll need a fresh start. An Army pension won't keep you in the style you've clearly become accustomed to. Speaking of which, where are you staying, Vincent?"

"I thought, a small hotel until I can find a house, preferably outside the city," Bantry mused, and, unbidden, his thoughts returned to his home outside Peking. His days of living to that standard were over, if he did not wish to be paupered within a year. Memories of the east distracted him powerfully, and he forced himself to listen to Lockwood.

"Nonsense, my boy," the doctor was saying. "You'll come home with me at once. Edith and Phoebe have relished every word of your letters over the years. They're only waiting to meet you. To pounce on you, in fact. You've not even seen a photograph of Phoebe since she was a child, have you?" Pale blue eyes took on an extra gleam. "She's a young woman now. Of the right age, and so on, and so forth, if you follow me."

"The right age?" Bantry laughed gently. "I've hardly set foot on British soil for the first time since I was a lad myself, and already you're trying to have me married? It's unthinkable, David."

"Wait," Lockwood said cheerfully, "until you see my Phoebe. She favors her mother, which speaks highly indeed of her charm." He stirred as the carter mounted his vehicle and gathered the reins. "Come

this way, then. I left a hansom waiting on the street. Save your stories of Xanadu for the ladies — there's a very fashionable bunfight on Friday evening at Mrs. Craven's house, if you can get an invitation. Best of everything, a fine cellar, and a string septet for your entertainment." They were walking along the dock, following the wagon with Bantry's chest. The *Carpenter* was abandoned without a backward glance. "Mind you," David went on, "you'd need a magic wand to get an invitation. Mrs. Craven is very ... choosy." He winked lewdly.

Bantry pretended shock. "You surely don't mean invitations must be paid for in *that* coin? The lady is a — a profligate in skirts?" He shook his head. "England is not what I remember."

The remark seemed to darken Lockwood's mood by shades. "You never rooted about in its cellars, then, nor walked its dark backstreets."

"And you did?" Bantry was mildly surprised. Lockwood had never seemed the kind of man to dabble in the so-called 'houses of ill repute.'

"Once or twice," Lockwood admitted, "in the days of my wild youth and later, in the course of my work." He looked sidelong at Bantry and chuckled wickedly. "Research, you know."

"Research," Bantry echoed, and for the first time in months he actually laughed.

"But still," Lockwood went on, "what you say is quite true. England *has* changed more than a little while you were away, and not for the better. Oh, we live in a glorious age, but it is indeed an age of looseness and vice. Not," he added shrewdly, "that such as yourself, with your years in the Orient, would even lift a brow at what old Blightey calls vice."

"I expect not," Bantry admitted as they left behind the orderly tangle of derricks and light shipping, and came up onto the street. The hansom was waiting, its driver dozing. The horse's nose was in a bag of feed. "There's little London could do to surprise me after I've lived so long in — Xanadu." He allowed a smile as Lockwood held open the cab's door.

The smell of the vehicle fetched back so many memories. Hansoms smelt like nothing else in the world: leather and oil, candlewicks and horse, and perhaps the last whiff of a lady's perfume. The odors invited a pageant of visions, the social whirl of his youth ... and the cab that whisked him from his mother's house in Knightsbridge to the Port, on his way out of England.

That day he was twenty years old, and a few weeks. Old enough to be loosed on the population of a foreign country, placed in charge of British Other Ranks and allowed to make decisions affecting the lives

and wellbeing of hundreds of people because, despite his youth and lowly rank, he had one indispensable qualification.

He was born *British*. It was the only real prerequisite to one who was determined to add his efforts to the construction of Empire. Even private soldiers in the British Army — the lowest of all forms of military life — in foreign places comported themselves like gentry and treated the people of the subject realm with contempt. It was one of the facts of life.

Such thoughts occupied Bantry as the hansom pulled out of the port's warren of warehouses and turned west. The wagon was right behind it, and soon Bantry was accosted by the sights and sounds of London. They wove themselves together as if designed to beguile him, and he opened his senses to drink in the city of his youth.

Sooty and vivacious, grand and grubby by turns, London was filled with human enterprise. On every hand the endeavors of the past competed with the present. To one side of the cab were structures whose foundations were laid not long after Roman legions marched these roads, and on the other were buildings whose roofing was still unfinished.

At least on the surface, nothing had changed very much, and Bantry was both disappointed and relieved to find the city as he had left it. The changes Lockwood abhorred were deep below the fashionable, modest surface. The cab swung along the road where Bantry's mother had lived. After she passed away the house was sold to pay old debts. He did not wish to see it, and as the cab drove by he turned his head away.

If Lockwood saw him avert his eyes he said nothing, and allowed the younger man his silence while the hansom and wagon threaded doggedly through traffic toward the trees of Regents Park. At last the vehicles drew up on the carriageway of a big house, old and beautiful, on Bayswater Road. Poplars and elm skirted the paved way and the cab's wheels rumbled over cracked flagstones.

"It's not much," Lockwood said dryly, "but it's home."

In fact, the elegant house must have required a small army of servants to keep it in order, and Bantry gave his old friend a smile for the remark. The doctor shared a chuckle and, as an elderly butler opened the door, he ushered Bantry inside.

"Irving, is Mrs. Lockwood at home? Captain Bantry will be staying with us for some time."

"Mrs. Lockwood is in the library, sir." The butler's voice was dry as autumn leaves. "Miss Lockwood arrived home moments ago and is upstairs, changing. She has been riding all morning."

"She's a tomboy," Lockwood said fondly, with a glance at Bantry. "You'll like her, old man. She's a breath of fresh air, a real English rose. Just what you need, I'll wager."

"Would you, now?" Bantry slid off the greatcoat and scarf he had been wearing since he came on deck. The early summer day was warm enough, but after the tropics he found the British air too chill for his taste.

The last photograph of Phoebe he had seen was years old. In it, she had been no more than six or seven, and he realized she must be eighteen by now. She was a fair child, he remembered, as blonde as her father was dark, the last of five sons and daughters — certainly the last child in this house — and coddled as the last chick on the nest. Lockwood was vastly proud of her and, in spite of himself, Bantry was intrigued.

Peking boasted few unattached women of any age, and so often his work took him upcountry. Many Chinese women were almost frighteningly beautiful, and skilled as any whore; the young Chinese boys were often indistinguishable from the girls, and even more skilled. A man could lose his mind 'out East' and spend the rest of his life trying to recapture his wits. But to Bantry, even the most beautiful Chinese girls soon seemed more like living dolls than human beings. They were tailored to serve, please, produce children and be bartered as the chattels they were. Before long he was disenchanted, and preferred his own company.

Or that of Lin, the houseboy who had come to love him deeply. Young and smooth, with white velvet for skin and black almonds for eyes, Lin was as beautiful as any girl. At the memory of him Bantry's heart turned painfully in his chest. He could only wonder where Lin was now, who he was with, who loved him now.

The hallway was rich with wine-red carpets and mosaic tiles, little leaded windows and polished walnut. Irving took Bantry's coat and sent out for strong backs to maneuver the steamer chest upstairs. Bantry stood aside, appreciating David's home feature by feature until he heard footsteps above and looked up to see a face at the balcony.

Could this be Phoebe? *This* was the whey-faced, yellow haired little waif in the ancient photograph, who clutched a golliwog and peered past the camera at the unseen photographer. She was tall now, and buxom, broad-shouldered as a boy, with hair darkened to strawberry blonde and her face fined down to strong bones. She was dressed in blue and white, with a lot of lace about her neck, a collar up to her jaw and the fair hair was somehow wound around her head.

"Ah, there you are!" Lockwood called as the men grunted and

heaved, laboring up the stairs with the chest. "I trust the riding was good?"

"The riding was excellent." Phoebe Lockwood's accent betrayed her good schooling but something of the Welsh endured, learned on her father's knee and never forgotten. Her eyes were on the stranger — she knew who he must be, since Bantry had written to David months before, telling him which ships he would be sailing in, and when he would be arriving, weather permitting. "Mister — Captain Bantry," she corrected as the steamer chest went around her onto the balcony. She came down the stairs, head cocked at him, eyes bright with curiosity. "From China?"

"The very same," Bantry affirmed, amused. "From ... Xanadu." From the land of barbarism and splendor such as not even the Sun King might have dreamed. He dropped a half bow before the girl as she left the stairs, took her hand and kissed the fingers in not-quite-mock gallantry. Her cheeks were flushed from the morning's exercise and her eyes, which were as brown as her mother's, laughed. David had not exaggerated. She was beautiful, marriageable, with education and background.

If Bantry had been looking for a wife, his search would have ended right here. But he was not, and he said amusedly, "I heard of your charm, Miss Lockwood ... I heard correctly."

"And who told you that?" Phoebe demanded. "My God, I suppose father told you. He says the same to every single man under forty, hoping someone will marry me and foil every plan I ever made." She gave her father a look that might have withered him. "Don't you, father?"

Lockwood only shrugged in resignation. "I suppose I do, and what of it? You're on your way to ruin, young lady, mark my words."

"Ruin?" Bantry was intrigued. "How so, Miss —"

"Call me Phoebe," she insisted. "I'm almost nineteen, I'm not a spinster yet! And he means, nicely brought up young ladies should have no pretensions toward a career on the stage. I keep telling him, it's not the stage, it's the *opera*, there's a world of difference." She drew up her head. "I sing. Very well, as it happens. I've sung for Richard D'Oyly Carte himself. There's to be a new production of *The Gondoliers*, fresh for the Christmas season, and I'll perform in it —"

"Or die in the attempt," Lockwood said aridly.

"Oh, come now," Bantry remonstrated, "persistence and patience reward themselves eventually. He stepped back a little and pretended to look the girl up and down. "D'Oyly Carte heard you and approved?"

"I should say so," Phoebe said with more than a hint of smugness.

"But I still need father's consent to begin. I'm only nineteen, after all."

"You're eighteen," Lockwood corrected loudly. "Now, kindly inform your mother we have a guest. Captain Bantry will be staying with us for some time, and we should at least try to make him feel at home. Irving?"

The old butler stepped out of the dining room, arms filled with silverware and wilted flowers.

"Tea for four, in the library." Lockwood turned back to Bantry. "Come this way."

Phoebe's eyes strayed back to Bantry, catching and commanding his attention, then she was gone. He smiled after her. She had a tomboy, boyish charm all her own, no doubt of it, but marriage was as far from her mind as from his own, and he began to relax. They both had their own trails to cut. If Phoebe desired a singing career she would never permit her parents to bully her into marriage — unless it was to someone connected with the world of the opera, where marriage would advance her career. Bantry was under no threat.

He dropped a hand on Lockwood's shoulder. "I'd like to unpack and change. Everything I possess is in that confounded chest, and I'm afraid half of it will be broken! I'll need to dispose of some of my pieces of art, David. My finances are ... at a low ebb, if you take my meaning. Oh, don't concern yourself, old man! There's a king's ransom in that chest, fragile wonders such as this country has rarely seen. Sell any three, and I'll live well for as many years. And I've many more than three, I assure you. You were always fond of art and antiquities; tell me, is there a dealer in this city whom you trust?"

Lockwood gave him a shrewd look. "What about old Henry Archer? I've bought a good many paintings and *objects d'art* from him over the years. I'd trust him to get you a fair price for whatever oddment you'll part with first. I can call at his home on my way back from the clinic, if you like. In fact, come with me. Bring the pieces, if you can safely carry them. But you're my guest here, Vincent, don't be in such a hurry to rush away. And don't you dare feel indebted! It's my pleasure to have you here, for as long as I can keep you here, even if I have to tie you down."

"You're much too kind, David," Bantry said with a smile, and headed up the stairs.

The carters had pushed the chest into a room at the back of the house. A large double bed commanded the chamber, flanked on either side by a stained-wood wardrobe and dresser, ewer and basin. The green-tiled fireplace was cold at this hour of the day and this time of year, and the rich, red drapes were fastened back at the window,

affording him a view of the garden, as far as clipped yew and privet hedges and old poplars.

He gave the room one glance of approval and turned his attention to the chest. Lin had done his work excellently. Piece by piece, the scrolls and carvings, pottery and jade were unwrapped on the bed, and to his intense relief Bantry found them perfect. He selected the piece he liked least and set aside the others for sentimental reasons. The piece he would sell was a little statuette of a lady of the Tang Dynasty dressed for the imperial court. It was no less than twelve hundred years old and so valuable, he suspected he would live handsomely for a year on the sale. Two, if he were frugal. It should certainly pay the lease on a suitable house and buy him his privacy.

While Lockwood's hospitality was very welcome, Bantry was ill at ease, restless. He would have relished a long stretch of solitude after the voyage, but he knew it was not to be, not so soon. He changed into clothes smelling faintly of camphor — mothballs. The scent reminded him of the day he left, the final packing, the lovemaking in the summer-house on the hill above the old city. Peking's rooftops had shimmered, gold in the sunset light, and such images drew Bantry back so powerfully, he felt the old pain under his heart. Those memories belonged to other times, other places.

Those pleasures were forbidden in polite English society, at best sniggered over, and at worst actually illegal. Still, London had its community of sodomites — any city had its simmering, notorious underground, but it was driven down deep by both the church and the law. The threat of prison and ruin were enough to make Bantry consign his memories of his Chinese houseboy and all such sensual indulgence very firmly to the past. English women, he told himself again, sternly, were among the most beautiful and independent in the world. A wealthy young Army officer, just retired with honors, must make an attractive proposition.

If this was the price of homecoming, he would grit his teeth and pay it. London would surely make him welcome. He sighed heavily, for a moment mourning all he had lost.

The door clicked shut on his room. As he followed the curved stairs down to the hall he began to mock himself with a rueful grin. The single man in London was between the devil and the deep blue sea, in a society that publicly frowned on adultery. How many young men here yearned for the freedom of what Lockwood called Xanadu? The freedom in which Vincent Bantry had reveled for years.

From the library came the clatter of teacups. An Indian servant, splendidly turned out in a starched white uniform and red turban,

showed Bantry inside and closed the door behind him. Lockwood had brought the man back from one of his journeys in the East. Bantry rummaged among disordered memories, searching for his name. Ranjit. The man had been half dead with malaria, lying in a ditch, abandoned by a family too frightened to even touch him. He owed Lockwood his life. When David returned to England, Ranjit simply attached himself to the doctor. Nothing Lockwood could say or do would make him remain behind.

Arranged on the settee with his wife at his right hand and Phoebe perched decorously on the stool of the baby grand piano nearby, Lockwood looked like a man at peace with the cosmos. The French windows were open to the early afternoon breeze, and Phoebe turned her face to the fresh air as if she longed to be miles away. She was physically very much like her mother. One easily saw how she would appear in thirty years. She had her mother's bones, and Edith was still handsome.

She returned Bantry's smile as he seated himself in the armchair opposite the settee, and Ranjit fussed with a silver teapot. On the tray was a selection of tiny cucumber sandwiches, scones and pastries. A grandfather clock by the door ticked away the time, and photographs from The Oval seemed to have colonized the sections of wall not lined with books.

The very *Englishness* was overpowering to one who had been away so long, and Bantry found it as absurd as nostalgic. He pinned on a smile, prepared to humor his host. The women wanted stories of China, and he spoke of the flotsam of society. Banquets, balls, the theater, diplomats and their families. Lockwood wanted military anecdotes, and these, Bantry chose with great care.

He could have told stories of war and suffering which would have shocked the women and even Lockwood himself. In their awful innocence they pictured none of that. They saw pigtailed peasants, tiny women tottering on broken feet, red and gold houses and temples, dragons and demons, a barbarian land, 'godless,' certainly alien.

So Bantry gave them what they wanted to hear, charmed them as he had charmed the families of his officers and the diplomats of so many countries, and they were happy. Phoebe hung on every word and when Bantry was done she set cup into saucer and clapped her hands.

"Bravo, Captain! You simply must come to Sarah's party! It will be deadly dull without you."

"Sarah?" Bantry returned to the pot for a third cup. "I'm afraid I don't know any Sarah."

"Mrs. Sarah Craven," Lockwood informed him dryly. "She's the widow of Gordon Craven, the Member of Parliament. A formidable dowager, somewhat notorious and highly popular in influential circles. How you'd come by an invitation to her party, I really can't imagine. Worse than trying to get into Buck House itself."

"I *have* an invitation, father, and you know I have," Phoebe remonstrated. She reached out to touch Bantry's hand, on the arm of his chair. "Sarah and I take singing lessons from the same teacher, Captain. She knows I've sung for Mr. D'Oyly Carte, and I'm to sing at her party. You could accompany me as my gentleman." She gave her father a triumphant look. "I've the right to have a gentleman. And my gentleman should be with me, to protect me from all those presumptuous young rogues at the party. So father would say, I'm sure."

Lockwood gave her a stern look but was clearly amused. He turned apologetic eyes to Bantry. "Humor her, Vincent, for my sake. I'd feel much happier if she were accompanied to that house. And she does seem to have taken a liking to you. Mrs. Craven hosts parties that have become legendary, but she invites some very ... well, some very queer people."

"Queer people?" Phoebe's voice sharpened. "You mean, like Madame Blavatsky, the famous occultist? Father, there were two violinists and three boy sopranos at the same party, a priest, an MP, two surgeons and a portraitist. What could you possibly have against occultists? They're the most fascinating people, as I'm sure Captain Bantry will tell you. China is full of occultists, isn't it, Captain?"

"Oh, bursting at the seams," Bantry assured Lockwood with a wink. The girl was imbued with the energy of youth. She had, as yet, no inkling of how to be old. The freshness of youth charmed Bantry. "The Chinese," he went on indulgently, "have their own system of magic. A way of foretelling the future. It is called *I Ching*. I saw it work many times."

Now Lockwood made scornful noises. "Oh, come, come, old man, you saw it work? Mere coincidence, surely. There's no such thing as magic. Foretell the future? Why, the whole idea is completely absurd."

"Is it?" Bantry had never been closed-minded, and even if he had been a born skeptic, the things he had seen and heard in the east would have shattered David's brand of dogmatic disbelief. He kept his own counsel today, preferring to avoid an argument.

In any case, those tales were not suitable for gentle company — stories of ancestral voices, the living dead, mystics who were a thousand years old and exorcists who dealt daily in blood and gore. Such tales were not for English drawing rooms. Phoebe was arguing stri-

dently, proving herself a worthy opponent for her father. Bantry sat back, folded his hands and enjoyed her defense of the pseudo-science of occultism.

"Absurd, is it?" she demanded, both fists clenching. "You should have been there last week to watch Mr. Michael Flynn deal out his pack of cards. The Tarot is far older than the Bible, did you know that? Flynn's cards are his own pack, designed and painted by himself. He read the life of a stranger while I watched, and told the events of the month to come." She lifted her chin defiantly. "I was there."

"Trickery, my dear," the doctor insisted. "Your Mr. Flynn is undoubtedly a charlatan, but a very clever and extremely charming one. It is this Michael Flynn who should be on the stage, young lady, not yourself."

"Oh, rubbish, father," Phoebe retorted. "Nothing he does is charlatanism. He's an occultist, one of the few who have been admitted to Madame Helena Blavatsky's inner circle. And the most talented of them, from what I hear. He is wonderful." She paused. "And he's beautiful, too."

"Phoebe!" Lockwood admonished.

The girl was simply ignoring him now, intent on Bantry instead. "You must come to the party, Captain. Come to hear me sing, come to meet Mr. Flynn — if you have any interest in occult matters you must meet him. He's the ... the strangest man."

"Strange?" Bantry's brows rose. "How so? A moment ago you said he was beautiful."

"He is," Phoebe mused, "but he's strange too. He is — what did he call himself? A child of the night. Yes, that was it. A child of the night."

A peculiar thrill wound through Bantry's nerves at the resonance of those words. Something very beautiful lay at the heart of them. Yet Phoebe was right, something inestimably strange lay buried within them too. Something which aroused shivers.

Was the strangeness all part of this Flynn's charlatan act? Was this the basis of his livelihood, as he traveled about, trading on his good looks, fleecing women like the redoubtable Mrs. Craven? If this Michael Flynn was as beautiful as Phoebe insisted, and as gifted in the art of sleight of hand, or clever with a Tarot pack, a good living was easily come by. Hence David's accusations of charlatanism.

But Lockwood was speaking again and the scorn had gone from his tone. "She's quite right there, Vincent. There's a good deal about Michael Flynn that's strange, though it's through no fault of his own. He has an illness, you see, which makes him a 'child of the night,' as he calls himself, and — thank God it's rare, and it's not catching. I've never

come across it before, and I'd pay good money to study him, if only I could dupe him into my laboratory at the clinic. Naturally, he won't consider it."

"An illness?" Bantry's brow creased. A beautiful young occultist with a rare disease which caused him to hide from the sun? Fascination brought his travel-weary senses back to life. "What is this disease? You're sure it's not catching?"

"Oh, I hardly think so, or the rest of the city would have succumbed by now. I call it *phototonic mydriasis*, and I think —"

"One moment, David!" Bantry laughed. "Go back and begin again. You call it what? What on earth does that mean?"

The doctor chuckled. "Forgive me. Often, I forget. Research is my life, you see. A *mydriasis* is a prolonged and abnormal dilation of the pupil. Oh, anyone's pupils will dilate because of darkness or certain drugs, but Flynn's pupils are permanently dilated. Be sure to take a close look at them when you meet him, if you conduct this daughter of mine to Mrs. Craven's entertainment.

"His eyes are dark, just as if you're looking into a deep, lightless pool. Just a rim of Irish green around the pupil. This is half his trouble, I'm sure. Daylight would be excruciatingly painful, and he would naturally choose to avoid it. There is also the problem of burning, so he says. He is so sensitive to sunlight, he'll be blistered with sunburn while the rest of us haven't even noticed the warmth of the sun.

"Now, this condition is called *phototonus*, the sensitivity of an organism, caused by light. At first I wondered if his condition could be simply a neurotic *mydriasis*, a dread of light for some irrational reason, probably rooted in childhood. But no, the pupils are genuinely dilated. He allowed me to experiment at one of Mrs. Craven's evenings —"

"And you hurt him," Phoebe said tartly. "I saw him rubbing his eyes. They were watering a good hour after you shone the light into them."

"Very likely why he refuses to let me look further into his condition," Lockwood guessed with a sigh.

It seemed probable to Bantry. Doctors, particularly Army doctors, were notoriously hamfisted and indifferent to the pain they inflicted. "There's no cure?" He was refilling his cup.

"Who can say?" Lockwood sat back and regarded Phoebe with a frown. "Unless Flynn allows experiment, where is the possibility of a cure being found? And to be candid, even were he to permit it, I'd be doubtful of finding any real remedy. Better to live as he does, I suppose, as a 'child of the night,' and look to his comfort." Lockwood stirred, checking the time with a fat gold pocketwatch. "Do you want

to bathe after the journey, Vincent? You'll have the house to yourself this evening. The three of us have tickets for the opera. I know from years ago, this isn't much to your taste! And the house is sold out anyway. It's Handle's *Xerxes*."

Baroque opera was less repugnant than simply mysterious to Bantry. Army life had allowed him little access to music, and the years before his enlistment had exposed him to no more than the music hall, ballads, an occasional aria warbled by singers whose talent would never take them within a mile of the legitimate stage. He lifted a curious brow at Phoebe. Did she have the gift? If Richard D'Oyly Carte had even agreed to listen to her, she must have something to offer. Doubtless, he would hear the story at the Craven house.

Dinner was served early in the polished walnut dining room, and soon enough Bantry was alone as the Lockwoods dressed and a cab pulled up the carriageway. David did not keep a carriage and horses, though the coach house and stables remained at the side of the house. From the French windows Bantry watched them leave. He was stretching stiff muscles, listening to the crackle of his spine and shoulders, and relishing an evening of peace.

It was the first taste of solitude he had enjoyed since boarding his ship in Shanghai. He dispatched Ranjit for coffee and brandy and retired to the library. The shelves were bowed under the weight of books — volumes of medical theory, Phoebe's music, a good selection of classics and readable fiction, from Mrs. Gaskell to Dickens. Bantry settled in a winged armchair with *The Cricket on the Hearth*, and by ten he was dozing.

At midnight the grandfather clock woke him with strident Westminster chimes, and he surrendered to the seduction of a feather mattress. Maids had set the hearth in his room. He lit a taper at the lamp on the mantel and held it to the kindling. The fire took the chill from the air as he undressed. He owned several linen nightshirts, none of them worn much, since he had never developed the habit of dressing to go to bed. But the house was strange and he was a guest. After a moment's consideration he pulled one over his head.

It was odd to sleep in a real bed, on a surface that did not roll with the sea and thrum with the drumbeat of steam engines. The very quiet kept him awake for a time, but when sleep came he did not even dream.

He woke to the sound of blackbirds and a flood of sunlight between curtains he had forgotten to close. It was several seconds before he could remember where he was, and when. A large part of him was still in the east, and he groaned as England filtered back, mote by mote, into his conscious mind.

The lady of the house was absent at breakfast but Phoebe was already up, energetic as ever, as if she had not spent half the night at the opera. She surprised Bantry with an invitation to ride. The horses belonged to a retired cavalry colonel whose stables stood back-to-back with the Lockwoods' coach house. Apparently the old man was glad to have the animals exercised, and Bantry was pleased to accept the offer.

Feeling his stiff muscles and a twinge of something not-quite-pain from his shoulder, he swung up into the saddle of a tall, chestnut hunter and followed Phoebe's roan gelding onto the rides about Hyde Park. The hour was still quite early but most of London seemed to be taking its exercise on the Carriage Road and along the Serpentine. Trees and lawns kept the city far enough away to afford the illusion of distance and freedom. The high, blue sky promised a warm summer, and for the first time Bantry began to believe he might be home.

England was less a place than a feeling which infused slowly into a man's bones and took time to accumulate. Many travelers took the feeling abroad with them, recreating pieces of England at will, in the most unlikely places — an English cottage, thatched roof and all, dozed in the sweltering humidity of Bangkok. Roses climbed around a door in Shanghai, five yards inside a moon gate. Bantry had always considered it the height of absurdity.

Phoebe's social life was a tale he learned in garbled snatches as they rode, and by midday he could recite her calendar and expectations, name her friends and outline their philosophies. He endured with a smile. Females were rare enough in his life for their chatter to have become a novelty. Once or twice over the years he had considered an affair with mild curiosity, but for a man who chose the Army as his career, patience was his best virtue. Marriage was not condoned by the service before a man reached the age of twenty-seven, and 'dalliance' was frowned on. Relations with the local women of whatever area were discouraged, if only to slow the spread of the social diseases, and what was left? Darby and Joan.

Bantry allowed himself a little wry humor, and knew he had been so lucky. A houseboy called Lin had kept his reputation spotless while his nights were a haze of pleasure. Lin would be a fond memory in the back of his mind as long as he lived, and he could only hope that one day he might somehow share the memory.

The social butterfly was on the wing once more, and after a hasty luncheon Bantry was free. David was already dressed for work, waiting for his regular cab to take him to the clinic, and with a gracious smile Bantry accepted the offer of a 'conducted tour.'

The Tang figurine was wrapped carefully in newspaper and hes-

sian, and he cradled it in the crook of his arm as he went down to meet Lockwood. David gave the package a speculative look and Bantry told him, "A piece for Archer, if he likes the look of it. Is his home on our way?"

"Almost. Just small diversion. We'll look in there after I've seen to business," David assured him. "I'm late already."

The cab made its way through Bayswater, and in minutes they were lost in the hurry and scurry of London. No other city in the world was like it, and once again Bantry absorbed its sights, sounds, smells, as if he were a stranger. In many ways, he felt he was.

The clinic had once been a private house. It hid behind high garden walls and dense yew hedges, with only a modest brass plate at the iron gate to suggest the small hospital inside. Lockwood's name was engraved there and, in smaller lettering, the name of George Helprin.

"My protégé," Lockwood explained blandly. "A quite talented boy, actually. He'll be qualified next year and practicing here."

"You allow a student to have his name on your gate?" Bantry was surprised.

"He's also a financial partner," Lockwood admitted with a touch of reluctance and a wry smile. "George brought two thousand pounds into this little enterprise of ours, and he'll be my junior partner the moment he's qualified. His father is a surgeon. He'll make a damn fine surgeon himself. I'll introduce you."

A pale, freckle-faced, red-haired young man took Bantry's hand. His fingers were cold, his manner icy, as if all his life had been reduced, in the course of his work, to a set of specimen slides to be placed under the lens of a microscope.

At once, with some animal instinct, Bantry disliked him intensely. He smiled politely, played out the old mime he had performed for countless diplomats and senior officers whom he also despised or scorned. Helprin was never aware Bantry considered his face like a dead fish, his voice like an unoiled hinge. The young man was busy with a legion of parish charity patients, each with a graveyard cough or rheumatics, lining up for attention in the consulting rooms at the front of the building.

Lockwood waffled theatrically at their pungent smell and led Bantry into more antiseptic cloisters. He must see the laboratory, the small morgue, the dissection room. Monkeys squealed, rattled the bars of their prisons, and white rabbits twitched their long whiskers at him. Bantry felt a pang of pity for the creatures, imprisoned here, sentenced to whatever excruciating death in the name of medical science.

Lockwood did not even seem to notice the casual cruelties of his

profession. He was proud of his laboratory, but to Bantry the place had the reek of a charnel house and he was eager to escape. Perhaps he had seen too much brutality in the Far East, and endured too much himself, to easily accept any suffering, human or animal. But he had better sense than to mention the misgivings.

He took his leave when Lockwood began to see his patients, and walked for hours while the evening breeze turned northerly and became cool. His mind wandered, headed back into the refuge of the past, and he lost track of time. When the city intruded on his thoughts at last, banishing the ghosts of other times, other place, the sun was down. David would be waiting for him at the clinic, with the afternoon surgery complete.

Night was falling as he hurried back, and its deepening gloom reminded him of the young occultist who so enthralled Phoebe. Michael Flynn, an Irishman. A child of the night. Young, beautiful, she said, gifted and strange, with his rare disease. Fascinated, Bantry found himself actually looking forward to the following evening, when he would accompany Phoebe to the Craven house on the absurd pretext of being 'her gentleman.' Her parents would have been delighted to believe it were true.

For a while as he walked, Bantry did consider the possibilities. He was slow to dismiss them, for civilian life had inescapable realities. He needed to make a second start, like many young Army officers whose careers were cut short by injury. A talented, beautiful and wealthy wife would certainly be an asset. Yet to Bantry marriage loomed before him with the appeal of a cage. As if the ring on his finger would imprison him alongside the monkeys and rabbits in David's dissecting room. The thought was consuming as he turned into the hospital's quiet side-street, and Lockwood's voice surprised him.

"Ah, there you are." David had apparently been waiting for some time at the gate, with the parceled antique in both hands. "Will we walk, Vince? It's a nice evening, and not far to go."

"Then we'll walk," Bantry decided. He could feel the softness in his limbs — too many weeks of indolence aboard a ship.

Henry Archer's place of business was a private house, set back in a deep, shadowed garden by the river. The brass doorknocker was shaped like a roaring lion. A stout old housekeeper showed them into the downstairs parlor, where Archer himself was reading by the hearth. He was a tall old man, slender and elegant, though he was in his seventies, if Bantry was any judge. He was in a green smoking jacket, and stoked a fresh pipe as Bantry unwrapped the figurine.

He took the lure like a trout. The man was astute, Bantry saw at

once. And he was knowledgeable. His eyes lit up at the sight of the Tang piece on Bantry's lap, and he seemed almost to lick his lips. "May I ask where you came by this, Captain?"

"Honestly, if that's what concerns you!" Bantry said ruefully. "In fact, this little treasure was in the possession of a minor official, a Manchu magistrate with more wastrel sons than he knew what to do with. A most unfortunate event took place — a murder, in fact. A British lieutenant was stabbed one night. The knife pierced him to the heart, and I'm afraid our man Parsons was dead even before he fell.

"Several witnesses placed the magistrate's youngest son at the scene, and I regret to say the lad would have been hanged under both British and Manchu law." Bantry paused, considering the crime, and the punishment. "The boy was just thirteen years old. Just a child." His voice was little more than a whisper, and hoarse. "I undertook investigations of my own. I had a ... a houseboy whom I'd taught enough English to get by, and who was extremely fluent in several local dialects.

"Eventually I found the man who *had* stabbed Lieutenant Parsons for his pocketwatch and a few shillings. The magistrate's young son was released, and as you might expect the father was fairly overcome with gratitude. He gave me the little piece you're holding, for my efforts." He paused, let the harsh memories dwindle back into their proper place and watched the almost reverent way in which Archer handled the statue. The gentle old hands turned it over and over. Archer was fully aware it was *history* cradled in his palms. "It's quite valuable, I believe," Bantry added. "It was praised many times by visitors at my home outside Peking, and several times I was made generous offers."

Now Archer angled a hard look at him. "It's probably worth rather more than you suspect! You can trust me, Captain, if you would leave this with me. Doctor Lockwood will certainly vouch for me, and I can contact my usual clients in the morning. Perhaps I can let you know their offers by Saturday."

Lockwood was intent on his pipe, but made muffled affirmative noises. "Excellent," Bantry decided. He offered his hand. "Find me a fair price. I'm not greedy. There's much more, some fine pieces I bought, others earned as this one was. I'll hold them till I need further funds, bring them to you as I decide to part with them."

"So long," Archer prayed, "as you keep them safe. This fair city is a hive of brigands and hooligans who would take a childish delight in destroying everything you have. Quite apart from the loss of revenue to yourself, I cannot believe such fragile treasures have survived the

centuries to end their existence as pot-shards in a London dustbin!"

"They're quite safe," Bantry said with a smile, and stepped out of the parlor as Archer set the Tang relic into a cabinet with his own valuables. Three stout keys turned to lock it.

The streets were almost dark as he and Lockwood left. Lamplighters were abroad, changing wicks and replenishing the brass lanterns along streets that by now were almost deserted. David turned up his coat collar and chafed his palms together as the wind rose, chill and aromatic, off the river.

A cab announced itself with a rumble of wheels, the iron clomp of horseshoes. Bantry stepped onto the cobbles to hail the driver for the ride back. A little boy wandered the curb almost aimlessly, crying out the headlines and waving the evening edition of the day's paper.

How curious it was to buy an English paper and read it on the same day it was printed. Bantry paid the lad his copper, and as the hansom pulled away he surveyed the news.

The paper was dated Thursday, May 14th, 1892.

Chapter Two

The Craven house was bathed in lights, and the sounds of a small string orchestra issued from the open doorway as Bantry stepped down from his cab and gave his arm to Phoebe. The girl was in white lace, virginal and extravagant. Bantry knew they made a handsome pair. In the morning, the society pages would be teasing with gossip about Doctor Lockwood's marriageable daughter and the retired Army officer. Bantry was amused. He had dressed carefully, well aware this was his first outing. The impression he made tonight could be crucial.

Every Saturday night Mrs. Craven entertained patrons of the arts, businessmen, writers and musicians, even actors, singers and occultists. Madame Helena Blavatsky had often visited, in the company of that advocate of political and social reform, George Bernard Shaw. Phoebe's invitation was an invaluable opportunity for Bantry to ingratiate himself, make the business connections that might be the difference between success in this new life, and an impoverished future.

He had tarried in front of the mirror in his room for some time, studying his reflection, and was satisfied. Despite the injury, his frame remained muscular and he was above average height. His hair was dark brown, just beginning to grow out of the military style. His clothes were immaculate; an ivory-handled cane and black opera cloak lined in scarlet created an air of elegance without swagger.

To his gratification Phoebe was enchanted, but his care in dressing was not for her benefit. Vince Bantry was handsome, and he knew it. His skin was pale, smooth, and his eyes were his best feature, though his mouth was wide and given to quirky, good humored expressions. He had always capitalized on his looks without hesitation; they had won him friends and opportunities in the past, and he saw no reason for them to fail him now.

The girl adjusted her ruffles and took his arm. They were ushered inside by a young man whose smart livery diverted the attention from

his bored expression, then they were in a realm of crystal chandeliers, polished marble floors, and a whirl of color, bright music and laughter.

The promised string septet was playing Sarasate, a gypsy melody, wanton and lilting, and the floor was already busy with dancers. Bantry swung off his cloak and a silent, mask-faced servant took both it and the cane. Beautiful young men were everywhere, some of them guests, others in house livery. A blond, big-shouldered young Viking passed by with a tray of champagne and Bantry took a pair of long-stemmed flutes.

Before Phoebe could take a glass from him a voice called her name. Bantry turned, watched her swept into the embrace of a stout, handsome matron in oyster-gray and straps of pearls. This was Mrs. Sarah Craven, till lately the wife of a prominent Member of Parliament. Gordon Craven had left his widow wealthy; she was squandering the estate as fast she could, Bantry guessed — and she was having a high time doing it.

He took her plump hand, brushed the cursory kiss over heavily-ringed fingers and regarded the formidable Mrs. Craven from beneath lowered lids, deliberately charming. A Chinese fan — fake, he saw at once, and hid a smile — fidgeted in her left hand, nervous or affected, and she gave a whisky-roughened baritone laugh, an earthy sound Bantry liked.

“Who in the world is this charming creature, Phoebe?” The voice was Wagnerian, strident and commanding. “Wherever did you find him?”

“Sarah!” Phoebe protested. “You make it sound as if I go fishing for men with a net! This is Captain Bantry, British Army, retired, just returned from active service. He’s an old friend of father’s. I hope you don’t mind my inviting him tonight, but I did want him to meet you — he has such stories of China to tell.”

“Just what a drab get-together like this needs,” Mrs. Craven decided, and slipped her arm through Bantry’s. “I’ll abandon Phoebe to her admirers and show you around, Captain. Don’t break too many hearts, my darling,” she said over her shoulder as they left the girl, and Bantry detected more than a trace of acid in the compliment.

He choked back a chuckle. Were women anywhere, any time, any different? Come to that, were men much different, no matter where you found them?

Shouting down the music were three arguing politicians, a bored dramatist, two French diplomats having difficulty with the language, and a wealthy merchant from Alexandria, suffocating his company with tales of the trade in Persian carpets. Mrs. Craven broke in among

them, speaking stridently over the septet, and consigned Bantry to a dismal fate.

He stood by a buffet table laden with sliced ham and smoked salmon, a glass of champagne in one hand, never less than brimming, and trawled his memory for stories, preferably repeatable in mixed, genteel company. Of a sudden, there seemed to be few. The lady of the house seated herself and her eyes never strayed from his face. The scrutiny might have unnerved a lesser man, but Bantry had been forewarned about the woman's proclivities, and was not about to be ambushed.

He merely smiled at her and, as casually as he could, told outrageous stories of patrols in the hills above Peking where bandits abounded; tales of companies gone missing, and severed heads mounted on the walls of feudal cities — stories just bloody enough to keep these people content, but not so shocking as to win him the reputation of a sensationalist.

In an hour Phoebe rescued him. He was hoarse, tired, and relieved when she took her place by the piano. A sheet copy was handed to a member of the septet, who would be her accompanist. She caught Bantry's eye, smiled at him, and he wondered what she would sing, and how well.

The melody was surprising, since it was written for a contralto and tonight was delivered by a high, clear, sweet soprano. He recognized *Softly Awakes My Heart* from the opera, *Samson and Delilah*, and Phoebe sang it excellently. With the first notes, the crowd fell silent in the long ballroom; they were rapt. The beautiful melody and lovely voice charmed them, and for the first time Bantry had the opportunity to observe faces while Phoebe commanded her audience.

He was looking for the occultist, Michael Flynn, but aside from the description of him as young, beautiful, and the suggestion of the Irish in his name, little marked out any face in particular. Mrs. Craven seemed to invite mainly the young and beautiful of both genders; this Flynn would be hard to pick out among them.

Applause swept through the room as Phoebe finished. An encore was demanded and she sang again, something light, frivolous from an Offenbach operetta. Bantry was moving as she finished the song, clapping with the others while at the same time he grasped the opportunity to escape. The armchair adventurers were still at the buffet, waiting to ambush him.

"That was wonderful," he told Phoebe honestly. "If you sang like that for D'Oyly Carte, he couldn't stage *The Gondoliers* without you." She was in high spirits and took the teasing compliment in good part.

“And now, where’s this associate of yours? The occultist I came here to see.”

“You beast,” she said, pouting. “I thought you came to hear me sing.” But she knew he was joking, and led him away as the strings began again. In moments a Strauss waltz seduced dancers back to the floor. “Come this way. Mr. Flynn has attended far too many of these bunfights to be in the least amused by them. You won’t find him dancing or drinking himself legless with Sarah’s dissipated friends. Here.”

She had led him away from the music, into a passage draped with crushed velvet and filled with shoulder-high, potted ‘piano palms.’ The air was heavy with some rich incense; a clatter of crockery and the hint of cooking aromas came up from the kitchens, but only the occasional servant intruded on the sudden quiet.

As his chest began to ache Bantry realized he was actually holding his breath in anticipation. Phoebe brought him to a doorway off the main passage. The gaslamps within were bright. A swathe of gold light illuminated a circular table about which sat two young men and two girls, all four watching raptly as oddly-shaped cards were dealt on the green cloth by slender, long-fingered hands.

In an instant Bantry was beguiled by those hands. He followed every movement of their nimble display as they dealt card after card. The waiting couples did not speak, and Bantry knew he and Phoebe had not yet been noticed. They were free to watch, and Bantry’s eyed lifted to the young man’s face.

It was almost a physical blow, winding him like a punch. In the same moment he saw the face of a stranger and yet was sure he had known it all his life. For a second he struggled to place Michael Flynn’s face, half believing he did indeed know the man, but it was only a trick of his heart as he tried to ascribe the immediate, irresistible attraction of the stranger to some prior association. He felt the breath catch in his throat, his heart began to beat against his ribs, and for a time he was so intent on the young Irishman, he was unaware of Phoebe and the couples at the table, for whom the Tarot was being dealt.

Flynn’s hair was dark, thick, and the lamplight suggested copper tones. It was uncut and fell in heavy waves on his neck and brow. His skin was pale as milk, for it could never have seen the sun, and his eyes were wide, direct, startling. His mouth was smiling, the upper lip a deep Cupid’s bow, richly sensual and seemingly at odds with a straight nose that would have been called aristocratic if Flynn had been born an Englishman. Bantry could not look away.

And then the stranger lifted his head, perhaps catching some

movement at the door, and his face took on a new aspect as the shadows shifted in the lamplight. An angel, a martyr? Bantry grappled with the image, in his mind's eye seeing its like on canvases from ages long gone by. Leonardo, Bellini, Titian, Caravaggio. The startling eyes were fixed on him now, and he felt his body respond automatically, dropping a stiff, formal half bow. What expression was on his own face he could not know.

How long they merely looked at one another, Bantry had no idea. The rustle of silk and lace at the table, a murmur from one of the women, recalled the Irishman to his work, and Bantry's spine slowly relaxed as if he were a fish somehow let off the hook. As if the occultist had in some way held him captive with that look.

He began to breathe again as he watched the cards dealt out across the green velvet tablecloth. The Emperor; The Priestess; The Jester; The Magician. The Tarot was older than the Bible, Phoebe had said. Much older. An odd thrill tingled the length of Bantry's whole body as he watched those deft, delicate fingers work the cards. They might have held a touchstone, some source of power far beyond the realm of the ordinary.

After a decade in China, not much of the Englishman's usual blind, stubborn skepticism endured in Bantry. He had seen and heard too much to entirely disbelieve, or entirely believe, anything. The last few cards were set down, the twenty-two trumps outlining the course of Destiny, and at last the Irishman sat back.

His words were for the young couple on his left, but his eyes returned to Bantry. His voice was utterly without accent, not Irish, not English, nor colored by any European inflection. "You wish for a family," he said to the young people. "And you will indeed have one; but sadness is ahead of you. Know this now, before you begin. Tears and grief await you. A son will live ... I suspect, another child will not. Travels and trickery lie before you, and a home will be won — and lost.

"In the end?" For the first time he looked at the woman for whom this reading was performed, and Bantry watched the smooth, pale face smile. It took on the benign aspect of a seraph, some creature from a canvas. "In the end, Miss Brookes, I can assure you there will be love. You can ask for no more."

Sadness? Bantry's brow creased in a frown as he heard the unmistakable tone of the emotion in Flynn's light voice. An inestimable sadness, masked by smiles and the vital face of youth. A slender hand brushed back the heavy chestnut hair and Flynn gathered up his pack, shuffled the long pasteboard cards back into order.

"I can tell you no more," he said almost brusquely. "If you wish to

win out over adversity, first you must make the wager and take such losses and triumphs as you find. Love is there for you, this I can say without doubt, and it will serve to gentle what befalls you, good and bad alike."

He placed the cards in a stack before him as the two young couples stood and murmured their thanks in chastened voices. Bantry stood aside to allow them to pass, and while he hovered, wondering how best to approach the occultist, Phoebe simply marched in and gave him her hands.

So Lockwood's daughter had known the man for some time? Bantry was content to take his lead from her. "You're in fine fettle tonight," Phoebe was saying as Flynn took her hands. But his eyes remained on Bantry's face, an odd little quirk on one fine, mobile brow.

Bantry watched the soft lips draw together and press against the girl's hand, just a light brush of skin on skin. Suddenly, absurdly, he ached to touch, even to taste, to know the feel of the man's smooth mouth. He shook himself hard, scorned himself for the nonsense of the ridiculous yearning, and searched for a smile.

"I'm a reflection of my company," the Irishman said softly, as if he done nothing unusual, nothing anyone could not have done. It was not an affectation or false modesty, Bantry was sure. Like many students who had studied the arts of the mind, he had most likely learned there were unplumbed, unexplored depths and heights to any man's mentality. The latent ability of the seer was said to be in almost everyone.

Very few people ever explored their own limits to realize what they were capable of. Flynn had done this — Bantry had been aware of the man's magnetic aura from the first. If there was anything more to Flynn than astute fortune telling and Celtic charm, he did not yet know, but even this was enough to set Michael Flynn apart, win him a place among Helena Blavatsky's circle.

"Nonsense," Phoebe said dismissively. "Your company reflects you, Michael, as well you know. I've watched them accost you, bumptious and scornful, and an hour later go away admonished. I'm only sorry we missed the reading. Will you deal the cards for me now?"

"Won't you make introductions first?" Flynn was smiling, but the smile was not for Phoebe. He stood, moved around the table, his tread silent, his movements as limber as those of a dancer. "This gentleman and I have not met."

"I'm being boorish, forgive me." Phoebe stood aside. "Mr. Michael Flynn, Irishman, occultist, traveler and I should say adventurer — child of the night, allow me to introduce Vincent Bantry, Captain, till lately of the British Army, my father's dear friend of many years and cur-

rently our house guest. And," she added smugly, "my gentleman for this evening."

Bantry held out his hand as the Irishman stepped closer. He was several inches above Flynn's height, he noticed, and much broader. Flynn was surprisingly slight, not so much short as simply slender and fine boned, which made him seem small. The elegant right hand extended and Bantry clasped it, almost unable to silence his murmur of surprise at Flynn's touch. His skin was smooth as silk but it was cool, as if he were chilled while the house was actually too warm. His grip was strong, firm, the handshake politely brief before the hand was withdrawn.

But Bantry had seen the flicker — almost of recognition — pass through those dark eyes, and Lockwood was right. The pupils were massively dilated, showing no color at all in the lamplight, as if the whole iris were velvet black, soft. Inviting. Bantry felt himself falling and did not care to struggle, though some part of his mind, even then, flashed a forewarning of what was ahead.

The flicker was gone as soon as it appeared. Flynn's smile banished it as he drew back to the table. "Miss Lockwood asked me to deal the cards again, Captain. Do you care to watch?" And some hint lay behind the words, a suggestion of needing, though Bantry knew instinctively, this man would never ask for favors.

"I do," he said smoothly. "You have me fascinated, sir. I just returned from the Far East, where I saw many a strange sight. Have you read the *I Ching*? It also is a method for divining the future."

"*I Ching*." Flynn pronounced it as a Chinese would have, 'Yee Jung.' "I've long been a student of that secret path." He shuffled the deck and the strange, beautiful eyes closed as he cut the cards several times and divided them into two stacks, face down. "Your question, Phoebe?"

She was anxious, breathless. "I sang for Richard D'Oyly Carte a few days ago." She pulled her chair closer to the table, leaned toward him. "I asked to be chosen for the Christmas season of *The Gondoliers*. Will I be? Can you tell me?"

Flynn's luscious mouth moved in a smile. "We'll see." His eyes opened now, commanding Bantry as the first cards were dealt, beginning the pattern. Batons, Cups, Swords and Coins; Fire, Water, Air, Earth. The Fool; The Hermit; The Lovers; Justice; Death and Temperance.

Sixty-six cards were set out in the pattern of a triangle under an arch, '*Le Grand Jeu*' — the Great Game. "The cards at the top of the arch tell of the present," Flynn said for Bantry's benefit as he worked.

"Those placed at the right speak of the past. The rest, the future."

Bantry sat back, watching closely as Flynn picked up the cards again, in a specific order, last and first, last and first, so the deck appeared to be utterly muddled; they were set out again in a circle, and in the middle of it he showed Phoebe the card he had chosen to represent her.

"Your significator. The star, you see? Traditionally, we take it to suggest hope and confidence, good prospects and insight. Have I chosen wisely for you, my dear?"

The little familiarity was intensely disquieting. A twist of something very like resentment skipped through Bantry's stomach. He swallowed hard. The feeling was absurd. Yet the soft, dark eyes of the seer, the seraph, were gazing at him as if Flynn were blind, and Bantry felt the tug of them, deep down under his heart.

Flynn was very beautiful, yet no part of him was in the slightest feminine. Every bone and joint was masculine, his features were strong and the hands dealing the cards, though slender, were full of strength.

Bantry's teeth closed on his lip to hold back a surge of irrational and self-mocking laughter. It could not be! He was standing here, gazing at this strange Irishman while the blood quickened in his veins, a pulse beat in his ears and lust began to lick through him like live fire. It should have been preposterous, but his body was already stirring and the pangs of desire were almost an ache

He knew he should look away, perhaps even leave, but the strange eyes held him captive, as if he were looking into a mirror and perceiving in it his own soul. He saw more in Flynn's face than he cared to name. The sadness, yes, deep and yearning for something impossible. Loneliness? Despair? A flicker of hope, making despair all the more painful?

Then the compelling eyes lowered to study the cards, and Bantry began to breathe once more. He watched the occultist's brow crease, saw the sudden guarded expression as Flynn studied the cards. Phoebe also saw the shift in Flynn's expression, and leaned across the table.

"What is it, Michael? What do you see? Bad news?"

"It is certainly ... less than rosy," Flynn allowed slowly. "This year ... won't be quite what you hoped, my dear. I'm so sorry, but there's no glory on the stage for you that I can see. Next year things can only change. Just wait. Everything always changes, and you are so very young."

His voice was taut. Bantry heard the tension snap like a whip in it, and before Flynn would say another word he swept the cards back into their deck and shuffled them thoroughly to be rid of the pattern.

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