



JOHN HOULIHAN

MON DIEU CTHULHU!

The d'Bois Escapades: Volume One

THE CRYSTAL
VOID

(Illustrated Edition)

AND

FEAST OF THE
DEAD

MON DIEU CTHULHU!

The d'Bois Escapades: Volume One

ALSO BY JOHN HOULIHAN

The Seraph Chronicles

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MON DIEU CTHULHU!

The d'Bois Escapades: Volume One

The Crystal Void (illustrated edition)

Feast of the Dead

by John Houlihan

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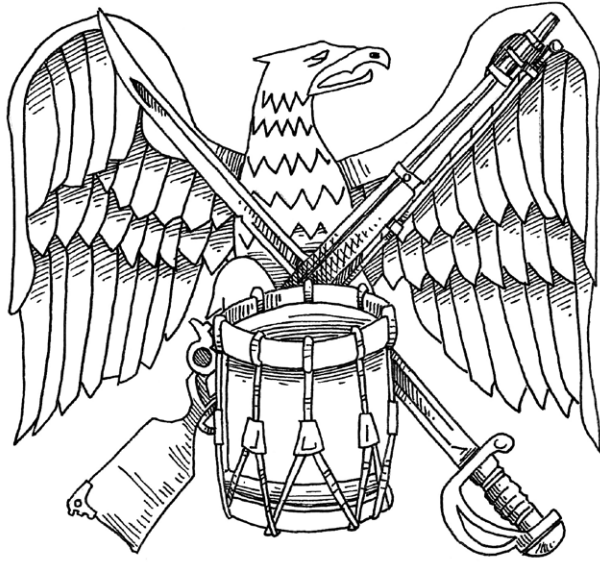
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For latest news and information see <http://www.John-Houlihan.net> or follow [@johnh259](https://twitter.com/johnh259) on Twitter.

THANKS




With a tip of the Busby to ACD and a certain Brigadier

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BOOK ONE

THE CRYSTAL VOID

ONE

A Cognac for the Lieutenant Colonel

“Oh, ver’ well, if you insist, *Monsieur*, I will have a cognac to accompany this modest *vin rouge*. A large one? *Mais oui*, you are most kind, I ’ave always said you British were the most generous of friends, as well as the most gallant of enemies. That is better—the spirit warms *l’esprit, non?* These weary old bones welcome some succour from the chill of winter and the ravages of time.

So, I raise my glass to you, *Monsieur*, but I will also raise it to him, the first *empereur*, my beloved master, our little Corsican corporal who led us on *le grande* adventure all those years ago on the paths of glory and honour. He made Europe tremble before him and they both loved and feared us too, his *Grande Armée*, before your *Fer Duc* stopped him on that terrible day I will not name.

They say little Louis-Napoléon, who seized the throne last year has something of his uncle’s genius about him. I hope he has, for these have been sad days for *la belle France*. We must hope for better times again.

Another? Well you are too kind, *Monsieur*, and an old soldier thanks you, though his doctor perhaps would not. Ach, what do these *toubib*’s know? What is *la vie* if not for the living? I would sooner die in my cups than in my sleep, since now a death on the field of glory is no longer possible.

Lieutenant Colonel Gaston d’Bois (retired), at your service, *Monsieur*, though alas I am now of service to so few, though if the widow relents a little, perhaps we shall see if there is still a fire in the hearth and time for

one last charge, *non?! Hah!* This cognac does me good and takes me back to those old days when I was a *beau sabreur*—and not a fair face or a pair of lips from Madrid to Lisbon was safe from the twirling moustaches or the flashing blade of d’Bois.

Ah, so it is him you wish to know of? Ah, well there lies a tale and now, a shadow seems to pass across the fire and even forty odd winters later it is enough to make these old bones shudder. You see the *cheveux* upon my head? Well, that was the time when it began to turn; from a deep chestnut, to the purest blanc.

And yet another? Hm, we may as well ’ave the bottle with your permission? *Bonne, Pierre!* Bring another glass for the kind, *Monsieur*. You will wish to fortify yourself, *mon ami*, for this is as *sinistre* a tale as ever was told and before I have finished, your hair may well be turned as white as my own. You have been warned, yet still you wish me to proceed? *Bonne*, but *prudence, Monsieur*, and I trust this cognac will loosen my poor remembrance of your fair tongue, which I consider second only to the beautiful *Français* itself.

It began in the autumn of 1810. That rascal Wellington... pardon, *Monsieur*, old habits die hard. Any ’ow, *le Fer Duc* had finally given battle to our own dear child of victory Masséna and we had traded ’ow you say fisticuffs at Côa. Pff, I remember our brave *Chasseurs de la Siège* died in their droves as they pushed Black Bob’s rascals across the river, and once we ’ad him on the run, we began our long struggle through the mountains of Portugal to try and bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion.

Oui, for in those days we still thought we could conquer the ’ole of the peninsula and, even though he had given us a bloody nose at Bussaco, le Duc was forced to retreat into the *coeur de Portugal* and dear Masséna pursued him with all ’aste. I will not lie to you, it was an ’ard road, *Monsieur*, as hard as a Jesuit’s heart. *Les Portugais*—the Portuguese—had stripped the land bare as a skeleton’s bleached bones and we suffered as we chased the British down country, until they eluded us and skulked behind those accursed earthworks at Torres Verdras. Is this the behaviour of gentlemen? *Non*, but le Duc would not stir himself from behind his defences to come and give battle and his cunning preparations meant we could not prise him from his ’ole.

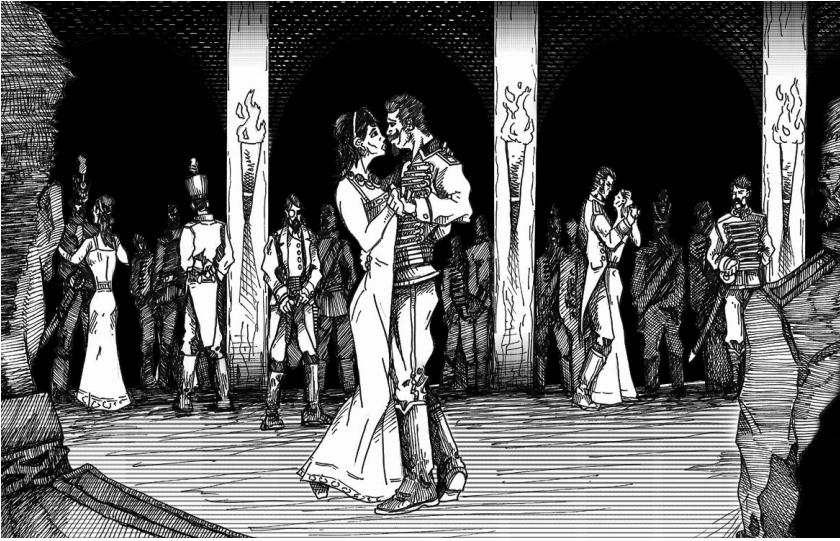
Yet we 'ussars bore it with the fortitude, providence and manliness you would expect of the premier chasseurs of *Le Armie Iberian*. We of the celebrated Thirteenth bided our time there, ever willing to patrol, probe and reconnoitre 'is lines, and there were several minor affairs, when the more sporting of the English were willing to engage in a little light sword work. Ah, but they were magnificent days when I think of them now *Monsieur*, our brave and noble fellows with their *cadettes* flying in the breeze, blades drawn as the bugle summoned us to the charge. The smell of les chevaux, the clash of steel, brave men trading strokes on the field of honour. Ah, it does this ruptured heart fair good to think of it.

Naturellement there were occasional amusements still to be 'ad away from the field, and it was at one of these affairs—a ball organised by the regiment to raise *les esprits*—that I first encountered *la belle* Odette. Oh *Monsieur*, words are simply not *adéquat* to describe her then in the dawn of her beauty. I can still remember the first time I saw her as if it were *ce matin*. Such poise, such elegance, the figure of a Venus, the face of an angel, such eyes, such lips, as if a very goddess has deigned to descend and walk upon this mortal plane. Forgive the moistness which invades this cheek *Monsieur*, allow me a moment to gather myself and continue.

She wore the plainest of gowns and was quite unadorned save at her throat, where she wore a necklace of smoky gems. Yet these were mere trinkets, adjuncts to her beauty, and I was immediately enraptured, smitten as you say *non*? I knew she must be mine and she knew it too, for there were none so bold and dashing as the men of the Thirteenth and of those—despite the shade you see before you here today—none so handsome, urbane or passionate as d'Bois!

Cœur défaillir jamais gagné beau visage or how you say 'faint 'eart never won fair face'. In those days thought became deed for d'Bois and I immediately paid her my respects, extended my hand, swept her into my arms and onto the dance floor and, for the rest of the night, the ball faded around us as we danced and laughed and fell into each other's 'earts.

As for my fellow officers? They were of no account and none dared to interrupt us, for one flash of d'Bois' eyes and a bristle of his moustaches was enough to dismiss any such imagined impertinences. The fair



'We danced and laughed and fell into each other's 'earts'

Odette was the daughter of Colonel d'Hiver of the guards but was a true daughter of France and we were such kindred souls, it seemed as if we had known each other for years. Ah *Monsieur*, they say love is sometimes to be found at first sight, but d'Bois would not have believed such an assertion until that night. You will gauge my seriousness when I tell you that—no matter how many tender female 'earts it broke—I took an oath to immediately forswore all others for *mon nouvel amour* Odette.

Mais even such star-crossed lovers must eventually seek respite from the giddy whirl of the dance and with aching feet but *coeurs heureux* I escorted my love to a cosy niche, while I fetched us some refreshments. I returned *tout de suite* only to find my love receiving the unwanted attentions of a most strange looking fellow. He was a *Portugais*, that I could see immediately, which may surprise you, but by no means was the whole country set against us in those days, and some of the local gentry rather welcomed the enlightenment and refinements we Frenchmen brought to their rather unsophisticated land.

Even those *Portugais* who opposed us, while a little unschooled and perhaps overly prone to the retreat, were nonetheless brave opponents when they stood in milor' Wellington's ranks, and would perhaps only run away one time in every two. Yet this one wore no uniform and was

not even a military man, yet he had the affront to engage my love in idle flirtation? *Merde!* I tell you, *Monsieur* it would not do! As for my love, she was plainly distressed by his ungallant attentions, but brave girl that she was, was making a formidable show of hiding it, fluttering her eyelashes with clear disgust from behind her fan, while he peered down his nose at her through his eye glass.

“*Monsieur,*” I said clicking my heels and allowing him to turn and drink in the full formidable figure and manly bearing of d’Bois. “I see you have made the acquaintance of the most beautiful woman in the world. A word of caution though: her beauty is liable to singe those who are not accustomed to its intense flame.” The scoundrel raised an eyebrow, looked me up and down ’aughtily through his eye glass and I took an instant dislike to the fellow.

I suppose he was handsome in a rather obvious kind of way, with the rich, well cut clothes and supercilious bearing of a natural aristo, and he wore his foppish rags with a certain *élan*. The fellow was dark-haired, but his skin was curiously pale compared to the olive hues of his countrymen and he bore the frivolous chin beard these *Portugais* nobles sometimes affect. The mouth was full and sensual, suggesting a debased nature, but it was his eyes that were most disturbing, dark and round, almost unnaturally so, and they seemed to peer from that visage with an expression like a gutted ’alibut. Noble he may ’ave been, but I could see he was no gentlemen and I knew at once that our blades must cross, if not now, then in time. If I could have known what was to come to pass, I would have drawn my blade and struck him down on the spot—without ’esitation.

“I am the Marquis Phillipe de Figueira da Foz.” He gave the most derisory of nods.

“Lieutenant Gaston d’Bois of the Thirteenth.”

“Well despite your lack of delicacy, I cannot fault your eyesight lieutenant, Mademoiselle d’Hiver is indeed a most charming young lady. Yet I also offer you a word of caution or perhaps advice. Beware, for *la mer* cools even the most ardent of heat and this country has an inconvenient habit of separating even the most devoted of lovers.”

“Indeed? Such a forced separation could only come at the cost of my life, *Monsieur le Marquis.*” I reposted.

“Why, naturally,” he said and with that, the vile fellow turned on his ’eel and was soon lost amongst the milling throng. What an ill-mannered aristo rogue! I should have punished him for his impertinence with an invitation to cross swords on the field of honour that very dawn, although I knew Odette had merely been feigning politeness to this creature. It was only out of consideration to my hosts and his rapid exit that spared the fellow. Yet I confess at that moment a shadow crossed *mon coeur* which was not so easily dismissed.

Yet my misgivings eventually evaporated as the rest of the night passed in a giddy whirl of champagne and dancing and laughter and the first ’ints of dawn were lighting the sky when I escorted my beloved Odette back to the tender care of father, Colonel d’Hiver. We said few words at our parting, yet somehow I already knew an understanding had been made between us. I skipped back to my billet born on the very morning zephyrs themselves, certain, truly, that I had met the love of my life, *vous comprenez?*

Exhilarated but exhausted I repaired to my quarters where I gratefully surrendered to the arms of Morpheus. I slept for most of the next day and when I awoke in the late afternoon, my head was still foggy and vague from the excesses of the night before. Yet while my mind was clouded, my heart was soaring and after I ’unted up a morsel of breakfast and a vat of *café noir*, d’Bois was once again restored to his former self. The rest of the afternoon was spent lounging around in the mess with my comrades and despite their boastful tales of gallantry and conquest, it was I who wore a secret smile and concealed a glowing ’heart.



As dusk became evening, I sauntered across to the stables to visit my two mares, Rosalind and Eleanor to give some *pommes* to my other sweethearts which they munched gratefully, snickering and whinnying their delight. I smoked a thoughtful cheroot in the starlight and was strolling back to the mess ready to seek a little light supper, when out of the shadows, a figure emerged.

“Monster! What ’ave you done with her?”

His sword was at once at my throat and his steel shivered and trem-

bled, though whether through weakness or fury I could not tell, yet the point danced most alarmingly beneath my eyes.

“Calm yourself sir, then explain. What is this dreadful thing of which you accuse d’Bois?”

“Monster! The allure of her jewels was too much, was it not? Where is she? Speak, or I will drive this point through your heart, so help me Mon Dieu!”

“*Monsieur*,” I said, calm as the surface of a lake in summer. “I can assure you I know nothing of the matter to which you refer. If you speak of Mademoiselle d’Hiver...”

“I do.”

“Then I will trouble you not to bandy the name of *mon amour* with such reckle...” But all the while I had subtly manoeuvring my assailant and in that moment my own sabre flashed, sparking against his blade and knocking it aside. I sprang back onto the balls of my feet, ready to deliver a fierce blow to my foe, but now that I had a full view of my opponent, I stayed my hand.

“Colonel d’Hiver!?” For indeed it the distinguished father of my love. Yet this was not the noble visage of the colonel of infantry who had led charge after charge in battle, but a pale shade of his former self. *Monsieur* le Colonel’s face was distraught and his blade fell uselessly to the floor.

“d’Bois. Tell me you have her, I will forgive any stain, any dishonour, if I know she is safe.”

“Slowly Colonel, slowly. I have not seen Odette since dawn when I entrusted her into your safe keeping. I have been asleep or in the mess all day, what has ’appened?”

“She is missing from her bed and I thought it must be you who had taken her away. Now her *maman* is gone, she is all I have, my dear sweet child, but she is a *naïf*, so pure, so innocent, that I believed she must have sought you out, or you her. She would speak of nothing else on the way back from the ball.”

“Believe me, Colonel, I feel the same way, but to take her? *Non*. That is not the action of an honourable man and no way to win her heart or your affections. As for her gems? I care not two figs for them, they are nothing to me.”

“Forgive me d’Bois, I see I was wrong. An old man’s concern for his sweet daughter has clouded his judgement. That necklace is a rare, curious piece that has been in our family for generations... I thought...”

“Perhaps it has, but it is a mere bauble compared to your daughter’s beauty. Would you consider such a trinket reason enough to abduct her?”

“I can see now I have ascribed the basest of motives to you with little justification, d’Bois. Forgive me if you can, for she is so precious to me, that it has driven me into gravely insulting you.”

“*L’amour d’un père est un puissant chose, Mon Colonel*—the love of a father is a potent. As far as I am concerned there is nothing to forgive.”

“Yet if she is not here with you, where is she? Her room is empty with no sign of disturbance and the necklace is also gone. You might see how I have leapt to this conclusion?”

“Do not give it another thought, *Mon Colonel*, but clearly there is some dastardly work afoot, and I believe I know its author.”

“You do? Speak *mon brave*, speak!”

“It is that villain the Marquis da Foz.”

”The *Portugais* noble? But ‘ow? Why?”

“His lurid, unwelcome attentions were being directed at Odette last night before I intervened. Believe me, there is little accounting for the actions of these degenerate aristos, they are always eager to acquire more coin. If there is foul work here, I have no hesitation in laying it at ’is door. I will wager he abducted her and ’elped himself to her jewellery at the same time.”

“The swine, I will cut his heart out!”

“*Non, Mon Colonel*, with the greatest respect, this is an assignment for a younger man and none will undertake it more gladly than d’Bois. Give me a moment to saddle Rosalind and we will away to your quarters to see what we may see.”

A short while later we cantered to an ’alt outside the farmhouse where the colonel and Odette had been billeted. His regiment of guardsmen were camped outside, tall, strapping fellows who had swept all before them on the battlefields of Europe, but *mon colonel* had sworn me to secrecy lest further scandal arise and, avoiding the picquets, we entered as quietly as field mice.

A quick examination of the scene of this outrage soon told me the

full story and I did not permit myself to show the fear or anger that stirred inside me, lest it infect that brave old warrior. The colonel, while an admirable man in many ways, had never hunted in the forests of the Ardennes where d'Bois had spent his youth tracking wild beast and fowl, and it did not take me long to discern what had happened at the scene of the crime.

The fiend and his helpers (for it was evident from the faint tracks below the window that he was not alone) had lured Odette into opening the downstairs window (perhaps impersonating d'Bois 'imself no less!) and snatched my love from there. Strange, that this activity should have gone unnoticed in the middle of an armed camp, yet da Foz was a devious scoundrel and undoubtedly knew the ground better than we and he had no doubt enjoyed some form of 'ome advantage.

Quickly, I checked my kit and weapons and made sure I had enough spare ball and powder and then I sprang upon my trusty mare and was reassuring *mon colonel*, with a confidence I perhaps did not entirely feel.

“Never fear sir, I will bring her back to you and make sure that *salaud* pays for his infamy with his life!”

A father's eyes implored me and not a word more did he need to speak. So, with a light touch of my spurs on Rosalind's flanks we were soon off into the night. The moon hung heavy and gibbous in the sky and it was not difficult to follow their footprints to where they had concealed their horses *un petite distance* away. They evidently knew their business well, for they rode in single file to conceal their numbers and the tracks disappeared away to the west, toward the coast. I set my little mare's nose to that point of the compass and followed as fast as my Rosalind's sturdy legs would take us.

Mon Dieu, but it was an 'ard road, my friend, for while they were easy enough for a seasoned huntsman to follow on the plain, the tracks soon led toward higher, stonier ground where even my *faucon's* eye was tested. But fortune favours the bold and, just like your English fox 'ounds on the scent, I would not abandon my pursuit, for just the thought of my beloved in that fiend's arms spurred me on and lent my Rosalind wings.

TWO

A Dance in the Moonlight

On and on I rode and as I trotted into a small clearing, the sounds and scents of the night time forest seemed to diminish. Rosalind gave a snort and whinny as if she sensed something too, and then there he was, that grinning degenerate da Foz, with Odette bound and slung across his saddle bow! My whiskers fair bristled with indignation and my sabre hissed from its sheath, but he just gave a contemptuous snort, disdaining even to draw his own blade.

“So, you are a brave man *and* a fool, d’Bois. Better you had never walked this road.”

“An ’ussar does not walk, he rides!”

With that I put spurs to Rosalind’s flanks and charged the fiend point-first, ready to slash those words from his throat, but the villain had prepared well and his ruffians came pouring from the trees in a devastating counter-charge. I hacked at one, slashed at another’s arms, but they were too many, and cunningly placed their horses between us as a buffer, with no thought for their poor creatures’ health. More of his villains assailed me on foot and, desperate, I forced Rosalind to dance and rear. Her hooves lashed out at another, there was a crack as his skull burst and he fell. But now their blows began to tell and as I whirled Rosalind around, a club buffeted my ribs, a blade raked my pelisse, my sabre was swept from my hand and I was dragged to the ground with blows raining down upon my Busby. *C’est vrai* I thought my last moment on earth ’ad come, but it ’ad not.



*'More of his villains assailed me on foot and, desperate,
I forced Rosalind to dance and rear.'*

“Enough!” The blows ceased, and I was dragged to my feet, held in the iron grip of Da Foz’s thugs.

“Such a brave man does not deserve to die... so quickly. At least not before he has had a chance to hear a last goodbye from his love. Say your farewells my dear, for you will not look upon his face again.”

Odette’s imploring eyes met my own and I held her gaze as I cursed Da Foz to the high heavens, rounding it off with an earnest lover’s promise.

“...and if you sully her I will ...”

“Enough! d’Bois, continue and I will cut out your tongue as well. Yet, brave fool that you are, you should know, it was not Odette that I sought, yet I will take her virtue nonetheless.”

“Make sure of me now Da Foz, for if not, I will ’unt you down...”

“Oh you’ll die d’Bois, be certain of that. But a Marquis of the blood does not sully his hands with such *common* toil. My men on the other hand, have no such qualms. Fernando, I leave the details to you, but dispatch him in a manner worthy of your vile imagination. Make it both lingering and painful.”

Then he was gone and I fought and shouted at the sound of retreating hooves, but to little avail and soon I was trussed like a turkey at a country market. Even my poor Rosalind was subdued and hobbled, and she looked at me with doleful eyes, while Da Foz’s thugs debated, in their debased way, the best method of dispatching your poor correspondent. They casually discussed such horrors as crucifixion, flaying, an ingenious method of rending a man apart using bent saplings (fortunately none were at hand), but the lank-haired, evil-looking one named Fernando, who had something of his master about his grim visage, ended their talk by ordering them to prepare a fire beneath one of the pine trees.

While they began to build it, I was manhandled over to a low hanging branch, strung up by my wrists to dangle in mid air while they piled the faggots beneath. In moments, the pain was excruciating, and my arm sockets felt as if they were already aflame, but Fernando had more sauce to add to my torment.

“We will slow roast you, Frenchman, and your dying agonies will be like music to our ears. What do you think of that?”

For answer I spat at him in my fury but I missed, and he gave a sneer as the final kindling and shavings were placed around the base. Then without so much as a pause, he struck a match and threw it into the pile.

I have faced death a thousand times in a hundred different circumstances, but oh it was most painful then—but not for myself, you understand. We all must die and this flesh is heir to decay and sorrow, but I had hoped to make my end in battle on the field of honour. Yet this? My humiliating death would condemn Odette to that villain’s clutches, and it was almost more than I could bear to think of. I began to shout and curse and scream at them incoherently, employing the rich vocabulary

that only a seasoned trooper of the line could muster. My toes began to feel the first heat of the fire's embrace and as the flames licked ever higher, I tried rocking back and forth. But the motion sent spirals of agony racing up my arms, even though it brought some small relief from the gathering heat.

"Ha, we will have roast Frog tonight brothers, although this one doesn't look very tender." They all laughed at his crass witticism, but real fear began to build inside me now. Do not believe any man who tells you they could face such a fate with equanimity. They are liars and I am not ashamed to say I began to babble, imploring, praying cursing, promising anything that would spare me this ignoble end.

My boots began to smoulder and even that small heat was becoming unbearable as I swung back and forth over the central flame. Now I could only hope that it would be over quickly. The fire crackled and popped, slewing showers of sparks into the cold night air, and the rope which bound my legs must have been aflame awhile as it snapped, leaving me bucking like a newborn colt. For one second my heart soared at this new-found freedom, but my arms were still bound tight and it just bought more loud guffaws from my captors, who shouted vile encouragements and elbowed each other in their cruel delight.

"Dance the Flamenco next Frenchman!"

But I saved my breath and kicked to increase my swing, for beyond their mocking I had heard something they had not, a distant, regular drumming which a born cavalryman recognises from the cradle. The pounding drew closer and now they heard it too, for they ran to snatch up their weapons and peered trembling into the night. Hoof beats! Hah, the sound of salvation! It must be a squadron at least as the clatter echoed around the trees, and now they were almost upon us and these brigands were recoiling and running around like a pack of curs in their terror! The first horse burst into the clearing, a cloaked rider on an enormous roan, and his lance buried itself deep into the chest of one of Da Foz's foremost men, impaling him to the trunk of a tree. A lancer! *Mon Dieu*, were our brave Polish allies to be my rescuers?

There was a flash from the rider's sabre, my bonds parted, and I hurtled earthward, more sparks flying as I danced daintily over the blaze. I must confess, it must have looked most comic, but I was in no mood

for levity as I snatched up the fallen man's cudgel. The rider's pistol barked once, another brigand fell and Da Foz's men began showing their heels, scattering into the darkness. But the one called Fernando and two of his bigger ruffians were 'ow you say, made of sterner stuff and advanced upon me, determined to finish the job. I prepared to defend myself, but my arms were still like knotted bundles from my painful suspension and, desperately, I searched the trees for the rest of the horsemen to come to my rescue.

Yet now it seemed the chorus of sounds had disappeared, and it was just that single rider who wheeled and came to my defence. Both of Fernando's henchmen turned to receive him and I faced off against Da Foz's lieutenant with just a knobby stick, which felt like shaking matchwood in my hands. He was a brute of a fellow too and came in swinging his crude sword like a scythe, as if he would beat me down like a sheath of corn.

But the art of the true swordsman is not about strength but about finesse and timing and, dancing back, I gave ground, easily evading his clumsy blows. Fernando came on with another hefty swipe, overbalancing and this time my rapid riposte smashed into his wrist, forcing him to drop the weapon. The gnarled head of my cudgel came up, crunching into his jaw and as he staggered, another precise blow smashed into the back of his leg, forcing down him onto his knees.

Nimble, I skipped around and kicked him in the back, which has the desired effect of plunging him face first into the blaze which was meant to consume me. Even though it does me no credit I confess, I planted a boot on the back of his neck and held it there while he screamed as if all the torments of hell had come upon him. Finally, I took pity and stoved in his skull. To this day I feel not the slightest 'int of remorse.

Meanwhile, my rescuer has dealt most skilfully with his opponents. One lay against the base of a tree, clutching his guts which another musket ball had blown open, while the other lay wide-eyed and dead, a tell-tale sabre cut across his face. The pale rider walked his roan over slowly, sheathed his blade and dismounted quietly, offering his hand.

"Are you quite well sir?" He asked in immaculate French, but from his dress and manner I could tell he was not of our *armee*.

"A touch singed *Monsieur*, but fortunately mainly underdone thanks

to your timely intervention, for which I offer you my eternal thanks.” I replied in passable English.

“Pff, think nothing of it, it would be a black day indeed when I left an honest soldier, British or French, to the tender mercies of Da Foz’s rogues.”

“You know that base villain then?”

“Oh I do to my sorrow and have observed his activities with growing trepidation. He courts both sides in this conflict, playing each against the other for his own darker purposes. A most cruel and unnatural fellow is the Marquis Da Foz.”

“Unnatural? I know nothing of that, *Monsieur*, my quarrel with the Marquis is entirely personal.” I said.

“Indeed?”

“This very night he has stolen the woman I love, tearing her away from her good father for his own depraved purposes. I was in pursuit when I was waylaid and overcome by his villains.”

“Forgive the indelicacy, but may I enquire as to the name of this young lady, *Monsieur*?”

“Why it is the fair Odette, the only daughter of Colonel d’Hiver of the guard.”

“Ha! So his greater design takes further shape, yet why would he...? It is strange, Da Foz is not normally distracted by the temptations of the flesh. So why kidnap this mademoiselle—saving your presence—no matter how lovely and why risk discovery with so transparent a crime? It is most unlike him. He must have another veiled purpose.”

“If he ’as, I care not, for I intend now only to resume my mission and rescue my love.”

“Then I trust you will not object to some company sir? It seems our purposes are as one in bringing Da Foz to justice.”

“If you would do me that ’onour sir, I would embrace it most heartily. If I do not mistake my guess, you are one of milor’ Wellesley’s Eyes?”

“Indeed, but it is not on the Duke’s business that I ride tonight, nor England’s, but for another purpose. I have been watching Da Foz for many months now, observing, studying, waiting for him to make his move. And now I find he has struck impulsively, a course of action

which is most unlike him, for normally he is the most patient and careful of man. Something has changed, something significant and it is—if you'll forgive me sir—not just milady which has prompted him to take this action.”

“Whatever his motive, I will see Mademoiselle d’Hiver restored to her father or die in the trying, and the devil take Da Foz!”

“Indeed, but I fear even the devil would think twice before supping with this blackguard. Come then, let’s be about it.”

“Ah, but in all this confusion, I have clean forgotten my manners, *Monsieur*. I have the ‘onour to be Lieutenant Gaston d’Bois of the *Empereur’s* own Thirteenth glorious Hussars. A pleasure to make your acquaintance...?” I clicked my still-smouldering heels and made an elaborate bow.

“The honour is mine Lieutenant. Seraph is my name—Major Seraph.”



After my *petite* ordeal, I was glad to be back in the saddle of my beloved Rosalind and as we began to eat up the kilometres on Da Foz’s trail, I regarded my new companion and ally from the corner of my eye. It was the work of moments to see he was no ordinary soldier, for he bore little of the manly aspect and bearing one would expect of the gallant gallopers, those dashing British officers who operated beyond the lines of the regular army.

Major Seraph sported no moustaches as I had seen the brave British ‘ussars wear, and indeed his dress was most plain and sober, with nothing of the dash or panache one would expect of a *sabreur* of any nation. The buff coat and riding breeches were simple, unadorned by any braid or decoration and indeed, he foreswore even the Busby, seeming to prefer a most understated top ‘at. Yet for all these evident defects in his attire, there was a certain stern calmness to his bearing, and despite the rather weak chin and long, almost unseemly, pale hair and that rather fey voice, his narrow eyes glowed with an intensity and otherworldliness, an *outré* quality, that spoke of steel and purpose. Nor would I forget that he had acquitted himself most forcefully in the heat of battle and I was glad, yet also a little nervous, to have such an ally by my side.

We passed through dark, lavender-scented woods and rode along the top of desolate ridges moving as fast as we could while following the trail, and all the time straining to get a sighting of our quarry, but to little avail. Now the air began to have a salt tang to it and suddenly, riding out of the dense darkness of the trees, a vast bay stretched out before us, the waves of the ocean shimmering in the moonlight.

Major Seraph reined in and produced a folding telescope from his pocket. "There," he pointed and I could just see across the curve of the bay, a small cloud of dust of the kind thrown up by a single horseman. For a moment I thought I glimpsed the retreating figure but then he was hidden by a hill and enveloped in shadow. Above, perched on a promontory, loomed the towers and ramparts of an ancient fortress, its crenellated walls and crumbling battlements speaking of an old, Moorish lineage. It was undoubtedly the domain of the *Portugais* nobleman though I 'esitate to 'onour him with such a title.

"So that's Da Foz's lair," said the Major. "That makes a lot of sense from what I know of the creature."

"And what is that, sir? Is he then known for his seamanship?"

"In a manner of speaking d'Bois, in a manner of speaking. Let's just say I suspect he may have more than a passing affinity for the ocean."

"Pff, why should this concern us? Let us onward and storm this foul creature's castle. I am eager to be reunited with my love."

"Steady, Lieutenant, I understand hussars are known for their bravery... and their impetuosity."

"It is true sir, we hold it a disgrace for an 'ussar to live beyond the age of thirty."

"Indeed? But this is no occasion for a full scale frontal assault d'Bois, not if you want your lady returned intact... and alive."

"I want that more than life itself, sir."

"Good, then perhaps you'll rein in your natural instincts and heed my words. Da Foz is no mere aristocratic fop, he is a very dangerous man and here, on his home ground even more so. We may face foes here, allies of his, who are more than shall we say *naturel*."

"Sir, surely you are not in earnest? There is little room for such superstition in this age of reason."

"Believe what you wish, Lieutenant, I only hope you are proved

right. But come, let us reconnoitre further forward and seek an alternative way into Da Foz's den."

We dismounted and the major attempted to stealthily remove some curious looking flasks from his saddlebags which seemed to glow with a strange light, but did not deign to answer my quizzical eyebrow as to their contents. However, after carefully muffling their hooves, we led our horses on a circuitous route along the cliff top of the bay. We wound over the rocky coastal paths taking care to remain out of view of the castle walls until we could conceivably lead them no further, and then picketed the beasts in a small grove of stubbly trees. Rosalind was not *sanguine* and whickered most pitifully at the prospect, until I nuzzled her head and breathed into her nose.

This done, the closer we got to the walls, the more the smell of the sea pervaded, but this was not the clean fresh tang of the ocean brine, but a foul, fishy stench, like the rotting of a shoal of fish guts. It made me feel *tres mal*, but the major seemed quite immune from its formidable reek.

Now we moved forward like *tirelleurs*, flitting from cover to cover, and I took the opportunity to study the castle. With each step, the major's words seem to grow in *crédibilité*, for it was a sinister place, shrouded in dark shadows which seemed to absorb or perhaps deflect the clean beams of pure moonlight. In a great many places the walls were crumbling and tumbled down, as if assailed by the ages and its whole character spoke of *désordre*, neglect and perhaps something darker. Although I could see no sentries, I had the distinct impression we were being watched from within, though *certainement*, any such observer would immediately have raised the alarm. Yet I could not dismiss the feeling and as we crept beneath the eaves of the walls, I found myself quite *crainitif* and immediately had to draw upon my reserves of manly courage to suppress a violent shudder.

"Shall we climb the walls, Major?" I whispered, seeking to mask my craven thoughts with the certainty of action.

"Hm, I think... perhaps not. If I'm not mistaken this small path may yield a more desirable mode of ingress, though perhaps... no it is nothing, come let's explore this way."

THREE

The Sentinel on the Stair

The route the major had chosen wound down beside the walls towards the sea and each step seemed to become more terrible to me than a direct assault upon the walls. Yet an 'ussar does not blanch or 'esitate, and one thought of my poor Odette quite restored my fortitude. So I followed in the major's footsteps and kept one hand tightly gripped upon the 'ilt of my sabre. Down and down we went, the winding path becoming more slippery, flecked with moistness and spume. The smell grew bolder too, more intense, such that I was forced to press a perfumed handkerchief into service, lest I gag like an *enfant*.

The path stopped abruptly above a small but precipitous cliff overlooking the roots of the castle walls and there, surrounded by choking vegetation and salt-rank seaweed, was a small break in the rocks, a cavern entrance, wreathed by the wisps and vapours of a sea fog. It was dark, black as a Cossack's soul and although I have never been prone to the night terrors, the very sight of it quite unmanned me, or perhaps I just 'ad a foreboding of what was to come?

"We must pass through here Lieutenant, I am afraid it is the only way," whispered the major, striking a dark lantern under his cloak. "Da Foz's men would have cut us down in an instant up there."

"But I saw no-one."

"Quite so, yet there they were. This way, though more perilous, will see us inside undetected."

"More perilous?"

“I’m afraid so, there is no way to prepare you adequately for what we may encounter Lieutenant, no words will suffice. All I can say is stay close to me and trust in your courage. It is your best, perhaps your only hope.”

“My only? But Major...”

“Don’t talk, just follow.”

The narrow beam of the major’s dark light lit our way, and inside we crept like mice in the wainscoting until the blackness quite swallowed us up. The walls ran with rivulets of moisture and I took one last look back at the cave entrance behind us and the comforting sweep of the moonlight. This strange man’s words had unnerved me more than any explicit warning might have done and again, I found my courage tested. Another thought puzzled me too. Even the mightiest of fortifications have concealed sally ports, yet with its commanding position and formidable walls why would the inhabitants of this castle leave this way open and unguarded?

True, it was well-concealed and the major had sniffed it out like an ’ound upon the scent, but my misgivings would not be so easily dismissed, and I tried to quell my beating pulse. Give me a sword in my hand and a clean fight and you would not have found d’Bois wanting, but the dank eeriness of this place was hard even for the most fortitudinous soul to bear.

For it was also clear that this was not an entirely natural cave, but had been built on and enhanced by many hands over the long centuries. The ceiling was ’igh, strangely ’igher than any man might require and in places had been fashioned into arches which bore a strange geometry that hazarded the eye. Steps had been carved into the rock by unknown hands and their smoothness and great size made progress harder rather than easier, as if the way had been designed for giant rather than human feet. That awful fishy smell, which had been pungent enough outside ’ung like a discordant note in the air and added further to my apprehensions.

We had not travelled far, but already we must have passed under the castle walls and ahead, in the dim glow of the dark light, it was just possible to see this tunnel intersect another at right angles, one way sloping up, the other heading down. Suddenly the major stopped,

stooping low and grabbed me with a force which belied his rather slender frame, pulling me back into an alcove in the wall. There was just time to see his hand pressed against his lips before the shutter came down on the dark lantern and then we were pitched into utter blackness. Long moments, which seemed like minutes, passed as we crouched there in the darkness and I was just on the point of whispering to the major when I heard it, a noise, distant at first but growing closer. *Oh mon ami*, how to convey that awful, 'orrible, sinister sound which would have frozen the very marrow of your bones?

It is strange to retell even now, but it had a kind of damp quality as if it had been hauled from the depths of the sea, and I had the impression of something slippery passing over the rocks, but as if it were sucking at the stone. That smell returned, rising to a pitch, an intensity, that I wondered I did not gag and retch. Then, even though I could see nothing, I had an impression, no more, of three large, terrible shadows, blacker portions of the blackness, crossing the space where the tunnels intersected. One of the shapes stopped and I was quite unnerved and to my shame, covered from its gaze, quite unmanned.

There were sounds, *Mon Dieu*, at once both alien and chilling, like no speech of this earth, like the ghost of a tide, the whisper of the sea. How I did not scream in my terror, to this day I do not know, but I felt as if my very soul were being torn and stretched by these unnatural shades. Then the shadow moved, passed and was gone, the wet squelching sounds receding as they, whatever *they* were, retreated down the tunnel. For long moments I was simply too stunned to move or speak, until I felt the major's hand upon my arm.

"My compliments, Lieutenant," Major Seraph whispered, and as he turned to me I seemed to see a strange light burning in his eyes, like the embers of a coal fire just before they are extinguished. "Not many men would remain silent when confronted by such creatures," he said.

"What were those things?"

"Fortunate for you, that you do not know. Suffice it to say that we have just encountered Da Foz's allies and let us leave it at that... for now. With any luck, you will not meet their like again and your life will be all the healthier and your mind all the saner for it. Now, let us journey onward before they return."

The major unmasked 'is lantern and I shuddered, took a moment to collect myself, then followed as he turned right and up into the upper portion of the tunnel. I 'urried on, not daring to look backward or downward, where distantly I could hear the waves crash with a peculiar violence against the shore.

Upward and ever upward we moved along a tunnel which had been made on the same gargantuan scale, but the more distance we put between ourselves and the intersection, the more I liked it. After a while, my natural *virilité* once again began to reassert itself and the 'ussar who feared not a mortal thing upon the face of this earth reintroduced himself.

Now we prowled under the foundations of the castle, along a path which showed the passage of the years, for the way was worn and smooth, as if many feet had walked here down the long ages. The major's lantern threw vast, elongated shadows upon the walls and I began to see many strange pictures, reliefs and friezes which came from many times and places. There were many *outré* geometric patterns after the Moorish fashion, that seemed to blend and whirl and fascinate the eye and occasionally, I would catch glimpses of some modern depictions which seemed to show uncanny creatures emerging from the sea and walking upright upon the land. One of the Moorish designs in particular caught my eye and I found myself drawn to its sensuous gyrations. The pattern seemed to quite rob me of my will, drawing me in into that shifting, opulent void, until I could have looked upon it for all the remaining days of my life. It was only the major's firm grip upon my shoulder that seemed to break its spell and return me to my senses. He quickly hurried me on before I could look again, as every fibre of my soul begged me to do.

Now, a faint luminescence began to seep through from the end of the tunnel and I could see the portal framed by the starlight and hurried toward it, eager to get beyond the womb-like confines of the earth and out in the pure clean air where I could feel the sweep of the skies above me once again. But as I drew level with the major, he held a hand out to hinder my progress.

“Not so eager, Lieutenant. The way ahead is barred.”

“I see nothing Major, let us...”

“No you do not see it, but there is something there nonetheless, a sentinel of some kind, I can sense it. Da Foz would not leave the entrance to his nest—even one so perilous to traverse as this—totally unguarded.”

“Ver’ well, what do you propose?”

“Here, take the lantern a moment.”

The major reached into the folds of his cloak and removed and unfastened a rather plain looking sabretache. Then he began muttering under his breath as he nimbly sorted through the vials and jars and potions, eventually determining the one he needed. It was a small leather pouch and contained as far as I could see, a small heap of rather ordinary grey looking dust. The major sprinkled a portion onto his gauntlet with elaborate caution and then, eyes blazing again with that strange witch light, said simply.

“Lieutenant, I would advise you to look away now, for once seen, the thing revealed cannot be unseen. Yet if you do choose to behold it, you will gain a deeper understanding of the darker nature of the fabric of the universe we inhabit and your eyes will truly be opened to the threat Da Foz presents—albeit at some cost to your peace of mind. Know that I nor anyone else will think the less of you if you decline. The choice is yours.”

“...I, it is a strange dilemma you pose *un homme, Monsieur*. But lay on Major, I am not afraid,” I said with a bravery I did not feel. For I had already allowed fear to govern me too many times this night and I was not ready to wilt again before the gaze of this stern Englishman.

“Very well then, stand back,” he said and with that breathed in, seeming to ingest lungfuls of air until he had drawn in many times what a normal man could. Then he pursed his thin lips and blew upon his palm, projecting the powder in a long, cone-like exhalation until it quite filled the doorway. At first the powder eddied and swirled, thick and choking, saturating the atmosphere with flecks like cinders. Then, as it began to settle, silver flakes glowed and glinted in the still night air, seeming to coalesce around a vaguely humanoid shape that barred the entrance. It was a vast being, the height of a man and half as much again and its limbs and body were bulky and weighty, silvery and scaled. At its neck, nebulous gills seemed to twitch with unclean life and its head and jaw were heavy, the nose multi-tentacled like the appendages of an



'At its neck, nebulous gills seemed to twitch with unclean life'

octopus. Yet the true horror lay in the outlines of its eyes, which were cold and dead, containing a blackness like the stellar void.

Its form was ethereal and insubstantial like a ghost, the spectral outline of an aquatic demon, for such I took it to be and indeed, it seemed it could be nothing else. I, who had never doubted the path of the sane and rational in my entire adult life, recoiled in horror, almost turning and fleeing from this apparition.

Yet the major did not tarry and was intoning strange words and phrases in a language I could not understand. His fingers wove complex patterns in the air which seemed to leave an after image behind them, the multifarious trace of a five-pointed star hung there suspended. The effect upon the creature was remarkable; at first, its insubstantial frame shook with anger and rage and its facial tentacles writhed, quivering in agitation. Yet then it seemed to quail, retreating from the image as if—foul creature though it was—it were the one afear'd. As the sigil faded, so too did the creature, slowly diminishing until it was just wisps and shreds of smoke and then they too were gone and only starlight remained.

“There,” said Major Seraph, “Our path is now quite safe. Are you ready, Lieutenant? I see you may have questions?”

“*Merde* Major, where to begin? What mysteries, what sorcery is this, that flourishes in this age of reason?”

“A convenient label for a mere moment in the course of human history and that itself, a mere footnote in the wider history of the universe.”

“But this creature, what was it? And what did you do to it? How... why?”

“Perhaps it is not wise for you to dwell too long upon this Lieutenant. Suffice it to say that being was a guardian, a sentinel conjured by Da Foz to bar the way into his fortress. As to my methods? Well he is not the only man able to marshal extraordinary forces to his cause. Perhaps now you begin to apprehend the true purpose of my coming here? I’m sure milady d’Hiver is as precious to you as life itself, but Da Foz is no ordinary villain, but a creature who consorts with the demons of the sea and the powers of the outer dark. He must be stopped before his foul purpose—whatever that is—manifests itself.”

“*Incroyable*, if I had not seen, I would... I would call you a liar, a madman if you had asked me to believe in such things. Yet now I have the evidence of my own eyes, though I can scarce believe them. What are we to do Major?”

“Let us move into the castle and find Da Foz’s lair, but quietly d’Bois, we would do well not to give any signal of our approach.”

“Rely on my discretion Major,” I said running a finger down the edge of my blade.

FOUR

The Call of the Ocean

The portal led out to a shadowed corner of the courtyard and we took advantage of the darkness to allow our eyes to adjust and survey the inner workings of Da Foz's den. Major Seraph was right to preach caution, for upon the crumbling ramparts could be seen several of the Marquis' ruffians covering the approach to the walls. To attempt them would have been a short road to a ball through the 'ead or a sword through the throat. Yet the way he had chosen was scarcely less perilous and I was still reeling inwardly from what I had seen. Yet amongst the many follies of youth, one of its few virtues is an ability to focus on the immediate. So rapidly dismissing any thought of supernatural terrors, my eyes quickly scouted the courtyard, searching for a way to proceed.

Far above, in the inner keep, was the *donjon*, the fortified great hall which formed the inner sanctum of any such fortification and it was there I knew we must find the Marquis. The major was of a similar mind, for he indicated a set of lighted windows near its top.

A quick nod of agreement and we were on our way, seeping through the shadows, dark shades ourselves, clinging to the patches of gloom which seemed to breed within those walls. Through the courtyard we snuck our way, pausing to allow two degenerate looking hirelings to saunter past on their patrol, then secreting ourselves behind some barrels at the bottom of a stone stair. I was all for a swift dash to attempt the battlements, but the major stayed my hand and it was just as well, for above I heard in broken *Portugais*.

“What are the master’s orders?”

“Keep a weather eye out. Fernando has not returned and he thinks one of the Frogs may come in pursuit. Yet none have attempted the walls.”

“Perhaps they have found the hidden way?”

“Pffh, If they have, they’ll wish for a swift ball through their brains or their throats cleanly slit. For the sentinel does not feast upon flesh alone, but it will crack their marrow before devouring their very souls.”

“And the others?”

“Will be up at high tide. Come, we have much to prepare, while the master *entertains* himself with the wench.”

The iniquitous cackle which greeted this foul observation almost caused me to leap out and strike them down in blood and fury, and the quiet way be damned! *Tres fort!* But the major’s wiser head and iron-like grip prevailed and with some difficulty, I kept my peace until their footsteps faded away. But murder was in my heart now and woe betide any of Da Foz’s *suppôts* who crossed the path of d’Bois!

Onward we crept, up the inside of the stair and onto the battlements where I could hear the sea lashing against the rocks below. The major led the way with seemingly unerring instinct as we slipped through a small portico and into a side door which led into the main body of the keep. As he fastened the door quietly behind us, the major unshuttered his dark light again and we found ourselves in a dusty, long abandoned corridor.

Now we were inside the inner defences of this foulest of creatures and we began to move upward, ever upward, flitting from cover to cover and ’astily concealing ourselves whenever the servants of Da Foz made themselves apparent. In any great campaign or battle, surprise is one of the most useful allies of all and suspecting nothing of our intrusion, the creature’s minions went about their business with apparent unconcern. I could not help but notice that like the brigands who had ambushed me earlier, they were an ill-favoured crew and here, away from the gaze of the outside world, their cold, bulging eyes, pallid skins and *poisson*-like features were even more pronounced. I wrinkled my nose in silent contempt at these degenerate specimens. What exactly was Da Foz the master of here?

To add to my disgust, the very castle walls emanated an oppressive atmosphere, seeming to speak of centuries of neglect with their dingy, shadowed 'allways, rotting tapestries, rusted weapons and decaying suits of armour. That putrid, fishy smell, though not as strong as in the tunnels, seemed to permeate everywhere, assaulting the nostrils, numbing the senses and provoking a primitive, instinctual revulsion that was distinctly unsettling.

Yet despite these distractions, we kept our course true and managed to gain the upper stories of the keep without any misadventure. Our path brought us up a final set of stone steps to a wide landing. Here at least, some attempt had been made to preserve the values and refinements of normal civilisation and society. This open space was much cleaner, 'ung with newer arras and lit with fresh torches, revealing portraits of what could only be Da Foz's ancestors set against the designs of the original Moorish walls.

I was certain that the 'eavy, ornately carve wooden door must lead to Da Foz's chambers, a fact confirmed by the presence of several armed thugs lounging in front of it. I whispered urgently, "Come Major, time and Odette's honour are of the essence! Let us put these beasts to the sword and then swiftly deal with their master."

"Lieutenant, please do try and at least contain your rasher impulses. Da Foz must certainly have no warning of our coming."

"*Mais* 'ow then, Major? There is no way to dispose of these thugs so swiftly that we will make no noise."

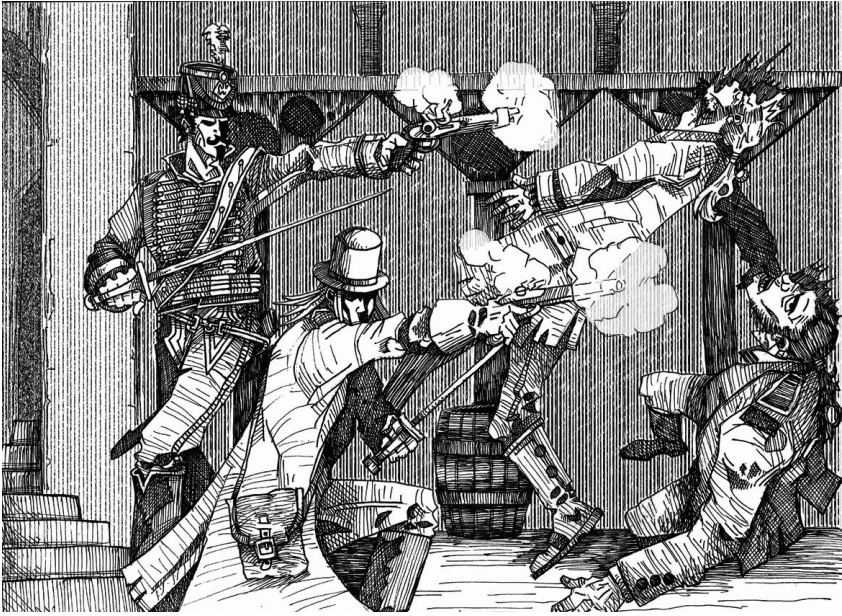
"No natural way, but lend me a few moment's patience and I will see what I can conjure."

The major rummaged in his sabretache and extracted what looked like a small, azure jewel which glowed with some inner fire.

"Now Lieutenant," he whispered. "As soon as the jewel breaks, waste not a moment but have at them. Use sword, pistol, whichever you prefer, both if you must, but know we have exactly one minute's grace before this will help no more. Make sure the business is done by then."

"But Major..."

"Ready?" He said and I nodded not quite comprehending, but trusting that the major knew his trade and with that, he lobbed the brilliantly coloured gem into the middle of the stone flags where it shattered



'A pistol ball took the first one through the eye'

into dozens of multi-faceted shards. I don't know what I was expecting, an explosion or something combustible possibly, but that was the sum of it, no more, no less and suddenly the major had leapt out beyond me to engage Da Foz's men directly. A pistol ball took the first one through the eye, the flash and powder blinding and acrid in that enclosed space and the major's next shot took another clean through the throat. That one fell clutching his neck, blood drenching the floor.

Not to be outdone in valour by an Englishman (no matter 'ow gifted), I was at his heels, pistol in one hand, sabre in the other. Often, in the heat of battle, time seems to pause, slow and curl in upon itself. One sees with such clarity, that each second lasts a lifetime as each successive move in the tableaux is played out: sword against sword, blade versus blade, stroke matching stroke. Yet as I rushed forward, steadied my hand, fired and another ruffian fell, some part of my brain was screaming that something was dreadfully amiss.

There was little time to consider it then though, for now there were just two of Da Foz's rogues left and we must press them 'ard to take advantage of this apparent minute's grace. The major took the smaller

fellow, while I engaged a great bearded rogue who came swinging a wicked, curved scimitar that must have last been employed in anger in the *Reconquista*.

He dealt me a great lusty blow so that my sabre shivered as I parried, and the deflected stroke cut through a corner of my Busby. My involuntary reaction was a hearty “Merde!” which I exclaimed loudly and at the top of my lungs, but the curious thing was I ’eard... nothing. Neither my words, nor the clash of steel, nor now I thought of it, the discharge of our pistols had made even the slightest of sounds.

As a quicksilver repost cut my lumbering opponent down, I saw that the major was also laying on his strokes—but again in total silence. Major Seraph was a skilled swordsman, but perhaps lacked a touch of the martial strength we ’ussars value so highly, and as he locked blades with his ruffian, an underhand elbow knocked him back, dislodging something from within the folds of his cloak. For a moment his gaze was fatally divided, then *sacre blue!* he dived to clutch the object mere centimetres from the flagged floor. This laid him wide open to the villain’s sword and as the moustachioed lout pulled back for a vicious overhead cut, which surely would have made an end of the major, I was forced to intervene.

My blade caught his edge the breadth of a whisker away from the major’s forehead and then a whirlwind of cuts forced the *Portugais* to fall back and let us just say, soon he would trouble us no more. As I wiped my blade clean, I saw the major hastily conceal the object back within his cloak, but despite his precautions, I readily recognised it as one of the glowing flasks I had seen him remove from his sabretache earlier.

Curious, but I had no time to dwell upon it, for the remainder of Da Foz’s villains lay around us, dead or dying. The major then went from each to each, checking for signs of life and extinguishing it if he found any. I made to protest, for this was surely not chivalrous behaviour even for such a debased foe, but the words found no substance as they left my mouth. It was if I had been struck soundless and rendered dumb.

The last rogue died in silence just as the last points of light from the major’s jewel winked out and as they did, the ordinary background hum of *la vie* returned.

Quietly the major remarked, “I know Lieutenant, it seems harsh, ignoble even to treat such a downed helpless foe, but it is necessary I’m afraid. It is imperative that Da Foz knows nothing of our approach. Quite simply I could not take the chance.”

“But that bauble, how does it confer such silence? With such a device, one could do anything. Ambush battalions, surprise armies, cut the throats of generals... why, even *empereurs* would not lie safe in their beds. ”

“Handy little trinket isn’t it? But don’t worry, it doesn’t work for longer than a minute or on any such grand scale and I would have no use for such a device in the normal course of human affairs. Yet when one encounters the darkest magic, one must oppose it with all the tools at one’s disposal...”

“*Vrai je suppose*, Major,” though the pricking of my soul was not entirely in agreement with my words.

“And what of this flask? Was it so precious you would gamble your life for it?”

“Oh yes d’Bois, that precious and even more so.”

The major, possibly sensing my disquiet at his rather maladroit evasion, said quickly:

“Now let’s see about this door.”

Instinctively I reached for the wrought iron handle, but the major ’ow you say, wagged his finger. “Perhaps best if you allow me, I have a feeling this is no ordinary entranceway.”

While Major Seraph inspected the door, I took the opportunity to reload my pistols while he looked it up and down, intently scrutinising each element of its composition. At one point I swear he even sniffed at it. The door was old, the dark stained wood worn over the centuries and its intricate carvings faded by the rigours of time. It must surely have come from the Moorish era of the castle’s occupation.

Major Seraph touched but did not turn the handle, then he raised a sceptical eyebrow and desisted from trying the lock at all. Instead, his fingers traced their way across the flowing patterns and then his gloved hand hovered over the points of a faded star near the top hinge. He pressed each of the points of the star lightly, there was a barely audible click and then the portal swung open gently without a sound. The

major motioned with a silent finger placed over his lips, then insinuated himself inside, beckoning me to follow.

Da Foz's bed chamber was fashioned like the inside of some oriental potentate's seraglio. Lofted, delicately arched columns divided the room into a series of smaller spaces and it was richly decorated, with many fine pieces of dark wooden furniture, ornate room dividers, opulent hangings and plush, richly patterned carpets. The room contrasted with the shabby, faded state of the rest of the castle and evidently its master revelled in the refined taste, elegance and a certain sensuous luxuriousness that he denied his brutish followers. Here no fishy odours lingered but instead a warm, sweet, 'eavy scent pervaded the air, spreading an ardent, drowsiness as if desire itself had been made flesh.

Low, sensuous music played like the piping of many flutes or a chorus of ethereal otherworldly voices, though I could detect no source and the music seemed conjured from the very air itself. It leant the scene a most disturbing, salacious, erotically-charged air.

On one wall a large open fire burned away in its hearth, lending the space a sultry warmth and as we flitted from pillar to pillar, its flames seemed to flaunt themselves brazenly, throwing dancing shadows across the ceiling. At the furthest wall was a grand four-poster bed and there, strewn amongst the sumptuous scattered pillows and cushions, in a state of partial *deshabillement* was the pale form of my own Odette! My first instinct was to dash to her at once, but remembering the major's words, I 'eeded his warning and stayed my hand.

On the opposite side of the chamber, was a large table stuffed with all manner of esoteric arcana and strange devices, like the explosion of an alchemist's laboratory. Ancient, weathered tomes lay in stacks on its surface and by its feet and on the wall behind were pinned up many maps and manuscripts, scrawled with strange symbols and glyphs which I could—or rather would—not discern with any clarity. Many of them carried motifs and pictures drawn from the sea and there were more disturbing images too which showed beings emerging from the waves, terrible things, like the strange offspring of man and fish that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand to *l'attention*. There, poring over a book bound in some strange pale leather, was da Foz, sat like a lobster over its supper, one eye hugely magnified through

a set of nested lenses. My thumb slipped easily upon the hammer of my pistol.

“Pah, the *Cthaat Aquadingen*, such a crude translation from the middle English, wouldn’t you agree? Come sir, step out into the light, don’t be shy,” the creature said in a half-mocking tone without bothering to look up from his work. At this, the major subtly signalled me to stay hidden and stepped boldly out.

“Ah Major Seraph, of course, I thought it must be you, for indeed, who else could it be?”

“Who else indeed, da Foz? You know why I am here.”

“Of course, but it will avail you little.” Silently, I worked my way around to one side of the pillar and sighted the length of the barrel down my arm at the scoundrel’s body.

“And Lieutenant d’Bois too? Ah, I am blessed, but please no need for such toys, Gaston.” Da Foz made some strange gesture with his hand, which caused my eyes to recoil and suddenly my pistol seemed to squirm and twist in my grasp as if it were possessed. Throwing the cursed weapon to one side, I had half drawn my sabre and prepared to meet him with cold steel.

“Stay your hand, Lieutenant,” said the major. “I am curious to hear what the Marquis has to say, for if there is one thing I have learned about his kind, it’s that they can never resist a chance to boast of their nefarious designs.”

“Indeed? You are too kind, *Senhor* and well, I am flattered naturally, for your name is spoken of with the highest respect in the circles I keep. Respect and not a little fear, I might add.” Da Foz laid off his study of the object beneath his lens and stood up to address us both.

“I am glad to hear it,” said Major Seraph nodding with a most supercilious incline of his forehead, “Though perhaps, Da Foz, you would satisfy my curiosity on one point?”

“Please, ask away,” said the villain.

“Why the girl? Why reveal yourself by such an action? Surely you must have known you would be pursued? That this would provide just the pretext I needed to hunt you down? Why would a creature of your inclinations have any use for a mortal maid?”

“Oh, you mistake me sir, oh I am certain—saving your presence

Lieutenant—the fragrant Odette would breed me many fine sons. But forgive me, it is almost laughable to suppose I would have risked so much just for the daughter of a mere colonel, whatever her more... obvious charms. No, no, you quite mistake me sir, it is not *la donzela* I sought, not *la donzela* but her treasures.”

“What!?” I interjected. “But she has no treasure, no dowry, her father is an honest man, but poor...”

“Oh but she has Lieutenant, though not one that many ordinary men would recognise perhaps. Indeed you were close to it all night and your breath must have caressed its very surface, yet you saw it not.”

“You speak in riddles, villain...”

“Then let me bring... enlightenment. And with that Da Foz lifted Odette’s necklace up into the light. The dark smoky stones glinted in the firelight and seemed to dance with an interior light that had I had not seen before. Da Foz cradled them as if he clung to life itself and his eyes glittered with avarice.

“For this trinket, this bauble you have abducted her, insulted her, made a mortal enemy of me?” I exclaimed.

“Oh please, have no concern for your *amour* Lieutenant, her virtue remains intact, I assure you. She is a charming young woman, yes, but such are common enough. No, what I find extraordinary is how one such as she came into possession of these stones.”

“I have no idea, her father mentioned they had been in the family for generations. But this is absurd, you kidnap her, attempt to murder me, for mere stones? Why, they are not even diamonds.”

“Not even diamonds? Pff, you have no conception of their true value, their true power, do you d’Bois? I should have known, hussars have the intellect of a carthorse, but the Major sees, the Major sees, do you not *Senhor* Seraph?”

“But this is extraordinary,” said the major and momentarily, even his impassive features dissolved into an expression of perturbation. “Surely these cannot be those fabled stones, the ones thought lost and passed beyond the knowledge of mortal man for millennia?”

“Ah, but they are Major, they are. Yes, yes, even you feel their pull and now you begin to understand why I risked all. Time passes swiftly on the surface, but oh so slowly beneath the waves and we have not

forgotten what was once ours. Can you imagine, can you even conceive of how I felt when I glimpsed them around the slender, delectable neck of Mademoiselle d'Hiver?"

"I believe I do."

"How, down the long centuries they fell into her possession I do not know and I do not care. But it was all I could do not to snatch them on the instant, even without the churlish threats of our rash Lieutenant here. But my will cannot be resisted and now these crystals will once again reside in the hands of their rightful owners."

"He babbles Major, let me run him through." I said. "We will revive Mademoiselle, return her jewellery and be gone..."

"I wish it were gibberish Lieutenant, but I rather fear the Marquis speaks the truth and this is a much graver matter than I first suspected. Many thousands of years ago, when the isles of Atlantis reared their spires against the primordial skies, the first men fought a great war against the sea demons, beings from the depths of the ocean, the so-called Deep Ones. The conflict raged for decades, centuries, until a great sorcerer rose among the Atlanteans. He is said to have stormed the Deep One's temple and succeeded in capturing one of the sources of their power, a vast alien crystal which he shattered into many shards. It is some fragments of these lost shards that appear to form Mademoiselle's necklace.

"The story is widely held to be legend and has only come down to us in whispers, rumours in some of the darker, forbidden tomes of ancient times," continued the major. "No one has seen an actual piece for centuries. To discover an entire set, why, it's almost inconceivable."

"Inconceivable, yet surely you believe the evidence of your own senses, Major?" said Da Foz suddenly stalking across the room and holding them up to the fire. "See, see how the flames dance in their opaque depths. How can you doubt it is so? And if that were not proof enough, I feel them, feel the tingle of their magic through my fingers, feel it coursing through my veins and I think you sense it too. Oh have no doubt Major, these are indeed how you British say, the genuine article."

"And what do you propose to do with these lost treasures?"

"Do Major? Why restore them to their rightful owners of course."

"Monster," I said. "Even if we suppose all this were true, why would

you side with these creatures, these Deep Ones, against your own kind?" I asked, incredulous.

"Oh but we are not his kind are we, Da Foz?" said the major. "For he is one of them unless I mistake my guess. Note the pallid hue of the skin, the strange cast of his eyes, the Marquis is one of their foul spawn, part human, part demon."

"You see much Major," said Da Foz inclining his head mockingly. "Your reputation is apparently well deserved. You are perceptive to name me their offspring, though I prefer the term 'hybrid', a composite being who combines the strengths of both species."

"Or their worst vices."

"Naturally I prefer to look upon it in a more positive fashion, but yes, I cannot deny I hear the call of the deep. I have already bathed in the currents and tides, frolicked in the ocean's garden. It will not be long before the call becomes irresistible and I will descend and return to the surface no more. But what a gift I will bring to pave my way to immortality. I will be the one who restores our ancient power and banishes the depravations of man."

"The depravations of man?" said the major.

"Yes, the depravations!" He spat. "For even now my brothers and sisters have noted how mankind begins to grope his way toward enlightenment and the first stirrings of the industrial age. In under a hundred years you have harnessed the power of steam and tamed the forging of iron and steel. The smoke from your factories belches into the sky and heralds the dawn of a new age, when your machines will allow you to spread across the surface of the world like a canker. I will convince my brethren that we must not allow it."

"And how will you stop us?"

"Oh very good Major, allow me to prattle on so I reveal my plan to you, making it all the easier to thwart, I suppose. But no, I rather think that this time, I will leave you in suspense."

"Leave us where you wish villain," I said, having subtly manoeuvred myself closer while the beast raved. "For you will never leave this place alive!" And with that I slashed at his throat meaning to carve a crimson streak there.

But the villain was quick, as quick as I have seen any man, quick

in a way that was not quite natural and he ducked under my blow, slid aside like quicksilver and stabbed at a portion of the mantelpiece. To my amazement, the whole stone fireplace suddenly rotated, like it was on oiled hinges, taking Da Foz with it and then he was gone, somehow secreted safely on the other side. There was a sound behind me and where my darling Odette had lain, now there was just an empty space on the bed.

“Rash Lieutenant, very rash!” said the major with some irritation, rapidly patting the mantelpiece where Da Foz must have depressed a secret switch.

“Don’t waste your time, Major,” said Da Foz. “It is a one-way mechanism which quite seals the chamber. The Moorish architect was indeed a cunning fellow and most thorough. Don’t worry Lieutenant, I will take the utmost care of Mademoiselle d’Hiver. Now, perhaps I can continue my oration without further interruption, for there is no earthly chance of your escape.

“A keen student of ancient lore such as yourself Major, will know that my brethren have many cities and dwellings spread across the depths of the ocean floor, indeed, even the crude scholar who translated the *Cthaat Aquadingen*, supposed as much. Yet we are still very much at the mercy of distance: time and tide and all the natural hazards of the oceans. It was not always thus, for in ancient times, before that cursed Atlantean interfered, the power of the crystals allowed us to open up a secret pathway, to travel almost instantaneously across the void, ignoring the perils of topography and the expanses between our mansions.

“These fragments will allow us to span those deeps once again, uniting our scattered colonies in a way that has not been possible for millennia. We know that these crystals seem to speak to each other and with the correct rituals we will be able to trace even more if any survive, allowing us to link our ancient dwelling places until we dominate the land as well as the sea, once again. Then the paltry industry of man will avail him not, for the new dominion of the Deep Ones will begin!”

“Never,” said the major quietly.

“‘Never’ in this case will be a very short time Major, for the hour approaches when I must again convene with my brethren and give them these glad tidings. Say your second final farewell to the Mademoiselle,

Lieutenant, for neither of you will leave this room alive. As for you Major, it has been neither an honour nor a privilege, yet I would have expected rather more from a man of your reputed talents. No matter, for I see you are quite disappointingly mortal after all. Farewell then, perhaps you should be glad you will not live to see it, for the conquest and enslavement of mankind is likely to be a most protracted, not to say painful process.”

The villain’s footsteps echoed down some hidden stairway, but his taunts lingered in the air along with their import. I looked to the major, but he seemed lost in thought, yet we were not spared in our deliberations for long, for almost immediately there was a noise from beyond and a low, seething began to fill the chamber. For a moment I was at a loss to explain it, then I saw the heavy, smoky vapour which was seeping through vents in the bottom of the walls. It curled and writhed insidiously over the floor and one small breath of that foul, noxious odour was enough for me to determine that Da Foz was not flooding the room with expensive cologne.

The major was already tearing at the bed sheets making makeshift masks to wrap around our faces. I hammered at the door where we had entered, while the major tried the mantelpiece once again, but both were in vain, the room was sealed tight as a drum head.

As we hastily donned our improvised masks, the vapour swirled around our feet and ankles, slowly climbing toward our knees, but Major Seraph’s voice was calm and deliberate as he ordered, “The gas is heavier than the air, we must seek higher ground, quick up, up on the bed.” We leapt onto the mattress of the four poster as the gas tip-toed ever upward, its vile curls and twists eddying like malignant fingers. Perhaps we only delayed the inevitable, but what else could we do? One fights for every last second of life when one is ’ard pressed.

Merde but our situation was desperate and in that moment I would gladly have faced a dozen of Da Foz’s thugs, that strange, unquiet sentinel or even those loathsome unseen creatures from the passageway—singly or all together—rather than succumb to this creeping death. Despite his many fine qualities, an ’ussar is made for action not cogitation and I could see no way out of our current predicament. Surely we were not to die here, caught like vermin in Da Foz’s foul snare?

“Major?” I enquired and could not entirely keep the tremor out of my voice as the vapours began to seep upward and wash over the mattress onto the covers and curl around our boots.

“There must be a venting mechanism, something so that he can return to the chamber unharmed...” The major muttered to himself. “But where to find it? Not in the room for certain. Well, desperate times call for desperate measures... Lieutenant d’Bois, I will trouble you to face away from me.”

“You have an idea?”

“Perhaps, but under no circumstances and I mean *no circumstances*, no matter what you hear, must you turn around. Do I have your word?”

“*Oui* Major, *oui*, anything.”

“Very well, look away d’Bois, quickly now, if you please.”

I did as I was bid, turning so that I faced outward. The deadly fog was rising higher, up to my waist now, as I stood on the bed. Whatever the major’s plan, he would need to enact it at the charge!

Then, from behind me I heard strange sounds, guttural words, incantations, *étrange* phrases that seemed to have no right to exist in the human tongue. There was a flashing of light in colours that I had never seen before or since, there was a retort like a *blancmange* being sucked through a whisk and it was only with the greatest difficulty, I restrained myself from turning to see whatever strange business the major was transacting.

Yet I had given my word and an ’ussar’s is not for breaking even though the vile vapours continued to rise, swirling above my chest, insinuating their way up toward my neck.

In spite of my vow, I must turn to seek higher ground or be engulfed by those vile mists, yet when I did, I saw nothing but the vapours, the major was quite simply not there! He had vanished like a wayward priest’s conscience when he views a comely maiden. Cursing through the mask, I leapt upon the dresser and scrambled up to on the topmost canopy of the bed. I was in shock... surely my comrade would not have abandoned me to so *terrible* a fate? Yet where was he and more importantly, how had he made his escape?

Reaching higher ground, I shouted, “Major! Major Seraph!” But answer came there none and as the deadly fog continued to rise, the

vapours wisped and curled over the edge of the canopy, oozing and percolating through the cloth. I raised my head to the highest extremity I could until it scraped the stone ceiling. Then I held my breath like a drowning man against the tide and as the first wisps began to twirl over my moustaches and seep through the cloth, the acrid scent penetrated my nostrils and I coughed and gagged. My last thoughts were of my lost Odette and I knew now that if we met again, it could only be in eternity.

It is said fate, *destinée*, is inexorable, but I believe it can be cheated or at least held at bay by certain gifted fellows and the major was one such, *un homme extraordinaire* who could twist and bend it to his will, as the blacksmith works the steel. For just at the final moment, when I believed I could hold no more air in my lungs, there was a great wrenching, a sucking sound and then strong currents of clean air blew through from below, filling the chamber and causing the deadly miasma to dissipate. *Merde*, but I have never smelled anything as sweet in my life! It was a close-run thing, for I swear, another breath or so and I would have been done.

I exhaled a great gassy sigh, spluttering from the small amount of noxious fumes I 'ad inhaled but quickly scampered to the lip of the canopy to discover my means of deliverance. There, wedging a make-shift stopper into an expanse of a semi-revolved fireplace was Major Seraph, who greeted me cordially.

"Ah, Lieutenant, there you are, I am glad to see the venting mechanism was prompt and my actions were not too tardy. How are you feeling?"

"As if I had smoked a thousand cheroots and inhaled the discharge of the entire imperial artillery, but I am still here Major, which is more than I could have 'oped mere moments ago..."

"Good, good. Well look lively, come down and give me a hand with this will you?"

I scrambled down from the arras and helped the major wedge a pole axe into the mechanical device which allowed the fireplace to revolve.

"But how did you escape the chamber? 'ow did you pass beyond the wall? 'ow did you find the means to save me?" I asked as we gave the poleaxe a last heave into position, snapping the head into its gears, so it was jammed *ouvrir*.

“It is probably best that you don’t peer too closely into my methods, Lieutenant. Shall we just say they are not readily explicable to the man of reason and leave it at that?”

“Ver’ well, if you insist Major, I will not press you further, let me simply offer my thanks for my own unworthy ’ide.”

“Not strictly necessary old boy, but you’re welcome nonetheless. Besides our work here is not by any means done and I could and would not abandon so dauntless a comrade.”

“Da Foz...” I said and I believe my eyes narrowed at the mere mention of his name.

“Indeed, I believe the perfidious Marquis means to enact his ignoble plan tonight and while breath remains in my body, I mean to oppose him. How are you d’Bois?”

“A little dizzy, that is all Major, but eager to land a blow on that villain and restore *mon amour*.”

“You’ll do then. Come, I don’t believe we have much time.”

FIVE

The Bridging of the Void

Scarcely pausing to gather weapons and snatch a lantern to light the way, we were soon proceeding down the hidden passage where Da Foz had made his cowardly retreat.

The narrow stone stair wound down through the vitals of the castle, twisting into its very core and in this 'idden space, its occupiers had not bothered to hide their affiliation with the dark. Strange, otherworldly motifs and reliefs spattered the walls, showing men worshipping things from beneath the sea, bowing down before them. Dozens of more horrible, unmentionable scenes were also illustrated, including some which featured diabolic orgies and unnatural congress with these beasts. I shuddered and tried to keep my eyes averted from such depraved depictions, instead keeping a tight grip on my pistols and my feet at the double behind the major's.

But what would we find at the end of this passage? Despite my own uncanny experiences earlier and these horrible works of 'art', I could still barely credit Da Foz's assertion about this submarine race who needed Odette's jewels to—what was it? Project themselves across the abyss? It seemed insane, inconceivable, far easier to dismiss him as an utter madman. Yet if one thing lent it credibility, then it was the major's absolutely ironclad certainty about this *incroyable* tale. He was no *naïf*—and that is perhaps what unsettled me most of all.

As we descended into the bowels of the castle, the light from my lantern scarcely seemed to illuminate the walls at all, as if it were being

absorbed by the darkness, but that foetid, fishy smell began to assert itself once again. Lower now and as the stone steps finally began to run out and give way to more natural formations, I could hear the sound of the waves lapping and breaking against the rock - and close by too. Then the steps came to an end and the rough floor and walls of a natural cavern disappeared off into the dark.

“That lantern will warn them of our coming, best extinguish it, d’Bois.”

“But ’ow will we find our way?”

“Don’t worry, I was born part feline, just grasp the end of my scabbard, follow close by and watch your step. These rocks are likely to be slippery.”

Deploying what I believe you British call *haussement d’épaules Gallique*, or what we call simply ‘a shrug’ to display my insouciance, I did as I was bid. Slowly, we crept through the dark, my left hand grasping the major’s sword casing, the right groping ahead of me so I would not falter. We moved on like *deux souris aveugles*, pardon... two blind mice, but the major seemed to indeed have the vision of *une chat* and although that rotten smell and the misgivings of my own querulous ’heart caused me no little dismay, onward we continued to press.

Fortunately, it was not long before a faint light began to trickle through from the way ahead and I was able to leave off trusting to my guide’s surefootedness and begin to make my own way.

Now I could hear the sea resounding as it crashed against the rock and the salt of the surf hung ’eavily in the air, as we inched along the last few metres of passage and concealed ourselves behind a small outcrop of rock.

From our vantage point, I could now see into what looked like a huge natural stone cavern. Furthest away from us, to seaward, a great aperture opened in the rock to admit the waves, which washed into a saltwater pool foaming across the floor of the cave. Great stalactites and massive formations of rock ’ung down from the ceiling of this sinister place and they had been carved, brutalised almost, into twisted unnatural pillars and arcane forms that gave the place a most ill-starred air.

At the landward end, near where we lay, the rock had been hewn into a huge natural altar and looming over it were two enormous statues,

vast loathsome amphibious monsters in 'umanoid form. The quality of their workmanship was unnerving, for it picked out fine details on their scaly skins, rippling gills, savage crests and webbed limbs that gave them a hideous, realistic quality, such that you would swear that at any moment they might spring to horrible, ghastly life.

The remainder of the cavern was comprised of many tiered terraces and galleries honeycombing through the rock and now, pouring through them, a foul congregation began to assemble, as if summoned by some silent signal. Da Foz's followers were an *hétéroclite famille*—a diverse group—comprising those muscular villains who guarded his castle, some degenerate looking peasants and even a few deserters from the *Grand Armée* and milor' Wellington's ranks, judging by the ragged remains of their uniforms.

As they shuffled in and took their places, my attention was drawn to the altar itself and the most singular object which dominated it. There, inside a weighty frame fashioned from some unearthly glittering metal was what looked like a great polished mirror, though no reflection played upon its mirrored surface. Its irregular shape was decorated with the treasures of the deep and at each point of the compass—from North all the way around to North North West—was placed a strange socket shaped like the fronds of an anemone. It was a most alien and disturbing object and although the mirrored surface was opaque, it seemed to pull the mind toward it and scatter one's senses in many directions. It was only with a supreme effort of will, that I managed to avert my gaze from it.

Now the last members of that vile coven had taken their places, a quiet descended over their unholy ranks and even the sound of the waves seemed to fall into an ominous silence. Suddenly the air was rent by a singular voice.

"Father Dagon! Mother Hydra, hear me!" Da Foz stood next to the mirror, his voice echoing back from the walls and as one, his flock turned their gaze toward him, their breath an echoing sibilance, like a whisper of the deep. He wore a cloak of lustrous dripping seaweed, interwoven with vile ocean flowers, a crown formed of the spines and claws of *les fruits de mer* and in his hands he clutched a twisted, barnacled trident, like 'orrible parody of Neptune. His eyes brimmed with fervour as his voice reverberated.



*'Ripples and bubbles began to appear in the water
as they began to emerge from the tidal wash.'*

“By the waxing of the moon and the rising of the tide, your servant calls, let the sound echo from deep to deep. Let your family, once more, be complete!” With this he struck the mirror-like object a resounding blow which caused it to ring out in a single, atonal note which carried across the water. At this, the congregation fell silent and its gaze turned seaward.

At first, nothing much disturbed the surface of the water but then after many beatings of *mon coeur* it was as if the very motion of the waves paused, frozen in a moment. Ripples and bubbles began to appear in the water as *they* began to emerge from the tidal wash. The moon was behind them at first, making silhouettes of the abhorrent heads and crests which broke through the waves. Bulging, piscine eyes glowed with a terrible malevolent phosphorescence and their gill sacks heaved and rasped as they first tasted earthly air. They stood upright now, hulking bodies tipped with scales and ridges, the grey-green of their flesh contrasting sharply with the pallid white flabbiness of their bellies. There were perhaps fifteen of the creatures and their webbed, amorphous limbs brought them to a halt on the edges of the pool, where they stared up at Da Foz in silent, terrible communion, smaller reflections of the vast effigies above. As one, their mouths opened and a terrible croaking emerged, like the high pitched squabbling of a flock of diabolical gulls.

“Deep Ones,” whispered the major, but his chilling observation was interrupted by the sound of Da Foz’s greeting.

“Welcome brothers and sisters, welcome! Now we are assembled and the family of the ocean complete.” Da Foz scanned the cavern and his voice rose and now swelled with triumph.

“You come to us my brothers and sisters when the moon is full and the tide is high and you arrive at the cusp of a new age, a new era when the tyranny of mankind will be overthrown.” Da Foz held up Odette’s smoky jewels which brought an audible chittering from the horrible conclave below.

“Yes brothers and sisters, yes,” continued Da Foz. “That which was thought to have been lost forever has been found! The forgotten pieces gathered! The ancient pathways may be re-opened!”

Now the creature’s high-pitched squawks became even more animated and murmurs echoed and spread amongst the ranks of the human congregation.

“Bring her!” shouted Da Foz, and two hefty henchmen appeared from the wings carrying a forlorn looking Odette between their greasy paws. I cursed loudly, but fortunately the sound was swallowed up by the excitement of the crowd.

“Steady Lieutenant,” hissed Major Seraph.

“But what shall we do Major? I will die before I let them...”

“Stay calm and be ready d’Bois, I just need a moment...” While the major cogitated, I eased a pistol from my belt and loosened my sword in its scabbard. The henchmen were chaining Odette to the upright slab behind the altar now and the sight made my blood boil and my moustaches quiver. Pffaw! Futile or not, at that moment I cared little for my own life and I was quite ready to rush the altar and die with my sword in my hand defending my beloved from their vile depredations. Damn their eyes, I would make sure these vile beasts remembered the name of d’Bois to their dying day.

“For mankind waxes strong!” screeched Da Foz. “His smoke pollutes the skies, his dyes run into the rivers and his effluent begins to pour into mother ocean. Unchecked, his machines will ravage the earth, poison the seas and he will spread like a plague across the face of the waters. He must be curtailed, brought to heel, contained. It is time to re-establish the natural dominance of the Deep Ones, time to restore our ancient byways, time to re-open the crystal void! Tonight, Mother Hydra and Father Dagon will be our witnesses!”

“Damn it, this is worse than I imagined. He means to summon the Deep One’s rulers to put the seal upon his infamy,” said the major. “This changes the complexion of things somewhat.”

“I know nothing of complexions major, but I do know my Odette lies trussed and upright there like *une poulet* in a butcher’s window.”

“Just give me a few more moments, d’Bois.”

“*Dépêchez-vous* Major, for I will not suffer to witness this for long. “I glanced back to where Da Foz continued his oration.

“...for mankind’s transgressions are plentiful, his sins against the bountiful seas legion and his jealous eyes covet our ancient treasure. Even now, his envious spies lurk amongst us! Seize him!”

Suddenly I was aware of them behind me, burly arms reaching out to take hold of me and my sword whirled, carving a crimson arc through the air. A limb flashed, I parried a blow from a cudgel, skewered one of the ruffians *en pointe*, but an ’ussar’s blade is made for cutting not thrusting work and as I tried to withdraw, the metal turned and lodged in his guts, causing him to howl. I levelled my pistol to take a shot at the

sea of faces, but then a cruel blow caught my wrist, the pistol dropped, they swarmed over me and I was pushed to the ground.

Blows rained upon me until I thought I must lose my senses and then, abruptly I was dragged upright. Futilely, I attempted to shake off my captors, but my arms were gripped firmly by many hands and I was dragged and hauled along the galleries and up to the dais.

There Da Foz's mocking eyes greeted me, a sardonic smile playing about his lips and just as my vision began to clear, I was forcefully bound upright alongside my *amour*. Odette bravely whispered 'Gaston' and both relief and terror were there in her face. '*Courage mon amour*' I mouthed back, but where our salvation was to come from, I could not say.

"I am surprised to see you Lieutenant, alive at least," leered Da Foz. "How is that possible I wonder? The Major's magics must be more formidable than I supposed." Suddenly I realised Odette and I were alone up there. Where was Major Seraph? I had not been aware of him during the brief fight; had my comrade deserted me... again?

Balefully I gazed at my tormentor and at that moment it was not death I feared, but the humiliation of dying without a sword in my hands and a curse on my lips.

"The Major *est mort*," I sneered. "He succeeded in springing your trap, but succumbed to your vile poisons. I will mourn my lost comrade later, but unchain me now you hound and by god..."

"Not by your god, Lieutenant, he has no place here in the womb of Mother Hydra."

Weak though I was, I strained against my bonds to free myself and land a blow on the villain. But it was no use, I was bound fast and all my efforts were to no avail. Da Foz merely laughed and leered and took up the stones, dangling them mockingly in front of me. He began mumbling an incantation and words which were not words came tumbling from that twisted mouth, the spell growing louder and louder until it echoed the speech of the creatures below. They, in turn, responded, emitting high pitched clacks and chirrups, their excitement and agitation growing and the chanting grew louder, taken up in a horrible chorus by the human worshippers, until the atonal dirge swelled and boomed, filling the cavern. Then, when the cacophony was at its zenith and I swore my ears drums must shatter, Da Foz raised his

arms above his head and the place fell to a sudden silence.

“Let the oldest ties be renewed!” shrieked Da Foz and carefully, methodically began to place a stone in each of the sockets. As he went around the face of the mirror, each of the small fissures opened, expanded like a flower and then gave a small sigh, as tiny, anemone-like tentacles grasped each stone and pulled it fluidly into place.

“Let the ancient avenues be restored!” Now that all but the topmost stone had been placed, small rivulets and streams of bright water light began to flow between them.

“Let the void... be opened!” said Da Foz placing the last stone and then the circle was complete. For long moments nothing happened, then a change began to come over the mirror, the solid surface turning liquid and rippling with small waves, as if it were subject to the pull of time and tide. Unholy dark light played around the portal and then a watery image began to form inside, slowly resolving into a coral dais which overlooked the peaks and spires of a vast underwater city, one populated solely by the same creatures which lurked at the tide line below! *Mon Dieu* it was horrible, yet strangely fascinating to see those demons in that vast alien vista.

Da Foz’s worshippers watched too, a collective moan issuing from them as they beheld the change. I looked around desperately, wracking my brain to formulate a plan of escape, yet my bonds held tight as ever and this poor ’ussar could see no means of escaping his fate.

“Yes brothers and sisters, the way is open and soon we will rejoin our family as we step through to greet our brethren beneath the waves. I will summon Father Dagon and Mother Hydra to receive their blessing for this hallowed endeavour.”

At this the congregation gave up a strange keening and the creatures below began to take up a new chant, one that was rich and guttural, laden with sinister cadences. Da Foz began tracing strange paths and movements through the air and even though my eyes could scarce credit it, I swear his hands left a faint afterglow so that the symbols seemed to linger visible for a moment, horrid import contained in their unholy patterns. Now Da Foz’s voice joined the ’orrible cacophony of man and creature, but it took on a more urgent, insistent, beckoning quality, as if he were calling someone or indeed, *something*.

Far out to sea, huge spouts of water suddenly erupted from the ocean's surface and the waves began to rage and swell, resolving themselves into two gigantic plumes which began to move ominously toward us. The dirge grew and swelled and I cursed I had not the liberty of my hands to stop up my ears, for I felt I must go mad with it. Da Foz's speech rose octaves and his voice seemed to enter a pitch which had no natural place on this earth. As the spell reached its climax, the two plumes began to charge and race and surge toward the shore, swelling and dancing until they dominated the whole horizon, their shadows filling the sky. Da Foz now pushed his face mere inches away from mine own.

"You first d'Bois, then the girl!" He spat. "Your blood shall usher in a new age, the end of man and the beginning of the hegemony of the sea!" He returned to that vile alien language to complete his incantation, drew back his trident for the thrust and I braced myself to receive the killing blow....

But suddenly that cruel face was enveloped in flame, the sounds from his lips transforming into screeches of agony as fire played 'orribly around his features! The chant died, the trident tumbled and Da Foz staggered away as he desperately tried to beat out flames which began to engulf him. With the invocation interrupted, out to sea, the giant waves seemed to pause, then falter and subside, their peaks diminishing, petering out, until they became just a succession of white plumed rollers, which broke placidly towards the shore.

I wrenched my head around to see what miracle had intervened to save us and there, *sacre blue!* who should it be, but the major himself?

Yet this was not the fey, rather *outré* British army officer who had first accompanied me on this night's dark adventure, but a vengeful archangel, wreathed in a shroud of smoke and flame! A fiery cloak adorned his shoulders, burning fiercely, flame writhing and twisting over his body and I swear he hovered a metre above the ground rather than walked upon it. Those pale, unblinking eyes had been transformed into fiery coals wreathed in sulphur and brimstone, which seemed to have been drawn from the lake of Gehenna itself. Flame played about his face and head, a halo of fire, although strangely, it seemed not to consume his flesh. On either side, he was flanked by two glowing *efrits*, strange female creatures of light and flame seemingly drawn from the

fable of a Thousand and One Nights, blazing like miniature suns as they orbited around him.

For a moment I was rendered speechless by this apparition, as, it seemed, were the unholy congregation about me and the only sound was Da Foz's scream as he plunged and fell from the dais into the water below. Seraph, or this fiery vision of him, regarded the scene for a moment and then stretched out a finger—like Da Vinci's creator reaching to Adam – and with a blazing smile playing across his lips said, "Allow me, d'Bois."

Liquid fire arced from his fingers, searing my bonds which dropped smouldering to the floor and it was the work of seconds to retrieve my weapons, then position myself to protect my darling. I was ready for any onslaught from the sea demons or Da Foz's degenerate minions, yet I should have saved myself the trouble, for Major Seraph and his flaming hours chose that moment to begin their assault, laying about them with a flaming vengeance.

The major extended his arms and sent a series of fireballs careering into the galleries and colonnades of that unholy temple. Where they landed, they flared, exploding with a deadly force, charring flesh, singeing hair and scattering Da Foz's human disciples. With shouts of dismay and cries of terror they left that place far more quickly than they had entered, beating and trampling each other in their panic to escape from the major's searing retribution. *Mon brave* it was a stirring sight, the *Empereur's* own artillery could have done no better and it was with much joy I watched those foul worshipers beat a headlong retreat with 'ow you say, their tails between their legs.

As for the sea demons, well, at the major's unspoken command, the *efrits* began to engage them, hurling cascades of fire which rained down into the shallow pool where the Deep Ones still stood with their fishy eyes and gaping jaws. One had the presence of mind to hurl a trident at the *efrits*, but the weapon charred and melted as it touched the djinn's molten skin and that seemed enough for those sea-born horrors. With a great hue and cry they turned tail and fled, diving back into the water in a maelstrom of scaly skins and thrashing limbs, until they were quite swallowed up by the waves.

The unequal contest may have lasted moments or minutes, I quite simply could not tell, for I stood shielding my darling, but also gazing

in awe at the fearsome havoc the major had wrought. It was truly a wonder, the major wielded the power of flame and hurled thunderbolts as if he had personal command of a more potent version of those absurd Congreve rockets which we 'ussars frankly consider are only good for scaring donkeys, peasants and small children.

As the last of Da Foz's disciples disappeared off howling into the night, the major floated down onto the dais close by me. With a delicate bow he saluted the returning *efrits*, those strange denizens of fire and they acknowledged him too, returning the salutation. Then, they seemed to turn inside out and be sucked back in upon themselves, diminishing from fire to smoke, then they vanished, leaving behind just the faintest trace of brimstone. I watched with fascination as the major's fire-shroud seemed to burn itself out, the flames smouldering and sputtering, until it too was just a faint outline and then was gone. The last thing to vanish was the blaze in his eyes and he allowed himself a small smile at what must have been a look of utter astonishment upon my face. But in a moment, that expression of amusement had turned into a shouted warning,

“d’Bois, look out!”

My blade whirled in a defensive motion and my instincts served me well, for my parry just caught and locked the points of the trident which had been spearing towards my vitals. Da Foz, his skin raw and blistered had been transformed into an awful, ghastly, crisped thing and this blackened shade spat malevolently at me as he tried to wrench back his weapon. But he was too slow and my own backhanded slash cut it from his fingers and those fingers clean from his hand. His curse lingered for a moment on the air, before my sword took out his throat and he died gagging and frothing on his own blood, a fitting end for that despicable creature.

“Nicely done *mon brave*, and I would say that concludes our business here,” said the major as I began to sever the bonds which still secured my beloved.

“Perhaps for you Major, but I will not forget this night so easily, nor will my sweet Odette.”

“Nor should you my dear d’Bois, but I hope that its conclusion proves satisfactory for both you and your mademoiselle.” At this he

bowed gallantly to my dearest one, who, freed from her bonds, was now crushing me with her embrace, smothering me in a welter of kisses and innumerable ‘Oh Gastons!’ I must confess, I found it most gratifying.

“Apologies, *mes amis*, that I appeared to desert you, but I had to await the critical moment, when the final opening of the crystal void exposed both Da Foz and his creatures. I’m sorry that you had to play the unwitting role of the bait upon the hook.”

“I understand Major, *les moyens justifient les extrémités*, the means justify the ends. Please, think nothing of it.”

“But how did you know what would defeat him?”

“Elemental my dear d’Bois,” the major smiled. “It is said the best way to fight fire is with fire, but naturally it also follows that the best way to fight water is also with fire.”

“...and this magic you employ, those demons, the *efrit*?”

“Creatures of darkness, like Da Foz, are not the only ones who can draw upon the elemental forces of the universe to do their bidding. As for the *efrit* as you call them? Well I carried them with me within those two jewelled cases for just such a purpose. They scarcely needed any encouragement, for even without my enchantments, beings of fire are naturally opposed to those of water. I had a feeling they might come in handy.”

“So the matter is concluded then and I may return my poor Odette home?”

“Very nearly, Lieutenant,” said the major as he reached over to where the surface of the great mirror churned and thrashed like the waves in a storm. On the other side, great legions of those creatures seemed to have gathered and they swarmed malevolently, some darting toward the mirror’s surface, before veering off at the very last moment.

“That’s quite enough of that, thank you,” said the major as he deftly plucked out each smoky jewel from its socket in turn. Almost instantly, the surface of the mirror calmed, faded and then resumed its former opacity.

“Stand back, if you please,” said the major and when we had retreated a sufficient distance, he sent a searing bolt of flame straight at the mirror’s surround, melting and contorting it, until it was just so much blackened slag.

“Now that, I very much hope, is the end of that.”

“*Mon Dieu*, so that is it? Victory? Da Foz and his evil are no more?”

“For the here and now, yes, but the struggle continues. There are always those who would harness dark powers, mingle their blood and make unholy pacts with beings from the depths. Yet fortunately, there are always good, brave men willing to oppose them.” The major nodded in my direction and I found myself experiencing *le rouge au front*, ’ow you say the reddening of the cheeks.

“You are too kind Major, but my assistance was hardly crucial.”

“On the contrary d’Bois, it was invaluable. Without your distract... aid I would never have had the time to complete the magics which ultimately defeated Da Foz and his allies. Alas, I’m afraid I won’t be able to return mademoiselle’s jewels, these must be taken and hidden far beyond the reach of the Deep Ones’ allies. However, I’m sure a representative sample from Da Foz’s accumulated treasures upstairs will provide more than adequate recompense. There should be more than sufficient there to set up a young, newly married couple for life; a life which I’m certain will be both long, fruitful and full of great joy. Come, *mes amis*, let us be away from this dark place and return to the clean night air.”



And so we made our way back up into the now abandoned castle itself and indeed most, if not all of what the major predicted came to pass, for he had an uncanny ability to part the veil of the future, that man. My darling Odette and I were indeed wedded before the end of that very year and although I followed my beloved *Empereur*, until all came to an end on that *terrible* day in the muddy fields of Belgium, I defied the ordained fate of the ’ussar and lived to enjoy a long and prosperous life. Using Da Foz’s treasures, Odette and I secured a beautiful, thriving stud farm in my beloved Ardennes where we bred *exceptionnel chevaux* from my beloved mares Rosalind and Eleanor. Together we also raised many handsome sons and beautiful daughters to continue the tradition of our line.

As for the major? Well I did not see him again until many years later. It was after the dream had finally died and *mon coeur, l’Empereur*

had been banished and begun his final exile in the remote fastness of the South Atlantic.

Milor' Wellington had been appointed ambassador to the court of the Bourbon usurpers and having declined to serve the white cockade, I had retired from military service and become a man of substance and was beginning to make my reputation as a refined *élevage de chevaux*, an 'orse breeder. I was up upon a rare visit to Paris, concluding some trifling legal affair and I had just left the office of my *avocat* when a tap on my shoulder caused me to turn with sudden alarm.

"Ah, there you are d'Bois, the very man I was hoping to bump into. Now, if you can spare me a few moments, there is a small matter I wish to lay before you."

It was the major, of course and so, from such innocuous beginnings began the second great adventure I shared with him. But as for the telling of that tale, *Monsieur*? Well you had best ask *mon patron* to bring us another bottle. And we had best make it a *supérieur* too if you would be so kind, for I will require much additional fortitude to sustain me through the telling of that *terrible* tale."

Fin.

BOOK TWO

FEAST OF THE DEAD

ONE

*A horsewhipping at the inn of the
Golden Chicken is narrowly averted*

‘Ah, sweet *vin rouge*, the very heart’s blood of *la vie*, the strong yet subtle grape that soothes the blood and settles the mind of this tired old campaigner. *Oui*, pass me a little of that delightful *fromage* and a morsel of *pain*, Monsieur, for even though the night draws in, the clock has not reached the hour when my rebellious indigestion will sound the trumpet and go to war over a *petit ruban de brie* which so compliments this magnificent Bordeaux.

It is good to see you again so soon, Monsieur, an old soldier has few such visitors during these, the dark days of his dotage.

What? You wish to hear more of the formidable career and strange misadventures of Lieutenant Colonel Gaston d’Bois (retired) who remains as ever, at your service? Ah, I have little doubt that cognac will be required before too long then, to lubricate these poor, failing vocal chords.

You consent? *Magnifique*, Pierre! A bottle of your finest and set two glasses before the brave Monsieur and I, for it is never good to drink alone. You will buy? Oh, you are too kind, Monsieur, but it is meet, for it is in the throes of that fiery spirit that I am best able to recall the blood and glory of the field of honour, and to recollect the many dark and *sinistre* adventures that I encountered away from it.

You will recall that when we last met, I regaled you with the strange and *outré* tale of the Crystal Void, when the brave and noble British galloper and sorcerer *fantastique*, Major Seraph, accompanied d’Bois in rescuing the love of his life, the incomparable Odette. Oh, it was a noble

time and bravely done as *a deux* we stood against that black hearted villain, the Marquis Da Foz, and his loathsome underwater allies.

Mon Dieu! What a struggle *catastrophique* that was! But believe me when I tell you that it was merely the first of many bizarre and unusual supernatural encounters which seemed to dog d'Bois' glittering military career thereafter, padding alongside 'im like the remorseless 'ounds of 'ell.

Ah *la bouteille c'est arrive* and *non*, Monsieur, allow *me* to fill your glass and let us drink to the memory of the Major and my own dear sweet amour—and after much peril and 'ardship—the 'appy conclusion to that sorry tale.

Confusion to the forces of shadow and *obscurité* Monsieur! *Salut!*

Ah, that is a little better—I begin to feel the warmth of the liquor trickle into these old bones and my memory improves and my recollection grows as the spirit begins its fine work.

Maintenant, to business... yet first you say there is something you wish to confess, Monsieur? Why, please, you are amongst friends here, we have drunk together, are fellows of the *bouteille* and nothing you could say would ever cause d'Bois to think otherwise.

What!? You are a *journaliste*? One of those scribbling jackals who prey on the unwary and disseminate lies and untruths to the ignorant and gullible?

Pierre! Fetch the *grande fouet!* For I intend to horsewhip you from the *Poulet d'or*, this very instant, Sir! Believe me when I say these infirm old hands retain enough strength to leave sufficient stripes on your back to remind you that you are the lowest form of scoundrel for perpetuity! *Très fort!*

Quoi! What is that you say? After reading of my first great adventure, your *éditeur* was so moved, so enthralled, so 'orrified, he wishes you to solicit further exploits from my glittering career, those to form an 'istoric record, a memoir *incomparable*, so that they may be placed before the wider public and gain the recognition they deserve?

Well... I see... *j'compris*... that is quite a different matter entirely, Monsieur and I believe I may have judged you and your intentions prematurely.

Forgive an 'asty old soldier, for though *mon corps* is wracked by the indignities of age and grey threads my moustache like a spring frost, an

'ot 'ussars blood still surges through these veins and is capable of rising to the surface with only the very slightest provocation—as the widow will no doubt attest if she ever lowers her defences enough for me to sound the charge once again! Hah!

Très bien, you are as gallant and forgiving as the best of foes should always be, worthy of my steel, but magnanimous in victory or defeat, ignoring the vicissitudes of *Madame Destinée*. Now, let me slake my thirst once more, so that my mind may be sharp and my tongue loose and the veils of 'istory and of your beautiful tongue—second only to *nonpareil Français* but still somewhat of a struggle for this seasoned campaigner—part a little easier. *Bon*, now I will light my cigar and if you wish, I will tell you of the strange sequel to the affair of the Crystal Void that befell me during that latter part of that most curious year of 1810, when my eyes were first fully opened to the supernatural 'orror which lurk behind the curtained fringes of this world.



As the year began its inevitable change from *l'automne* to *hiver*, pardon, from autumn to winter, Milor' Wellington and 'is *Portugais* allies still skulked like *chiens...* *pardon* Monsieur... 'eld their discipline behind those accursed earthworks at Torres Verdás. Marshal Masséna, our own dear sweet Victory's Child, had chased milor' half way across Spain and Portugal and now found himself confounded by these vast, and it must be conceded, rather unsporting fortifications, which *Le Fer Duc* had cunningly constructed to protect his retreat (although if you recall, 'e was a mere viscount at that time). Facing such an immovable object, Masséna had dug in to plot his counterthrust and as the cold began to settle upon the land, our two forces stared uneasily at each other across the lines, in that most dishonourable and unsatisfactory condition known as a stalemate.

Naturally a bold 'ussar's spirit chafes at such inaction, but after the perils we 'ad faced in Da Foz's lair in the affair of the Crystal Void, it was a relief, at first, to rest and recuperate from the ordeal. Upon the insistence of her father, the redoubtable Colonel d'Hiver, *mon amour* Odette, had, amidst a flurry of kisses and 'dear 'earts', departed for the safety of

la belle France ahead of our proposed marriage. Those nuptials were a saga worthy of inscribing upon the Roll of Honour itself Monsieur, but the tale of those battle honours, which d'Bois earned with much blood and sweat, must be preserved for another day, for now we must not be diverted from our course.

d'Bois for his part and with the Colonel's accompanying recommendation for 'is valiant conduct—which could of course not be widely disclosed, or indeed possibly believed—had been transferred to the seventh squadron of His Imperial Majesty's XIIIth "Death's 'ead" 'ussars. It was a newly formed regiment, and despite its rather ill-omened *prénom*, it no doubt felt its reputation suitably enhanced by the presence of such a redoubtable *chevalier*. While a worthy addition to the *Empereur's* ranks in many ways, the XIIIth, like so many in those days, was comprised of many bits and pieces, spare parts and odds and ends which had been reformed and reconstituted into a new whole. It was both fashion and necessity in those days, but it meant new shavers with scarcely a scraping of fluff upon their cheeks, rode alongside grizzled veterans and wizened warriors. Having won no distinctions of its own, the XIIIth, with its deep blue jackets, pink breeches and death's 'ead cap badge, was a regiment in search of glory, 'onour and an identity of its own.

However, it is no *fanfaronnade*, no idle boast, to say at this time, d'Bois, like our beloved *Empereur* 'imself, was at the very 'eight of his powers. Despite many acts of bold and daring valour, he was miraculously untroubled by his many wounds (for the main part), strong of arm, noble of mien and with moustaches and cadettes that set the gentler sex's 'earts a flutter. No doubt, he would have made a statue fair blush to be 'old 'im, unlike the sad old specimen he has now become. He can say with no fear of contradiction or false modesty—and there is no 'igher praise—d'Bois was the very epitome of a model 'ussar.

But once he had recovered from the shock of his travails at the 'ands of the Marquis da Foz and 'is unnatural allies, this state of affairs before Milor's unnatural earthworks began to chafe at 'im like new boots on a ride through the Russian steppe. Although there was a little occasional light skirmishing to enliven the ennui, there was no immediate prospect of bringing milor's Redcoats to battle, the environment which is d'Bois' *naturelle* habitat.

In truth, it was an 'ard time, made 'arder by the cooling of the climate, the poor state of the Portugais roads and a scarcity of food, supplies, and the luxuries and *nécessité* the 'ussar requires upon campaign. The Iron Duke had attempted to scour the land of food, fodder and resources to limit our ability to stay in the field and prosecute the siege and by doing so, eventually force our ignominious retreat. Of course, 'e had not counted on the inborn *ingéniosité* of the French cavalryman who is able to sniff out a scrap of food and more importantly a drop of wine and a choice cigar, as the stoat sniffs out the lark's egg.

There was little honest fighting for 'ussars in such a protracted siege and with little prospect of winning the renown which would establish our name and reputation in open battle, d'Bois, and elements of the XIIIth were charged with the equally vital work of foraging.

Now you may scoff when d'Bois terms this 'vital work', but it is an important aspect of war and the 'ussar is its natural practitioner, able to scout deep behind enemy lines, sift the wind for intelligence, disrupt enemy troop movements and ferret out additional food and weapons squirreled away by the most cunning of foes.

So it was that d'Bois found himself in the command post, where the grizzled visage and single beady eye of Monsieur Colonel La Garde ran their rule over him as he stood rigidly at attention. Le Garde was renowned as a rather candid and dyspeptic old fire breather, but he was a brave man and a fine commanding officer for all his gruffness. Yet this was our first proper encounter and 'e had not yet ascertained the full measure of d'Bois, so with an unpleasant—and to d'Bois' ears rather unnecessary snort—*Monsieur le Colonel* began.

'Pff, I can spare no proper officers for this undertaking d'Bois, so you must suffice.'

'Oui, Mon Colonel.'

'You will range to the north east and become our eyes and ears in that territory. Discover what you can, and keep an especial look out for any caches of arms or food which might be recovered. But act with caution and try to keep that foolish head upon your shoulders, for there is some talk of one of Wellesley's Eyes being active in the area. I have appointed Sergeant Sacleaux to act as your NCO. God help me, I can think of no two who more fully deserve each other.'

d'Bois' mouth began to form some words but before he could utter them, the Colonel raised an eyebrow which managed to appear both quizzical and threatening.

'You have a problem with my orders, d'Bois?'

'I... that is... *non*, of course not, *Mon Colonel*. It will be my pleasure.'

'Your duty, d'Bois—it will be your duty. There will be little time for pleasure. Now begone. I have other, more important matters to attend to.'

'*Oui, Mon Colonel.*'

'Oh, and d'Bois...'

'*Oui, Mon Colonel.*'

'Return with a supply of brandy and cigars for your commanding officer, or do not return at all.'

'*Oui Mon Colonel.*'

TWO

At the Chargez!

So it was, in this rather perfunctory manner, that d'Bois received the orders which would not only trigger the considerable honour of his first independent command, but signal the beginning of the second great adventure since his eyes were first opened to the supernatural terrors lurking at the fringes of this world.

Yet in truth it began auspiciously enough, and the next morning just after dawn, amid the jingle of harness and the of rumble our beasts, a little over two dozen men and horses slipped quietly through French lines into the wilderness and our foraging foray—and this strangest of sequels—began.

Our progress was *rapide* and under the stern though steady influence of d'Bois' guiding hand, this small detachment of the seventh squadron had soon roamed far to the north and east, leaving those cursed fortifications behind us and ranged deep into the dense *interieur* of that bleak and desolate country, which was overlooked by the snow-capped peaks of the *Serra de Montejunto*.

A few well-placed coins scattered among the greedy peasantry, bought whispers of recent guerrilla activity and caches of weapons and food being transported across this steep and arid land. D'bois remained as cynical and sceptical of this intelligence as of all else—for *Le Français* were a hated and despised invader now, and there was little love for us here. Rumours spread like wildfire, *Les Anglais* had landed a new army in the north, Mil'or Wellington's deadliest agent was abroad, a sheep

had been born with the head of a goat. Which meant of course it was a goat—pah!

Two day's ride and countless leagues across the frankly appalling *Portugais* roads had bought us to the fringes of a place of high sierras, deep valleys and twisting ravines, all laced with caves and ancient ruins. In short, perfect places of concealment that our enemy might utilise to hide his most valuable supplies. It was here that d'Bois' *chasseur's*—*pardon*, his 'unter's—instincts told him would be the most fruitful place to search.

We had bivouacked overnight in a small olive grove and the early morning light revealed a scene typical of an 'orse soldier's camp: men rising, tending to their beasts and being about their morning business. Drinking a cup of *café noir* and smoking a thoughtful cheroot, d'Bois felt a little thrill of pride as he watched, for there is nothing like an independent *commande*, no matter how *petite*, to be the making of a fellow.

Puffing away, d'Bois reflected that any officer would thrill with *fierté*—*pardon*, with pride—to be in charge of such a fine looking, competent and downright 'andsome body of men. Swords gleamed as they were sharpened on the whetstone, shakos were donned, dolman jackets of deep blue contrasted richly with *pantalons* of noble pink—the colours, facings and accoutrements of the XIIIth's most striking and vivid uniform. The gentle murmur of conversation, the rustle of 'arness and the morning chorus of birds made d'Bois feel as content as any officer could ever be.

The one fly in d'Bois' ointment was the presence of Sacleaux, the hulking sergeant which *Monsieur le Colonel* had inflicted upon this mission. A gigantic, brooding figure with a scarred visage, and it must be admitted superb moustaches, Sacleaux had been a member of the Cavalry of the Imperial Guard, that elite corps of noble and admirable men who served the Empereur with such bravery and distinction.

Yet Sacleaux had been dismissed from that august regiment under a dark cloud, like Satan 'imself plummeting from the 'eavens to find himself now attached to the mere mortal ranks of the XIIIth. Clearly he had landed 'eavily and it went most 'ard with him.

No one knew the truth behind such a dramatic fall from grace and none dare ask the saturnine Sacleaux, though plenty of wild rumours

abounded in the mess: enraged, he had struck a superior officer, drunk, he had shot one of the Empereur's beloved 'ounds, sober he had goosed the Empress! *Mon Dieu*, what a catalogue of calumny! If even one of these rumours bore a grain of truth he was lucky to be alive, and now he carried out d'Bois' orders with a curtness which bordered on insolence, and the men were unnerved by his prodigious cursing and foul temper; in short, he loomed over the mission like a solitary thundercloud in a deep blue sky.

Yet there was little time for d'Bois to contemplate the problems of Sergeant Sacleaux for more than a few moments, for young Henri Delacroix, an eager young regimental trumpeter who had pestered your 'umble *narrateur* into accompanying 'im on this mission, came sprinting into the camp, nearly ploughing into his commanding officer in his 'aste.

'Monsieur Lieutenant! The enemy, they are upon us!' Delacroix suddenly remembered himself and threw an 'asty salute, but his blue eyes, which still retained much of their childlike innocence, were open wide and his chest heaved, as he attempted to catch 'is breath and convey his information.

'Calm yourself Henri, now, report, like an 'ussar. Details lad, *tout de suite!*'

'*Oui* Monsieur Lieutenant, my apologies, Trumpeter Delacroix reporting, Sir. A band of *Portugais* infantry, hundreds of them, moving across the plain on a parallel course toward us ...' His face shone with excitement and his words tumbled one over the other in his painful earnestness. 'Hundreds Sir, an overwhelming force.'

'*Bonne*, well done lad. Now, point the way, so your Lieutenant may see this enemy battalion which is about to overtake us.'

Moments later and d'Bois was perched up in an 'andy olive tree's higher branches, inspecting this 'overwhelming force' through 'is telescope. While Henri's powers of description were accurate, his mathematical powers proved somewhat more rudimentary. Across the dusty expanse of winter plain, stretched a small column of *Portugais* infantry, marching in two lines perhaps some sixty strong, with the rearguard dragging along two fully laden wagons behind them.

They were led by a British officer on a bay mare and harangued by two loud Redcoat sergeants whose shouted commands marshalled

this motley collection of troops into some form of order. They did not quite resemble a shambles, but their green coats, paired with a ragged assortment of peasant trousers and bare heads, spoke of organization that was perhaps rather less than first-rate. Nevertheless, their muskets appeared gleaming and well cared for, perhaps a consequence of that famous British discipline?

d'Bois spared a quick glance at his own petite force below. We were outnumbered by just under three to one, but he asks you, in all seriousness, were 'ussars—and French 'ussars at that—ever daunted by such odds? Against infantry and indeed, infantry who looked little better than militia? *Incroyable et non!* Point d'Bois at an enemy in open battle and does his 'eart quake? Do his lips quiver and his chin tremble? Does his pulse quicken? Non Monsieur, they do not, not now, not then, not ever! *Certainement pas*—forgive me, certainly not!

In seconds, d'Bois was bounding out of the tree, patting young Henri upon the shoulder with an 'eartfelt 'good work' and ordering Sacleaux to pass the word amongst the men to leave off their work, mount up and prepare for battle!

Ah Monsieur, in all my long and distinguished career, there are few things to match the sight that met d'Bois the morning of 'is first independent command. The ground was 'ard beneath the 'oof, the winter frost riming the early morning grass and Eleanor, my second beloved chestnut mare's breath steamed in the pale sunlight as d'Bois walked her a couple of paces out into the open.

d'Bois looked down the tree line and beheld his small squadron, sabres drawn, held at rest upon their shoulders, the horses pawing the ground and tossing their heads, the men's moustachioed faces stern beneath their shakos, all awaiting 'is word of command.

'Squadron *avant!*' d'Bois' voice rang out deep and clear in the stillness, and we began at the walk, some two dozen and more 'ussars gliding out onto the plain in one long unbroken line. Eleanor strained and pulled at her bit, flaring her nostrils and tossing her mane, eager to close with our foe, but even for one so young, d'Bois 'ad a wise 'ead upon his shoulders. Already 'e knew what a fatal mistake it was to begin the *chargez* prematurely and arrive spent and exhausted before being able to bring the foe *en pointe*.

Non, we must arrive all together, at once, en masse, bringing the weight of our charge to first shock and then break the enemy, or better still, scare him into the rout, so we may pursue 'im and ride down his confused lines as his formation broke. At such thoughts, d'Bois' 'eart was full and glad, for it was a glorious day to be alive, in the service of the empire and about such noble work.

At first our foe did not appear to notice the arrival of such a deadly threat upon 'is flank and we proceeded at the walk, every metre gained without detection an *avantage*.

Discipline and composure are the most important qualities a commander must show at such moments, and d'Bois, to the fore and at the 'eart of the squadron, displayed his resolution and *sang froid* leading his men, by example, *à partir de l'avant*—where he should be—at the front.

'Trumpeter Delacroix, here lad, by my side,' d'Bois called and young Henri trotted forward and as his horse fell into step alongside mine, his visage showed no fear but shone with the joy of forthcoming battle—a true son of *La République!*

We had advanced to within three hundred metres of our foe and with a gentle squeeze of d'Bois' knees and a shout of '*au trot!*', Eleanor's pace quickened and d'Bois' 'eart sang, as his squadron responded as one, matching our speeds *exactement*. The drumming of our 'oooves on that dusty arid plane must finally 'ave alerted our foe, for now, many eyes turned toward us, the first 'int of panic beginning to seize 'im as he realised the seriousness of his predicament. The British officer wheeled his mare and his sergeants ran up and down the column bellowing, urging the troops to turn and face their doom.

Incroyable! He had ordered them to form square! d'Bois grinned grimly beneath 'is moustaches, for these were no infantry *de la ligne*—of the line—able to instantly transform themselves into that porcupine of shot and steel which is the stoutest defence against even the bravest of cavalry attacks. Confusion reigned in their ranks as they laboured to manoeuvre and now d'Bois urged his squadron to the canter.

'Steady men, steady! Dress your line! Together *mes ames*, together, together now, ready? *Au galop!*

Too late our foe 'ad seen his mistake, for he had not sufficient

numbers or discipline to construct his best defence and now he attempted to reform his infantry into two lines, dressing them to deliver the volley which was his last, perhaps 'is only hope. Oh, no doubt it sounds like a simple enough manoeuvre here, sitting here by this fire-side, to simply turn and face, arranging yourself to stand shoulder to shoulder with your comrades. But there, in the heat of battle, out on the exposed plain, when a hostile mass of man and beast is bearing down upon you at speed, it is quite another matter. Sweat slathers the back, the throat dries like a desert, and one's hands become clumsy and feeble as one tries to fix the bayonet or ram home the ball, your only defence against the terror which is about to rain down upon you.

Sixty metres away and now d'Bois was ready to unleash his fury.

'*Charger! Charger!*' d'Bois shouted and Henri's trumpet rang 'igh and clear, a stirring martial melody in the watery morning sunlight. Now the quickening, the rhythm of 'oof and 'eart merging, surging, horse, rider, squadron becoming one: a great many legged leviathan of flesh and steel, which gathered momentum, hurtling itself toward the half-formed line ahead.

The last sixty metres at the triple *galop* are the hardest, the vision narrows, the heart pounds and all one can see is the line of muskets ahead, the faces of the foe whitening as his doom comes upon him. It is at this moment one stares Death in the eye and to one's surprise, does not flinch. Without prompting, a great battle cry, a primal expression of warlike passion erupted from his brave 'ussars, and d'Bois, levelling his sabre, joined them.

'*Vive l'empreur! Vive l'empreur!*'

Wreathes of smoke erupted along the line and the air around us buzzed like angry 'ornets as their balls shot past. But even in that moment of the greatest peril, d'Bois noted it was a ragged, ill-disciplined volley, too early, too high, too unfocussed, and now a great pall of gunpowder smoke 'ung in the air between us, momentarily masking our foe.

We scythed through it, the smell of powder and cordite burning the nostrils and we were upon them like a great winged fury, d'Bois the very tip of its talons!

There was a strange moment of silence, then a great resounding boom as we struck, flesh and bone colliding in an unholy cacophony,

men screaming, horses whinnying, our concentrated weight, the heaviest of impacts shattering their line.

At such moments, the fury of battle descends and as Eleanor reared and kicked, d'Bois' sabre rose and fell in the confusion of the melee, each stroke as deadly as the next, pitiless and precise as the hands of a superior pocket watch, as he struck, ending the life of another foe. It was a bloody 'arvest and perhaps you judge d'Bois to be an 'arsh and merciless executioner, but *c'est la nature de la guerre*. Having survived the peril of the teeth of their fire, now was our time to exact the 'eaviest of tolls.

To their credit, the Portugais fought well. Perhaps only a quarter of their rear line took to their 'heels *immédiatement*, though a quarter again had already perished under the shock of our charge. D'bois' troopers fought like caged animals, doing dreadful execution on that shocked infantry and it was here that he saw Sacleaux indeed live up to his most *terrible* reputation, for he carved and hacked one of the British NCOs to pieces and spitted the other sergeant clean through the chest, *tres fort!* Yet amidst the tumult of falling sabres, of stabbing bayonets and wheeling horses, d'Bois saw and sought out his own opponent.

The British officer was attempting to rally his men, his great roan *cheval* interposing itself before the line of 'eadlong retreat, his shouts urging them to find their manly courage and return to the fight. Already, a few had begun to heed this gallant foe and sheltering in the shadow of his mount, made to reload their muskets and rejoin the battle. D'bois glanced around quickly, assessing the tide of the engagement. His brave 'ussars were clearly upon the point of victory, but if many of the Portugais rallied, they might make a stand, pour fire into the tumult of the melee, and the battle would 'ang in the balance once again.

This must not come to pass! D'Bois seized his reins between his teeth, spurred Eleanor's flanks and with sabre in one 'and and pistol in the other, took the fight to this brave *adversaire*. Oh, but here was a foe worthy of his steel, for instinctively, ascertaining the challenge, he turned and met d'Bois at the charge 'imself and our initial strokes rang like an orchestra of 'igh piccolos and flutes in the maelstrom of the morning.

Now we closed, trading blows as each sought the advantage, horses whirling and dancing. Beneath his stern expression and officer's 'at,

d'Bois studied his opponent. Like d'Bois, he was a young lieutenant, full of boldness and daring, but perhaps lacking the experience and finesse of a more seasoned warrior. Every blow was delivered with his full strength, while d'Bois marshalled his resources, and soon 'is face was as red as 'is uniform, as he puffed with 'is exertions. Another fierce exchange of metal, and as we turned again, d'Bois knew his opponent was close to exhaustion.

'The advantage is mine, Monsieur. Surrender. You 'ave fought well and with honour and I would rather not 'ave to kill so valiant a man.'

'Never sir, not while I have breath in my body.'

Summoning the last of his reserves, he came at *la charge*, his blade flashing wildly, but d'Bois' cool counter knocked it aside and regretfully, he delivered the final cut which downed 'is foe. His fall seemed to suck the fight from his troops, and the few who he 'ad rallied threw down their arms and ran, while the remainder of the line 'eaded for the hills, pursued by the more eager of d'Bois' troopers.

The aftermath was a scene of *dévastation*, men and horses stretched out upon the plain, the dead and dying mingling their blood on that cold earth. After the frisson and passion of the fight, comes the cold 'ard reckoning and the price which is counted out in lives and blood. We had routed these *Portugais* with our devastating charge, destroyed them as a fighting force, and captured their meagre battle honours which now 'ung from the saddlebow of one of d'Bois' troopers. But the toll 'ad been *terrible* and many brave lads were counted amongst the dead or seriously wounded.



Wearily, d'Bois looked around for young Henri to sound the *retour* and recall those men who were still pursuing the *Portugais* stragglers, but he was not to be found immediately, among the fallen, or indeed those who still staggered on their feet.

With trepidation rising in his breast, d'Bois scoured the field and quickly found 'im, a short way away, the only apparent victim of that first, rash, ill-considered volley. A ball 'ad struck him in the chest, plucked him from his steed and his breath now came in laboured gusts,

blood bubbling on 'is lips. Yet as d'Bois knelt beside him, he smiled a pain-wracked smile, although his words came with difficulty.

'Was the... was the charge successful, sir?'

'*Oui*, an action worthy of Lasalle 'imself, the enemy is routed and we 'old the field.'

'I am glad, sir, though... I hope the *chargez* was sounded properly and with... with appropriate vigour?'

'*Oui*, trumpeter Delacroix, it was most... formidably done.'

'Then I am glad to have done my duty, sir,' said 'e and with that his eyes closed with exhaustion, as d'Bois' struggled to suppress the tears in his own.



Ah, it is in those moments, Monsieur, that the true cost of victory is counted. When we ride to war, it to the beat of the drum, to stirring martial tunes, notions of glory and honour clouding our minds, softening our judgement. Yet it is only once one has experienced the horrors of the field, the pitiful tally of dead and dying, it is then and only then that one knows the true value of the toll which must be paid to sustain such delusions. Here it was written large in the body of this poor broken boy, the consequences of men pursuing such madness. An old man knows, though perhaps a brash, young lieutenant did not.

d'Bois carried him back to where the main body of his troopers had gathered, after they had left off harrying the last few remnants of the retreating *Portugais*.

Although Henri's skin was pale as milk and his breathing was 'arsh and laboured, the smallest of hope remained whilst he still clung to life. D'bois cursed sufficient to make a guardsman blush, for we 'ad no surgeon amongst us to probe the wound, remove the ball and perhaps give 'im a fighting chance. He would not survive a ride back to the main body of the *armee*, even if d'Bois could have spared the time or the men to take him. *Merde*, what to do? d'Bois is a man of reason, not religion, but if a way could be found to save the boy, he vowed he would light a shrine's worth of candles to the 'oly mother if she would extend her protection and spare the boy's life.

But although d'Bois' feelings about the boy's wound were *tres fort*—*pardon*, very strong—there were many other matters to attend to as well and a good officer's first duty is always to his men. Our account stood at three troopers killed outright, six wounded to varying degrees and the remainder, including the imposing Sacleaux, left with minor wounds but still fit enough to serve. Of our opponents, a full three quarters, some forty five men including both English sergeants and the gallant officer, lay stretched out on the earth by the ferocity of our assault, while the remainder had fled for the 'ills.

A successful action and a most satisfactory result, if one were placing two columns side by side in an accounting ledger, yet those figures told little of the true cost.

'Sergeant Sacleaux.'

'*Oui...* Monsieur,' the sergeant added the honorific late and grudgingly, regarding me impassively, as he cleaned blood from this sabre. His uniform was spattered with blood, testament that he had been elbow deep in the butcher's work.

'Have Henri and the rest of the wounded loaded into those carts. Gently with the boy now, make him comfortable—he is hurt most sorely. Hitch up the spare horses, so the creatures may draw the wagons.'

'Poor work for a cavalry horse, Monsieur.' He looked regretful at the necessity of utilising these noble beasts to pull a peasant's cart.

'They will serve, as we all must... even you, Sergeant.' For a moment Sacleaux's eyes flashed, bridling at d'Bois' exertion of authority, but a Lieutenant should not concede anything to a new sergeant, whether he had served in the Imperial Guard or the *Empereur's* bedchamber itself.

'Indeed... Monsieur,' Sacleaux continued in a most disdainful tone, '... and may I ask what do you intend to do with the wounded? We cannot transport them back to our lines very easily and we cannot continue our work if we are weighed down with such *baggage*.' d'Bois could now feel his own anger rising and with the eyes of the troopers upon him as they heard the heat in our exchange begin to build, he replied.

'What then Sergeant? We should put them down, with a pistol to the temple like a wounded 'orse? I do not intend to abandon my wounded comrades deep behind enemy lines, for you know the fate that awaits

any captured by guerrillas—a long slow death under torture. We must trust to providence, and like all good ’ussars be ready to seize the opportunity when it presents itself,’ d’Bois said and he meant it, leaning back upon his saddle and fixing the impertinent sergeant with an ’aughty eye. Yet Sacleaux, perhaps realising the futility of his position, gave ground, though his dark eyes retained much of their insolence as he conceded.

‘Very well, Monsieur, it shall be as you say.’

Fortunately, for d’Bois—who had similar concerns beneath his bluster, though he would not express them in such a outright, callous way—fortune like an eager whore, did not take long to show her ’and.

As for the dead? Well, burial in such ’ard unyielding soil, was out of the question, nigh on *impossible*, so d’Bois had the bodies stacked neatly, reverentially, friend and foe alike, for all are equal in death. Then the men fetched wood and faggots from our former bivouac, piled them ’igh to form a natural bier around the dead and, under the watching eyes of the survivors, d’Bois crossed ’imself, said a silent prayer, then held a match to the kindling. Soon the wood was ablaze, ribbons of white smoke, like a benediction, reaching to the ’eavens and a great pall ’ung in the air, a sombre beacon in the midst of our desolation. D’bois bade a silent farewell to his valiant comrades and ’is fallen foes then turned to mount up.

Even as he stepped into his stirrup, he suddenly beheld two riders, trotting down a distant ’illside toward him and then come streaking across the plain. It was most curious—for they were apparently not military types and evidently no threat to our squadron—so d’Bois was content to let them close the distance to us with no further action. Upon closer examination they resolved into the figures of two civilians, an older, grey-haired, bearded fellow and a rather striking blonde-haired young woman. D’bois set Eleanor off with a squeeze of his thighs and trotted out to greet them.

‘Bonjour Monsieur... Mademoiselle, I ’ave the honour to be Lieutenant Gaston d’Bois of the His Imperial Majesty’s XIIIth ’ussars. If I may be so bold, ’ow may I assist you?’

They immediately showed their refinement and good taste by answering in perfect *Français*, though their accents told that they were not of d’Bois’ native land.

'I am *Docteur* Malfeas... this is Mademoiselle Brockenhurst. The honour is ours, Lieutenant, I am sure.'

'*Merci, Docteur.* This is a most fortunate chance, for not twenty minutes ago, my dearest most 'eartfelt wish was to encounter a man of your profession.' d'Bois' 'eart quickened for 'ad he not desired this very thing? Fortune indeed seemed to have smiled on us at that moment, although she is often the most fickle of lovers, as you will soon discover.

'Indeed, I see you have created some fresh employment for these tired old hands,' said the *Docteur* regarding the pyre and the wagons of injured. 'By your leave, Lieutenant, I will look to the wounded.'

'I would be most grateful for it, sir,' I replied, 'especially for our young trumpeter.'

'I will look to him first.'

'And the Mademoiselle?' I enquired.

'Will assist the *Docteur*, as I always do,' said Mlle, rather testily, though with the delightful trace of an accent *Anglais*.

Monsieur le Docteur was a distinguished if rather aged old gentlemen, *Portugais* or Spanish if I was to judge and attired all in black. His seamed, weatherworn face bore all the 'allmarks of a life spent carrying the burden of caring for the sick, yet he was a surprisingly sprightly fellow and behind his golden *pince nez*, his dark, almost *noir* eyes, gleamed with a very particular life and energy.

His companion, Mlle Brockenhurst, however, was a most striking contrast to the *Docteur*, for where he was mostly shade, she was all light. A most magnificent figure was constrained beneath a sober grey riding 'abit and she wore a grey soldier's tunic and *zut alors, pantalons!* rather than the female attire of the *vivandières* and *cantiniers* who followed our own forces. Golden curls spilled out from beneath a plain forage cap and she had a most striking face, severe, steely and sombre in its cold beauty. D'bois' 'eart leapt and 'is moustaches bristled in the presence of such a formidable looking *femme*, for was he not 'uman after all—and French to boot? But she spared just a small incline of 'er noble head to his manly attentions and proceeded to dismount skilfully and assist *le Docteur* without a further wasted word.

Content for the moment, d'Bois ordered his men to dismount and take some rations, *pain* sprinkled with oil, garlic and pepper, which is

the 'ussar's defence against sickness and the stomach cramps, for now we had no choice but to wait, while *le Docteur* and 'is 'andsome assistant proceed with their work. D'bois stood off a little distance, smoking another of his cheroots, watching as the pair dispensed their *medicines* quickly and efficiently, dressing the wounds with expert hands and relieving their patients' pain with applications of spirits and morphine, not to say the natural healing properties of Mlle's charms—for there are few 'ussars who do not naturally perk up in the presence of a beautiful woman, be they at death's door or no. D'bois tried to observe with dispassion, for a *chef* should show no fear or favour, yet his concerns for young Henri preyed upon his mind most sorely.

d'Bois was extinguishing his third such smoke when the *Docteur* finally finished his work and approached.

'I have seen to their immediate comfort, Lieutenant, and eased their suffering as much as I am able. But I must recommend they are moved to our field hospital at the *Monasterio de St Cloud*, where I can give them greater care. It is but a short ride, if you are willing?' d'Bois took a moment to consider his proposal, but it was not as if he 'ad much choice—it was the best offer if not the only offer he was likely to receive.

'*Oui*, thank you *Docteur*, but what of the boy, Monsieur? Young Delacroix, will 'e live?'

'I make no guarantees, Lieutenant, but if we are able to get him to the hospital alive, he will have a fighting chance.'

'Bon, then let us be on our way,' said d'Bois, turning, ready to mount up and get underway, but Malfeas had evidently not finished, for he looked to the pyre, which now blazed furiously in the open plain and said. 'A great pity, sir, that you burned the bodies of the dead.'

'A curious thing to say, *Docteur*.'

'Ah, you must forgive the distorted perspective of a lifelong student of medicine, Lieutenant. I have made a careful study of the dead throughout my career. One may learn much from them, a cadaver yields many secrets, tells many tales, that in turn may aid the living. And if not, well... even the ravens must feed, It is the cycle of nature.'

'A most singular perspective indeed, *Docteur*,' d'Bois said, 'is eyes seeking those of the nurse, at this strange turn our conversation 'ad taken. But 'er face remained impassive, yielding nothing. 'But I think

we should concern ourselves with the living, rather than those already beyond our 'elp.'

'Indeed, Lieutenant, indeed. Forgive an old man's ramblings. Come follow me, if you will—the *monasterio* is this way.'

THREE

An Accommodation at the Monasterio de St Cloud

It is an old maxim, that an *armee* cannot travel faster than its slowest *baggage*, and on those ever-steepening mountain roads, and with those jolting carts, we made what can only be described as a most gradual progress. Although the sun shone with a weak wintery glow, we were 'ampered by patches of snow, ice and tumbledown earth, for the mountain road was little more than a track, full of potholes and melt water.

The surrounding country differed little from the reports we 'ad, being comprised of many wooded valleys, lonely defiles and secluded gorges. It was a solitary, sombre place, bereft of life and even the occasional birdsong was thin and reedy, as if their little feathered 'earts were not truly in it. As we climbed ever 'igher, on the exposed portions of the road the wind scythed through even the stoutest riding cloak, like a blast from a frozen hell. Several times we were forced to dismount and put shoulder to the wheel of the carts, puffing as we levered them over the rough ground and tight 'airpins of the track. The wounded groaned and cursed as they were jarred and jolted by our exertions.

'igher still and the cold of altitude began to gnaw at the flesh, the chill snapping at one's bones, despite drawing cloak and pelisse even tighter. The 'orses were strangely nervous and tentative, wickering and whinnying to each other, as if the ground underfoot were uncertain and liable to give way at any moment. Still, like the 'ussars we were, we struggled manfully to overcome all the obstacles laid before us and

after what seemed like hours of painful progress, we rounded a bend and first sighted the walls of the *Monasterio de St Cloud*.

From the beginning, it was not a place to inspire confidence in a fellow, for while d'Bois was no believer in omens and portents, evidently he was starting to develop a nose for trouble of the *surnaturel*—*pardons*, supernatural—kind, especially following 'is recent travails with a certain Major.

The *monasterio*'s walls were broken and tumbledown, denuded by the passage of the years and barely a single one of the original buildings remained untouched by the ravages of time. The central chapter house had crumbled like a decrepit molar, and the cloister stood with three of its walls fallen to the earth. Little remained of the chapel except a bleached outline and the refectory and dormitories were almost levelled, overgrown with moss and weeds as nature had begun to reclaim the works of man.

Only the infirmary stood in some sort of repair, but even this was partially exposed to the elements and crowding close to it were several white 'ospital tents, serving as temporary shelters. The whole rested upon a plateau which was riddled full of 'oles, like one of those fine Italian *fromages*. Further up, beyond its broken walls lay an extensive *cimetière* the final resting place to which we all—even the gayest of 'ussars—must eventually succumb.

These passing impressions d'Bois devoured in an instant, for there would be time to fully explore our temporary 'ome later. For now, he was most anxious to have young Delacroix and the rest of the injured men settled in and seen to, so that they might begin the recovery from their wounds.

d'Bois issued his orders and Sacleaux received them with the blackest of looks but urged the men—though not unkindly—to *dépêchez-vous!* They sprung to it with alacrity, making temporary stretchers from their cloaks and blankets and carrying the afflicted as gently as they could, toward their new accommodations.

Although an officer should have no favourites, d'Bois was in close attendance as young Henri was lifted down with much tenderness—for the men were extremely fond of him too—and transported to the nearest tent. D'bois swished aside its flaps and inside were many beds,

most unoccupied, but in the remainder, a small smattering of soldiers of every kind and nation: British, Spanish, *Portugais*; the noble cavalry, the dogged infantry, the infernal artillery, uniforms of all shades and hues—a *petite* commonwealth, a broken band of comrades and enemies, their conflicts forgotten, united in peace by the severity of their wounds.

Now, d'Bois is no willing frequenter of the hospital ward, having seen more horrors contained therein than he has ever witnessed on the field: piles of arms, legs, the necessary savagery of the surgeon's trade, men crying, screaming, pleading, calling for their *maman*, or for the sweet release of death. D'bois has known men who would rather put a bullet through their own brains than risk going under the knife and he could not blame them in the slightest, *tres fort!*

But 'ere, at least, none of those medical horrors prevailed. Instead serenity and cleanliness seemed to be the order of battle, the patients well cared-for and content, if extremely quiet—perhaps asleep or sedated in the neat rows of camp beds that 'ad been provided for them. Few enough indeed even seemed to notice our arrival, and lay there heedless and uncaring, beyond everyday concerns.

Monsieur le Docteur and his nurse were soon busy, briskly and efficiently organising the wounded according to the severity of their afflictions. *Triage*, I believe the system is termed and it was developed by our own Monsieur Larrey which shows the *Docteur* must have been particularly *au fait* with modern medicinal methods. The walking wounded were settled; several, including young Henri who were in need of urgent attention, were quickly readied for the operating theatre.

Officers and men of action are particularly useless at such moments, unable to contribute much of consequence at all, but d'Bois did what he could, moving down the line, offering words of solace, tobacco or spirits, trying to reassure his brave lads before they faced the horrors ahead. Even though young Henri was feverish and barely conscious, d'Bois squeezed 'is hand hard and told him, '*Courage mon brave*, all will be well', but it was more in hope than expectation. With a very great sadness weighing on his soul, d'Bois watched him being wheeled away to the butcher's slab in the next tent.

d'Bois returned outside and ordered Sacleaux to organise the remainder of the men and to set our camp within a secluded corner

of the *monasterio's* outer walls. Although a veritable Tartar he may have been, the sergeant was also enough of a wise old hand to keep them fully occupied and detached at the greatest distance possible from the 'ospital tents, so they would be spared contemplating the gruesome fate of those about to go under the knife. D'bois watched for a moment as he marshalled them with a steely eye and the foulest of curses, and although the men seemed to settle easy enough, the horses, even the normally placid Eleanor, seemed restive and discontented as they were picqueted and fed their ration of oats.

No matter, for the commander there is no such respite from the normal soldierly routines, he must be close to the suffering of his men, but Lord, the hours do not sit easily upon the soul at such times. D'bois visited and talked with his own walking wounded who had been settled into the main wards and made comfortable under the ministrations of the fragrant Mlle Brockenhurst. Most of the existing inhabitants were now either asleep or comatose, but some shifted slightly at d'Bois' approach, glassy eyed and under the influence of the strong opiates necessary to dull their pain-wracked senses.

These d'Bois could do little for, but for his own men, a laugh, a joke, a filthy anecdote, it was easy to infect them with a small portion of bonhomie and good cheer, for death had but touched them lightly and their recovery was, if not certain, at least very much on the cards.

This lesser duty done, d'Bois took his post on a barrel outside the operating theatre and waited with as must manly fortitude as he could muster. The groans of the injured and dying punctuated the afternoon, as each suffered under the privations of the knife and each piteous cry was a fresh torture to his ears. The sun had turned to late afternoon and a pile of bitter, spent cheroots lay piled at his feet, when at last d'Bois' solemn vigil was broken by a stern but unmistakably female voice which interrupted his reverie.

'Lieutenant.'

'Ah, Mlle Brockenhurst, enchanted to make your acquaintance properly, even if it is at such a...'

'You may spare me the charm offensive, Lieutenant, I have no need for such fripperies.'

'Forgive me Mam'selle, when a Frenchman encounters a lady of

such evident refinement, his default opening is *a la galant...*'

d'Bois turned to face his interlocutor, but the prim statue of earlier had now transformed into a most shocking apparition. Her hair was disordered beneath a nurse's cap, her apron streaked with blood and gore, her eyes bright with fatigue.

'Pardon the imposture. Please Mlle, 'ow is Henri, the young garçon who took a ball to the chest?' d'Bois asked earnestly and that glacial expression melted a small degree at his evident and heartfelt concern.

'He lives, but barely, the ball has been removed and the wound cleaned, but the damage is extensive. Whether he will survive the night is no longer in our hands I'm afraid.'

'I see... and the others Mlle, the rest of my men?'

'Two yet live, four... I regret to say, no longer.'

'*Merde!*' d'Bois spat and then remembered he was in company. 'Ah, forgive me, I spoke without thought.'

'Do not concern yourself, Lieutenant, I can assure you I am quite unshockable. I am well used to the coarse language of military men.'

'Nevertheless...' d'Bois looked her straight in the eye and took her hands. 'My heartfelt thanks, Mam'selle, for your noble and courageous efforts. You possess a sense of duty and courage far greater than those whose work is death not life. You 'ave d'Bois' eternal gratitude for your 'elp.' d'Bois words were strong, sincere and spoken from the 'eart which seemed to surprise her. She took a step back disengaging her hands from his own. Her head moved almost imperceptibly from side to side and then she said in an urgent whisper:

'You should not have come here Lieutenant, you would be wise to leave as soon as you are able.'

'Really? You surprise me Mlle, but it is quite impossible, not while my men linger here in need of rest and recuperation. Yet why on earth should we leave and so suddenly? I...'

'...I cannot articulate fully, here and now. But be wary, Lieutenant, I can say no... ah *Docteur*, I was just informing the Lieutenant of the results of our endeavours.'

Malfeas had suddenly materialised behind me, appearing like a great grey crow out of the mist. He too bore many gory emblems of his recent work.

‘Thank you dear Mlle,’ he replied. ‘Now, would you be kind enough to prepare the dead for burial?’

‘Of course *Docteur*,’ she said mildly enough, but a flash of her eyes held d’Bois’ and told him that the whole of this tale had not yet been told. D’bois could read enough meaning there to perceive that such knowledge should not be shared with *Monsieur le Docteur*, which was equally curious in its own way.

Malfeas lingered for a moment, watching her as she returned inside and then said, ‘I am sorry for your losses Lieutenant, but such is the toll which war exacts. I trust everything was explained satisfactorily to you?’

‘*Oui*, the Mlle was kind enough to give me the main points. It is always a heartfelt sorrow to lose one’s comrades, but I am sure you made every effort, and for that I am most grateful.’

‘Thank you, yes death is inescapable, an ever-present part of our daily existence here, but I am glad we were able to help some of your men. As for the lad, well, he is young and strong and there is life in him, and while there is life, there is always hope.’

‘Indeed *Docteur*, may I see him?’

‘He should rest a little while yet, sleep is the best thing for now. Perhaps later, more likely tomorrow, when he has had a chance to recover.’

‘Of course, of course. But now that your work is done *Docteur*, I have a couple of questions about our situation, if I may be so bold?’

‘Of course Lieutenant, please.’

‘I am curious Monsieur, this ’igh plateau seems a strange situation for a *monasterio*. What on earth drew you to such a place?’

‘The *Monasterio de St Cloud* has been here since medieval times and the monks, a Black Brotherhood of Benedictines, I believe, though long departed, originally chose it for its secluded aspect,’ said the *Docteur*. ‘Its isolated location means they—like we—could treat the sick quietly and with the greatest of delicacy, while imposing the strictest of quarantines against all manner of pestilence: the great plague, leprosy, and the other infectious diseases prevalent in those days. Yet it was also a sanctuary and a retreat for the sick, the despised, a place where they could escape the prejudice and judgement of those less enlightened times.’

‘Despite its isolation, its aspect also provides a truly unique perspective, its elevated position a window to all four points of the compass:

Castille, Aragon, Portugal, Navarre. For centuries this plain has been a crossroads, a focal point, where the men and armies who have conquered and re-conquered this land have met and fought countless battles. It was how we spied your looming encounter this morning.

‘Stragglers, deserters, the wounded, the whole tide of humanity has been swept through this place down the long centuries, and we are honoured indeed to care for those who need healing and respite from the horrors of war.’

‘And what happened to those Black Monks?’

‘History does not record why they deserted this place, though the local peasants whisper of wild superstitions, ghosts, witches, hauntings. Yet peasants always speak of such things.’

‘And you, what brought you here, *Docteur*?’

‘Me? Why I spoke the same oath that Hippocrates swore, to heal my fellow man. I have enjoyed a long and illustrious career, which means I no longer have material needs of any kind and can now devote my time to the study and the improvement of medicine itself. My thirst is for knowledge, scientific advancement. It is perhaps regrettable that the best place to pursue such knowledge is the crucible of battle and its bloody aftermath, but the dead and wounded provide invaluable instruction. It is a morbid pursuit I know, but such is the fate of all such pioneers.’

‘And the delightful Mlle Brockenhurst?’ d’Bois asked. ‘Why does she *choisir* to be here?’

The *Docteur* smiled, ‘That you will have to ask her. She arrived some few months ago and volunteered her services as an experienced nurse. I do not question her reasons for remaining so—they are her own affair entirely and remain locked within her own breast. She is a highly competent nurse, popular with the wounded. You can see their faces light up when she attends to them. Perhaps that is reason enough?’

‘As you say *Docteur*, as you say.’

‘Now you must forgive me, I must see to my other charges. A *Docteur*’s duties—like a Lieutenant’s I’m sure—are never done.’

‘Of course *Docteur*, of course,’ and with that, the old gentleman was off about his business. D’bois took another of his dark, bitter cigarillos and lit it, watching his retreat toward the main hospital tents.

d’Bois was grateful that his men’s ordeal was over and his own for

that matter—and we both now had the chance to rest from the rigours of the day. But Mlle's strange words also gave him pause for thought. Why had she issued such a dire warning when all was apparently so calm and peaceful here? This would bear closer investigation, no doubt. D'bois pulled his cloak a little closer around him, and it was not perhaps entirely prompted by the encroaching chill, as the sun started to sink in the lowlands off to the west.

FOUR

The Long Watch of the Night

D'bois' concerns over the Mademoiselle's ominous warning were soon forgotten though, swept away in the round of command, care and duty which is—as d'Bois was rapidly discovering—a cavalry officer's eternal lot. Men and horses must be inspected, fodder and forage seen to and all the hundred and one minor details of camp duty to be established: a watch had to be set, the day's objectives reviewed and tomorrow's goals considered. Sacleaux, to his credit had settled the men in well and his moustaches (which seemed an infallible indicator of his mood and general demeanour) were at the ease as he delivered a report which only skirted the fringes of surliness (a marked improvement upon his previous attitude).

The men were still buoyed by their hard-fought victory and the elation of the charge, but now required the rest and recuperation which always follows such an action—whether they knew it or not. However, once the evening camp fires were lit against the cold, Sacleaux had anticipated d'Bois' wishes and taken the liberty of distributing an additional ration of wine and tobacco, assuring his commanding officer, that following a moderate carouse tonight, the men would be well-rested and ready to resume their duties tomorrow, or he would 'whip them out of bed, for you.' d'Bois assured Sacleaux that would not be necessary but thanked him for his efforts and dismissed him with a polite *bon nuit*.

So, after the passage of a couple of hours, darkness beginning to draw its cloak around us and d'Bois returned to perform his most

painful duty; visiting the men who had gone under the surgeon's knife, including of course, young Henri, who he was most anxious to see, despite the *Docteur's* orders, for it could no 'arm to look in on him, surely? Outside the tent which had been reserved for their use, d'Bois found four heavy canvas bags which had been neatly stacked and it did not take much of d'Bois' fabled intuition to realise that contained inside were four of his comrades who had not survived the *Docteur's* ministrations. D'bois whispered his 'abitual prayer for the fallen, which even at that tender age he knew only too well, crossed himself again and then moved aside the tent flap to go inside.

Trooper Marmont, a fine, reckless lion of a fellow who 'ad taken a bayonet to the guts was lying senseless upon a field stretcher, 'eavily sedated. However, Trooper Dupont, who had taken a glancing ball from one of the Redcoat sergeants, was, despite his grievous arm wound, in much better spirits and greeted his commander with a weak *salut* but a stouter grin. We shared a few minutes' idle talk and he seemed much the better for it, but always d'Bois' thoughts strayed to young Henri. Dupont, perhaps sensing his commander's inner desire, eventually said, '*Merci beaucoup* for your kind words and most pleasant company, Sir, but, please, enough now, go and see the boy.'

A nod of gratitude and without undue 'aste d'Bois moved into the smaller, curtained-off area which had been reserved for our young trumpeter. Yet upon laying eyes upon the boy, his breath caught in his throat, for the poor child made a most pitiful sight, lying there as ashen as the bandages which covered his chest.

Pain or medication had quite overwhelmed him, his eyes were closed and his breathing fitful and laboured, coming in uneven gasps as he seemed to fight for air. D'bois crept to his side and placed a hand upon his forehead, which seemed to burn with a most pronounced fever. Now, an 'ussar is no *Docteur*, no apothecary or dispenser of medicines, but what he does possess—which is a positive boon to the sick and wounded—is an inexhaustible fund of stories of adventure, stirring martial tales that have been known to have a strong palliative effect upon many a patient.

Young Henri's eyes may have been closed, but his unconscious mind would most certainly be open and able to appreciate such tales, even if

he could not respond. Armed with his repertoire of yarns, d'Bois was determined to 'elp his young trooper through the long watches of the night, for such a fund of stories could not help but have a healing and enervating effect upon such a young, impressionable mind. Now d'Bois may roar and bellow upon the field, but his speaking voice is of a most honeyed and gentle nature (it has been remarked upon, by many a discerning Mlle) and soon, with d'Bois' soothing words pouring into his ears, Henri began to calm down, his breathing came easier, and he less restive. D'bois took the poor boy's hand in his own and so we passed a few hours of the evening, until at last it was time to depart and let the boy 'ave his deeper rest.

d'Bois looked back and found his eyes most affected as he left the lad, a small tear welling (we are a sentimental race, we French) and his moustaches drooping in sympathy at the courage and fortitude of this brave young 'ussar as he fought against the embrace of the Grim Reaper. D'bois walked and walked, his thoughts clouded, 'is mind numb, until eventually 'e found himself again and proceeded to take his place in camp, lying a little apart from his men in his temporary bivouac. He let their talk, the clink of the bottles and the low 'um of their boasting drift over him, smoking a thoughtful cheroot and contemplating the magnificence of the sky above and 'is destiny upon the broad earth below.

Tomorrow would indeed be another day and d'Bois had to weigh carefully 'ow he should proceed. Clearly he 'ad a mission to fulfil, but he could not abandon his wounded even if they were now in relatively safe hands. A compromise then? Perhaps we could base ourselves 'ere for a few days and ride out to scout and reconnoitre the countryside, while we waited to see 'ow our wounded fared. *Bonne*, d'Bois' cunning and leadership had found a way to satisfy both goals and mulling on this and the other *mille et un* decisions that must be made for the morrow, he wrapped his cloak closer around him and began to tackle the wineskin that he had thoughtfully secreted by his bedding roll.



After a while d'Bois must have fallen into a doze and then into the deeper nightly oblivion which all men crave. Now, normally d'Bois

sleeps like a dead man; earthquakes, 'urricanes, artillery shells, could all fall on top of 'im (and sometimes 'ad) and it would barely disturb his slumbers. But this night was peculiar, his mind troubled, ill at ease, 'is normally dreamless sleep haunted by visions of the wounded, the dying and the myriad horrors of the 'ospital. An ill wind seemed to stir and blow though his brain and 'is thoughts were chaotic and disordered, full of a vague looming darkness which seemed to rise up from the very earth to claw at him.

d'Bois woke with a start to find 'imself sitting bolt during the long watch of the bleak early hours of the morning. Here the night is at its darkest, man's spirit at its meekest and over'ead the moon shone down from a cloud-lit sky, its light bearing a *force sinistre* which weighed upon the very soul. A shiver, perhaps the afterthought of some wild premonition, transmitted itself down d'Bois' spine, but he tried to dismiss it as nonsense and return to his rest. Yet sleep would not come and five minutes later, after much tossing and turning, he found 'imself as wide awake as if dawn were already peeping over the horizon.

At such times it is wise to bow to the inevitable and so d'Bois rose and took a turn around the camp, inspecting the sentries, who fortunately for them 'appened to be mostly awake. This small duty done, he returned to his bed. 'owever, when once again, after ten minutes of restless wakefulness, the arms of Morpheus failed to embrace him, he thought perhaps he would look in upon young Henri again to calm his disordered mind.

Walking through the darkness away from the security of the camp, toward the tumbledown bulk of the *monasterio*, d'Bois was struck by a sudden feeling, an instinct perhaps, which made the 'airs on the back of his neck stand on end. Maybe his recent adventures with the redoubtable Major Seraph were preying again upon his mind, but he began to imagine ghostly ruins, and the strange and demonic creatures which haunted them. Foolish thoughts, for those sea demons, dependent as they were upon the bosom of the ocean for their life, would never venture this far inland. Pfah, he chided himself, d'Bois you are becoming as superstitious as an old woman!

Yet perhaps this was a portent of what was to come, for, as he lengthened his stride and puffed out his chest, a blood curdling shriek pierced

the air bringing him back to his senses. Running toward the faint glow of the 'ospital tent from whence it came, d'Bois' spurs clanked on the uneven ground and his sabre rasped from its scabbard as he burst through the door ready to confront whatever was causing this commotion!

Inside Trooper Marmont had shaken off his drugged torpor and was thrashing about upon his bed. He had broken through one of the restraints which 'eld him down and was clutching at his belly, where he had, in 'is delirium, torn through the blood-soaked bandages which covered his stomach. Raving and encrusted with gore from his freshly re-opened wounds, he presented a most distressing sight, but it was the sheer horror in his eyes, which were wide with fear and terror which was the most disturbing thing.

'Eyes! Eyes in the night! Its eyes! Clawing hands from hell, coming to take us all! Fangs and claws! Coming to take us all!'

Dupont was valiantly trying to restrain his comrade, but his injured arm hindered his efforts and Marmont, even in his torment, was a beast of man, thrashing around like a wounded animal in a snare. D'bois launched himself at the struggling figures, but Marmont seemed to perceive this a fresh attack and redoubled his efforts to break free of his confinement. We careened crazily around the tent, Marmont spraying blood and gore, and in his madness failing to heed his comrades' urgings to calm down. It was only after a most protracted struggle and with the most supreme effort that we managed to wrestle him back to his bed for a few moments and 'old him there. His eyes rolled up into their sockets like two *blanc* billiard balls and foam frothed from his mouth as he shrieked.

'Claws! Claws in the darkness, come to feast on us sinners! Don't let them take you! Don't let them take you!'

His ravings lent him superhuman strength and despite both of us putting our full weight upon his shoulders and pinning him down, he struggled and wriggled like an eel. His madness gave him the strength of an ox and at any moment he might throw us off like chaff scattered to the winds, but fortunately the commotion had summoned help, and *Docteur* Malfeas and Mlle Brockenhurst came rushing to our aid.

'Hold him down, Lieutenant, hold him down,' urged the *Docteur*, while he rummaged in his bag. But Mlle Brockenhurst, displaying

immense personal *courage*, assessed this situation *immédiatement* and dashed to the end of the bed and sat down 'eavily upon Marmont's thrashing ankles. This helped stabilise him and allowed us to exert a measure of control, now restraining his upper body with much greater ease. For long moments we three still struggled and then the *Docteur* was beside me, bearing a vial of colourless liquid and urging, 'Hold his mouth open Lieutenant, while I sedate him.'

This was not a prospect d'Bois beheld with any glee, for in his frenzy, Marmont's gnashing teeth could well 'ave bitten off a finger, if not more. Thankfully at that moment, more troopers arrived, summoned by the 'ubbut and headed by the formidable Sacleaux. The Sergeant, seeing our predicament and hearing the *Docteur's* instructions added more men to the press restraining Marmont, then produced a sheathed 'unting knife which he adeptly levered between Marmont's jaws. The unfortunate trooper bit hard and deep into the leather, and Sacleaux's shovel-like hands exerted pressure opening up a gap, so that the *Docteur* could administer his medicine.

For long moments Marmont continued to rave, his eyes bulging, but as the drug took effect, he slowly began to calm down and relax, his struggles subsiding as the strength left his limbs, though the fear did not desert his eyes. As Sacleaux gently removed the scabbard which Marmont had almost bitten through to the steel, the distressed patient continued to mutter and ramble about the 'fangs in the dark, claws dragging us all down to hell' and all manner of fanciful oaths which d'Bois will not repeat here, until eventually the drug took a hold and he closed his eyes, insensible.

Zut alors! A most disturbing incident and it was with great relief that we could now relax our hold on the supine body. D'bois mouthed a 'well done Sergeant,' to Sacleaux, and he, reading his Lieutenant's expression, hurried the rest of the men out, lest Marmont's madness unsettle them, for 'orse soldiers are a superstitious bunch, as easily spooked as a mare in season.

As they filed out hastened by a few coarse oaths from Sacleaux, *Monsieur le Docteur* began to attend to Marmont's stomach wounds, which had been opened up by his exertions, the flesh torn and ragged where the bandages had come away. In the meantime, Mlle Brocken-

hurst, sprang from her temporary seat with surprising dexterity and d'Bois was quick to offer his thanks.

'Thank you for your assistance, Mlle, I fear we would not have been able to restrain him without it.'

'Your thanks are appreciated, but unnecessary Lieutenant, I was simply doing my work.'

'Are you quite well after such an ordeal?'

'Quite well, Lieutenant. Thank you for your concern, but I am no refined rarefied flower, unused to such episodes. I have endured far worse in the course of my duties. Believe me, I am no shrinking violet,' she said tartly, in that supercilious way that the English have.

Chastened at this unexpected rebuff to what he considered a perfectly polite inquiry, d'Bois turned to question Dupont, hoping to gain some insight into the madness which had seized his fellow patient.

'What on earth happened, trooper? What can have caused him to behave so?'

'Nothing I can account for, Monsieur. I awoke suddenly he was already covered in blood, clawing at his wound, having broken one of his bonds. He was seized with a horror that seemed *incroyable*, and was quite deluded. I tried my best to calm him, but he would not listen to reason and he is a brute of a man. With but one hand, I had little hope of restraining him.

'It was as if he had gone simply mad with fear, but what can have caused it? I know not, Monsieur. A nightmare? *Non*. It was as if he had peered into the very jaws of hell itself and what he seen there had driven him quite beyond reason.'

'The drug can have a strange, disturbing effect upon some men's minds,' said Malfeas, as he continued to sew the torn flesh on Marmont's stomach, which looked like it had been clawed deeply by his own fingers. 'That, combined with the pain of his wounds and the enervating sensibilities of combat, can unleash the primordial beast within a man's breast. It causes a complete unbalancing of the mind, so that in his delusion he turns his fury and anger upon himself. It is rare enough, but I have seen cases like this before.'

'Indeed, we have, *Docteur*,' said Mlle archly, staring at him intently. 'Perhaps a little too frequently of late.'

‘Perhaps, but it is the nature of experimental medicine Mlle, any viable alternative to morphine comes with an element of risk,’ said Malfeas mildly. ‘But fortunately, in this case, I believe your man will survive, Lieutenant. I will close him up now and then he will need rest and quiet until I can attend to him again in the morning.’

‘Once again I am in your debt, *Docteur.*’ d’Bois said, but as he made to leave, Mlle’s eyes flashed, holding his own, trying to convey a meaning that went beyond words.

FIVE

The Peasant and the Priest

Reveille came for d'Bois not from the familiar clarion call of the trumpet, but a sudden violent shaking of the shoulders and a hiss of urgent insistence. D'bois' eyes seemed to have barely closed for an instant after last night's disturbance, but now they sprung open like traps, and his hand went for his 'ilt. At first all he saw was the rays of a new day framing the shadowy outline of a vast 'ead, which loomed over him like a particularly malevolent giant. D'bois' immediate fear was that this creature had come to crush the life from him in his sleep, but as proper wakefulness came, the features resolved into the now stolid face of Sacleaux whose iron grip still weighed heavily upon his shoulder.

'Pardon, Monsieur, I did not mean to startle you. Here, take this—it will help.' Dazed and discombobulated—as you English say—by this rude transition to wakefulness, d'Bois was powerless to resist, as Sacleaux pressed a steaming cup into his hand. To his immediate delight, he found it to be a brimming vat of *café noir*, stiffened with a liberal application of some strong spirit, brandy, if he was not mistaken.

Whatever it was, it was most gratefully received, and d'Bois mumbled his thanks and took a sustained draft of the scalding potion, which immediately 'ad the desired effect. His head threw off its sluggishness, his senses came alive, and when he lowered the rim, the cup half-drained but his spirits much-awakened, Sacleaux still hovering in close proximity. This was a rather unusual state of affairs, for the Sergeant had been most distant, even hostile up until this point but now he seemed diffident, almost shy as he waited there.

‘Again, pardon for the imposition Monsieur, but I wished to have a word in private, while the men are still occupied.’

‘Of course, Sergeant, please, speak your mind.’

‘I only wished to impart a small concern, sir. The men were much affected by the business last night. Soldiers are superstitious old women at the best of times, but ’ussars? Doubly so. They have been unnerved by hearing one of their finest raving in such an unbecoming fashion, especially with his talk of devils and hell, even if it was just a drug-induced delirium. They are unsettled easily and grow restive, muttering around their campfires. I, of course, understand it to be the height of folly, but I thought you should know of this development, Monsieur.’

‘You did well to inform me Sergeant, yet I know the remedy and it is the one our Empereur himself recommends... It shall be ’ard work and discipline.’ At this Sacleaux’s craggy face split into what might be construed as a grin, a most singular occurrence, and one—which d’Bois imagined—not many had witnessed before.

‘Going about an ’ussar’s usual business will do much to settle their minds, Sergeant, so we will continue our mission and reconnoitre these mountains in search of forage and intelligence. Ready them for a patrol; we will leave in an hour. That should concentrate their minds upon more immediate matters.’

‘*Bonne*, Sir, then we are of one mind. I shall see to it *immédiatement*,’ he said with evident relish, for there is little a French cavalry sergeant likes better than an excuse to give his men the ’urry up. D’bois returned to his cup and took another long draught of the reviving mixture, reflecting that perhaps relations between officer and sergeant were also showing signs of a thaw.

For the next five minutes d’Bois watched with sly admiration, as he affected to sip thoughtfully at the fortified *café* as Sacleaux deployed that mix of blasphemy, mockery and savage humour (at which French NCOs excel), to whip his men into action. The troopers hurried to it, more for fear of his savage tongue, than the many and varied punishments which he promised to rained down upon them should they falter. Clearly, whichever heinous crime it was that Sacleaux had committed to see himself fall from grace, it was not dereliction of his sergeantly duties, for the man had talent, of that there was little doubt.

d'Bois himself hastily consumed a little *fromage*, some dry olives and blunted his teeth on some stale *pain* to fortify himself for the day ahead, before draining his cup to its very grounds. That done, Eleanor whickered her greetings and set about the *pomme* he had saved for her with much delight, while he carefully fitted her tack and saddle. It was d'Bois' 'abit to always prepare his own *chaval* before a day's soldiering, one he had never grown out of. A man, an 'ussar, should always prepare his own gear, for if 'e does not, 'ow can he fully hope to rely upon it?

So, well within the allotted hour, the troopers were lined up and ready to be reviewed. Sacleaux had subjected them to a profound and profane inspection and pronounced them, 'acceptable enough for 'ussars, Monsieur' which meant most likely they could have been presented to the *Empereur* himself without a stain upon d'Bois' reputation.

Shadows slowly stretched themselves across the monasterio's ruined walls as the sun peeped over the mountain's summit and bathed the morning in a pale glow. With the smell of 'orse in his nostrils and a small swell of pride in his 'eart, d'Bois gave the order *advancer* and we rode out at a slow walk down the mountain road. As we passed the tents, his glance strayed to where young Henri and his other poor wounded troopers lay, and he could not help but feel a pang of concern. Standing there, observing us was Mlle Brockenhurst, looking stern and coldly beautiful in the early light. Yet she watched with detachment and said not a word as the noble 'ussars passed by and not even a fraction of that fair face moved to acknowledge d'Bois' gallant salute.

Yet an officer must put such worries and rebuffs behind 'im, for, out in the field, it is his troopers and their preservation which should concern 'im most. So, with that rarefied mountain air gently tousling his cadettes, d'Bois' mind turned once again to his original mission, intelligence and forage, the twin teats upon which every army is nourished.

But in truth, despite d'Bois' earlier optimism, the hunting was poor in that strange and desolate country. The parched and arid expanse, baked deep by the remorseless sun and now cold and frozen in its winter mien, seemed as dry and lifeless as a desert, and it was poor horse country, for cavalry, like the breeze, desires wide-open expanses and limitless plains to best flourish. Here, the paths twisted and turned down dusty ravines

and winding gorges, full of scrubby trees and bleached foliage, so that for much of the time we were reduced to riding single file as we scoured the barren wastes. To add further to d'Bois' *préoccupations*, death could be hiding behind any one of the thousand rocks and boulders which littered the landscape, readying an ambush which would not be easily evaded in those narrow confines.

So we spent a not entirely fruitless morning (though it came close) riding through those steep winding paths, acquainting ourselves with the lay of the land and being watched by a solitary eagle, which soared 'igh overhead. The only curiosity of note was that the further away we drew from the *monasterio*, the more docile and well behaved the 'orses became, which was at least some small relief.

The hour of noon, when all sane creatures (save Englishmen) seek escape from the dominion of the sun—even such a pale and pallid wintry one as this—had come and gone and the men siesta-ed under a grove of wild olive trees, dozing away the middle of the day, while d'Bois imbibed his *tabac* and planned the next phase of this *petite* campaign.

We 'ad moved according to the 'ussars' long-established precedent, spiralling out in a rough course away from the *monasterio* to cover the most ground, while d'Bois began to build up a mental picture of this remorseless little corner of 'ell. It was a most perfectly constructed country for remaining concealed, and stark indeed were our odds of uncovering anything significant by chance, for, d'Bois calculated, one could 'ide a small *armee* in here and no one would be any the wiser.

Non, our best chance was to rely upon that oldest of resources, human intelligence and just as d'Bois had begun to wrack his brain on how we might find such gold in this uninhabited wasteland, fortune delivered it straight into his very 'ands.

There, rounding the corner some little distance from where we were encamped, came an old, bent-backed peasant, leading a recalcitrant flea-bitten *burro*—or donkey—heavily laden with all manner of worthless produce, the head of a train of many more of the stubborn creatures. The lead beast gave a loud braying call, but the old fellow was so busy cursing and cajoling his animal, that at first he failed to notice the body of armed soldiers who were taking their ease not ten paces off the track beside him. Indeed, it was not until a chorus of guffaws greeted his

increasingly feeble efforts to shift the donkey, which 'ad by now dug its heels in, that he noticed us at all. His bandy legs scrabbled in the dust as he attempted to turn the reluctant beast around again and escape back the way he had come, but a quick nod to Sacleaux, and in moments, the peasant had been hoisted up by two brawny 'ussars, and to further catcalls from the wayside chorus, his legs wagging in thin air, he was unceremoniously presenting his tired old face to d'Bois' scrutiny.

'You may put 'im down troopers,' d'Bois said, though not harshly for it is wise not to intimidate the simple minded—at least not at first.

'Pardon *Señor*, what can an old man have done to offend you?' he enquired, in remarkably serviceable French.

'Why nothing father, nothing at all. Do not fear, I only wish to speak with you, and then you may go upon your way. Perhaps with a small reward, if I like what I hear.'

'Reward is it? Hm, it will be hard-earned no doubt, it always is with you soldiers. Very well, very well then, what can you want of a poor unfortunate old man, *Señor*?'

'Just some information. We seek some local knowledge of this countryside, these hills. We have heard tales of armed men, soldiers, Englishmen and *Portugais* passing this way. Have you encountered anyone like that?' The old man's eyes glittered and he rubbed his chin meaningfully.

'Perhaps I have, I travel a lot, see all manner of things, and no-one pays much attention to old Pedro. My eyesight seems weak, yet it, like my memory, might improve with the shine of some suitable coin.'

'Indeed?' d'Bois said eyeing the old rogue. 'Then perhaps this will loosen it?' d'Bois brandished his small store of currency which he had been issued for use on such occasions, for nothing loosens the mind or the tongue like the glitter of a freshly-minted coin. The old peasant's eyes lit up with a greedy gleam, and d'Bois deposited a small portion of his wealth into those grasping palms, which immediately shut like a vice. The money disappeared inside the travel-worn tunic so fast it might have been magicked away.

'Ah, yes, it's coming back to me now, *Señor*. I did see soldiers, two, maybe three days ago? Marching out east, led by three of those *Inglés* lobsters.' He turned and spat.

'I see,' said d'Bois, knowing that that particular force would be

unlikely to trouble anyone again. Yet at least it proved that the old man's words had some veracity.

'But where did they come from? d'Bois enquired. 'Somewhere nearby I would suspect?'

'Oh yes,' he said hawking vigorously and waving an arm vaguely in the air. 'These hills are riddled with caves and camps, though of course none will venture near the *monasterio*. Hide an army in here you could, easy. Bandits, desperadoes, guerrillas, anyone who has a reason to stay out of sight, finds themselves lurking in here somewhere. Those foul *Inglés* has been using them to strike at your lot, ever since you invad... came to this land.'

'Could you show us any of these camps?'

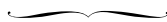
'Well, I don't rightly know, downright dangerous that could be, they move around see, never quite sure where they're gonna be, never in the same place two nights. Besides, Esther here is getting on, needs her feed and her rest and Pedro's memory is not what it was.'

'Hm, I see, well I'm sure we could provide additional compensation.' A greedy claw shot out immediately ready to pocket more of d'Bois' coin.

'Owever, be aware, that if that fails to nudge your memory sufficiently, or you entertain notions of playing us false, then the Sergeant here has a very particular and painful method of recourse, and I do not think you would care to experience it.'

At this, Sacleaux grinned and began to examine the point of a wickedly curved, razor-sharp Ottoman knife which had suddenly materialised in his hand. Old Pedro looked worried, and given the intensity of Sacleaux's evil leer, he had every right to be.

'As you say *Señor*, as you say,' said the decrepit old villain. 'I believe there may be such a one close by, certainly within a short ride. Perhaps we might begin by seeing if any of the abominable *Inglés* yet linger there?' While he struggled to wheel the loudly braying *burro*, d'Bois gave a nod to the men, who hurried to mount up.



Our 'short ride' turned out to be at least two hour's at the walk, behind the peasant and his slow moving donkey train, and the sun had ascended

to a pale mid-afternoon splendour as we climbed 'igher into the interior. Yet this wily old peasant knew all the back ways, shortcuts, and hidden goat tracks like a smuggler, which d'Bois half-suspected he might have been in some past, sorry life, the old rogue. Still, d'Bois considered the time well-spent as we acquainted ourselves with the less well-travelled parts of the hills, and built up an invaluable picture of the local area—the lay of the land as you *Anglais* term it. Pedro indeed proved a fount of knowledge, pointing out landmarks and signs by which we might orient ourselves for future excursions.

Yet, finally, after much beating around the proverbial as well as the actual bush, we found ourselves below the base of a rising wooded gorge, overgrown with trees and choked with vegetation, the path narrowing to a single track, which was far too steep to ascend on 'orseback.

Pedro presumptuously signalled a halt and said, 'There, *Señor* I have guided you faithfully as you asked. This is where the *Portugués reghūlars* and their *Inglés* allies were encamped. I do not know if any remain, but at the top there is a series of caves where one might find shelter or store supplies and other valuables.'

'And an approach where one could hold off an army with a single company,' muttered Sacleaux. 'A fine place for an ambush.'

'*Oui*, Sergeant,' d'Bois replied, 'your warning is both timely and heeded, but our duty remains clear. Have the men dismount, but keep the majority back with their carbines at the ready. Let us escort this wretch at sword point while we assay the truth of his tale. Assign two of the swiftest men to act as *chasseurs* and send them to scout ahead, taking every precaution, mind.'

'I will see it done, Monsieur,' said the Sergeant.

Which is 'ow Sacleaux and d'Bois found themselves some short while later, creeping up the narrow path some ten paces behind Troopers Gauthier and Fontaine, with the reluctant Pedro a pace yet in front of us again. *Monsieur le Paysan* had grumbled and protested, but Sacleaux's Ottoman knife had spoken most eloquently, and now we found ourselves in the role of dragoons—that strange mix of cavalry and infantry which are truly neither one thing nor the other—on foot, and inching up a steep slope, which is never the most comfortable position for one who was born to the saddle. Still, needs must, and our brave *chasseurs* were

some three-quarters of the way to the summit, and Gauthier turning to signal something, when there was an audible click from above. D'bois, recognising the telltale sound of a misfired pistol 'ammer had just time to shout 'down, down!' and throw himself to the floor before a volley of musketry erupted around us, screeching through the trees and scrub, like a swarm of screaming bats.

When d'Bois raised his head again, he saw the most disconcerting sight: Sacleaux clutching at his most precious parts, where he had evidently taken a low blow from the hastily departing peasant, whose back was now disappearing at a rate of knots into the dense undergrowth, curse him! A thick pall of smoke 'ung around the top of the path where many muskets had been discharged, and in an instant d'Bois saw that it also wreathed some positions in the 'eights surrounding us. We had been led, like pigs to the slaughter, into a deadly trap—and now it was sprung!

Merde! It is at such times that it is a curse to be a commanding officer, but hazards and ambuscades are our stock-in-trade and it is not so much how one is snared but how one reacts to it that is most critique—apologies, critical. A cool 'ead at such times is crucial, and knowing it would take our ambushers time to reload, d'Bois took a moment to coolly assess the situation. Gauthier was bleeding from a minor wound in his shoulder, but thankfully, none of the other men (save the unfortunate Sacleaux) had been hurt to any serious degree and the dense trees and scrub, combined with the fog of our ambushers' muskets, provided plentiful thick cover in which to conceal ourselves.

'Into cover *mes ames*, 'ide yourselves!' commanded d'Bois in a voice that rang across the impromptu battlefield. Glancing back, he was proud to see his troopers had needed little direction; carbines primed, they were already scanning the ridge above him for targets to make their reply.

'ow are you Sergeant?'

'They are both still there, so I will live, Monsieur, long enough to repay that dog with an answering blow, at any rate, I promise.'

d'Bois waited and now he could hear the sound of frantic reloading from above. Fontaine, our uninjured vanguard, suddenly put his carbine to shoulder, bobbed up and loosed off a snap shot which disappeared ineffectually into the sky. He just managed to duck back behind cover, before a hail of fire spat in reply.

‘Do not waste your ammunition, *mes ames*, pick your targets and make sure of your shot,’ d’Bois ordered as he quickly tried to assess the tactical situation.

Our ’ussar’s carbines lacked the range, accuracy and power for the sustained volley which might free us, so while the main body of troopers were fine, we in the vanguard were both outgunned and pinned down. Yet the ambush was not perfect, for in this dense undergrowth, they could not be sure of their targets. We could not be shot down like dogs, and that gave a fellow ’ope, as you English say. Yet despite that small *avantage*, we could not dash for our ’orses and make our escape either, for we would be gunned down if we tried to cross the open clearing to where they had been ’itched. An impasse then, and the gears in d’Bois’ brain ground quickly, struggling to form a plan while looking for some small advantage that might give us a way out.

‘Hah, *Francés* scum. You cannot hide in those trees forever,’ came a familiar voice, though one that had transformed from the feeble, confused tones of an elderly peasant, into the triumphant boasting of a guerrilla lord. ‘I promise you, you will die here and the vultures will feast on your corpses!’ gloated the loathsome Pedro, though now his words drifted down from the top of the gorge where he had joined his ambushers. D’bois could just see the old rogue’s face as he peered over the crest to hurl his insults at us. How the devil had the deceiver made ’is way up there, without passing Gauthier or Fontaine?

Damn his lying hide, it was a most perplexing mystery, but in its solving, could we perhaps find our salvation? d’Bois looked to Sacleaux who was back on his feet and despite his reddened face and empurpled features, was now regaining his poise after being most foully and underhandedly wounded in the line of duty. Yet his next action was most perplexing, for he produced a ball of thread which he had previously concealed in his pocket, accompanying it with a most gleeful and thoroughly malevolent leer, which raised his moustaches above the ’orizontal.

For a moment d’Bois did not *compris*, but when he saw a thread emanating from the ball and disappearing off into the undergrowth, understanding began to dawn and ’is respect for his Sergeant grew to new and *formidable* ’eights.

‘Sacleaux, you are a genius. Remind me to recommend you for a

decoration when this campaign is over. Now 'and-pick four men and we will teach the creature Pedro to deceive the pride of the French 'ussars!'

For you see Sacleaux, with Reynard-like cunning, 'ad spun his web, secretly fixing a strong thread onto Pedro's person while the old devil had been unawares. Now, like Ariadne's silken cord in the Minotaur's maze, all we need do is follow it and it would lead us to the secret way which that cunning old goat had taken to give us the slip.

Yet to maintain the deception that we were trapped here under fire was also of the essence, and so d'Bois called to the remainder of 'is men and told them to keep up an intermittent fire to wreath our position in smoke, so that our ambushers would not suspect our devious flanking manoeuvre. That accomplished, d'Bois and Sacleaux, with four chosen men who 'ad dashed forward, waited for the guerrillas' next volley, then returned fire, and while the smoke 'ung thick about us, we snuck forward, following Sacleaux's 'golden thread' into the bushes.

Alors, but it was 'ard going for we 'ad to move most slowly, fearful lest we give our position away. The undergrowth was dense and the ground steep, so we 'ad to proceed like church mice, sneaking in for a crumb at Christmas mass. Yet the remaining troopers acquitted themselves admirably, shooting and cursing and adding to the general noise and confusion, and before long we had smuggled ourselves away from the main body and were following the thread like blood'ounds upon the scent, down on our 'ands and knees. The telltale led us to the edge of a sheer cliff face and then *zut alors une catastrophe!* It 'ad snapped and lay upon the ground, severed, like any 'ope we might of 'ad of getting out of this ambush. *Merde!* For a moment d'Bois was lost in despair. Would we 'ave to return and beat an 'asty and possibly costly tactical retreat?

Mais non! That villain had scaled these cliffs somehow and he 'ad done so out of sight. He cannot have scrambled up such a steep cliff face, so logic said there must be some 'idden way nearby. D'bois was about to explain 'is theory when Sacleaux's whispered 'Monsieur' and pointing a finger, provided the answer. There, concealed behind an outcrop on which the thread 'ad evidently parted, was a fissure, a passageway in the rock, leading up into the darkness. No doubt this was the way that villain 'ad come. Now we would 'ave his hide!

Quietly, ever so quietly, we ascended the narrow passageway, many worn marks in the rock forming natural footholds, attesting to its use down the long ages. We moved silent as the grave, for d'Bois was conscious that if that blackguard had stationed a sentry at the top of this stairway, we would quickly be discovered and lose the vital element of surprise. Emboldened and hoping to set the 'ighest example, d'Bois tucked his pistols into his belt and took the lead, trusting his instincts and cat-like tread to guide him in that shadowy space, although as the stairway steepened and darkened, he was forced to use both hands and feet to progress.

In such a place, one climbs more by touch than sight and d'Bois used his fingers to feel out every hand- and foothold, silently levering himself up each portion of rock, while outside, the muffled sounds of intermittent musketry popped and fizzed. After what seemed like a small eternity, d'Bois began to perceive light breaking through at the top of the shaft and now was the critical moment for caution.

Reaching back, d'Bois tapped Sacleaux lightly twice on the forehead, our prearranged signal to halt, which he would then pass on down to the rest of the troop. Moving forward alone and expecting any moment to hear the cry which would herald our discovery and our doom, d'Bois inched up the final few rough-hewn steps, like a cat warily testing out a branch to see if it would bear its weight. The inkling of a light breeze began to blow on his forehead and now he could see the aperture where the rough stair opened out into the top of the 'eights. Inwardly d'Bois rejoiced, for it seemed in his 'aste to be at us, our foe had been incautious enough to leave this vital space unguarded for a moment. Another crashing volley thundered outside just as d'Bois hauled 'imself up the final few steps, and now he could hear his enemies' words drifting toward him.

'They are as slippery as eels these damned hussars, Padre Pedro.'

'Bah, have faith Paco, see there, another falls wounded and now there is nowhere for them to run. Patience, they will all die beneath our guns before long. Now, it has been a while since I saw that popinjay of a lieutenant, or that brute of a sergeant. Go, check the hidden stair again and see that none come to outflank us. You never know what a devious Frenchman is capable of.'

‘Fools if they do, for I will drop a cannonball upon their heads and kill them as they climb.’

Scandalised by this outrageous characterisation, d’Bois had clambered to the very lip of the entrance and *immédiament* he flattened against the rock, so that he would be ’idden from prying eyes. It was not a second too soon, for now a vile, moustachioed desperado’s ’ead poked through the entrance peering down the shaft into the gloom. As he leaned over and saw Sacleaux and the troopers bunched below, his mouth opened to shout a warning.

But his words died in his throat, where the tip of d’Bois’ blade buried them and fortune was with us, for just at the very moment, another volley of musket fire drowned out the sound of his death rattle. D’bois pulled his lifeless body to him and then manhandled it quietly to one side, silently gesturing Sacleaux and the men to come up and to be *tout suite* about it. Soon, we were arrayed around the entranceway and removing his Shako, d’Bois peeped around the corner to see how our foe was deployed.

There, peering over the ridge were a dozen swarthy-looking men, clad in typical peasant garb, kneeling or lying on their bellies to pour down more fire on d’Bois’ gallant demi-squadron. Bandits *certainement*, though whether Spanish guerrillas or just plain blackguards, or a combination of the two—for they are often merged in that benighted country—it was difficult to say, for they wore no uniform, though their weapons and blades spoke loudly enough of their intent. Most astonishing, though, was the transformation of the dozy old peasant called Pedro, for he had now donned a black cassock and crucifix and seemed to breathe fire and brimstone as he urged these men to deal death and destruction to the hated invaders. *Zut alors*, this was an accursed country, where even men of god set their hand against us!

‘Paco? Paco? What detains you? Come, there are more Frogs to be slaughtered down there and then horses, food and weapons, to be taken,’ shouted the priest, eager to bring an additional musket to bear. But in his excitement and his gloating, he had not thought to look to his man, and that was a fatal mistake.

Delay then would have brought disaster, so with a quick nod to Sacleaux, the raiding party quickly hauled themselves up and we sprang

out from the cave's entrance and fell upon them. Our surprise was total and their carbines and d'Bois' pistols deadly at such close range. A good half dozen lay dead or dying before they even knew they were attacked. Their prone position and the ferocity of our assault, quickly evened the odds. Good French steel in the hands of professional soldiers can do 'orrible work, and we plied them with the same mercy they had thought to show us: none.

Even as d'Bois set to work, he could not but marvel at Sacleaux, who proved a *terrible boucher*—*pardon*, a most terrible butcher—in such an encounter. His skill with arms, formidable physical strength and animal cunning carved a bloody swathe through the startled foe, many of whom he struck but once and who would never rise again. As always, d'Bois was glad he was born a Frenchman, for to face such an onslaught? *Merde*, even one who has ice water in his veins shudders at the thought.

Both pistols discharged into the nearest guerrillas, d'Bois threw them aside and while his troopers took care of the rest, he fought his way toward 'is frocked foe, the duplicitous Padre Pedro.

Grimacing, and wearing a scowl sharply at odds with his priestly appearance, the blackguard faced d'Bois with a snarl, wielding his great cutlass-like blade. For such an aged and wiry fellow, his strokes were strong and vicious as he tried to beat d'Bois' guard down, but the deft parry and lightning riposte are d'Bois' fondest companions and soon, despite his exertions, darker stains spread upon his cassock from the many wounds d'Bois inflicted upon him. It was a most interesting exercise, for he had courage and strength, but none of the finesse to which d'Bois is a natural heir, and as our blades locked once again, for the final time, d'Bois offered him the mercy, which he scarcely deserved for his deceptions.

'Now Padre, lay down your sword and you may yet escape with your life.'

'What? To rot in one of your filthy French prison barges or be hung like a dog? I would rather die with a sword in my hand and a curse on my lips.'

'Come now, it is not necess...'

But d'Bois' attempt proved futile for he broke away again and lay on with such venom, that d'Bois was forced to defend himself properly as a welter of strokes rang against his blade. Much as d'Bois tried to

hold back, his natural instincts took over and as the priest attempted a low thrust which would have separated d'Bois from his bowels, he could not prevent himself from parrying, then countering with a raking slash that opened up a welt of flesh from chest to face. The black priest's blade dropped from his hand, as he clutched at his wounds and he gave an anguished cry and staggered, falling to his knees, before collapsing against a nearby rock.

d'Bois advanced, thinking to bring some succour to his fallen foe, but the priest's hands left his face which was streaming blood and reaching beneath his robes he produced a small bible and—*merde!—aussi un pistol!* His trembling hand levelled the piece at d'Bois but *immédiatement* he heard the hammers of muskets behind him as his troopers snatched up fallen weapons to protect their lieutenant.

'Easy now, Father,' d'Bois said quietly, sheathing his sabre and spreading his palms in a gesture of conciliation.

'The fight is over. Your wound is bad but need not be fatal. Put aside that pistol and we will take you to the *Monasterio de St Cloud*. There is a hospital there and a skilled surgeon...'

To d'Bois' surprise, he began to grin and splutter, a terrible parody of a laugh, his teeth white in the midst of that ensanguined face.

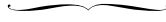
'Better to die here than await a far more terrible fate in that charnel house. You may have killed me Frenchmen, but you have doomed yourself and your men to a fate much worse. I would rather sup in Hell and will, for that is now where I go, for my many sins, not least this final one... I will see you there soon.'

And with that, holding d'Bois' eyes ever to his own, he took the pistol and slowly and most deliberately placed it against his own temple and pulled the trigger. The ball ripped through, ejecting a gout of blood and brain matter and then his body slumped, slowly keeling over, twitching gently as it bled into the dust.

Merde, d'Bois has seen men do many strange things in the course of *un batteille*, cursing, weeping, dissolving into fits of laughter, but few disturbed me as much as that treacherous old priest's final act. It was common knowledge that the church plotted against the forces of Revolutionary France in this embittered land—that was no surprise—but to discover one who would commit a mortal sin, that of suicide, rather

than be taken prisoner, that, well that was truly unprecedented. He did not fear death, few of them truly do, but I could see in his eyes that the prospect of returning with us to the *monasterio*.

had horrified him and he had preferred to mask it with bold words and put a bullet in his own brain. It was *incroyable*. What knowledge could drive a man to such a recourse?



Still, practical matters must be attended to first, and now that we held the top of the pass, a few well-directed shots at the remaining sharpshooters scattered them to the winds. In five minutes, the field was ours, all opposition had melted away like a fart in the breeze and the rest of the troopers were climbing over the top of the ridge to join us on higher ground.

Such moments are the leader's true reward. For, having been beguiled by that wicked priest and foolishly led into deadly ambush, the cost had, in the end, been a few bruises, a minor flesh wound or two, and Sacleaux's bruised privates—a more than fortunate bargain and one d'Bois was happy to strike. The troopers' broad smiles and bloodied sabres told their own story and d'Bois' stock with his men was as 'igh as a kite and further reinforced when we discovered the cave system which the guerilla-banditos had been protecting.

Inside was a veritable treasure trove: food, supplies, caches of weapons, it was stacked with loot of all kinds, supplied by those hated British Merchantmen who defied the Empereur's continental blockade to land their wares on the wharfs and quays of Lisbon. Here were crates of muskets, shot, powder, even the barrel of a small field piece. *Certainment*, the life blood of the Spanish rebels and their *Portugais* allies, exactly the kind of weapons cache we had been tasked with searching out and destroying. After such a successful and deadly action, the men expect and deserve some sport and d'Bois was determined to give it to them.

'Sergeant,' said d'Bois, and Sacleaux was at 'is side in an instant. All eyes turned to see how the spoils would be divided.

'*Oui*, Monsieur?'

'A fine victory, the men are to be heartily commended, would you not agree?' Eyes watched d'Bois expectantly now.

‘*Oui* Monsieur, an action worthy of Massena himself.’

‘In the normal course of events, I would now release them to reap their reward.’

‘Indeed Monsieur.’

‘But... we are still deep behind enemy lines, dusk approaches and an officer cannot lead his squadron blind drunk through such perilous terrain in the dark.’ At this the troopers appeared crestfallen and there was much shuffling of feet.

‘Yet the men deserve their reward. Therefore, my orders are to take as much shot, weapons and especially powder as we can carry. Press that accursed donkey train into service to carry it. The men may help themselves to any food and provisions, but all alcohol is to be entrusted into your possession for safe keeping. Once we are back at the *monasterio*, we will test the potency of these fine vintages and your commanding officer will not only join you for a drink and a carouse but he will be pleased to sing the first song!’ A resounding cheer greeted these orders.

‘A most prudent course, Monsieur...’ said Sacleaux noncommittally, before continuing in a most deathly and menacing whisper that caught the troopers’ attention far more than any bellow or harangue might. ‘But woe betide any man who dares to sample even a drop before his time, for this Sergeant’s wrath will make the torments of hell seem like a Sunday dress parade!’

‘Yet, Monsieur,’ continued the Sergeant, addressing d’Bois in a far more respectful tone, ‘there are far more muskets and cannon here than we can ever hope to carry, what is to be done with them?’

‘Oh, don’t worry Sergeant,’ said d’Bois, ‘Your *chef* knows exactly what to do with them. I have a plan that will place them far beyond the enemy’s reach and should provide us with a little sport into the bargain. Now, have the men begin loading up. We ride within the hour.’

‘Yes, Monsieur. You heard the Lieutenant, you loungers, who do you think you are? The slovenly infantry?! *Vites*, fill your bellies and your saddlebags, but know if I find a single drop of the hard stuff has passed your lips, you’ll wish the devil himself your new Sergeant!’

SIX

The Thing on the Patient

In a little under thirty minutes the task was complete, a stark measure of Sacleaux's efficiency, as d'Bois was rapidly beginning to learn. The donkeys and mules creaked under their burdens and we had gained enough weapons and treasure to make this a most satisfactory opening to our fledgling campaign. Amongst the Priest-Bandit's horde was coin, jewellery and keepsakes which must have been taken from unwary travellers they had waylaid, plus, most disquieting of all, heartbreaking mementos and letters from captured French stragglers. D'bois shudders to think what fate had befallen those poor souls, but the savagery of the partisans was well known and several bloodstained uniforms spoke of their unfortunate demise. It would not have surprised me to find these brigands committing outrages and atrocities in this borrowed guise, stirring up trouble and fomenting unrest.

No, we had done a fine day's work for *La Republic* in cleaning out this bandit's nest and as d'Bois lit a cigar looted from a fine box he had made his own (and with which he would later placate *Monsieur le Colonel*), he took immense satisfaction from it. He puffed at the most agreeable tobacco until the tip smouldered a deep crimson and then took a long, last look at the cave and the corpses his troopers had placed inside it.

Down below, Sacleaux and the men were all mounted and ready to move some small way off and so, savouring the deep rich flavour of the smoke, d'Bois leaned down and placed his lit match to the gunpowder

trail which led into the cave. It took at once, the flame chasing along the dark line and consuming it with remarkable rapidity. D'bois is not normally the fleetest of fellows on foot, but he took to his 'eels like an 'are in March, scrambling down the steep incline like the very devil himself was on his tail, for in a sense he was. He made it to Eleanor just as the flame must have reached the cave, for there was an enormous explosion, deafening the ears and rattling the teeth. Rocks and debris were thrown into the sky and there was a gratifying sound of stone collapsing in on itself, burying that bandits' nest and putting its remaining weapons and treasures, far beyond the reach of any insurgents.

'A most satisfactory outcome Sergeant.' d'Bois observed, swinging himself into the saddle and taking a deep and most gratifying pull upon his cigar.

'*Oui Monsieur,*' agreed the Sergeant, helping himself to another of the fine cigars which d'Bois offered. We puffed away contentedly for a moment, watching the thick, dark pall of smoke corkscrew up into the sky, and d'Bois pondered that perhaps he should begin to revise his opinion of this taciturn Sergeant, who had behaved with bravery, perspicacity and not a little raw and admirable savagery during our engagement.

It took us considerably longer to return to the *monasterio* than it had to leave it, for a mule train goes a great deal slower than imperial cavalry, and so it was well after dark when we finally arrived within sight of those tumbledown walls. D'bois' orders had been obeyed to the letter, though with a little customary grumbling, for 'ussars are a naturally high-spirited bunch—'thieves on horseback' as we have sometimes been called—and not ones normally ready to rein in our natural instincts, especially where liquor is involved.

d'Bois was glad the men 'ad mastered their baser desires, more for fear of Sacleaux's wrath than military discipline no doubt, but it had also been hard to shake the feeling that we had been watched as we returned. The very countryside itself felt alive with hostile, watching eyes—though we saw not a trace of a person, priest, peasant or otherwise. No matter, it would do any observers good to know that the *Empereur's* reach extended beyond the massed concentrations of the *Armee Iberian*.

There were none to greet our return, yet what should we expect? A band and martial music to meet the all-conquering heroes? Non, but some acknowledgement of our 'ard day's toil would 'ave been nice; even a glimpse of the icy disdain of Mlle Brockenhurst would have been welcomed.

Yet none such was forthcoming and instead, the *monasterio* was all shadow and shade, taking on a rather *sinistre* aspect in that night air, scarcely relieved by the occasional flicker of torchlight in the darkness. Pah. Well we would have to liven things up on our own, so d'Bois ordered the mule train unloaded *rapidement*, and then we would set to drink and make our own entertainment on this chilly night!

'Very well, Sergeant, once the horses are seen to and the baggage stowed, then the troopers may claim the reward that have rightly earned!'

d'Bois' orders evoked a small cheer and then the men quickly set to it, supervised by Sacleaux, whose glowering eye dared any to transgress before the task was complete. D'bois led Eleanor over to the small bivouac in the ruined stables he 'ad claimed as his own (rank must have some privileges *naturellement*), unsaddled her and began to brush her down. Despite the day's happy conclusion and, lest we forget, just the second successful skirmish of his fledgling command, its events continued to weigh 'eavily upon d'Bois' fatigued brain. Twice, yes twice that rogue of a priest 'ad 'inted of something dark and sinister which haunted this place, yet there was little evidence to back his portentous warning. This was most likely simply the final curse of a bitter, dying man, a ruse designed to weigh 'eavy on d'Bois' 'eart and lend disquiet to his thoughts. Well, d'Bois would not succumb and let him enact such a petty revenge from beyond the grave.

A nosebag of flavoursome oats settled the rather skittish Eleanor, who signalled her appreciation by whickering and then demolishing them wholeheartedly, while d'Bois' thoughts once more turned to the occupants of the 'ospital tent.

He really should go and see Dupont, Marmont and of course young Henri at once, but perhaps now was not quite the appropriate time. Tonight was a night for victors, and he had promised the men a drink and a song, and d'Bois was an officer of his word, or he was no officer at all. Later, after a suitable interval, when the rest of the troopers were

sunk in their libidinous revelry, he would slip away and see how the wounded fared, but now was the time for celebration and inebriation. He felt this instinctively *tres fort*—very strong!

d'Bois lit a cheroot and wandered over to where the men were working. His timing was perfect for the last of the plunder was just being stowed away under Sacleaux's expert eye. At d'Bois' entrance, the troopers laid off their idle chatter and regarded him expectantly.

'Men,' he said, blowing out a funnel of smoke and laying down the vast vat he 'ad borne upon his shoulder, resting its bulk upon an 'andy piece of upright stone.

'Today you have served your *Empereur* and your 'umble commander with the boldness, courage and fighting spirit of true 'ussars. I would expect nothing less of the glorious XIIIth. Now you shall taste the sweet fruits of your victory!'

A pistol was in d'Bois' hand and without looking, he fired it at the cask, shooting out the cork which acted as a tap, and a glorious stream of rich, dark port began to spurt from its insides.

'Now, fill your cups and drink, drink to the 'onour of the glorious XIIIth! Upon this expedition you have earned its first real battle honours! *Salut!*' d'Bois said, filling twin cups and indicating the troopers should join him. This sent them scampering for vessels with which to capture the tawny liquid and soon they were queuing to drink their fill.

'A most generous gesture, Monsieur,' said Sacleaux, as d'Bois handed him one he had filled to the brim. 'But they will be drunk as lords and fit for nothing within the hour.'

'And deservedly so, Sergeant, as should you, as should you. But first there is the little matter of the song that I promised them. Do you sing Sergeant?'

'Sing, Monsieur? Well, I have been known to sing a song or two upon occasion, and the results are said to be not wholly unpleasant.'

'Excellent, Sacleaux, then I will require the assistance and reinforcement of your no-doubt *formidable* voice for the choruses.'

'It will be my pleasure, Monsieur,' said the redoubtable sergeant, and for the first time ever, d'Bois watched his moustaches split in a broad grin, as he warmed his vocal chords by draining his cup in one fluid motion.

As Sacleaux had foretold, the revels were most profound and enthusiastic, for there is nothing like a brush with death to make one truly appreciate the pleasures of life. Dupont limped down from the 'ospital tent to join us, just as d'Bois favoured the men by launching into a perennial favourite, the rather risqué ballad of the 'ussar and the Milkmaid, which was received with great pleasure, especially when Sacleaux added his deep bass to d'Bois' liquid baritone for the raucous conclusion.

If we 'ad had rafters instead of the night sky over our 'eads, we would have been cheered to them and the rest of the men were soon drinking and smoking, embellishing their martial feats with the good-natured camaraderie and the outrageous boasting which is a 'ussar's stock in trade, a condition a novitiate commander is most keen to nurture amongst his men.

Yet in truth, d'Bois drank only sparingly and kept the greater part of his poor wits about him, for on a night like this, someone most certainly had to.

One of the deepest regrets of becoming an officer is that one must always stand a little apart from one's men; rank removes you from them, places you above them, and it is you who must set the example and with detachment, for tomorrow you may have to order them into the cannon's mouth once more. It was at times like these that d'Bois' 'eart yearned to be the simple trooper he 'ad formerly been and lose himself in drink, talk and the simple pleasures, the *vin ordinaire* of an 'ussar's life.

Yet it was not to be, and a little while later and after the initial reverie had calmed down, the men lazed and drank and talked with much conviviality and bonhomie , while d'Bois, some little distance apart, took some small pleasure in their 'igh spirits.

Sacleaux, perhaps seeing d'Bois' *petite* bout of melancholy, 'ad them raise three cheers for their 'audacious and bold' commander and, he must confess, d'Bois' cheeks reddened as he tried to wave away their acclaim. They would have little of it and it was only with great difficulty he managed to extricate himself from 'aving to perform another song, saying that instead he would do his duty by visiting their poor, wounded comrades. He promised to convey their best wishes and then, securing a bottle of something strong to revive the patients' spirits, d'Bois excused

himself from that fine company, forever lost to him now it seemed, and strode off purposefully into the darkness.

Distracted by the events of the long day, the glow of the port and still disturbed a little by the words of the faithless Father Pedro, d'Bois strolled for a while in the ruined precincts of the *monasterio's* shadows, letting his feet find their own way amidst the ruin of the centuries. His mind also wandered where it would, balancing the demands of duty, care and fatigue, as he felt the warm flush of the fortified *vin* working its highly pleasant way through his system, flushing his cheeks and slightly confounding his balance. He must confess he may even 'ave hummed a little to himself, snatches of old 'unting songs and other romantic ballads of his carefree youth. Yet, drunk or sober, an 'ussar's instincts are sharp as a poacher's snare, and when a quiet sound, which should not have been there, suddenly intruded upon his thoughts, his sword sang from its sheath and he brought the naked blade *en pointe*, ready to skewer whoever lurked behind him in the blackness.

'I hope you don't intend to use that thing on me, Lieutenant?' d'Bois' blade halted a mere centimetre away from a pale throat, close enough to inflict the closes of shaves, but to its owner's credit, she did not even flinch.

'Ah Mademoiselle Brockenhurst, it is you. Forgive me, but it is wise not to startle an 'ussar, especially in the dark, and from behind, for his sting is passing deadly.'

'So I apprehend Lieutenant. Now, if you would kindly lower your weapon, please.'

'Of course, pardon, Mlle,' d'Bois hastily re-sheathed his blade for he did not wish to give this Englishwoman the merest 'int of offence. 'Now how may I assist you?' he continued politely. 'It is a little late to be taking a constitutional walk, I would venture.'

Mlle regarded d'Bois coldly and she stared straight through him with those curiously pale eyes, as if she were dissecting a *poisson—pardon*, a fishy—upon a plate.

'Well, you seem to be coping adequately, Lieutenant. Now, if you have quite finished brandishing your blade, and carousing and stupefying yourself though drink, then perhaps we might resume our earlier conversation?'

Mon Dieu, d'Bois had long 'eard of *la Roast Beefs* sense of superiority and 'aughtiness, but the attitude of this Englishwoman? *Merde*, it took ze biscuit! *Sec!* Emboldened and perhaps even a little infuriated in his intoxication, if d'Bois 'ad drawn both his pistols at that moment and fired, he could not 'ave given her more of a taste of both barrels.

'Pah, Mademoiselle! It is very easy to patronise and deprecate when you have not stood on the field this day, knee deep in the blood of your enemies, and having shed your own, fighting for your life against an implacable foe who would cut your heart out as soon as look at you. Deception, deceit, the knife in the back, when even men of cloth turn against you in this benighted country on the very edge of civilisation. What would you 'ave me do? Drink water and live like the monks who used to 'aunt this place of shadows? *Non*, I may be a little drunk, Mlle. but who would blame an honest Frenchman in such circumstances? I, an 'umble cavalryman, am not afraid to confess I 'ave a living 'eart here which beats beneath my breast, a ventricle instead of an icicle! *Tres fort!*

d'Bois could see his strong outburst 'ad shocked her and for a moment blunted that sharp tongue, but *le courage de le vin* coursed through him, making him quite forget his manners although his hot ire soon began to recede. Both a little ashamed and a little melancholy from the drink, and his dereliction of civility towards a member of the gentler sex, he stumbled over his words and made ready to apologise again, but instead it was Mlle who spoke.

'No, it is I who should apologise, Lieutenant, and quite rightly too for my lack of grace... and lack of thought. I did not know you had fought an engagement today, and I know how this can effect a soldier's nerves. I did not mean to judge you so harshly, when I merely wished to have word in private with you, away from prying eyes.'

'*Bien sûr Mlle...* please, carry on. Prying eyes? What exactly is it you wish to discuss? Your words earlier seemed to contain a warning rather than any matter for debate, but come, you need keep no secrets from me.'

'Firstly, Lieutenant...'

'Gaston, please.'

'...Lieutenant, you should know I am no do-gooder, no well-meaning nurse come here to complete my medical education at the front by smiling sweetly and mopping the boys' brows. Although I have

some small skill in the healing arts, it is a much more... personal reason that draws me here to the *Monasterio de St Cloud*.'

'I see Mlle, and may I enquire, what is that reason?'

'First you must give me your word, as an officer and a gentlemen, that you will not disclose a single word of what I am about to tell you, not matter what the consequences. Do you agree to my terms?'

'I can 'ardly refuse them, Mlle. Please, consider it given.'

'Very well then, I act from the highest of motives... love.'

'A cause any Frenchman can readily understand.'

'No, Lieutenant, it is not *l'amour* that brings me here, but rather fraternal love. My brother, the Hon. George Brockenhurst, has been on campaign with Lord Wellesley's forces, and was badly wounded during a recent skirmish. I am told by a reliable source that he survived the field and was conveyed here, still alive, though it has cost me much to earn that knowledge.'

'I see. A bold mission for a sister... a lady... to seek out a brother, no matter how cherished, in times of war.'

'I am no lady, d'Bois, despite appearances, I am every bit as capable a fighter as you or any of your men. More so, even.'

d'Bois hastily made to stifle the small scoff which had risen in his throat.

'You would do well, not to mock me, Lieutenant,' she said and in an instant those eyes flashed with a fire that gave d'Bois real cause to revise his opinions. There was a blur of motion and before he could move, the point of a razor-sharp dagger had been inserted to an uncomfortable degree straight up d'Bois' left nostril!

The eyes beneath those heavy lashes, shifted from side to side, as if checking for eavesdroppers, then she confided, 'You have heard perhaps of *La Rossignol*?'

'The Nightingale? Why, of course, every Frenchman in the Peninsular 'as 'eard of Milor' Wellesley's most deadly agent and assassin. There is a bounty of a thousand Louis on her head, though it said she wears almost as many faces. Why, do you know her? Is she close by?' Again d'Bois received the most withering of looks.

'*La Rossignol c'est moi*, to paraphrase one of your most celebrated monarchs.'

‘Pah, forgive my scepticism Mlle. but I can scarcely believe that the lady who stands before me is the woman who is said to have smuggled Trouvier out of the Bastille beneath her skirts, liberated the plans for invading Iberia from a locked strongbox under the *Empereur*’s bed, and eliminated the unfortunate General Lanoir through the sheer vigour of her lovemaking...’

‘Believe it, d’Bois,’ the blade shifted almost imperceptibly costing d’Bois several much-valued nostril ’airs.

‘Now Mlle, please forgive me; I spoke in ’aste, but such a paragon of womanhood, one naturally assumes...’

‘You should assume nothing, d’Bois, especially in times of war,’ inch by inch the dagger was slowly withdrawn, though the point hovered tantalisingly before d’Bois’ moustaches which seemed to wilt under the close attention. Her next words were spoken in a sibilant hiss:

‘I should have known, he said you weren’t the brightest, something of a chauvinist...’

‘*He*, Mlle? Who, Mlle? Let me assure you, I am nothing of the kind. I hold the fairer sex every bit as capable and lethal as any man. Why, if they could but dispense with the riding of the side saddle, I know Frenchwomen every bit as fearsome as our hardest cuirassiers, and twice as likely to gallop to the sound of the trumpet at the *chargez*...’

‘Stop babbling d’Bois, I believe you.’ The dagger was withdrawn and she continued. ‘On my way here I sought out a mutual acquaintance, one who helped me locate my brother, and one who also suggested our paths might cross. How he is able to predict such matters, well, he alone knows, for he is a most mysterious, not to say opaque individual. But there you have it. If I say I know you stood together in a recent affair, involving a certain degenerate Marquis?’

‘*Mon Dieu*, do you mean the Major?’

‘Who else?’

‘Well Mlle, any friend of the Major’s... even such a deadly enemy of France... though by rights, I should...’

‘Your word was given, Lieutenant.’

‘And a d’Bois will always honour it, Mlle, but why did you not say something before?’

‘Even with the Major’s recommendation, I wished to know more of

you in person, in the flesh, Lieutenant, before I placed my trust in you and revealed my hand.'

'And what 'and is that Mlle? You spoke earlier of why my men and I should leave this place. You must understand it is quite impossible under present circumstances, but I would know the reason for your concern?'

'I have come to believe that there is something dark, something sinister, an ancient evil which lurks at the heart of this *monasterio*, and its defeat is a matter which goes far beyond whatever uniform we happen to wear...'

'*Mon Dieu*, are we not a little too far inland to encounter the sea demons, Mlle?'

'They are not the only foul creatures to walk this broad earth, Lieutenant, or indeed, burrow beneath it.'

'*Merde!* Then you 'ad best tell me more Mlle, but rest assured, d'Bois' sabre is at your disposal... if I can but...'

Those pale eyes regarded me once again, piercing, evaluating, then with a sigh, a most unnecessary one in d'Bois' opinion, she seemed resigned and said, 'Well, in for a shilling in for a guinea I suppose...'. But Mlle did not complete her sentence, for the very next moment an ear-shattering scream rent the quiet of the night, and then we were hurtling helter-skelter toward its source—the hospital tents!



Now d'Bois may have perhaps mentioned that 'is bandy legs are made for riding not running, but he covered the ground like a *lièvre*—an 'are—for he recognised at once that the voice was no man's cry, but that of a *garçon* seized by incalculable pain or terror. Yet Mlle matched d'Bois every stride of the way and our chests heaving (hers in a most attractive way), we burst into the tent where young Delacroix had been recovering from his terrible wound.

Dupont was nowhere to be seen, but the boy was stretched out senseless on the stretcher, his face whiter than the bed sheets which had been made up for him. For a moment, d'Bois thought he must have simply cried out in his sleep, the drug which had sedated him provoking terrible dreams, for he was lying still and quite insensible.

Bending over him, his back to us, was what looked like a young shepherd lad, dirty, grime-streaked legs poking out of his tattered rags who must have been summoned, like us, by the 'orrible sound. It was curious, for d'Bois had not seen a single other person at this *monasterio*, which was a strange enough thing in itself. An odd contemplation to have at such a time, but perhaps he was a local peasant boy, curious and understandably drawn to the vicinity by the allure and gallantry of the French *armee*?

'Easy child,' d'Bois said in his most gentle tones, hoping not to startle this unlooked-for Samaritan, 'let the nurse here see to young Henri now. Thank you for your kind intentions...'

d'Bois sought in his purse for some small coin to reward the peasant child, but he did not seem to know French, or indeed d'Bois' pidgin Spanish when he repeated the instruction. D'bois took a step forward and now he could see blood seeping from an open wound, Henri's bandages torn and shredded, exactly like Marmont's. Had he too in his delirium clawed at the very coverings protecting his injury?

'Come now,' d'Bois said advancing upon the peasant boy with purpose, repeating his command more urgently. 'Let Mlle tend to the patient, child. You must come away now and let her do her work.' d'Bois reached out with a gloved hand to forcibly remove the lad if needs be, only to hear Mlle's shouted warning.

'Have a care, d'Bois!'

It was fortuitous that she spoke when she did, for it made your 'umble Lieutenant hesitate the merest fraction. The next moment his riding glove was ripped from his right hand with a violence that was as unexpected as it was shocking. Fortunately, d'Bois' reactions are like quicksilver and instinctively he sprang back, already unsheathing his sabre before his feeble brain had quite realised what 'ad happened.

Mon Dieu! Where d'Bois 'ad expected to encounter a snivelling urchin, instead crouched a nightmarish apparition, which seemed to have crawled up from the very pits of Hades. A cruel, heavy jaw bearing wickedly curved teeth, which moments ago had snapped at his hand, now chewed and spat out his glove, clean severing its pliant leather fingers.

Its face was savage, primordial, like the degenerate crossing of a jackal and a mastiff, and its head and body were quite hairless, its skin

bearing a pallid, translucent sheen as if it had been altogether deprived of sunlight for its entire unholy life. Its eyes burned a malevolent crimson and it was a most startling sight, quite at odds with the simple peasant child d'Bois had been expecting. Now it snarled brutishly, a low menacing growl of defiance as it sprang up and onto Henri's bed in a manner which was both inhumanly swift and strangely unnatural.

Now d'Bois could see the fragments of blood and flesh dribbling from its jutting maw, which matched those upon young Henri's bandages. *Mon Dieu!* It had been attempting to consume our poor trumpeter, its disgusting jaws biting at the skin surrounding his injury!

d'Bois must confess he was quite beside himself, enraged, forgetting any thought of shock or fear, the sight drove him near wild, that such a beast should seek to feast on a *garçon* in d'Bois' charge! On that poor wounded boy. Quite forgetting himself, d'Bois shouted a most profane battle cry, slashing instinctively with his sabre, its keen edge opening a crimson arc from the claws the creature threw up to ward off the blow.

The sting of a Frenchman's sword is a most deadly kiss and this beast of the pit howled and shuddered in its fury, its severed fingers flying across the room. D'bois could see its body tense, unnatural muscles quiver, ready to spring for his throat and he drew back his blade ready to cut again or catch it *en pointe* skewering it in the throat.

But before either of us could play out the next act of that deadly duel, there was a sound like thunder, the discharge of a pistol and the side of the creature's shoulder exploded in a welter of black ichor. It fell, clutching at its wound, then rolled upon the floor and in a moment it had gone, bounding away with preternatural speed, like a fox with the 'ounds of 'ell hot on its 'eels. The tent fastenings flapped in its wake and d'Bois turned to see Mlle, her hand holding a smoking and most unusual multi-barrelled pepperbox pistol. Her face looking grim and resolute.

'Damn, merely winged the brute—I must have grown rusty.'

d'Bois rushed for the opening and saw the sinuous, brutish shape haring through the stones of the *monasterio's* graveyard before it was quickly lost from sight. When he came back in, Mlle's unusual pistol 'ad disappeared and she was quickly and efficiently seeing to Henri's wound.

'Quickly Lieutenant, press here.' d'Bois did as he was bid, applying pressure and noting the ragged bite mark. Yet even in that most bizarre

of moments, he saw that it was the dead necrotic flesh around the wound which had been attacked, the healthy flesh strangely remained untouched.

‘Is poor Henri ..?’

‘He will live, I believe, Lieutenant. But...’

‘*Quelle horreur*, what was the thing, Mlle? When you spoke of unnatural creatures, I ’ad no idea this is what you meant.’

‘Indeed, Lieutenant, perhaps you will take my claims more seriously from now on?’

‘*Bien sur*, and your pistoleering also.’

‘Hm, Budding’s finest rarely disappoints.’

‘A most singular armament, if I may say so, Mlle?’

‘You may not. Now, no time for explanations, d’Bois, I hear sounds approaching. Follow my lead.’

Not a moment later Sacleaux and several troopers, including Dupont who had snuck down to join his comrades for a drink, came blundering in, little more than half-drunk, d’Bois reckoned, but armed to the teeth and ready to do instant violence. Yet, when they saw Mlle at work, their zeal turned to incomprehension.

‘Monsieur?’

‘A scavenger, Sergeant,’ said Mlle to Sacleaux’s astonished countenance. ‘A wild dog or some such creature. It attacked your poor trumpeter but the Lieutenant’s shot scared it off. The boy is safe now, but please remove yourself and your men. I need quiet to concentrate while I finish cleaning and dressing the wound.’

d’Bois nodded assent and Sacleaux immediately snapped to it, shooshing the bleary troopers out of the makeshift theatre.

We worked for several minutes in silence, Mlle’s quick, deft, fingers proving as skilful in her healing, as her aim was deadly.

‘There, I have staunched the blood and he is stable now,’ she said. ‘Best he sleep through the rest of the night and think his experience an opiate dream.’ She pressed several drops of liquid onto the boy’s tongue, and although his face was still pale and feverish, he soon seemed to breathe easier and settle into a more profound slumber.

‘I would have words now, Mlle,’ said d’Bois, ‘about this beast and the great secret that this *monasterio* ’olds.’

‘In the morning, Lieutenant, I need some small time to compose

my thoughts. You would be wise to say nothing further of this to your men, either. Set a watch over the poor boy now; we must trust all will be well.'

Hotly, d'Bois made to protest further, but her severe countenance silenced all of his objections.

'Until the morning, I said.'

'*Bien sur*, Mlle, words we shall 'ave then. Words, *à demain*.'

'Until then, d'Bois,' she said and with that, she glided off into the night without a backward glance.

Sacleaux returned within a matter of moments and it did not take a fortune teller to read the perplexity on his broad face. There seemed no way to tackle it but 'ead on.

'Speak Sergeant, what is it?'

'Monsieur... it is the men, they are... troubled... fearful. This incident has unsettled them and...'

'They are scared of wild dogs? Pah, are they such cowards that they...'
d'Bois tried to work himself into a fit of moral outrage but his heart was not truly in it.

'Pardon Monsieur, but the men are no fools...'

'The men? The men, Sergeant? The men's task is to...'

'...and with respect, sir, neither am I. May I speak plainly, Monsieur?'

'Certainly Sergeant...'

'That was no wild dog which attacked Henri, or I am a Prussian.'

'How could you...'

'Please sir, let me continue. Nor with respect was it your pistol that was discharged, for however much drink I have consumed, I do not mistake the report of something so exotic for a French cavalry pistol.'

'And yet, Sergeant...'

'Your indulgence once again, Monsieur. As for your tale of a wild dog, well, I saw that thing, whatever it was, bolting through the *cimetière* like a banshee as we rushed to your aid and I think the men may have seen a glimpse of it too. There was already some disquiet after Marmont's... experience yesterday, but this is of a degree of strangeness again. Routine, combat, wine—these things will dull a trooper's senses sufficiently for a while, but this place has an evil air about it and the men have been unsettled since we first arrived.'

'Nonsense, it was an 'ound I tell you, a great 'ound to be sure... fierce as a wild boar and swift as a deer but...'

'Monsieur, come now, I do not wish to contradict you directly or be insubordinate, but a wild dog does not leave behind droppings like those.' He pointed to the severed talons on the floor and the splash of its black blood. 'It is not your courage I question Monsieur, but your veracity,' the Sergeant concluded with his eyes lowered to the floor in a most 'umble, almost shy pose—at odds with his colossal form.

'Ah... I see,' said d'Bois. 'You have the truth of it then, Sergeant? Well, I suppose there is no further use in dissembling.'

'*Oui* Monsieur, but come, I know you only wished to shield the men, me, from the horror of that thing, whatever it was.'

'Whatever it was indeed. Ach, in truth it is some small relief Sacleaux, that I may finally share this burden and confide in you, for it has disturbed me greatly. In battle, we can leave our fear back with the baggage train, for no matter how hot the encounter, we face but men, flesh and blood like ourselves. But this? I have to confess, this is not the first time I have encountered such supernatural terrors, but I am at a loss to explain what happened during this particular instance.'

'As am I Monsieur, yet clearly something malevolent has had hold of the boy. It is gone now, but it will return—evil always does.'

He bent and, using a knife, skewered one of the severed digits so that we might examine it further.

'Hm, the flesh is pale, cold and stiff, like it belongs to a corpse, Monsieur.'

'Yet it lived, moved, pulsed with unholy life.'

'*Oui* Monsieur. It reminds me...'

'Reminds you? Speak Sacleaux, what could this remind you of?'

'Nothing that I have ever seen Monsieur. Yet when I served the *Empereur* during the great campaign in Egypt, we would sometimes sit late at night and listen to the camp followers and servants tell tales and legends of their land. Most were simple campfire stories, the legends of the Pharaohs and their strange animal-headed gods. Yet I remember one night an ancient fellow, eyes milky with age, deep under the spell of the *kif*, his voice creaking as he told us of the *ghûl*, a demon which feasted upon the flesh of the dead.'

'Mon Dieu, incroyable, and you think this could be such a creature?'

'What mortal man can say for certain in such matters? But it was what was most called to my mind when I saw that thing bounding away in the moonlight. It is certainly in keeping with what the old man told us. They are said to move like a dog or hyena, but much faster, bounding in a way that is unwholesome, unnatural. The face is terrible, like the...'

'...cross of a beast and an 'ound.'

'Exactment, Monsieur.'

'Yet this was no spirit, but flesh. See, you hold the evidence on the point of your knife.'

'Oui Monsieur. It is so. The old man said they were carrion feeders, haunters of the grave yard, the charnel house, the battlefield, these eaters of the dead.'

'Yet Henri lives.'

'Oui Monsieur, a strange detail, but one we should be thankful for.'

'These are dark events, Sacleaux, and we should ponder them at more length. Find me the least drunk pair of troopers and set a watch at the entrance. I will not have Henri molested again.'

'Oui, I will see to it personally, Monsieur.'

'Bonne, thank you, Sacleaux, you have proved yourself of most invaluable assistance to your commanding officer. And not for the first time, I might add.'

'Thank you, Monsieur.'

SEVEN

Cathedral of Hate

The rest of the night passed fitfully, for d'Bois could not sleep and sat with loaded pistols concealed beneath his cloak awaiting *la clarté*—pardon, the clarity—of the dawn, occasionally reviving his chilled bones with a healthy draught of fortified wine, punctuated with a smoked cheroot. The men had sobered quickly, and 'uddled in their cloaks, shifting their eyes at every night time sound, from the snap of a rogue twig to the 'oot of an owl, keeping close to the fires and even closer still to their weapons. Even Sacleaux's formidable presence could not entirely reassure them, though he attempted to take their minds from their troubles with a series of ribald stories and risqué anecdotes. Then, when few responded, he chided them for fools and children to be so nervous, 'not like French 'ussars at all, but like fearful peasants and old crones'.

Still apprehensive, they muttered softly beneath their moustaches, wincing at Sacleaux's inventive insults, though none would dare stand and contradict the hulking sergeant directly, no matter how much he questioned their honour.

As the grey of the false dawn undermined the true darkness, and the stars of that ill-favoured night began to fade away, the chill also began to relent a little from our bones and from our minds. A little later, as the pink streaks of true dawn began to steal over the horizon, licking the peaks of the surrounding *Colinas*, the lingering fears began to seep away as they always do when daylight reignites the world and banishes *la crainte*—the fears—of the dark.

The strange and terrible events of last night began to diminish too, banished like the surreal dreams they become in morning's first light. D'bois' soul 'ung a little easier as well, for, confronted with the familiar sensations of a soldiers' camp as it began to stir, it seemed almost preposterous that we 'ad been 'aunted by such a shadowy fiend. Could such a monstrous night dweller, the *ghūl* of Sacleaux's stories *really* have appeared from that ancient land of story and legend to prey on young Henri? And if so, what was such a creature doing so far from Egypt, the 'ome of such ancient monsters and sand demons?

Yet d'Bois knew all too well that it could, and he would not so easily dismiss the evidence of his own eyes nor the reality of his other recent experiences, nor indeed the strange severed digits of the thing itself, which he 'ad stealthily disposed of.

Non, now he must come to a resolution and determine a course of action, not only to repair the men's morale but to prevent the creature striking again. He should consider it 'is sacred duty not only as a soldier, but as a commander.

He pondered this as the familiar rhythms of the morning camp began to re-establish themselves, for whether 'ussars sleep the sleep of the *juste* or shiver the night away in turmoil beneath their blankets, their beloved mounts must be fed, watered, brushed and attended to.

Eleanor gave a welcoming whicker as d'Bois approached, and he whispered his greetings, rubbing her behind the ears, a gesture she always loved. He had secured a juicy *pomme*—an apple—for his mount, which she munched with much appreciation, before nudging him and inclining her 'ead against his own in her 'abitual gesture of gratitude. The affection of this warm, trusting beast began to raise d'Bois' leaden spirits and 'arden his resolve toward a new course of action for this new day. He called Sacleaux to him and began to outline his plan.

'Good morning, Sergeant.'

'Monsieur.'

'Prepare the men for a patrol, I wish them to be ready to depart in half an hour. Keep them occupied and their thoughts away from last night's events and the plight of our wounded. Work them well, but do not exhaust them—I will require fresh bodies and fresh minds later.'

‘*Oui* Monsieur, I shall see it done. Where do you intend to lead us? Should I...’

‘*Non*, Sergeant, I shall not be accompanying you on this endeavour. I trust to your discretion and commend you on this your first command of a squadron of ’ussars.’ The sergeant’s chest swelled slightly at d’Bois’ unexpected complement and his eyes glittered at the prospect.

d’Bois continued: ‘Take a wide patrol route, find out more about the lie of the land. Gather as much information as you can and gain intelligence from any local peasants you encounter. But be cautious, especially after that Priest’s deception. Do not engage an enemy unless you see an overwhelming advantage, I trust to your sound judgement in this matter. Bring them back to me, intact and fresh, along with your report, as the sun begins to fade.’

‘As you command, Monsieur.’ He bowed to acknowledge my orders, but d’Bois could almost see the workings of his brain beneath those bushy brows, puzzled as to why his commander would so easily pass over the reins. After ’is candour and good conduct of the night before, d’Bois was a little more inclined to enlighten him.

‘I must trust you with this duty, Sacleaux, because I ’ave other *poisson* to fry as I believe *l’Anglais* say. I will work easier and better if I act in this matter alone.’

‘Very well, Monsieur, I will carry out your orders to the letter.’

‘I ’ave no doubt of it, but come back and see me, before you leave. Quietly, mind, and bring Trooper Durand with you.’



So, leaving Sacleaux to first roust and then assemble the men, d’Bois took his morning café and smoked a thoughtful cheroot, observing from inside the ruin of the stables as the Sergeant made them ’op to it, with the mix of dire threats, filthy jests and repartee which is the particular gift of the French NCO. For a man apparently in disgrace he ’andled them well, an astute word here, a beady eye there and a rough but jocular manner which soon set them at their ease and ’ad them concentrating on the task at ’and.

Whatever the reason for his exile amongst us roughneck ’ussars, it

was clear that he knew how to handle fighting men and 'orse soldiers to boot. Another cheroot and several refills of *café* 'ad passed d'Bois' lips by the time the brawny sergeant reported back to his lair, with Trooper Durand in tow.

'Monsieur, we are ready to depart,' Sacleaux reported.

'*Bon*, then I will wish you God speed, with one small adjustment. Trooper, take off your jacket and shako and give them to me.'

'Monsieur?' Durand, although a fine soldier in the 'eat of battle, was never the sharpest sabre in the scabbard, and he positively gaped at d'Bois' order.

'Do as the Lieutenant commands, Durand, quickly now.' Sacleaux's tone brooked no argument, and soon we had exchanged our jackets and 'eadgear. Durand, being of a similar 'eight and bearing as d'Bois (though frankly, his moustaches and cadettes were not one tenth so glorious) now bore the death's head insignia and badges of a lieutenant, while d'Bois sported the ordinary trooper's habit, which had once been his daily bread.

'*Bon, non parfait*, but it will suffice. Durand, today is your lucky day, for you will ride at the 'ead of the troop and behave as if you were its officer. Use my telescope to survey the land, wave your arms around and make *grand* pronouncements occasionally, for I believe that is what officers mainly do.' At this jest, a wolfish grin enveloped Sacleaux's face and even Durand managed a smile. 'But leave the actual commanding to Sergeant Sacleaux, here. Keep your shako pulled low and take Eleanor, who I have saddled for you. Treat her well, as if your very life depended upon it, for in many ways, it does.'

'Sir, I don't...'

'Be quiet Durand, you don't have to *compris*, you just have to obey,' said Sacleaux. 'Now, snap to it lad, lead the Lieutenant's horse and take your place at the head of the men.' Durand, looking perplexed, led d'Bois' dear Eleanor away.

'I believe you 'ave grasped my intention, Sergeant?'

'I believe I have Monsieur, when we depart, any prying eyes will think you lead the patrol, leaving you free to pursue your own business, while we are absent.'

'*Exactement* Sacleaux, *exactement*.'

‘Very well, I will leave then, Monsieur, and...’

‘Yes, Sacleaux?’

‘I wish you good hunting.’



From his place of concealment, d’Bois watched his squadron depart until it had dwindled into no more than a faint column of dust rising into the thin, parched air. Despite the absolute necessity of remaining behind to put his plan into action, d’Bois still felt a sudden twang on the strings of ’is ’eart as his troopers disappeared off and were swallowed up by the vastness of that pitiless interior. *Merde*, was this simple foreboding or perhaps even a little jealousy about seeing his troopers placed under another man’s command? The former guardsman was certainly going up in d’Bois’ estimation, and he had already proved himself a more than worthy soldier—there was no doubt they would be safe in his vast and capable ’ands.

Alors d’Bois allowed a little time to pass, drinking the dregs of his cold breakfast *café* and observing the ruins of the *monasterio* from his hiding place. If he had hoped to discover unusual goings on or an ’int about the strange truth behind this terrible mystery, he was disappointed. Several buzzards glided lazily above on the thermal currents as the weak autumn sun began to strengthen, but there was little else, save the occasional rattle of a drowsy cicada and the gentle gust of a zephyr to disturb the quiet.

Perhaps d’Bois was mistaken in his suppositions? But then again perhaps he was not, for he soon saw what he sought, the glint of a mirrored surface as it caught and reflected the sun, bouncing around the foothills which surrounded the steep ascent to the ruins of St Cloud. There, and there again, so quick you might almost miss it, and then an answering flash from another distant ’ill. They were brief, vanishing almost too quickly for the eye to follow, but d’Bois’ plan had worked exactly as he ’ad hoped. He tossed away the bitter dregs of his *café* and allowed himself a grim little smile.

Satisfied at last that those distant watchers would now be intent on following his carefully prepared decoy, d’Bois pulled Durand’s shako

onto his head, fastened his jacket with the collars up and trudged towards the 'ospital tents, affecting a limp, so that he might easily be mistaken for one of the walking wounded. Of course, he could not pass that way without looking in upon his men and while Marmont remained unconscious, still sedated and recovering from his 'orrible wounds, Dupont was up and about and ready to converse, although a coarse jest erupted from his lips before he fully appreciated the true identity of his visitor.

'Pardon, *chef!* I did not recognise you for a moment in Durand's rags.'

'Quietly Dupont,' d'Bois hissed, 'address me as you would a fellow trooper and consider me such, in case any over'ear.'

'*Oui che... pardon... Durand, good of you to drop by mon ami.*'

'*Mon plaisir, mon brave, how are you? How is Marmont?*'

'I am well and he is quiet, since *Monsieur le Docteur* attended to him.' We both contemplated the inert form which lay immobile and 'elpless upon the bed. Suspicion now clouded d'Bois' brows for he wondered perhaps had Marmont's wild dream and savage outburst been some 'orrible precursor of last night's terrible encounter? Perhaps it had not been mad drug-induced ravings at all, but maybe he had been attacked and seen a glimpse of the same beast which had mauled young Henri? d'Bois stroked his moustaches thoughtfully, while he pondered this unsettling thought.

Yet Marmont did not stir and *naturallement*, d'Bois' thoughts quickly turned to the brave young trumpeter who lay in the space next door.

'*Excusez-moi, Dupont.*'

In a moment d'Bois was through the divider and contemplating the poor boy's prone form. Young Henri was as pale as a mortician's sheet and when his commander laid his hand upon his brow, it was cold and clammy, as if his body had attempted to sweat out all his vital fluids through his pores.

Yet he sighed contentedly at the crude touch of d'Bois' rough fingers and immediately seemed to breathe a little easier, a hint of colour returning to his cheek. No fresh blood darkened the bandages which protected his chest and it was a great relief to see him so, apparently at peace. D'bois stood and watched him for some moments before Dupont was at his side, whispering quietly.

‘Do not fear, I shall take care of him. I have a brace of loaded pistols and a sabre ’idden beneath my cot... none shall disturb him again.’

‘*Bonne*, Dupont, I will feel a lot better knowing you ’ave this matter firmly in ’and.’

‘It will be my duty and my pleasure, but what do you intend to do now? Surely you have not stayed behind, without some definite purpose in mind?’

‘*Oui* Michel, and now I must be about it. And quickly so. *A bientôt.*’



You may recall that d’Bois mentioned in the chronicle of his first great adventure that as a youth, he was something of a woodsman and a *chasseur*—an ’unter—of some note? He was often to be found disporting himself beneath the canopy of the great forest which was both his home and his first great love, before his *grande* affair with both the cheval and soldiering began and later came to define his life. *Oui*, the Ardennes was both nursery and playground to this callow, impetuous yet strangely ’andsome youth and growing up, it taught him many lessons in the art of tracking both beast and fowl.

These lessons were both ’arsh and indeed salutary to begin with, for if he failed to absorb the subtleties and nuances of the pursuit, the delicacy of the stalk and the patience required for the kill, his reward was an ’ard bed, made ’arder by an empty stomach and the humiliation of failure. Worse even than those were the sad eyes and gentle reproaches of his *père*, who was much disappointed, even grieved when he ’ad failed to secure something tasty for the pot. Yet, he was always a patient and knowledgeable teacher, and eventually d’Bois prospered under his tutelage and in time, came to understand the many subtleties of the chase.

Now, d’Bois intended to use this knowledge to its full *avantage*, though in truth, it was not initially the most difficult of trails to pursue. There, on the ground where d’Bois’ sabre had severed its digits was a telltale splash of black blood and Mlle’s pistol shot had added further sanguinary evidence. In the din and confusion of last night’s encounter, picking up the trail may have been a challenging, though not impossible task, but ’ere, as d’Bois emerged into the stark autumnal sunlight,

it was *très facile*—very easy—for an experienced *chasseur* to read. The creature's bloodied tracks led away from the tents towards the back of the *monasterio* and it had departed in a rapid bounding motion, like the leap of an 'are or a stag, for the signs were spread out, many paces apart, much further than a boy or indeed a man would have made when running.

Despite the heat, d'Bois' spine played host to a small shiver as he was reminded of the bestial face and savage demeanour of his prey, but he concentrated on the trail which it had left, winding through the tumbledown walls and ruined buildings of the *monasterio*, darting 'ere and there in its pain and fury as it fled. *Mais* its overall direction of travel was not difficult to discern, and d'Bois had its destination in view long before the final dark splash of spoor confirmed it.

The *monasterio's* *cimetière* had been built on the rear slope of the mountain on which the former house of the holy perched and even in the hazy morning sunshine, it seemed full of shadow and portent. A long, crumbling wall ran around its exterior, and at the entrance two stone statues, grim-faced guardians their eyes raised heavenward, flanked the crumbling gate, reminders of man's temporary *état* and his brief sojourn on the surface of this unhappy world. D'bois' moustaches bristled, but a *chasseur* does not quail even when he has trailed a beast to its den and without hesitation, he plunged forward, eager to come to grips with what propelled this *étrange* mystery.

The rays of the sun overhead seemed to carry little warmth within the *cimetière's* confines and a chill wind blew through d'Bois' bones, and perhaps his soul aussi as he took his first 'alting steps within that unsettling domain. Row upon row of neglected paupers' graves were marked by a simple cross, their faded inscriptions testament to untold generations of monks who had 'ere found their final resting place on earth.

But as d'Bois progressed, these gave way to elaborate tombs and ornate stone mausoleums, housing the quality of both church and state. The Baron of this... the Abbot of that... all lay at their ease, sharing the fate which me all must come to in the end.

The *cimetière* seemed long-abandoned, pierced by decades, perhaps centuries of decay and neglect, those apparently eternal monuments weatherworn and disintegrating, vines and weeds threading their way

amongst the bleached stone, like the veins of nature enfolding it back into her bosom.

A sudden and curious thought struck d'Bois. Why were there no recent graves? Surely *Monsieur le Docteur's* 'ospital should have produced many new tenants for this 'allowed ground? The tracks continued unabated along the dusty paths and byways which wound there, though d'Bois found it difficult to dismiss this stray thought from his mind. Save for the breezy whining of the wind, it was as quiet as a resting place of the departed should be.

The tracks bounded this way and that, but led inexorably toward a mound of rocks which thrust up like a great bony fist at the outer edge, and the surrounding boundary wall itself was built on the very edge of a precipice, a steep drop which plunged many hundreds of metres below. The great stone mound was split by a large v-shaped fissure, narrow at the top but spreading wide enough to encompass two men abreast, the entrance to a dark and foreboding tunnel which burrowed deep into the cold earth.

Above it, 'ewn into the very rock by some unknown hand was another carved figure, an angel—or a parody of one—its mouldering wings spread wide, flowing in disgusting symmetry down either side of the opening. But no inhabitant of 'eaven this, no archangel but some kind of archfiend, its bony hands clutching a great scythe and instead of radiant beatific features were grinning teeth, fleshless cheeks, and the gaping eye sockets of a bony skull.

Mon Dieu, even d'Bois' renowned dauntlessness was checked in the face of such a disturbing and *outré* image, which seemed to glory in the finality of death, and was, no doubt, the product of a most disturbed mind.

It had a most repellent and *sinistre* air and faintly, d'Bois' highly sensitive nostrils detected the first insinuations of a most unusual and foetid odour which emanated from the earthy depths below. Upon inhaling his first sniff, d'Bois' body seemed to rebel, a sudden shiver wracking his spine, and despite the pale heat of the day, the sweat on his back turned cold upon the instant. Yet, there could be no doubt that this was where the creature had gone to ground. Its tracks led up to the entrance and then dissipated in the dust, but the telltale splashes of its

crusted black blood were still visible on the unyielding stone, where it 'ad placed its wounded claw.

Courage mon brave, d'Bois whispered to fortify himself, for he who has faced the fury of a Redcoats' square, and stood against the wrath of those abominable sea creatures should not fear a simple 'ole in the ground. Gripping the 'ilt of his sabre, d'Bois plunged through the crack, studiously ignoring the grim visage which loomed above him.

Inside he went and within two paces, all the light and heat of the sun outside seemed to have been sucked away by the cold, ancient darkness of the stone. D'bois found himself in a tunnel whose jagged walls may or may not have been a natural formation, but whose floor seemed to have been worn smooth by the passage of many centuries, or perhaps, many feet. Flint and tinder quickly provided the spark for the small lantern he 'ad secreted about himself and its flame threw up a meagre illumination as he soon left the surface world behind.

Down this tunnel d'Bois plunged, down and ever down and he stalked it like a most nervous *chat*—*pardon* a kitty cat—treading so lightly that his boots and harness barely made a sound. The tunnel broadened and widened as he descended and soon passageways began to spring off left and right. Yet d'Bois held his course straight and true, the telltale splashes of black, a darker foulness signposting his way. Time seemed to have little meaning down there, and the whisper of his breath and the beating of his 'eart were the only ways to measure it. D'bois began to feel the weight of the earth above descend upon him, like an oppressive force. The walls were rough-hewn and had started *au naturel*, but soon he began to notice niches and alcoves carved into their surface. The first examples were crude, as if they had been made by primitive hands long ago and simply 'acked out of the rock with whatever came to 'and. All were tenantless apart from the odd spider or scorpion which scuttled away from the arc of his lantern.

However, as he progressed deeper into the dark, these alcoves became more numerous and regular, carved with purpose and no little ingenuity and these were no longer empty, but occupied by the parched, bleached bones of the long-departed dead. *Mon Dieu*, what a grim spectacle they formed, human ivory, picked clean by the passage of the ages, the few

shrouds and rags that remained looking as if they would crumple at the merest touch.

d'Bois 'eld the lantern high, but a persistent nervousness dogged his steps as he began to realise this whole 'ill was riddled through like an 'oneycomb, a vast catacomb, a veritable temple of the dead. The monks and their ancient predecessors must have interred generations of the fallen down 'ere, a vast mausoleum which stretched back through 'istory to its formation in the mists of the medieval world. Those who had died violently in battle or peacefully in bed; women in childbirth, children in the cradle or ancients in their dotage, some claimed by the Black Death, others by lesser maladies that all flesh is heir to—each had found their final resting place in this unsettling warren.

d'Bois gave a shudder and pressed onward and it seemed to him that noises now sounded somewhere out there in the dark. Nothing definite he could identify, but sounds of movement on the very periphery of his 'eightedened senses.

Only a little daunted, he continued forward and now a deeper scent began to tease his nostrils, something at once familiar, yet alien, heavy and musky, sweet and cloying, almost intoxicating. It seemed to grow in strength with every footstep downward and he followed its scent further into the 'ollow hill.

As he progressed deeper, the alcoves grew more regular and even and stretched from floor to ceiling. Having previously passed through the gamut of the ancient aeons, d'Bois now began to recognise rags and scraps of clothes and even uniforms from a more contemporary epoch. Oh, they would still date well before our present age, but the faded finery and clothing was decades rather than centuries old, though the bones and skulls were as bare and stripped clean as ever.

The smell began to dominate now and d'Bois began to detect notes of that singular odour which 'angs around a butcher's shop, or lingers on the field in the aftermath of battle, the scent of the dead and dying. Suddenly he became aware that the air was parched and dry, as if all moisture had been sucked from it. More disturbingly, those *sinistre* 'noises off' as you *Anglais* say, began to impinge upon his conscious ear: light, furtive, scuttling sounds, made by things that were far too big to be mere rats or any other conventional subterranean creature.

Yet the trail led on, and d'Bois like a stag 'ound, was not to be put off the scent by mere sounds, no matter how outré or inexplicable they appeared. Drawing one of his pistols, and with his moustaches positively aquiver, he marched on, but now with a cautious tread, for ahead he had detected the presence of a faint illumination punctuating the dark. Turning the lantern low until it was no more than a flicker, he stalked forward, alert, poised, ready for any eventuality. The tunnel ahead opened out now and it was from here that the charnel odour seemed to emanate most strongly. Moving forward, d'Bois crept to a small outcrop of rock at its entrance and began his reconnoitre.

What was revealed was a large, roughly semi-circular cavern located in what must be very close to the 'heart of the mountain. The roof sloped high above him, a natural formation, vaulted like the arches of a church and through it—via a large sinkhole—poured in a single shaft of purest sunlight, cutting like a knife deep into the gloom. The contrast between the blinding light from above and the stygian shade below was most pronounced, lending the cavern a surreal quality, as if one had suddenly come upon an abandoned cathedral. From the ceiling 'ung row upon row of sharp, serried stalactites, looking for all the world like a wicked set of fangs caught in mid-bite, a picture enhanced by the jagged stalagmites which rose up to greet them.

The dark splashes led away into the centre of this most unsettling place and beyond into the darkness, but d'Bois 'esitated there on the verge of entering, as an unnatural stillness settled on this subterranean temple, as if the mountain itself was caught upon the point of exhalation. It was most strange, but d'Bois cannot think of a better way to describe it, and now he could see more alcoves stretching from floor to vaulted ceiling, sloping up like vertical graves in the very rock.

Merde, he swore softly, and in an instant his *chasseur's* eye caught more horrifying details in the main body of the cavern: strange effigies and symbols cunningly fashioned of bones and twisted cartilage, sinews entwined into grisly statues and obscene icons, a series of bizarre and unsettling tableaux fashioned from the leavings of the dead in a warped, perverse celebration of mortality.

At its heart lay a most disturbing black altar, elevated upon some a kind of sacrificial platform, but raised to what blasphemous god, d'Bois

could not tell. Four great dark ebon candles were raised at each of its corners, and it was adorned with many strange implements and devices, whose forms were unknowable, unguessable, though some of the simpler objects suggested some bizarre form of musical instrumentation: flutes carved from human leg bones, strange stringed instruments fashioned from men's intestines, drums made of flayed skin...

But beyond, in a great steaming pile in the middle of the circle of light, were no mere bleached bones or dusty skeletons, but fresh remains: bodies, muscles, tendons, skin, meat and exposed viscera stinking abominably, like carcasses in a butcher's shop. D'bois saw the uniforms and accoutrements of French, Spanish, Portuguese and British soldiers who must have somehow ended their sorry days in this unholy place. He recoiled, almost choking upon the bile that rushed unbidden to his throat. His foot was still poised on that threshold, yet somehow he knew that if he entered that terrible place, it would be the very last step he ever took.

Even now, many winters later, it makes d'Bois shudder to recall such an unsettling and unholy image.

d'Bois instinctively felt the rising tide of a malice which seemed to swell and grow from within. That charnel house smell rose in pitch until it became quite choking, and now he understood it to be what it was: a seething, invisible cathedral of hate, a concentration of malevolence, a manifestation of an awful ancient will which had subsisted for untold centuries there in that benighted cavern, hidden far from the warm embrace of sunlight. Then there was a sound, an awful sound, beginning as a disgusting low sibilant hiss, growing and swelling, seeming to echo and re-echo inside his head, like the shriek of a thousand demons, building to an awful inhuman crescendo, like the climax of some blasphemous symphony... he screamed with the unearthly horror of it all and then... and then...

EIGHT

The Battles of the Monasterio de St Cloud

The next thing d'Bois knew he was outside, blinking as the blinding glare of the autumn sunlight dazzled him. He must have taken to his heels like a raw recruit at the battle's opening barrage, running senseless, blind, consumed by the horror of what he had felt. Now he was in the middle of the graveyard once more, panting and sweating, that sinister entrance gaping behind him. All at once, he bent over, retching bile into the dust, white as a phantom, the blood drained from him and acid tears stinging his cheeks. It was a while before he was master of himself once more and comprehended that words were being spoken to him.

'My goodness, whatever is the matter?'

Disoriented, d'Bois straightened, but kept his face shaded, trying to conceal his sorry condition from *Monsieur le Docteur* who was approaching with an expression of concern upon his visage.

'Oh, it's you Lieutenant. My apologies, for a moment I thought you one of your men, wandered up here from the ward. Are you quite well?'

'I will be. A momentary weakness, *Docteur*. Forgive me, I am not quite myself.' The effect of the daylight and having to focus upon normal discourse began to have an effect upon d'Bois, and with every passing moment, the inner soldier began to reassert himself.

'Are you certain, Lieutenant?'

'*Oui, Docteur*, it is nothing, a passing indisposition.' d'Bois tried to make light of his affliction. 'Perhaps, it is some small reaction to the strange events of last night.'

‘Strange events?’ Malféas looked puzzled. ‘Whatever can you mean, Lieutenant?’

‘You noticed nothing amiss last night, *Docteur*?’

‘Alas, no, I was not in the vicinity yesterday evening. I am a martyr to insomnia and often take to the hills to walk in the moonlight to try and curb my restless spirit. I was on one such ramble, far from the *monasterio*’s walls, last evening. I have a strange fascination for nocturnal creatures, considering myself, at least partially, to be one of them. I often rove these hills when the fit takes me, seeking the company of firefly and owl, hoping to alleviate my condition through sheer exhaustion.’

‘Indeed, *Docteur*? Then you know nothing of last night’s... bizarre ‘appenings?’

‘No. I returned at dawn and checked in on the patients and finding all was apparently well, have slept soundly until a short while ago. Whatever can have happened?’

‘You missed a great deal, *Docteur*. Something attacked poor Henri.’

‘Something?’

‘A beast, a wild animal.’

‘Mercy. How terrible.’

‘Terrible indeed, for this beast appeared to wear the shape of a man... or rather a boy, at least,’ d’Bois said, peering keenly at the *Docteur*, to see what effect this might have upon the old man’s beatific features. But they remained remarkably placid, before resolving into a quizzical aspect.

‘A beast that wears the shape of a man? Is that some kind of riddle, Lieutenant?’

‘No riddle, Monsieur, I assure you. It wore the aspect of a peasant child, but this concealed the shape of a demon.’ At this revelation, the *Docteur*’s bushy eyebrows stood to attention.

‘Come Lieutenant, surely this is a joke? I am a man of science, of rationality. This is surely some mistake, perhaps a hallucination bought on by the recent strain of battle? I have known men under the immense strain of command to...’ Malféas’ features returned to their bland neutrality, as he recounted the symptoms of his battle-weary patients, yet even as he spoke smoothly and convincingly, something in his eyes was not wholly honest it seemed to d’Bois.

‘I too am a rational man, Monsieur,’ d’Bois countered, ‘or I was,

until recently. Yet even I cannot deny the proof of my own eyes.'

'But this is preposterous, this is the age of reason, enlightenment, surely this kind of thinking belongs in the dark ages...'

'As does the creature we encountered, *Docteur*, but I can assure you it was quite real. As tangible as you or I...'

'Well, I am at a loss to explain this, Lieutenant. I don't doubt your earnestness, but simply your conclusions. Let me speak to Mlle and examine the patient you say it attacked. Perhaps that will shed some light upon this apparent darkness?'

'Let us hope so *Docteur*, let us hope so.'

Still wearing a look of puzzlement, *Monsieur le Docteur's* aged legs shuffled him off toward the hospital tent. Yet as he left, d'Bois suspicions were picqued: something about the *Docteur's* story and his reaction didn't ring entirely true. Perhaps it was just instinct, but that is something a soldier learns to rely on and something told d'Bois that Monsieur was playing us false or at the very least, concealing the truth in some way. As a man of science, perhaps he found d'Bois' story to be unbelievable, yet this apparent insomnia was newly-found and most curious, and certainly extremely convenient in removing him from the centre of last night's *outré* events.

Was it that, or was it perhaps that he was secretly in league with the guerrillas who roamed these hills, and had disappeared to keep some clandestine appointment with them? d'Bois moustaches twitched. Something was not quite right with *Monsieur le Docteur*, or d'Bois was the prince of the Danes. But whatever he was up to, d'Bois' highly sensitive nose would sniff out the truth of it, of that you should have no doubt.



That disturbing idea and a thousand others dogged d'Bois' footsteps as he trudged his way back to the comparative calm of the 'ussars camp. His thoughts were as heavy as his steps: the dilemma of the *Docteur* was but small beer, as you Anglais say, beside the greater mystery which he had uncovered in the depths of that bizarre 'ollow hill.

Mon Dieu, but even the meagre heat of the autumn sun and the mundane sights of the surface world, could not quite dispel the lingering

effects of the powerful force which had overcome d'Bois' poor brain in that monstrous place. Even now, his rational mind struggled to come to grips with exactly what he had encountered there. Was what he had felt even real? Perhaps it was some delusion of 'is troubled mind, overworked by the strain of command and 'aunted by his gallant comrades' fate?

Non! Even allowing for the strange circumstances of the previous evening, d'Bois, knew it was no figment of his overworked imagination. That demonic child had been no illusion; both Mlle and the redoubtable Sacleaux had witnessed it at first hand, and additionally, there was the proof of the digits and its spoor, which had led him directly into that nightmare lair.

What then, had d'Bois encountered there? Not the imaginings of his own fevered brain, but a palpable force which had exercised itself upon him. Perhaps it was the *famille* of this creature, acting in conclave, concentrating their supernatural will, their implacable hatred, to quite overwhelm his senses? Yet if that were so, why had they simply not attacked *en masse*? Why had they not killed d'Bois while they had the chance, so that he could live to tell no tale?

d'Bois forced his addled mind to concentrate. Demons or not, that *famille* were no mindless swarm; their macabre constructions proved that. A predator does not decorate its lair, but discards the bones of its victims where they lie.

Yet these things—whatever they were—had raised complex effigies and grim totems of their grisly works, and that central dark altar with its black pyramid was a most perplexing and unsettling sight, perhaps a focal point for whatever demon attracted their foul worship.

Perhaps that seething well of hatred was meant to function as a warning, an admonition not to meddle in the affairs of the creatures that haunted that blighted abode? Or *peut être* they merely wished to subjugate the mind of their foe, provoking fear and terror in 'im, so that he would retreat, be defeated before any battle could be fought?

There was much 'ere that was uncertain, a great deal to ponder and consider. However there was one thing that was *absolument certain*, no matter how taxed he was, d'Bois remained not only a commander of 'ussars but an implacable foe of darkness. He would never blindly submit to such forces in this life or the next—*tres fort!*

So the afternoon passed in much contemplation and a pile of smoked cheroots lay by d'Bois' boots as he sat beneath the cool shade of the walls, shuffled the pieces on 'is mental chessboard, and played out the many permutations in which fickle fate might cast her capricious favours.

As a relief from his dire contemplations, d'Bois made occasional surveys of the surrounding countryside through his spare telescope and also reviewed the strategic situation in the *monasterio's* grounds.

Whichever way he *émietté le biscuit*—*pardon*, crumbled the biscuit—the best option for such a small force as he commanded was a tactical withdrawal.

Lightly armed and made for operations requiring speed and stealth, the tactics of 'it and run, his 'ussars lacked the defensive strength of the massed musketry of infantry or the sheer overwhelming firepower of artillery—they were simply not equipped to deal with the latent threat of whatever 'aunted this place. Yet retreat was also denied to 'im by the impossibility of moving young Henri and the other wounded, and d'Bois could not... would not leave them to whatever 'orrible fate might await, if he abandoned them here. So what then?

Beset by a hostile countryside and a *Docteur* whose motives were at best mixed and at worst, well, who knew, only added to his complications. Yet he would not despair, for in his meagre column of credit, he 'ad a small but active troop of France's finest 'ussars, a dependable sergeant and possibly also, the formidable talents of Mlle Brockenhurst to draw upon. Those of course, plus his own natural cunning and the dash and élan which came so *naturellement* to those who shared the uniform he wore.



The sun was starting to wane in the west, streaks of orange cresting the sky and lining the hilltops when d'Bois spotted the telltale column of dust which spoke of his troop's return. Slowly, at the walk as instructed, it wound its way up towards him, and d'Bois observed its progress through his glass while scanning the countryside on either side and to its rear. He saw exactly what he had expected to see there, and by the time he could hear the familiar creak of harness, the talk of the men (for

there are none so gossipy as 'ussars) and the familiar whinnies of the *chevaux*, eager to have their evening feedbag, he was well satisfied with the outcome.

The gallant impostor Durand was first through the tumbledown gate, but it was Sacleaux who led them home and such was his natural authority, he did not have to issue a single command, but they formed up line abreast, waiting to be dismissed. Sacleaux issued the command and at ease at last, his troopers dismounted and led their creatures away to remove their tack, and begin the familiar rituals of brushing and feeding their beasts and stowing away their harness. Durand detached himself from the mass and discreetly, beneath the shadowy lee of the stable, we exchanged uniforms; and it was with some relief, for d'Bois did not know how much he had missed it. Now he felt properly dressed and ready to command once more.

'Sacleaux.'

'*Oui*, Monsieur?'

'Your report: how went the day?'

'*Bonne*, Monsieur. As you anticipated an honest day's soldiering reminded them of their duty and who and what they are, and last night was soon forgotten amid the ordinary rigours of service. They grumbled and groused, chatted and idled and smoked, but rode well, a standard day's employment for an hussar. I worked them, but not too onerously and they are as well-rested as could be expected after a day in the saddle.

'Good, for we will need their energies tonight, unless I am very much mistaken. And did you encounter anything else?'

'Very little save a pale sun and an empty countryside, bar a few witless peasants, genuine ones this time it seemed, for they had little food and even less useful information. Yet I felt eyes watching us from the hills, always out of sight, but always there nonetheless. I suspect our beloved Padre and his confederates may not have been alone. And what, if I may be so bold, of you, Monsieur? Did you discover anything that would shed light on last night's peculiar events?'

A cloud darkened d'Bois' brow, but he laid out the facts of his subterranean encounter in full to the bluff, honest face of the Sergeant, omitting nothing, not even his dishonourable retreat, and his subsequent fear and his shame.

When he had finished his tale, he was prepared for protestations of doubt and disbelief, but instead he found only sympathy and understanding in the hulking sergeant's honest gaze.

'*Merde incroyable*. Your pardon, Monsieur, but it sounds as if a very demons' lair lies below us. You have discovered the very nest of that vile creature's clan.'

'So it would seem, Sacleaux, so it would seem. But I am astounded you accept my story so casually, without additional comment or dissent? You have no misgivings about your Lieutenant's courage or indeed, his sanity?'

'*Non*, Monsieur, I have no cause to doubt you. I am no superstitious fishwife, yet I have travelled this wide world as a soldier and seen things... unnatural things... on my campaigning that would make the very *Empereur* himself quail. I witnessed what happened last night and I also believe not everything may be explained by the rational philosophies of our age.'

'I have seen things too, Sacleaux, other things which would... but that is a tale for another time. Yet now we come to it, and we must take our chance however the cards may fall, for we are soldiers of *La Republic*.'

'You have some thoughts, *chef*? A way in which to combat this menace?'

d'Bois was most taken aback, staggered even, for when Sacleaux uttered that one word, 'Chef', d'Bois' heart swelled with pride for it was a tacit acknowledgement of a new relationship which had sprung up between us, and it made this poor Frenchman's heart almost burst. For now he was properly d'Bois' sergeant, and I, his commander. d'Bois struggled to keep the emotion out of his voice as he replied.

'*Oui*, Bastien, I have thought long and 'ard on it and I do indeed.'



The moon shed pale spears across the plateau lending it a strange phantasmal aspect, glowing clouds flitting across its face, dividing the mountain into realms of light and shade. Except for the occasional 'oot of a drowsy owl, the night was quiet as d'Bois strode about his business, making sure all was as it should be. The doleful cry of some far-flung

fox sounded near midnight as he 'uddled within his cloak, attempting to ward off the chill, and crushed another spent cheroot into the dirt. Finally, all was in readiness.

Earlier in the evening, he had sought out Mlle Brockenhurst hoping to enlighten her on the day's strange happenings and perhaps seek her counsel on what he had discovered. Yet this icy Englishwoman was nowhere to be found in the immediate vicinity of the *monasterio*, and he was forced to rove beyond its confines in his search. Eventually, after a seemingly fruitless 'unt, he discovered her on a rocky outcrop some little distance down the 'ill side, tall and pale in the moonlight, her eyes shadowed as they contemplated the steep void of the precipice below.

'Forgive the interruption Mlle, I did not wish to intrude upon your thoughts, but...'

'I was just thinking of my brother, Lieutenant. A brave, handsome boy, but so young and foolish. He came out here stuffed with notions of chivalry, glory and honour, determined to serve his country and live up to the finest traditions of the service, do honour to his uniform and win his spurs...'

'As every soldier does, Mlle, as every soldier does.'

'I wonder if such notions served him well as he lay bleeding on the field, before he was dragged wounded or dying to this unholy place?'

'I am... I am sure he fought bravely and nobly, Mlle, if it is any comfort.'

'It is not.' She turned her face toward me, and for an instant d'Bois saw the hurt and grief that lingered there, but then the mask snapped back on and she was her aloof, detached self once more. 'Now, what is it you wished to discuss, Lieutenant?' she said.

Briefly and with the minimum of embellishment, d'Bois laid out the strange and unsettling episode he had endured in the cavern, adding a *souçon* of Sacleaux's speculations as to the true nature of the creatures we faced.

'And you believe then that this was the den of the beast we saw last night, and a great many more of its kind beside?'

'*Oui* Mlle, it was evident from the malice that flowed from that unwholesome place. For all my many faults I am not easily unmanned by mortal terrors.'

‘I see, well we must think on what we must do, how best we might combat these vile beasts, these *ghūls* as you call them...’ Her eyes flashed and she was stern and upright, a magnificent warrior like Boudicca or Britannia, but then a thought must have occurred and you could almost see the mask slip a little once more, and she was vulnerable again, hesitant about what she must ask.

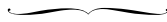
‘I don’t suppose... I don’t suppose you saw anything that might indicate George’s fate down there?’

‘Nothing directly...’ d’Bois hesitated, torn between veracity and delicacy.

‘Come Lieutenant, spare me nothing, if you would be a true friend.’

‘There were a great many uniforms and accoutrements, some undoubtedly English... I am sorry Mlle, I wish it were not so, but it does not necessarily mean...’

‘No, it does not, but it must be considered a possibility, even a likelihood, I suppose. Very well then,’ her eyes narrowed, ‘what do you propose to do?’ That glare flashed fire and brimstone and suddenly it was d’Bois who pitied any creature who might have cause to stoke such hatred in this glacial Englishwoman. D’bois sketched out his plan, outlining the main points as he had done to Sacleaux for her approval, then incorporated some minor adjustments to accommodate Mlle’s incontrovertible determination to play ’er full part. When we had agreed the requisite measures, she dismissed me with a terse, ‘Until later then, Lieutenant,’ and stalked off into the darkness, instantly becoming part of the night. d’Bois, once more, was alone.



d’Bois reached for the flask beneath his cloak and took another bracing draught of the fine cognac he reserved for such occasions. An unlit cheroot dangled in the corner of his mouth, and he felt for the reassuring weight of his pistols, primed and loaded in his belt. Across his knees his sabre lay unsheathed, ready, its blade honed to a keen sharpness by the running of his whetstone up and down its edge. He scented the air and once again tried to resist the urge to rise up and check the preparations he had made. As always, he found it was the waiting which was the ’ardest part.

Some five metres from the fire's remains, a single sentinel sat outlined by the pale of the moonlight, motionless, apparently dozing. Swaddled in their blankets and lit by the feeble glow of the embers as they died to a white ash, lay d'Bois' troopers: dreaming of cards and dice, women and winnings, an 'ussar's principle concerns, whether awake or asleep.

All was still, all was silent, even the cicadas had ceased their restless murmuring, and the night breathed quiet, shallowly, as if saving its energies for the long hours which stretched ahead. The owl 'ooted softly once again, but something was amiss, its note was not quite *authentique* and at once d'Bois' senses came alive, alert, bristling, straining to detect the slightest 'int of menace. The moon clouded over and for a moment there was nothing but the questioning nicker of a sleepy *cheval*...

d'Bois sensed them before he saw them: the stealthy pad upon the rock, the slight sound of a muted foot caressing the earth. Myriad shapes emerged from the darkness, detaching themselves from the shadows, creeping over the ruined walls of the *monasterio*, blurred, indistinct, keeping low to the ground, muffling their advance: quiet, swift, deadly. Transfixed, d'Bois watched them approach from beneath the peak of his shako, scarcely daring to move, hardly able to breathe, as silently and efficiently they swarmed across the intervening ground.

Now, a dark shape bore down on the sleepy sentry, others gliding to take their positions over the recumbent forms, dripping with deadly intent. D'bois held his breath, surely the sentry would wake, surely he must see them, 'url off his cloak and shout his alarm?

But he made no sound, and now something flashed in the moonlight and was drawn across his neck, where it could scarce leave anything except a crimson arc and the gurgling sound of blood, a death rattle echoing in his throat?

'*Mierda! El Falso.*' A voice sounded, perplexed, uncertain.

But the others already in place, took no heed, their blades flashed in the moonlight, striking, cutting, piercing. Yet where there should have been the searing sound of steel cutting through flesh and bone, instead there was a series of dull thuds as the blades rebounded from the sleepers' blankets. A chorus of curses echoed the first, but now was d'Bois' moment and he leapt up and hurled the dark lantern concealed beneath his cloak into the dying embers.

Whooooooooooooooooosh!

The mix of oil and gunpowder ignited in a dense, blinding flash, outlining the shapes of the attackers, their ranks thrown into confusion, dazzled by both the sudden light and the fake wooden bodies they had encountered, wrapped beneath their deceptive blankets. A levy of Spanish guerrillas, compatriots of Father Pedro and his horde now stood revealed. This was no time for niceties, for when an enemy is caught with his breeches around his ankles, one must act with dispatch and press home his advantage. D'bois shouted: '*Volée, mes amis!*'

d'Bois' first pistol ball caught the fellow who had been so keen to cut our wooden sentry's throat in the shoulder and spun him around, so that he fell squealing into the fire, setting his hands and boots alight and causing him to dance a most peculiar jig. From the darkness, came a withering hail of carbine balls, shattering flesh and bone and knocking several of the partisans to the floor and to their deaths. Even in those frantic first few seconds d'Bois could applaud his men's fine marksmanship, for that decisive volley had brought the odds down to a degree that we were perhaps outnumbered by no more than two to one.

With a roar, his troopers charged forward, coming out of the surrounding dark and their places of concealment like an army of demons in 'ussar form, and then it was sabre to sword and hot work too in a deadly melee, as a very rare *chargez à pied—pardon*, a charge on foot—of the French 'ussars thrust the guerrillas back.

Sword to sword and pound for pound we outmatched them, for professional soldiers will always prevail against irregulars, no matter how brave or determined. One-two and d'Bois' blade sang, taking one in the throat *en pointe* and then with a backhand stroke, he deflected a basket-handled Toledo-forged blade, and inflicted a deep slash upon a partisan's cheek which left him screaming.

Yet, as the initial weight of our surge wore off and with the *avantage* of numbers, the Spanish began to rally. They were most worthy foes and despite being caught off guard, they fought with cunning and ferocity, for what they lacked in skill, they made up for in raw courage, fuelled by a patriotic love of their homeland and a fierce hatred of the invader. Harsh blows were given and struck, and now we came to the very 'eart of it.

d'Bois' blade slashed again and another guerrilla lay bleeding, his arm opened from elbow to wrist; and now d'Bois' vision became filled with staccato images of furious combat as 'ussar and guerrilla fought with no mercy, no quarter: Trooper Maquis, whirling his carbine like a club, smashed the stock into the face of a partisan, so that bone crunched and teeth flew; Blanchard, a strapping corporal, wielding his sabre like a butcher's blade, wreaking bloody havoc as heedlessly he swung it back and forth; Aubert, a young Gascon, grunted and fell as a Spanish blade sheathed itself in his side, holding his exposed ribs as he crawled for cover.

Should d'Bois deploy his reserve, his trump card? For now it was the Spanish who pressed, led by a bull of a man with dark hair and a fierce gleam in his eye, who bore more than a passing resemblance to Padre Pedro, but who was younger, wolfish, more dynamic. D'bois slipped a blow and with a lightning counter downed another guerrilla, then ran towards this fellow, determined to bring him to task. The quickest way to end such a fight is by killing or incapacitating the enemy commander, dealing a decisive blow to his men's morale and causing them to flee from the field or lay down their arms.

Now d'Bois intended to prove the truth of this maxim and spare any more of his troopers' precious lives. Through the fog and confusion of the melee, our eyes met and he, no doubt discerning d'Bois' intent, and of a similar mind, rose to the unspoken challenge. With a roar of defiance, he ran to meet me, his cold steel bared ready to do most dreadful violence.

Oh, *mon amis*, it was a most heroic encounter, one for the ages, two warriors, virile, vital and full of manly skill and deadly cunning. Sparks flew from our smoking blades in the opening salvo, as we traded our first fierce blows and came to take the measure of each other, and d'Bois immediately knew he had an opponent worthy of his steel.

Every stroke he gave was countered with a swiftness and expertise that was most marvellous to behold, and d'Bois had to use his nimblest footwork and finest parries to avoid being gutted. This was no time for *outré* tricks or elaborate feints, for we were both in the most deadly earnest, our entire bodies and minds bent to the task of beating down and destroying our enemy. My opponent knew it too, for he redoubled his efforts; the sounds of battle faded around us and we seemed to occupy our own space, a place where only blade and will existed.

The fight became a conversation, a question and answer of sword and sword. D'bois' sabre whispered a hair's breadth from his opponent's throat, while his long blade slashed a sliver of shako peak; a fractionally indecisive parry allowed him to tear a great rent in d'Bois' shirt, but he twisted his body as a surprise thrust *en pointe* bounced from the ball of his shoulder, spraying blood when it should have sheathed itself in his heart. The purest repost saw his foe's blade deflect from d'Bois' pelisse, and tear a rent in his dolman and a long shallow groove in his flesh.

Yet for all this opponent's noble skill, d'Bois was a professional, soldiering was 'is trade, and he was well used to hard nights, long days in the saddle and titanic encounters in the field, and his stamina and endurance was *nonpareil*—unmatched. Sweating and panting with the exertion of our struggle, this most noble of *hidalgos* raised his sword once more, and now d'Bois detected the faintest of tremors in the hand holding the horizontal blade. A feint and thrust sent him stumbling back, his footing uncertain and, as he tried to balance once again, his sword tangled, tumbling to his side. In an instant d'Bois was on him, the tip of his blade pricking the Adam's apple of this noble's throat.

'*Rendirse Señor*, call your men off, for I would hate to have to kill so gallant an opponent. Surrender, with your honour intact, the advantage is mine, *c'est la guerre*—it is war. Come, you will be treated fairly and with 'onour.'

For a moment those brooding eyes flashed defiance and he seemed on the point of making a hopeless grab for his fallen weapon, but then he acknowledged the helplessness of his position and with resignation, he commanded.

'Enough brothers! Lay down your arms.'

The cry echoed and re-echoed across the field and there was a short pause as the guerrillas hesitated, looking lost, uncertain at the apparent downfall of their leader. In a moment their weapons were lowered and d'Bois seized his chance.

'Quarter, grant them quarter!' d'Bois shouted *en Francais* and *en Espagnol*, eager to make sure all understood and nothing foolish was committed by an over-ardent trooper or guerrilla, which would cause the fighting to restart.

Despite their casualties, these partisans still outnumbered us and

d'Bois would not have them inadvertently fight to the death and lose more of his own men, when such a thing was completely avoidable. It was with some relief d'Bois saw reason begin to prevail and all was beginning to simmer down, so d'Bois reached out his hand and pulled the *hidalgo* to his feet.

'A most noble and virtuous attack, sir, which we were fortunate indeed to contain through *une ruse de guerre*. I have the honour to be Lieutenant Gaston d'Bois of his imperial majesty's XIIIth 'ussars. May I enquire of your name, gallant foe?' d'Bois has always found it pays to be polite when addressing a freshly-taken prisoner, for the fortunes of war are such that the position soon may be reversed.

'I am the Don Miguel de Ditri,' he replied, bowing. 'I must commend you for your honourable conduct. It has not always been the way with French officers of my acquaintance...'

Yet even as his courteous reply was uttered d'Bois was looking past him and in an instant he had thrown the Spaniard aside and his pistol was up and levelled.

'What is this treachery, Frenchman?! You accepted...'

But d'Bois' ball was already speeding out into the darkness to take the leaping horror in its throat. In an instant he had used his boot to flick the don's fallen blade up and into the outstretched hand of the perplexed *hidalgo*.

'Apologies Don Ditri, we will parley later, now we must fight... and upon the same side this time!'

For there, coming bounding from the outer dark were a wave of horrors, sounding a howl that was enough to freeze the blood, and in an instant, a fresh conflict erupted upon that high plateau.

Frenchmen and Spaniard, trooper and guerrilla, those who had been sworn enemies but moments ago, now fought shoulder to shoulder as they turned to face these foul creatures. These were the *ghûls*, siblings of the immature specimen we had previously encountered, but grown into great brutes of putrid flesh and brawny muscle, with savage mastiff-like visages and burning pits for eyes. They smelled as foul as a plague pit and moved with unnatural speed, their dreadful claws and snapping jaws tearing and rending at any unfortunate enough to be surprised by their *chargez*.

One leapt upon a guerrilla's back, its weight smashing his face into the ground, and then its jaws locked about his neck and tore his head and half his shoulders clean off. Raking claws swept aside Trooper Marget's sabre and disembowelled him before he could react and his scream turned to a sickening death gurgle.

Yet for all their supernatural strength and agility, they were not impervious to our shot or steel. D'bois flattened himself to avoid a *ghūl's* fierce oncoming rush, and then hamstringed its rear leg, before applying a *coup de grâce* through the back of its bullish neck. As he slid his sabre free, unleashing a shower of foul blood, d'Bois turned to behold Don Ditri's elegant thrust transfixing another between its heavy gaping jaws, the point piercing its savage brain. Yet despite these small successes, the creatures' power and savagery were immense, carving great holes in our ranks, claiming single victims, 'ussar and guerrilla alike and one-on-one we were no match for them. D'bois weighed the tactical situation in a trice and shouted his orders, flailing his arms so that all—'ussar and guerrilla—might understand.

'Retreat *mes amis*, to the inner wall! Make your stand there!' The Don understood instantly and relayed d'Bois' order in Spanish and we gave ground, paying for every inch as the pack of *ghūls* snapped and leapt, claiming more victims as we withdrew. Shots rang from the darkness as sharpshooters' carbines spoke from our prepared fallback position, felling a half dozen of the creatures and giving us a vital few moment's breathing space.

d'Bois' sabre shivered as it slashed against a *ghūl's* skull and bounced off, leaving a bloody trail and ruining the brute's face, and now he urged his men up the slight incline of broken ground and fallen stone, where they stood side by side with the Spaniards. That tumbledown wall, our small 'eight advantage and a forest of blades sufficed to keep the beasts at bay for a moment.

The respite was brief, yet most necessary and as d'Bois hauled his last trooper up by the lapels of his dolman, disaster struck; in his 'aste he misplaced a step, the ground beneath his boot gave way, his ankle turned and he was stumbling, falling to lie prone upon his back, his usual cat-like equilibrium gone awry.

A shrieking *ghūl* was upon him in an instant, leaping through

the air ready to pounce upon his chest with a meaty thump, crushing his bones with all its bestial weight! d'Bois tried to bring up his sabre to spit the fell creature, and make it pay for his life with its own, but it was too late, much too late. Foetid jaws and serrated teeth yawned like the chasm of the abyss.

d'Bois heard the retort of a pistol shot and then its head exploded in a welter of bone and brain, the impact of the ball checking its momentum in mid-air, so that the headless corpse plummeted, flopping with a thump by his side. Needing no second invitation, he was back on his feet and scrambling for the safety of his lines and giving thanks for the deadly eye of his rescuer—a rescuer who turned out to be a particularly flinty-eyed Englishwoman, who nodded her acknowledgment, as she aimed another long barrelled and extremely deadly looking pistol.

'*Merci*, Mlle, a magnificent shot!'

'You can thank me later, Lieutenant.' Mlle fired again and another *ghûl*, went to meet its foul maker. D'bois began to quickly reload his own pistols, even as he took stock, calculating the odds of an increasingly desperate situation. Despite temporarily holding the high ground, all was not so well with our gallant little force. The *ghûls'* savage assault had claimed many victims, both 'ussar and guerrilla alike, seriously depleting our ranks. Now they milled and circled below us, like a shoal of carnivorous sharks, snapping and biting, attempting to drag down any unwary victims and only sporadic fire and desperate sword strokes kept them at bay.

As soon as they realised that one final mass assault would quite overwhelm our feeble defences, we were doomed, and as if to answer of this realisation, there, emerging over the lip of the mountainside, loomed a vast and fearsome outline. Clouds momentarily masked the moon, obscuring the detail of its features, but it was far larger and more malevolent than its bestial pack, at least twice the size of the nearest specimen but far bulkier and rippling with muscle. At its appearance the *ghûls* now swarmed back, circling around its gigantic feet like wolves awaiting their pack leader's direction.

d'Bois, milady and the Don glanced at one another, momentarily robbed of speech by the sheer awfulness of this abhorrent spectacle, and you could feel a new degree of terror exert its grip upon our surviving

men. Muttered curses and groans were drawn from them, as they contemplated the sheer otherworldly power of that terrifying thing. D'bois, knew he must act, for in a moment, unchecked, they would waver and break, to be slaughtered like sheep as they ran.

'Stand firm, *mes amis*, stand firm, it is our only hope! Do not fear, all is not lost, we have more deadly cards yet to play! Load every spare carbine and pistol, but hold your fire, await my order for one decisive volley! Make ready!'

d'Bois had no time to check, for his eyes were held by the grim spectacle of the *ghûl* pack, but he could hear the sound of powder being poured and ball being hastily pressed into his troopers' carbines, while Don Ditri ordered the same measures for his men. Despite our desperate situation, it was *magnifique* to behold such courage in the face of such danger, such defiance in the face of evil. D'bois' hands worked quickly and methodically and now he was cocking his pistols. As he made for ready to receive the charge, he lit what might very well be his final cheroot.

It was not a moment too soon, for now, emerging from behind the strapping legs of the chieftain of the *ghûls*, came a smaller echo of its giant parent, one arm hanging loosely at its side and by the pale light of the moon, d'Bois could see it lacked the digits which he had severed the night before. It was the demon *ghûl* child which had savaged young Henri.

Just d'Bois' luck. If he had been even partially inclined to entertain the notion that these creatures' attacks were mindless and unprovoked, then this proved the lie of it. For now it was *très facile*—*pardon*, very easy—to discern the *ghûls'* motive for this attack: revenge, pure and simple upon the men who had inflicted such injury upon its progeny.

Malevolent eyes blazed and the *ghûl* chieftain—for it could be nothing less—threw back its head and those terrible jaws split asunder, bellowing a blood-curdling scream designed to freeze the blood of men. At this signal the pack surged forward, leaping and bounding once more, almost tripping over themselves in their eagerness to come to blows and tear out our throats. They covered the ground *rapidement*, closing the intervening space so quickly that they were a great blur, a moving wall of snapping jaws, gnashing teeth and glowing eyes. As they closed to within fifty paces, a swirling mass of fang and claw, d'Bois

shouted himself hoarse as he urged his men, '*Attends, mes amis, attends...* wait, my friends, wait!'

The *ghûls* sped even closer now and at thirty paces, even d'Bois had to curb his instincts and hold his nerve.

'Wait... wait!'

Twenty paces now and he touched the glowing cheroot to the vent of 'is trump card.

There was an acrid rush of powder igniting, a discharge like thunder and d'Bois' ears were almost shredded by the cannon's retort. For, being a cunning, low, devious kind of fellow, d'Bois had concealed within his final redoubt, the barrel of the small field piece he had recovered from Father Pedro's 'oard and had ordered it loaded it with all manner of stone, metal, shrapnel and musket balls, to produce an effect very much like the deadly grape shot so beloved of our artillerymen.

It tore through the creatures' ranks, creating great gaps, as scores of them were sent back to the benighted hell from where they had been spawned. The rear ranks piled onward, tripping over or trampling the fallen, adding fresh confusion and dissolving any ounce of momentum the charge might once have had. Now d'Bois yelled, *Tirez! Tirez!* Frenchman and Spaniard fired as one, a great coordinated volley which could scarcely miss at that range, stinging and smiting the creatures further and sending many more into hellish oblivion. Then, despite his poor wounded hearing, he could detect a fresh sound, so familiar and yet so welcome, for summoned by the cannon's discharge, came a regular thudding and drumming upon the earth—music to d'Bois' ears! Now he was ready for his boldest of counterstrokes, for if by some chance he were to die here, it would be with a sword in his hand and his beloved Napoleon's name upon his lips.

d'Bois was up in an instant and amidst the acrid cloud of bitter gunpowder which 'ung like a pall after that volley, crying, '*Vive l'empereur! Vive l'empereur!*'. It put fresh courage into his men and they took up the cry and followed as he drew his sabre and leapt over the tumble-down wall to press home the counterattack. It is amazing how swiftly one is able to change the momentum in a battle from a desperate defence to a surging attack and blood rising, and no doubt buoyed by d'Bois' example, the Don led his guerrillas likewise, adding their impetus to

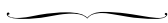
our own. We leapt forward as one to come to blows with the bewildered *ghûls* who now floundered before our combined might.

Facing such a dauntless and unified force might have been enough to tip the balance on its own, but d'Bois always likes to load his dice in such games, and now the drumming drew nearer and his final card was revealed!

There, galloping towards the rear ranks of the *ghûls* were Sacleaux and four troopers on horseback, sharpened stakes couched like the lances of our brave Polish lancer regiments. They crashed into the disordered formation with a shock like a thunder, spitting several *ghûls*, throwing more of the creatures through the air and scattering the rest to the wind. Sacleaux was a most terrible beast in combat—his improvised lance pierced the chest of one creature, throwing up a great wave of black blood and pinning its luckless body to the ground. Others fell in similar fashion to the troopers' charge, just as our infantry hit home, and then it was a melee of slashing swords and desperate fighting. Our momentum carved great bloody holes in their ranks, swords hacking off limbs, smashing skulls and instilling terror into our supernatural enemies. Our brave *chevaux*, enraged with adrenaline were biting and kicking and now the cavalry sabres rose and fell, carving great bloody arcs and our combined assault drove home, shattering those terrible monsters' resolve.

d'Bois smashed his crossguard into a bestial jaw and hacked at another. Seeing their imminent defeat, one of the *ghûls* turned tail, and then another, and then another and soon they were in headlong retreat, taking to their heels and fleeing back towards their nest. The last thing d'Bois saw was the chief *ghûl's* piercing crimson eyes meet his own, full of antipathy and malice, but d'Bois merely raised his blade and wagged it, an impudent act of defiance, before he watched it turn and stalk purposefully away after its fellows.

The field was ours.



Joy unbounded! Tired and weary, covered in the blood of their foes, but exhilarated, elated, the rapture of an unlooked-for victory when death and defeat had seemed a certainty, overwhelmed the men. It

made eternal comrades of those who, not minutes ago, had been hell bent on ending each others' lives. A great ragged cheer erupted and then they were whooping and capering, embracing each other, cursing and laughing, shaking and crying, running through the entire gamut of emotions which seize one at such a time. D'bois' shoulders sunk and his body shuddered, a mix of exhaustion and relief. Victory was his.

Yet what a victory, for even in that moment of triumph, the cost was easily reckoned. There, stretched out on the field, intermingled with the corpses of the foul horrors who would have slaughtered us to a man, lay the still bodies of guerrilla and trooper, brave men who would never stand to see another sunrise. The *boucher's* bill was significant, less than a quarter of d'Bois' command remained and the don's men had suffered equally, for no more than a bare dozen Spaniards still stood. It was fortunate indeed that Sacleaux's *coup de main* had been so timely and so devastating. Without it, we would never have survived.

'A most creditable action, Lieutenant,' said Don Ditri as he approached, fastidiously wiping his Toledo blade. 'But now we have seen off our common enemy, I must ask you where we stand?'

'Surely you can't..?' blood rising, d'Bois prepared to answer him hotly, but he had misunderstood, for the Don continued mildly, 'I gave you my parole, Lieutenant, I am still your prisoner.'

'Pah, nonsense *mon brave adversair*,' replied d'Bois, 'now we are no longer Frenchman and Spaniard, opponents in war, but brothers in arms, a bond forged in the fight against a *terrible* otherworldly foe.'

'A generous sentiment, especially when we came with the express intention of killing you in revenge for the death of my brother.'

'Your brother? The same Father Pedro, who fell beneath my blade during the battle at the caves?'

'The same and here in *España*, that act created a blood feud and alas, despite our recent alliance, one I regretfully cannot forget.'

'I understand, well I am prepared to give you satisfaction at any time... indeed, if you are willing, we shall now lay the matter to rest once and for all...'

'Gentlemen, gentleman, if you could kindly sheathe your swords and your egos for one moment, perhaps we could postpone any such encounter until a more relevant time?'

It was Mlle who came striding forward and she too bore many marks of battle. She wore the dark green jacket and close-fitting breeches of a British cavalry regiment (a development d'Bois had unaccountably failed to notice during the heat of battle) and carried them most fetchingly, despite many tears, rents and splashes of dark blood. The Don bowed to acknowledge her with a most gracious '*senorita*', which sent a most unexpected pang of jealousy through d'Bois' breast.

'The question is what must we do now?' Mlle continued. 'We have survived this encounter by the skin of our teeth, the battle may be won, but the war is hardly over.'

'I suggest a temporary truce while we abandon this benighted place, then,' said the Don. 'We have few men left and little enough to gain by pursuing these creatures.' He paused and then his dark eyes flashed. 'I had always dismissed the rumours about this place as the fevered imaginings of superstitious peasants. This is an old land, full of ancient secrets and hidden malice, yet I did not suspect it contained such real and tangible evil. Let us away, then, and I will return with more men to cleanse this place with fire and steel.'

'A wise course of action,' answered d'Bois, 'for there is no shame in a tactical retreat in the face of overwhelming odds and who knows how many of the beasts yet remain in the hill? I still have wounded men in the 'ospital and if we move them it could prove fatal. Yet if they remain, they will almost certainly fall prey to these foul beasts...'

'Alas, I am sorry to tell you, I think they already have...' a sudden voice came from the darkness; it was *Monsieur le Docteur*, a most solemn expression upon his face. 'This way Lieutenant, there is something you must see.'

NINE

A Feast in the Hollow Hill

The men—some dazed, some elated, most simply exhausted as the frenzy of battle drained from them—tended to each other in a most soldierly way, while d’Bois, Mlle, the don, and *Monsieur le Docteur*, ’urried off to the hospital tent where those hors de combat had sat out the battle.

Despite his weariness, d’Bois’ heart ached with an ominous foreboding as he trudged every step, yet he kept his council until he might see the truth of the matter. As you may remember he had ordered Dupont to load both pistols and make sure his sabre’s edge was at its keenest, as he had been charged with defending both Marmont and young Henri with his very life.

That courageous man had obeyed his orders to the letter, for despite being wounded, he had evidently made a brave fist of his final moments; both pistols had been discharged, the smell of gunpowder still lingered in the air and spatters of black blood upon the canvas walls of the tent were mute witnesses to the fact he had taken an ’eavy toll on his assailants.

Yet it had availed him little in the end, it seemed, for the bloody sabre lay flung to one side and a great pool of his blood lay congealed in the centre of the tent, long streaks on the sawdust floor showing where his body had been dragged away.

Curiously, trooper Marmont still lay upon his gurney, untouched and unharmed, sedated and senseless to all the horrors that had transpired. As he swished back the curtain, d’Bois’ heart sank into his boots, already suspecting what he would find, but hoping against hope. He did

not know whether to be relieved or dismayed when he found Henri's cot lying empty, yet showing no signs of a struggle or indeed any kind of violence. The boy had simply been spirited away.

'*Mon Dieu*, what have they done? What could they want with the poor child?' d'Bois demanded, the rage beginning to bubble up inside him, despite his exhaustion. He turned, ready to lash out, screaming 'Why have those creatures taken him?' and his gaze alighted on the unfortunate *Docteur*, who no doubt shocked by the violence of d'Bois' utterance, blurted out:

'I do not know Lieutenant... they do not usually trouble the living...'

'Usually? What? *Incroyable!* What do you know of these creatures? *Mon Dieu* man, why didn't you speak out before?' but d'Bois' hot temper had risen to a passion and seized by a violent impulse, he lunged at the unfortunate *Docteur*, ready to take him by the scrawny throat and shake him until he confessed. It was only the combined efforts of the brawny Sacleaux and the surprisingly strong Don who managed to pull d'Bois back. Yet *Monsieur le Docteur* now recoiled, and under the hostile gaze of all in that tent, he wilted, seeming to shrink and diminish before our very eyes. Boiling with rage, d'Bois could not speak, and it was Mlle who eventually broke the heavy silence.

'It is evident you know more about these creatures than you have been willing to disclose, Malfeas. Talk now and I advise you not to hold anything back, or I will not be responsible for the Lieutenant's actions.'

'W... when I first came to this place, it was with a genuine calling to help the wounded, one I still hold to this day.' In spite of a slight trembling he spoke defiantly and as he listened, d'Bois' temper began to simmer down. 'War, despite its many horrors, is a boon to the surgeon, a chance to learn, a chance to practice one's art, explore new theories in anaesthesia, experiment with new surgical techniques and treatments. In short, it is a shockingly comprehensive course in both the alleviation of suffering and the healing of the shattered body.'

'Despite its rather sinister reputation amongst the local peasants, I found this place to be well suited to my calling: I set up my field hospital here with little fuss and, at first, I was simply immersed in my vocation, for your vaunted generals have given us plenty of material to work on, a ready supply measured in young lives and broken bodies.'

‘Yet one curiosity I noted was that few of the surrounding villages chose to bury their dead, preferring to immolate them, disposing of the corpse by cleansing it with fire, you understand? A most unchristian practice, I noted, but took little heed of it at first, believing it to be simply an accident of local custom, inherited down the centuries.

‘Naturally, a field hospital sees more than its fair share of mortality. For every life saved, perhaps some three or four are lost, a sad but inevitable consequence of our still limited power to heal. Here, I hired some local peasants to dispose of the dead, using the old *monasterio*’s cemetery. Despite much shakings of the head, whispered words and dark looks, they eventually took my coin and came and did as they were bid, although they would not venture here at any time apart from at high noon on the brightest of days. In truth, I was too busy to take a tally or pay much attention, for I had far too much concern for the living to notice the recently departed.

‘It was a moonlit spring night, pale and cold, when I first encountered one of the creatures. Worn and weary from yet another day of placing young men under the knife, I had wandered away from the carnage of the operating table—for even if we become accustomed to it, we are never quite used to it—and sought refuge in the cool night air. I lit a pipe and gazed out, unseeing, my mind still preoccupied with the cares of the day, roaming thoughtlessly out over the crosses and statues of the cemetery and beyond the outer walls, seeking truth and perhaps a little peace there.

‘I heard it before I saw it—a scrabbling and digging sound which interrupted the stillness of the night. Intrigued, and thinking this some nocturnal animal scavenger, I crept along the outer walls hoping to find a better view, for as I have mentioned, I retain a keen interest in all forms of the natural world. There it was, its back to me, perched upon a freshly dug grave, mounds of earth and dust thrown carelessly on either side, chewing noisily on a femur—the leg bone—of a freshly interred victim. At first I mistook it for some hitherto undiscovered genus of Iberian jackal or hyena and excited, even thought this might be some new addition to the Peninsula’s natural order. Fool that I was, I even flattered myself that it might be named the *Malfeseur* after the man who had bought it to the attention of the scientific community.

But as it squatted there on its haunches, its head turned as it upended the bone to suck out the marrow, I could at last discern its true form and those distinctive facial features which seemed to me a mix of the demonic, the bestial, and the subhuman.

‘As a man I was revolted, for they are not an aesthetically pleasing creature, yet the naturalist in me was also fascinated, for here was a species quite unknown to science, a repellent yet remarkable being which occupied a previously unguessed-at niche on the chart of Linnaean taxonomy. As it continued to feed, unconscious and unheeding, I immediately resolved to make a study of it, so that I might better understand its true nature.’

‘Its nature is pure evil,’ d’Bois intoned. ‘How could you tolerate such an abomination?’

‘No Lieutenant, not evil, merely functional. Is the jackal evil? The hyena? Do we condemn them for their role as scavengers? No, they are organisms which play a vital part in the organisation of life. I have stated I am a rational man and after much observation and study, I have come to realise that these creatures, these *ghūls*, occupy a similar role in the natural order of things. Like other carrion feeders, they do us a great service, if we can only suppress our natural repugnance.

‘Think Lieutenant, this place has been a crossroads for decades, centuries, as armies have fought their way up and down the Peninsula: from Carthage to Rome, from the Moorish conquest to the Spanish *Reconquista*, and now once again it is at the very centre of conflict, fuelled by the ambitions of your imperial master himself.

‘These creatures have haunted the battle grounds down the long centuries and without them, rot, disease, plague would be the heirs of the battlefield, claiming many more victims than mere conflict alone. These *ghūls* make no distinction and I have seen them devour dead plague victims, lepers, those who had been wracked with typhus. Their digestive systems are quite fascinating to a scientist, and are able to cope with all manner of material which would send a human into paroxysms.

‘Yet they despoil the bodies of brave young men who have recently given their lives for a noble cause,’ said d’Bois. ‘These are haunters of the charnel house, eaters of the dead, feeding on the crumbs from war’s table. They are repugnant, They are monsters.’

‘Monsters... hm. Who is more monstrous? They, or your generals and emperors who send legions to their deaths for an idea, or for some absurd notion of unifying Europe under a single figurehead, Lieutenant? I have no religion and I do not believe in an afterlife. Even if I did, it would make little difference. Christianity teaches the transcendence of the spirit: the flesh is weak and heir to sin, but the soul is eternal. I have seen enough of life to know that whatever awaits after death, nothing remains of a person within the cadaver they leave behind. It is an empty shell, just so much meat. Despite our repugnance, why would we deny these creatures their source of nourishment, nutrition, when it is just dead flesh?’

‘Yet, if they gain sustenance from the dead as you say, why did that young one attack Henri, who was very much alive during the first assault?’ said Sacleaux.

‘Ah, I have thought long and hard on that and I can only conclude it was a mistake, perhaps. An immature specimen, not yet versed in his people’s ways, over-eager, snapping at the necrotic flesh...’

‘It’s *people*? Surely you do think of these creatures as sentient?’

‘The evidence is not conclusive, but they display signs of intelligence, co-operation, communication with each other. By most definitions that would make them worthy of the name.’

‘Then why did they attack us? Why drag away young Henri, while he still lives?’ said Sacleaux.

‘Retribution? Perhaps revenge? Your Lieutenant maimed that *ghûl* child when you scared it off. Perhaps they simply identify in spirit if not in familiarity, with one of the oldest Biblical principals: an eye for an eye.’

‘*Merde!* Well as for that matter *Docteur*, so do I,’ said d’Bois. ‘So be it then, if it is further conflict that they seek, then I shall be happy to oblige them.’

‘What do you mean to do, Lieutenant?’

‘I intend to retrieve our lost comrade, *Docteur*, and if that means I have to exterminate every one of the beasts, then that is ’ow the cards shall fall!’

Exasperated, boiling, d’Bois thumped his gauntlet upon the blood-soaked gurney. The time for talk was done, now it was time to institute a *conseil de guerre*—*pardon*, a counsel of war—to discuss how best to deal

with this menace. d'Bois would not put his trust in Malfeas any longer, in one who 'ad argued with such conviction for these feasters on the dead.

Indeed, there was something strange, even unwholesome in his fascination with these creatures that went beyond purely scientific curiosity. His tone when he spoke of them was admiring, almost reverential, and d'Bois despised him for it. Mlle seemed to sense d'Bois' hostility and her timely intervention defused the palpable tension rising in the room.

'Come Doctuer, there are many injured and wounded remaining from the attack. Your talents would best be employed attending to them.' And with that she hustled him away before d'Bois' temper got the better of him, again.

'Excusez-moi, Don Ditri... Sacleaux, I forget myself...'

'Quite understandable, Lieutenant, I think we are all infinitely relieved to be spared the *Docteur's* company,' said the don. 'A most curious fellow, to be so enamoured of such creatures.'

'What would you have us do then, *Chef?*' said Sacleaux.

'A moment, gentlemen—please, take a cheroot, while I compose my thoughts.' d'Bois opened his case and offered them a small cigar each, which they both took gratefully. A flame, two draws, and soon we were all puffing away, and d'Bois' anger, quick to rise, but equally quick to dissipate, began to ebb away, replaced by the fatigue of battle's aftermath: the stiffness of his body, the ache of the limbs, and the sheer tiredness of the mind.

We smoked, each appreciative of the silence and now calm, despite the recent turmoil.

'I rather suspect I would enjoy one of those, Lieutenant,' said Mlle as she re-entered the tent and d'Bois nodded and did the honours. 'The *Docteur* is now fully occupied with the wounded,' she said, exhaling a cloud of blue smoke with apparent familiarity. 'Now, the question remains, what the devil are we going to do about those damn creatures?'

Quickly, and with the utmost brevity and not a little sagacity, d'Bois acquainted them all with what he had discovered earlier that day, his experience of entering the tunnels and the vast underground lair which he had encountered at the heart of the mountain. They nodded sagely, giving d'Bois' loquaciousness full rein for the duration, and he finished his oratory with this definitive conclusion.

‘There you have it. They will no doubt have taken Henri to this central chamber for whatever foul purpose they ’ave in mind. If we are to save him, we must navigate this most hazardous of paths and do battle once more, only this time upon the creatures’ ’ome ground.’

Each of their faces told its own story. The Don thoughtful, yet resolute, Mlle pensive, her mouth crinkling as she weighed the odds; only Sacleaux seemed unpreturbed, retaining that most insouciant of expressions, even in repose.

‘Sounds like a bloody tough nut to crack, d’Bois,’ said Mlle eventually.

‘*Oui* Mlle, I fear it will be a most dangerous mission, perhaps even the end of us all. Yet honour demands it. I will not abandon a mere boy to these things, no matter what the odds. I do not know if I may ask for your assistance in this matter, for this is our fight, it is our comrade who was lost. Not an hour ago, Don Ditri, we were at each other’s throats, but I would be grateful if you could spare me any men.’

‘We will aid you in wiping out these vermin,’ said the don, firmly. ‘Their presence on the soil of my homeland is an affront that cannot be tolerated. You may count on us, Lieutenant.’

‘And you may count on me, too,’ said Mlle meaningfully, daring d’Bois to raise any objection, which of course, he did not.

‘*Bonne*, it is settled then, but *naturellement*, I have some thoughts on how we might proceed for it would be wise not to place our ’eads in the crocodile’s jaw without taking some precautions. Allow me to outline them to you, and then we must speak to *Monsieur le Docteur* again, for reluctant as I am, I believe we will need his assistance one final time before we are done.’



A short while later, the don, Mlle and a small but serviceable force of troopers and guerrillas stalked through the *monasterio*’s graveyard as the false dawn began to lighten the skies. D’bois’ plan, with a few very helpful additions from Mlle and the don, had unanimously been agreed upon and our preparations had perforce been *tres rapide*—*pardon*, very swift. Time was extremely precious if we were to save our poor trum-

peter and d'Bois knew that every second counted. However some things simply could not be rushed, and impatiently, we waited, as Sacleaux made his preparations and all was ready. With *Monsieur le Docteur* beside him (who had been gently or perhaps not so gently 'persuaded' by the formidable Sergeant to accompany him), there was a quick nod, a '*Bon Chance*' and Sacleaux and his men were hastily dispatched on detached duty, with d'Bois' strict instructions fresh in their minds.

Moonlight glinted on the tombs and sepulchres, lending the graveyard a most sinistre air, its ground no longer hallowed but cursed by association with these foul creatures. Despite there being little need for silence—for undoubtedly they knew of our coming—we could not help but move as quietly and stealthily as possible, the creak of arms and rattle of harness the only murmurs as we wove our way between those mocking shapes.

Now we stood before the imposing entrance to the nest, its skeletal scythe-wielding guardian seeming to taunt any living being who would dare enter this dread portal. As they caught sight of this macabre monument, d'Bois sensed a wave of fear run through his companions, as they contemplated the near suicidal nature of our mission. It is one thing to fight such creatures, under open skies and clean air, quite another to pursue them underground into the very belly of the beast. Would they quail at this obstacle designed to provoke such terror? Had the battle been lost before it had even begun?

'Pff! Well he looks like he may have missed a meal or two,' observed milady in that loud and authoritative voice the English reserve for correcting horses and servants. D'bois could have 'ugged her, for her jest (once translated) broke the tension and her insouciance in the face of such an intimidating icon, put fresh heart into the men. If this bold Englishwoman dared voice such defiance, then no trooper worth his salt could do any less. Now, d'Bois realised, was the time to seize the moment.

'Courage *mon braves*, keep together, stick to your orders and we shall prevail. On now, on, *mes ames*, light your lanterns and let us be about the business!' So saying, d'Bois, put flint to wick and strode boldly into the darkness.

Into the earth we plunged, and as we left behind the faint moonlight and the last breaths of unsullied air, the atmosphere quickly grew

oppressive, humid and foetid, as if unseen evil crawled upon our skins. The smell of death pervaded all, causing us to choke and gag and whereas before, d'Bois' path seemed to run straight and true, now the warren of tunnels divided and crossed, twisting and turning back on each other, as if we had entered the very maze of the legendary beast of Knossos.

Yet down and ever down d'Bois led them, those brave men and that most courageous of Englishwomen, for 'is *chasseur's* instincts seldom guided him wrong, and no matter 'ow foul and putrid the noxious odour was, it helped d'Bois' finely-tuned nose scent its way inexorably towards the heart of this great nest of evil.

Now other sounds began to accompany us, paralleling our course, a strange scurrying and rustling, as if many unseen feet lurked beyond the comforting circles of our lanterns. Whispers and insinuations seemed to spring forth from the darkness, an ancient malevolent language, guttural and foul in its articulation, half-whisper, half-incantation, a language that spoke of misery, despair and death. D'bois recognised it of course for what it was: tricks and feints designed to unnerve and beguile the unwary, unman his troopers before the battle had even begun. These were merely the preliminaries, the stratagems and mind games of an enemy determined to frighten and demoralise his opponent.

Merde, but it was doing its most unholy work! Troopers and guerillas who had fought with the utmost bravery above now froze and stared wide-eyed and gaping into the darkness, sighting their carbines and muskets wildly, hoping to find a target that they could not see and could not hope to hit. Even the Don was not immune from this unsettling effect, and white-knuckled, he gripped his blade in one hand and pistol in the other, desperately trying to find a solid opponent to unleash the shot which would end his torment. Only Mlle retained any semblance of composure as her beady gaze swept the shadows, a pistol resting casually on each shoulder. D'bois knew he must do something before our small force fired into the darkness, wasted its ammunition and became a disorganised rabble, easy prey for those horrors circling just beyond our comprehension.

'd'Bois, any ideas?' Mlle hissed. 'Quickly, do something man, before it's too late!'

Furiously d'Bois racked his brains, but nothing *immédiatement*

suggested itself and now even he was beginning to succumb to the undertones of that horrible, 'ateful hymn.

A hymn! *Merde*, that was it! We needed a hymn of our own and d'Bois had the perfect one in mind. His deep baritone began to sound, small almost timid at first, but he soon found his range and then it began to come, first as a solo that echoed from the walls, though it bore none of his usual lusty delivery, a lone isolated voice in the dark. But soon the curvature of the tunnels caused it to echo and swell, and now, hearing that familiar battle cry, one of his troopers joined in, then another, then yet another. Louder and louder, voice joined voice, until our chorus rang out in that lusty affirmation of life, duty and patriotism, which embodies the true values of *La Republic*.

*Allons enfants de la patrie
Le jour de gloire est arrivé!
Contre nous de la tyrannie
L'étendard sanglant est levé!
L'étendard sanglant est levé!!*

The rousing chorus of *La Marseillaise* broke the *ghûls'* spell, the charm of death that would have ensnared us, and now it diminished and faded before our resounding chorus. Even the Don and his guerillas, though hesitant and somewhat nonplussed, managed to mumble their way through the unfamiliar verses to bring additional volume. The creatures' foul whisperings and insinuations faded before our resounding invocation, and soon we had banished all thoughts of fear and undaunted, strode forth, no longer in thrall to the whispers from the shadows.

d'Bois shrugged, opened a palm and mouthed, '*C'est voila*, Mlle' and milady raised a quizzical eyebrow, though d'Bois thought he might have detected the faintest trace of amusement flicker across that impassive face.

Several more lusty verses carried us through the rest of those benighted passageways until at last we came onto familiar ground, the very threshold where d'Bois had paused and peered into that cathedral of hate, less than twenty four hours—a short life time—ago. A quick

glance showed that dread space remained unoccupied for the moment and d'Bois ordered the two troopers who had borne the heaviest burdens forward with hearty encouragement, for he knew they would not have long before the creatures made their presence known. As they carefully placed their precious cargo in accordance with d'Bois' directions, he could not help but notice that Mlle had gone to one side and had knelt for a moment, peering into one of the alcoves near the entrance.

'Are you quite well, Mlle? All is in readiness... we await your pleasure.'

For a moment, she did not speak, her face remained veiled in the darkness and then in a low voice, she said, 'Quite well, thank you, Lieutenant, just give me a moment and then you may proceed.'

Puzzled, yet stung by the need for urgency, d'Bois tucked the horn he had prepared for the occasion into his belt, securing its strap tightly at his side.



A stealthy approach would avail us little now, so d'Bois strode forward with Mlle and the Don flanking him, trying to put fresh heart into his troopers on this forlorn hope of a mission. To their credit, the men accompanied him without hesitation, deploying in the fan formation we had rehearsed, with a small rearguard securing the tunnel mouth, for there is nothing worse at the 'eight of an encounter than to be taken in the rear. Now, all was stillness and silence, the thin circle from our lanterns swallowed up by the outer reaches of the dark, pale beams sweeping over the edges of the cavern's stalactites and stalagmites which looked more than ever like the razor-toothed maw of some great savage beast. Here, in the very heart of darkness, the vile smell had risen to a crescendo of intensity and it was all we could do not to hold our noses and gag. Quickly, d'Bois' eyes flickered heavenward, to the great sink-hole which punctuated the cavern's ceiling. Already the first delicate pink streaks of a new dawn were beginning to steal their way across the sapphire sky and in them he saw hope spring eternal.

But now his attention was drawn back down below to the noxious stockpile of flesh and bone which still lay steaming in the middle of the cavern. There fresh horror awaited, for, lashed to the effigies and totems

which these things raised to the unholy gods, were the bodies of the brave Dupont and some unfortunate guerrilla who had been forcibly dragged away from the battle. Both, fortunately, had already experienced the mercy of death, but great bites and gouges had been ripped from their flesh as if they had been 'ung there and then attacked in some perverse feeding frenzy. It was clearly meant to humiliate and intimidate us, drive us to fresh depths of disgust and despair, but d'Bois was determined not to surrender any initiative and he shouted defiantly.

'Show yourself, hell spawn! Unless you are afraid to face our steel again!'

For a heartbeat nothing stirred, and then a sigh like the exhalation of a great demon swept over us, a foetid miasma which caught the breath in one's throat. Four black flames on four black candles ignited at the corners of the great altar, streaming a dark unholy light which burned with dread malevolence. A noxious smoke twisted in ribbons and tendrils from the dais, which suddenly burned with unwholesome animation, and for an instant they seemed to form into a giant face, a dark, inscrutable Pharaoh, spiral galaxies for eyes, before the illusion dissolved away.

Above, the passageways and galleries surrounding the central chamber were suddenly alive with their bestial forms; one moment they had not been there, the next they were, as if one had blinked and they had materialised in the single beat of a heart. Hundreds of narrowed eyes burned with an unholy hunger as they contemplated our meagre force below. Now we could feel their hate, their anger, like a palpable thing, burning fierce and bright, a swelling crescendo of abhorrence directed at our pitiful ranks.

'Humans...' A voice replete with venom and loathing boomed, reverberating around the cavern. It had an ancient timbre, old and evil, like the grave given tongue and grappling with an unfamiliar language. It was steeped in hatred and malice, a guttural speech which seemed drawn from the earth's very own depths.

'Why have you come? There is only death for you here.'

'Return our trumpeter,' d'Bois said. 'The wounded boy you have taken. He is innocent, and has no part of whatever quarrel you have with us.'

'No, his life is forfeit, the price you must pay for your unprovoked attack.'

'Unprovoked attack? What do you mean? It was you who attacked us, assaulted our encampment.'

'I mean the maiming of my child!' The voice thundered.

'Maiming? It was this creature, your child, who first attacked Henri,' d'Bois said. 'We merely drove it away, before it could take his life.'

'It? That is my offspring. You lie....' Yet perhaps the faintest note of doubt crept into that hideous, disembodied voice.

'No,' interrupted Mlle her tone as icy as the frost upon a winter morn. 'I was there, your child was perched on the trumpeter's chest, tearing at his flesh while he lay senseless. We merely sought to protect our own.'

'You have maimed him, ruined him.'

'If the positions were reversed, would you not have done the same, defended your own from an unprovoked attack?' Mlle countered magnificently, her words full of courage and conviction.

Now, massive footsteps echoed in the cavern and a soft, sibilant moaning emanated from the galleries above, as the dread steps approached. From behind the altar, came a vast form, some two and half metres tall, a mass of muscle and sinew. Powerful arms ending in wicked claws, 'ad slung young Henri lightly across its bulky shoulders, as easily as you would port a brace of game birds and its face was savage and bestial, like the visage of some vast snarling hell hound at rest. Pupiless eyes burned with a crimson fire and its pallid skin was punctuated with many unholy tattoos and hellish markings. Behind it billowed a cape made of the remnants and trappings of many uniforms crudely stitched together, medals and decorations glinting on the fabric like a glittering parody of some vainglorious field marshal. Its demon child, the source of all our woes, clung close to it, like a cat circling a housewife's ankles, as it strode to within ten metres of us and glowered with a barely suppressed fury. Instantly the noise from the galleries was 'ushed and an uneasy silence descended.

'Am I to believe the lies of humans or the word of my own child? We do not feast upon the living.' The demon spawn wound around the *ghūl* chieftain's massive legs and its lips moved, whispering to its parent.

'Children speak as children,' said Mlle refusing to be cowed and staring hard at the *ghūl* child, 'unschooled and selfish, twisting words to

their own ends, their immature desires. We saw what we saw, you hold the living proof in your hands. If you only feed on the dead, why is the boy still alive?’

‘You lie as the living always lie. Down the long ages we have dwelt in these hollow hills, shunning the affairs of man, for your wars and conflicts mean little to us, apart from the harvest of flesh which they provide. You despise us for our ‘unclean’ ways, but our concerns are our own, far beyond the understanding of mortal men.’

‘If your concerns are your own, why attack us?’

‘We do not trouble the living, if we are left in peace. Yet still you persecute us. When you maimed my child, you invited my vengeance—that is why we moved against you.’

‘And so what then would you have had us do? Simply lay down and let you kill us?’ Mlle enquired archly, ‘no, when attacked, we defend ourselves, as you would.’

‘Your iron and steel have slain many of my people, a heavy price to pay and one which affects us far beyond your comprehension, for we do not breed and multiply as easily as you. Despite that, honour might have been satisfied by this encounter, yet now you have the temerity to enter our realm, beard us at our gates, presume to hunt us in our lair, as if we were prizes for the taking. You come to exterminate us, as if we are vermin, but you are few and we are many and it would be the work of moments to decimate you and feast upon your flesh.’

‘Do not be so sure, monster,’ d’Bois growled. ‘Our teeth are sharper than you imagine.’

‘Quiet, Lieutenant!’ said Mlle, then she addressed the chieftain again. ‘We do not come to hunt or exterminate. We come to retrieve our comrade, a wounded boy who you have taken. Give him to us unharmed, and we will leave in peace, without a shot being fired.’

‘You would risk yourselves, to save a single boy?’

‘Would you not travel to the ends of the earth or indeed its very depths, to seek your own son if he was in danger?’ countered Mlle.

The chieftain scowled but a contemplative look swept across its grim visage, and for a moment it was no longer some monstrous demon from folklore made flesh, but a being with needs as real and pressing as our own. Carefully, almost tenderly, it unslung the form of the help-

less Henri and held him upright in a mighty paw, contemplating the wisdom of what Mlle had said. The boy looked desperately pale and sickly, but he was still breathing and there was still a chance to save him, if we could only get him back to the *Docteur* without delay. Long moments passed, then as if coming to a decision, the *ghûl* spoke again in another booming rumble.

‘Very well, there has been enough blood shed today, I desire no mo...’

But the chieftain’s speech was interrupted by a dreadful sound, which shattered the still of the cavern. Henri’s body twitched and jerked unnaturally, as if in the throes of some antic dance, then there was an awful tearing and rending. Black, jagged claws burst through his stomach and chest, showering blood and entrails and then heaved them to either side, ripping the poor child clean in two and reducing him to just so much bones and broken flesh, one half left dangling in the *ghûl* chieftain’s grasp. The horror of this unexpected violence seemed to stop time, freezing the moment and then the demon child emerged, its claws red and dripping.

Oh, *mon amis*, you must forgive me, for even with the passage of well over half a century, this recollection still brings a tear to d’Bois’ jaded eye, he can scarcely begin to describe the horror of it, the despair of that moment, seeing a young innocent boy simply torn apart like that. What prompted its actions I still do not know to this day. Malice at seeing its will thwarted? Implacable hatred for those who had wounded it? Humiliation and exposure of its lies before its sire and its people? Even with any of these motives or all of them, it made no sense then, and it makes none now, apart from sheer naked savagery. You will forgive an old soldier the consolation of a few bitter tears, even when he thought he had none left to shed.

Immédiatement several things happened at once. An insensible scream of shock and horror burst forth from d’Bois’ lips, as he was stunned by this dreadful sight. The chieftain roared in rage and incomprehension and slapped the child an enormous open-handed blow which sent it reeling. There was the telltale click of a flintlock a fraction of a second before the boom of a pistol echoed around the cavern and then a musket ball drilled a hole clean through the demon child’s forehead, dropping it dead as a stone on the cavern floor.

The chieftain dropped to its knees cradling the inert form, pressing the body to its vast chest, as if somehow hoping to revive it. But it 'ung limp and lifeless amidst the gore of Henri's remains and a low keening escaped the chieftain's mouth, before its head looked heavenward and it emitted a primal howl of agony as it cradled its dead offspring. The effect was awful, terrible and its eyes would not meet ours, as it laid the lifeless corpse gently to rest upon the cavern floor.

'Now, see what you have done, see what you have caused by coming here...' It muttered in a dread undertone as if speaking to itself. Its massive muscular back toward us, it traced a mighty finger over the forehead of its fallen child, smearing the black blood which pooled in the bullet hole. Then suddenly it sprung up, wheeled its vast bulk around and dropped into a crouch, poised, ready to spring, snarling its hatred at us, searching to see who had fired the fatal shot.

'See what you have done!'

d'Bois' eyes flickered right and to his surprise, he found it was Mlle who held the smoking gun, still extended in the same position as when she had pulled that fatal trigger.

'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord,' intoned Mlle coldly and now she was bringing up another pistol and firing again, as the chieftain hurtled toward us. We both managed to dive out of the way at the last second as its weighty bulk came barreling past us and ploughed into our backlines. Now, a gibbering circle of horror began to descend from the galleries, as a swarm of *ghûls* dropped into the pit to join their chieftain and enact vengeance on the presumptuous humans, who had invaded their realm and slain their crown prince.

Mon Dieu, it is a sight one can scarce forget, and still it causes the pulse to quicken, the blood to chill and a strange tremor to seize the vitals, even these many decades later.

As d'Bois sprang to his feet, behind him all was mayhem. The don, the guerrillas and his troopers struggled to contain the unleashed wrath of the *ghûl* chieftain, as it charged headlong into their ranks sending several flying with a sickening crunch. Muskets and carbines fired a loose volley, enveloping the entrance in a pall of black smoke, searing bullets biting deep into its flesh. But in its madness and grief they scarcely seemed to slow it down at all. The next moment it had seized

two guerrillas by the neck, lifted them bodily with hammer-like fists and squeezed until their heads popped like ripe melons, spraying brains and gore over their horrified comrades.

Yet terrifying as this sight was, it was not d'Bois' only concern, for now the main body of the *ghûls* began to muster on their cavern floor, their massed ranks a solid wall of teeth and claw, ready to rend us apart. There were so many of them that they would quite overwhelm us with their numbers and even as d'Bois realised this, they began to surge forward, rippling with implacable hatred, ready to burst upon us like an ocean wave swallowing a child's boat.

d'Bois drew his sabre, lifted his eyes to the heavens, and gave a despairing cry, entrusting his fate to a higher power!

'Throw, throw my friends, throw for your lives! Let your aim be true and God preserve us!'

Now the *ghûl* swarm broke into a trot, a horrific stampede gathering momentum and in scant seconds it would be upon us! But there, smoking shapes began to curve and arc through the air, emitting a fizzing, hissing sound, falling just ahead of the advancing host! Heedless, blind, they ploughed onwards, ready to break into the final charge which would have been our utter ruin.

'*Attention! Protège toi*, protect yourselves!' cried d'Bois 'urling himself toward Mlle and we both scabbled toward cover, as we had planned for just this moment, landing in an ungainly heap behind the protection of a small rocky outcrop. D'bois had just enough sense to pull his shako down to cover his ears before the inevitable.

The next moment the cavern erupted in a blinding light and thunderous roar as a resounding series of explosions rang through it, piercing, deafening, sufficient to have woken any dead who had been unfortunate enough to be interred here.

The *ghûl* charge was torn apart as if it had hurtled headlong into the teeth of the Grand Imperial Battery; bodies, limbs, heads and viscera were hurled in all directions, thrown to the winds as the volatile charges detonated. Dozens, scores, must have perished in that instant and many more were wounded and maimed. It was like a great avalanche had been halted mid-fall, its progress impeded by a sudden impenetrable barrier of fiery lava, its force completely dissipated by the fierceness of the convergence.

Now, dazed and confused, the surviving *ghûls* staggered and reeled amidst acrid clouds of gunpowder, deafened, bewildered by the explosive bombardment that had quite overcome them. For a moment a few of the larger, fiercer specimens tried to recover themselves, to find the courage to rekindle their charge.

But more bombs rained down upon them, an additional dose of the explosive and grapeshot *grenados* which had killed the charge outright and now packed musket balls tore through them, demoralising them even further. Soon these last few were also in headlong flight, retreating back up the walls, falling back into the galleries and deeper tunnels, while carbine shots harried them from afar, picking off any lingering stragglers. The *ghûls'* final murderous charge had ended in ruin and dissolution.

Certainement, you may wonder how all this was possible indeed. D'bois is not a religious man and when he had cast eyes heavenward looking for salvation, he had in fact been searching for the stolid features and dependable moustaches of Sacleaux and his small detachment of troopers. Those brave exhausted men had forced-marched themselves up the mountain carrying their load of improvised *grenados* and the final barrels of gunpowder we had liberated from Father Pedro's guerrillas, and arrived just in the nick of time at the great sinkhole to pull d'Bois' bacon from the pan—as I believe you English say, *non?*

It was *they* who had rained down death and destruction upon our ghoulish foes, and it was they who now peered down from the rim of the cavern. With a hasty *pardon*, d'Bois untangled himself from the delectable form of Mlle (not without a certain momentary reluctance, it's true), restored his equilibrium and raised his sabre to his nose in acknowledgement, to be met with hearty cheers from his comrades above.

Yet, even as the smoke cleared and the dust settled on this *redoutable* victory, a fearsome roar told d'Bois that the battle may have been over, but the war was yet to be won. He whirled around to discover a scene of utmost carnage where the chieftain had been about its bloody business. Several guerrillas and troopers lay dead or mortally wounded, fallen where the *ghûl* chieftain had pulverised them, and the Don was slumped insensible against the cavern wall, a grievous shoulder wound staining his frock coat. Having been decimated by this ferocious onslaught, the

few survivors had retreated back into the tunnel entrance where they were now busily warding off the enraged chieftain with a thicket of bayonets and sword points, poking at it from that confined space, where it could not so easily get at them.

d'Bois took a moment to appraise the tactical situation and then looked to his right to find Mlle hastily reloading her pistols. There followed a frantic series of hand signals to signify his intentions, then he took an instant to strike his slow match and when a glance and a nod from Mlle showed she was ready, we began the final act of that deadly dance.

'Monster! Monster! Your people are defeated and scattered. Turn, turn now and face your nemeses!' d'Bois bellowed, but the chieftain was quite overcome by its rage, and did not hear, continuing to try and batter its way through the troopers' improvised thicket of steel.

'Perhaps then, you will heed this,' d'Bois took careful aim and waited for a clean opening as the chieftain's gaudy cloak whipped and whirled about. Quite deliberately he put a shot into the soft flesh at the back of the creature's knee, gambling that it would have the same effect as upon a human opponent for it is a most debilitating and painful wound to endure. The chieftain emitted a great scream of pain, buckling and faltering and then swivelled around clutching at the wound, where the ball had struck but not quite shattered its great kneecap.

'*You!*' it screamed, in a voice that was like the rumble of the apocalypse. '*You have killed my child, slaughtered my people, defaced our temple, you will never leave this place alive!*'

Despite the grievous wound, it came bounding forward like a great warhorse whose legs have been shot from under it, but whose great heart still refuses to yield and yet pumps its lifeblood, urging it on. Despite his utmost attempts at provocation, it was not d'Bois whom the chieftain aimed at but Mlle who immediately fired off a shot of her own. Her aim was true, but the ball merely glanced off the thick part of that brutish skull and then it was upon her, swinging those muscular arms, trying to rake her with its wicked talons. Mlle, for her part, skipped nimbly aside with a grace which would have become a prima ballerina, dexterously evading those savage blows which would have meant immediate death if they had connected.

The chieftain stomped and flailed trying to lay hands on the infuriating figure which danced and pirouetted before it, close, but always maddeningly just out of reach.

Now Mlle had drawn a blade of her own and stung the chieftain with well-timed counterstrokes to each lumbering blow. Despite her audacity, d'Bois had no doubt this could not end well, for the slightest mischance would mean her death, but with the beast distracted for an instant, d'Bois turned to his comrades at the tunnel entrance, and shouted, 'Save the don, and any others you can! Drag them back into the tunnel, *Dépêchez-vous, mon braves!*'

As the troopers and guerrillas alike hurried to retrieve their fallen comrades, d'Bois turned back to the fray for now was the time to strike the decisive blow. He struck a match from the box he had nurtured so carefully and then applied it to the black powder which he had trailed into the cavern in the horn he had skilfully concealed at his side, at the very outset. It took a moment to catch and then the flame sparked, hissing into life, and began to burn sulphurously with a wicked intent towards the casks, which his troopers had concealed by the cavern's entrance.

'Mlle Brockenhurst, the time for dancing is over! If you would be so kind, please?' d'Bois shouted and Mlle gave a small nod of acknowledgement and skipped lightly aside as the chieftain launched another murderous swing, riposting with a cut which drew a shower of blood and another vile exclamation from the beast. Yet, as she nipped nimbly aside once more, an unexpected eddy of that gaudy cloak became entangled with her feet and in a moment, an incidental brush of the chieftain's flailing elbow sent her reeling to land with an unedifying crunch upon the cavern's floor.

Merde! The chieftain still stung by its wounds, would be upon her recumbent form in a moment once it realised, and d'Bois must respond *immediatment* if she were not to be pummelled to a pulp by those awful fists! Drawing his sabre, d'Bois leapt across the intervening space like a stallion at the gallop, and positioned himself over the prone form of milady, to find himself facing the now grinning giant.

'*Stand aside little man, and I may yet suffer you to live. She though, must pay the ultimate price,*' that heavily fanged maw growled, as it lowered itself down towards d'Bois' eye level, emitting a great wave of stinking

breath. D'bois' moustache curled at this foulness, as the beast flexed those great arms preparing to rend one or perhaps both of us apart.

'Never! Not while I live!' d'Bois cried and as his lightning quip was deployed, so too was a lightning lunge of his sabre.

Now, as all great cavalrymen and students of warfare know, the sabre is made for cutting, not thrusting, but when the need is great, the tool must answer, and propelled by d'Bois' quicksilver arm, the blade flew straight and true, its tip buried, *en pointe*, into the soft, liquid jelly of that crimson left eye. The chieftain recoiled with a great shriek, staggering backwards, clutching both hands to its face and the ruined orb which now streamed with black gore.

There was not a moment to lose, and in that brief respite, d'Bois dragged Mlle abruptly to her feet. Still dazed and unsteady, for a moment she seemed insensible of both her surroundings and even who she was, but d'Bois' insistent voice was quick to remind her.

'Pardon, but I believe we have rather outstayed our welcome, Mlle.'

'I am at your disposal,' she replied shakily, 'though my legs seem to have other ideas. Your arm if you please, d'Bois!'

It was hers in an instant and, as the flame of the gunpowder trail burned alarmingly close to the barrels, d'Bois set off, pulling her with him, moving as fast as our sorry feet would carry us, propelling our weary bodies only through an extreme effort of will. Already, d'Bois could hear the stomp of the chieftain's massive feet as it shrugged off the effects of its wound and came barrelling after us, desperate to enact a murderous revenge, before we could escape its clutches. Oh, *mon Dieu!* Each metre felt like a mile, each breath a burning ordeal and d'Bois daren't look behind, but seemed to feel its hot, repulsive exhalation on the back of his neck.

Yet desperation lent us the speed of extremity, and now, as the powder burned agonisingly close to its destination, d'Bois sprinted forward, half-pulling, half-dragging Mlle after him, through sheer force of will.

There was a fearful slamming sound as the chieftain tried to squeeze its vast bulk into that confined space and pull us back into its domain. But both d'Bois and his burden had dived beyond it now and into the safety of the tunnel's boundary, staggering and sliding across the sandy tunnel floor.

d'Bois remembers with horror the swish of a great volume of air over his head as the chieftain's arms scrabbled to catch us and then a last awful howl born of rage and frustration as we rolled away, evading its grasp. In a moment, with a speed born of utter desperation we were up and running like the hounds of hell were at our heels, away into the enveloping darkness, running sightless, fleeing on instinct alone away from that place. There was a blinding light, like bolts of lightning had been pulled down from the heavens, then a deafening roar and then, then, d'Bois remembered no more.

T E N

A Rendezvous Beneath the Stars

Awareness came in small increments, and d'Bois' first conscious sensation was of a tugging motion upon his wrists, pulling at him, while his body, curiously, remained fast. His lower limbs were held immobile like they had been frozen by the rictus of death, but his head rung like a congregation of bell ringers after they had been at the brandy and are now enthusiastically pealing a greeting at the arrival of a new dawn—so at least he was alive. When he tried to raise some small objection to this cacophony, he found his mouth parched like a desert at noon, brimful of ashes and dust. His attempted words *rapidement* devolved into a hacking spluttering and coughing.

'He lives, he lives, thank God.'

'*Oui*, Mlle. Troopers, dig, carefully now! Loosen the earth around the *chefs* knees. Quickly, or I will have your ear lobes for my stirrups!'

'Brave, foolish, but brave, he shielded me from the worst of the blast. Sergeant, please, make sure he lives to tell the tale.'

'I will try Mlle but have no fear, our *chef* is made of stern stuff. Dig you dogs! Now heave, together! *Merde*, were you born this inept or did you have to be especially schooled to be so useless?'

d'Bois made to raise some small objection to this rough treatment and rougher discourse. But while he 'eard all, he could contribute little. Something seemed to shift around his knees, restoring some feeling to his benumbed calves, however before he could comment anew upon

this development, darkness folded around him once again and his next conscious thought came in a very different place.



d'Bois awoke alone, in a comfortable bed covered by clean white sheets, with the wintry light, pale and gleaming, streaming with an almost unearthly luminescence through the flaps of a tent. For a long while he just lay there, looking at the light as a gentle breeze stirred the canvas, making it dance and shift as it fell upon the floor in ever-changing patterns, his mind as empty and peaceful as the void. He could not move, would not stir, losing himself in the sublime emptiness, the complete absence of thought. Yet even as he lay there, he knew that memories, intimations of the recent past were circling, testing the barriers of his fortress of indolence.

No man is able to postpone the pain and woe of life indefinitely, even one who has recently fought the forces of darkness and quite reasonably believes he might be excused the cares of duty for a while. Soon though, small details began to seep through, intruding upon d'Bois' relaxed, indulgent state.

He slowly became aware of the battered and bruised condition of his body, which, although initially as stiff as if it had been cast from iron, was now finding that sensation was slowly returning. Peeping hesitantly under the covers, he noted that his many wounds and scars had been expertly tended and dressed, and that he had also been washed and bathed, pink and clean. Exactly how long had he been lying here and also, why was he completely *nu*—naked beneath the sheets?

Pondering these mysteries provoked even further self-examination and now he discovered he was as parched as a thirsty traveller who think he spies a distant oasis. Nearby, a canteen was slung upon the back of the chair, and his fingers reached for it eagerly, grasped, unstoppered then greedily upended it, letting the water gush down his throat. He drank too quickly, for some of the liquid went down the wrong pipe, in turn provoking a prolonged coughing fit which seized control of his body, bringing tears to his eyes, and pain in his chest, as he fought for air.

'Ah *bonne*. It is good to see you conscious and sitting up, *chef*.'

‘Clinging onto life, but barely, it seems, Sacleaux.’ d’Bois managed to hold his breath and stay calm as the fit thankfully passed. ‘How long have I slept?’

‘Most of the day, *chef*. We carried you back at dawn and it seemed touch and go for a while, for you took much of that final great detonation upon yourself. Your back was singed like a *chat* who has fallen asleep in front of a fire. But Mlle insisted upon cleaning and bandaging you, after applying some wondrous salve of her own devising. For a while you were... well... after that you seemed to relax and fell into a deep and evidently much-needed sleep.’

‘For a while I was what, Sergeant?’

‘Well... *chef*, you were very restless and cried out several women’s names... Mlle’s, one Odette’s, and at one point you were most insistent that we summon your *maman*, for you did not wish to choose between them and thought that she might be able to help you decide.’

‘Oh, *merde*.’

‘You were delirious *chef*, from the shock, no-one took it at all seriously.’

‘Hm, it seems my fate to forever appear a fool in the eyes of those who I esteem. But enough of such chaff, Sacleaux. Tell me, how do we fare? The threat from the *ghûls* it at an end?’

‘*Oui*, Monsieur. The chieftain perished by the explosion, I saw it blown apart with my own eyes. A handful of survivors returned to reconnoitre, but we drove them off with carbine fire and *grenados* from our vantage point above, and they fled like whipped curs into the deeper tunnels below. The entranceway was sealed by the detonation and I doubt any will return to trouble the living for some while.’

‘What of our own men?’

‘*Naturellement*, we have paid a high price, but one does not face such monsters and hope to remain unscathed. The troopers are resting and licking their wounds, and those who live are in good spirits and enjoying their ease, as they deserve. We have lost many brave men.’

‘Not only men, but brave young boys, also.’

‘*Oui* Monsieur, it is a tragedy, but we are soldiers, these are the fortunes of war. Henri, young though he was, knew it was a possibility, as we all do.’

‘But to die such an awful death...’

‘*Oui chef*, but it is not the manner of his death we must remember, but the manner of his life. He was a brave lad and none was more devoted or happier to serve the *Empereur*. He spoke of it often. It was a terrible end, but for all its brutality, mercifully swift and in his delirium, I doubt he would have known much about it. I do know he would have been content to have fallen doing his duty.’

‘Perhaps you are right, Sacleaux, perhaps...’

‘Speaking of duty, Monsieur, I took the small liberty of bringing you these.’ The good sergeant lent forward and proffered a box of cheroots. ‘Perhaps we might take a moment and remember all of our fallen comrades?’

‘Ah, Sacleaux you are indeed the best of sergeants and the worthiest of men. Please join me.’ d’Bois selected one of the slim cigarillos and offered Sacleaux another. He produced a match, and we both drew in the smoke and exhaled solemnly. After a suitable pause for reflection, d’Bois asked,

‘And what of the Don and his guerrillas?’

‘Don Ditri was seriously wounded but not mortally so, and after *Monsieur le Docteur* had patched up his wounds, his men have taken him back to his own people. Before he left, I took the small liberty of arranging a truce, a cessation of hostilities, to which he readily agreed.

‘For our service last night, we have his leave to stay until we are recovered and we will not be attacked either here, or on our way back to our own lines. A guerrilla’s promise usually evaporates faster than the sweat on a mare’s back, but it is said he commands much respect in this region and I do not believe we will be molested.’

‘*Bonne*, so we have a stay of grace? You have done well, Sacleaux, none better. It seems you scarcely noticed the absence of a lieutenant at all.’

‘You are too kind, chef, but I merely asked myself what you would have done and my course of action seemed clear. As to that, *non, Monsieur*, the men have been much concerned about your welfare. Without your cunning and foresight, those creatures would be feasting upon our bones this very night in that subterranean hell hole they call a home. The troopers will be most glad to hear you are awake again

and able to smoke, for that will mean they know you are on the road to recovery. ‘Now,’ the redoubtable sergeant continued, ‘I have orders for you, and they are for you to eat, rest and sleep as much as possible. I am to bring you food and watered wine, and even a small tot of brandy, when you are ready.’

‘Orders?’

‘From Mlle, *chef*. She was the one who tended and bandaged you and she was most explicit about your treatment regime, before she departed.’

‘Departed?’

‘*Oui chef*, on a most urgent errand, or so she said. She rode out early this very afternoon.’

‘I see, and did she indicate when... if she would return?’

‘No *chef*, she did not.’

‘I see. Thank you Sacleaux.’

‘*Chef*.’ And with that last exchange, full of princely discretion, the burly sergeant took his leave. Despite the pangs of hunger (usually a good sign) d’Bois had only just enough energy to finish the last few centimetres of his cigarillo, before a most profound sleep overtook him once more.



Several days later found d’Bois, like our *petit* encampment, much restored. Although less than one quarter of his original squadron remained fit and ready for active duty, d’Bois felt that the work they had accomplished was full of merit and at least worthy of some note. Not only had they acquitted themselves admirably in the *chargez*, disrupting and scattering an enemy column, but also killed a dangerous guerrilla leader in Father Pedro, destroyed and denied that enemy a substantial weapons cache, and incidentally put down a pit of howling horrors which had begun to prey upon the living of both sides, before concluding a temporary—though honourable—peace accord. Not bad for a few days’ work and d’Bois’ first independent command, although the final phase of his report would require some delicate phrasing, or perhaps indeed some outright subterfuge, if he ever hoped to command again.

Yet now as he looked around the remains of the camp, he could at least feel a degree of contentment. The dead had been buried and would rest unmolested. As for the living? Well, the familiar sound of the troopers gaming and cursing, the clink as a bottle of wine was passed around, the crackle of the fire, and the gentle whickering and snorting of the horses gave him a feeling of familiarity and satisfaction. The troopers had been sworn to secrecy with some fearful oaths—and not of the profane kind this time—from Sacleaux, and like all true soldiers, it was today's cares that concerned them now, yesterday's travails were quickly forgotten.

Above in the darkened skies of this mildest of winter evenings, the universe had conspired to reveal a great display of splendour and the stars were scattered across the heavens in shining sheaths, suns and galaxies entwined, in a great dance of the firmament. D'bois, perhaps rather conceitedly, was happy to believe this had all been laid on for his own benefit and was content to smoke and lose himself in the majesty of it all, for it spoke to the dumb, inarticulate poet who lurked in his breast.

A light background sprinkle of music punctuated the air as trooper Blanchard scraped a soulful bow across his battered fiddle, and a merry murmur of appreciation sprang up in response. Sacleaux began to entertain the men by embarking on a long tale of his adventures in the Italian campaign, which would no doubt turn salacious and filthy once he had warmed to his theme. D'bois' heart felt a pang and wished he could go and join his fellows, take his ease and a long pull on the wine skin and lose himself in their simple company, but alas, it was not to be.

Even then, he knew this simple truth: any officer who attempts to become one of the men again—even one raised from the meritocratic ranks of the *Empereur's armee* as he had been—spoils the moment for all and will ultimately lose all respect from his charges. Those who are called to lead must learn to forgo this ease and comfort of such comradeship.

Still, one final night would not be so difficult to endure beneath this *magnifique* firmament. Then tomorrow morning we would ride at dawn for the main body of the *Armee Iberian*, rejoin our comrades and our own sweet child of victory, Marshall Massena, and besiege milor' Wellington at those accursed earthworks once more. In a few short days,

d'Bois would be back in the officers' mess and be able to recount his adventures and boast of his accomplishments to Deschamps and Picard, and feel the warmth of a welcoming fellowship of 'is peers once again.

Comforted by this thought, d'Bois wrapped himself in his cloak, took a wineskin of his own and decided that he would leave his men to it on this most auspicious of nights. He would not be sorry to leave this accursed *monasterio* and consign its memories to the past, but he was determined to take in one last view of the surrounding plains before departing, fixing it in his memory for the ages.

A few minutes' walk and soon the laughter and glow of the campfire was far behind him. He stalked 'igher and 'igher under the light of a waning moon, seeking a spot where he might light up, take a glug of wine and enjoy the fine panorama which stretched out both below and above, alone with his thoughts. Soon he had found his heart's desire, a natural seat formed in the hollow of a rock, sheltered by the lee of a stone fissure above, but softened by lush grass and soft herbage to provide his weary body with all the ease of a natural salon. In just such a place, the monks of ages past must have sat and contemplated the mysteries of the soul, the universe, and the will of the one whom they served. D'bois settled himself down, took another long pull on his wineskin and lay back to drink in the majesty of the heavens above. However he was not long in his divine contemplations.

'Lieutenant?' The voice came behind him and d'Bois almost jumped out of his skin.

'*Mon Dieu!* Mlle! Are you related to *un chat* that you are able to sneak up upon a poor unsuspecting 'ussar, undetected so?'

'Possibly, though more likely some darker beast than a mere feline. May I join you?'

'Of course, Mlle, please, make yourself at 'ome. Yet I did not think to see you in this place, or perhaps, ever again, so abrupt was your departure.'

'Indeed, and my apologies for its swift and abrupt nature, but time was of the essence and other considerations meant *La Rosignol* was needed elsewhere. Call it... the expediencies of war.'

'Ah, yes, I had almost forgotten your true identity, Mlle'

'Nor must you ever disclose it.'

'You had my word, Mlle, and once given, no d'Bois would ever break it. Duty I understand completely and no doubt the life of an *agent spécial* has many competing demands.' Not a little *hauteur* dripped from d'Bois' tongue and he meant every word of it.

'It has, but perhaps you do not appreciate the nature of this particular duty. It was a familial rather than a military obligation which called me away, Gaston.'

'Indeed Mlle?' d'Bois said, curious as to why we were now suddenly upon first name terms, for her tone was not as 'aughty and unyielding as usual, and now, if anything, she seemed somewhat downcast.

'Yes, rather sadly, I recently discovered the fate of my brother, George, and felt I must inform my family immediately of his demise.'

'*Mon Dieu*, Mlle, my most 'umble and 'eartfelt condolences, but how? When?'

'As we made to enter the monster's lair and your men were setting the gunpowder by its entrance. I chanced to see something glitter in the darkness of an alcove and stooped to look. I discovered my brother's pocket watch amidst the tatters of his uniform and his bleached bones... quite picked clean I'm afraid. Those creatures must have eaten their fill... but there could be no doubt, it was quite unmistakable, definitive, you might say, I only hope he was... long before they...' and at this distressing revelation, this most glacial of Englishwoman began to thaw, like spring snow upon the mountain top.

'The poor boy, I remember when we used to play in the garden, always soldiers and he was always the bravest, the most foolhardy, always the first one in the charge, always the first to volunteer. A courageous fighter but alas, not a survivor.

'I rather feared something like this might have happened. I hoped against hope, that he might have escaped or been taken away from that place, but it seems he perished here, and his end was as a feast for those beasts.' At this her voice wavered and her lip trembled, for she was obviously much affected by the recollection, and now she began to melt, those blue eyes watered by tears and that firm, resolute mouth even began to tremble a little.

'I am most sad and distressed to hear it, Mlle, but you must not fret, for it is the fate all soldiers accept. I am sure he behaved with the

utmost courage and bravery and fought like a lion for his king and country. Coming of such noble stock he could scarcely do anything less. Come, do not dwell upon his end, but remember how he lived, how he loved, who he was, for that is all we who fight would ask of any we leave behind.'

'You think so, Gaston?' the ghosts of tears glinted upon her cheeks. 'I know so, Mlle.'

There, in the moonlight, was a moment when our eyes met and never more than in that moment, were they the most transparent window to the soul. The next thing d'Bois knew urgent kisses were being pressed upon his lips, and he was being forced by main assault, until he lay on his back. Meanwhile while Mlle was thrusting aside his pelisse, tearing away at his dolman, and he dare to venture, would have been making a determined foray upon the removal of his breeches, if had he not cried.

'Mlle!'

'Lieutenant?'

'Are you sure this is wise... I mean, of course I am immensely flattered... but I would hesitate... a lady... in such a delicate position... I would not think to take *avantage* of... I would hate to think...'

'Oh fie, do not think so much, Gaston, it does not become you. Besides the *avantage* if there is any is all mine... and you must call me Felicity, not Mlle. Now, I think I have made my intentions clear, I do not wish to spend this night alone, with my thoughts and my grief endlessly circling around. Surely an officer, a true gentleman would understand and not refuse me this small comfort? Surely it cannot be such an unpleasant duty?'

'Well, Ml... of course it is not. I would be 'onoured, but perhaps I might suggest a small skirmish before the main battle? Come, let us at least make ourselves a little more comfortable. Let me spread my cloak, let us take a small measure of wine and then I will be more than happy to oblige you in this, as in all things... Felicity.'

And there, d'Bois must swiftly draw his veil, for an 'ussar, a gentleman, does not disclose the details of such an encounter, though in military terms, it was a most prolonged not to say taxing engagement, during which that pale, 'aughty, glacial Englishwoman transformed into a creature of fire and passion beneath the starlight. Suffice it to say

we took much comfort in each other there beneath the sweep of the heavens, to the greater satisfaction of us both.



d'Bois woke in the morning to a gentle kiss upon his eyelids, but it was merely the touch of the sun's rays, and when his hand reached out, seeking his paramour, she had gone again with the coming of the dawn.

Oh, you may wonder at this indiscretion, this unfaithfulness, for was d'Bois not a taken man, already affianced to a woman who was his one true love and would soon be his wife? Well, what you say is true *mon amis*, but d'Bois was young, and French, and an 'ussar no less, with many long leagues between himself and his *amour* and having fought a great battle, he took the conqueror's reward, and that is *peut-être*—perhaps—all the explanation that you will ever need.

Now my dear sweet Odette has long since passed, I am no longer required to keep such secrets and you must understand, I do not tell this to boast of d'Bois' manly prowess, or for any salacious reason, but to show you that lurking beneath the buttoned-up corsets of that cold, reserved, not to say most deadly *agent special*, beat the heart of a passionate and surprisingly gifted Englishwoman. *Zut alors*, the memory alone would make d'Bois blush, even now, if he had any shame left to expend.

Once again *La Rosignol* had left no note or word of her departure, and vaguely dissatisfied, d'Bois sat up, lit a cheroot and smoked it thoughtfully, gazing across the plains as the sun slowly levered itself into the sky, bathing the scene with its pale wintry light and casting away any lingering shadows.

A new day was beginning and his men would be waiting, no doubt, so he roused himself, gulped a swallow of wine to wet his whistle and stood naked and ready to face the challenges of the day ahead. It was the work of moments to restore his uniform: buckle on sword and pistols, pick up his shako, wrap himself in his cloak and be ready to return to his men. There, he intended to resume his rightful command and *aussi* to 'unt up a barrel of *cafe noir*, to steel himself for the journey ahead.

Yet even as he brushed off some small specks from his shako, he found, interwoven with the death's head badge of the XIIIth, a small knot

of bright white and yellow mountain flowers that had been deliberately placed there by an absent hand. It caused d'Bois to smile and this small token left him the impression that perhaps he had not quite seen the last of this most straight-laced and yet surprisingly vigorous of ladies after all.

Of that matter there may be more to tell you anon, but for now, I see Pierre wishes to retire and roust us out from the warmth of the fire and into the harsh cold of the night. D'bois must apologise if he has allowed an old soldier's reminiscences to consume the better part of entire evening, Monsieur. Yet when he speaks of them again, he seem to picture them so vividly, that they come alive and breathe new vigour into this withered old 'usk that he has become. It is as if once more, d'Bois is a dark haired, handsome young dasher, rather than the decrepit old grey specimen you see before you currently.

What is that? Not at all? You are too kind, Monsieur. Yet you say this is exactly the kind of story your esteemed publication is seeking? Your audience would consider it a fine example of an exciting tale of daring and high adventure against the most terrifying of foes? Why Monsieur, surely you flatter an old soldier, but are you sure the world is ready for such calamitous and shocking revelations? You are? It is? *Certainment?* And you say you have a room reserved at this fine establishment for the recording and transcribing of more such reminiscences and memoirs? And you will telegraph or courier them to your editor and a now waiting audience once they are complete?

Bon, Monsieur, then let Pierre set us up with another bottle before he retires, and perhaps if an old soldier may be so bold, some of the finer, more potent *matériel*? For you will need strong spirits and an even stronger stomach to hear some of the stranger tales, macabre stories and outlandish creatures which d'Bois encountered during his many travails, *batailles* and campaigns serving the Empereur during the glory days of *sa République aimée*.

d'Bois' only hope Monsieur, is that *le Monde* is indeed ready and willing to hear these shocking disclosures and chilling revelations. Is your quill sharpened, your ink and parchment prepared? *Bonne* Monsieur, then let us begin...

Fin.

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Be sure to check out the other Seraph adventures, *The Trelborg Monstrosities*, *Tomb of the Aeons*, and *Before The Flood*, available now on Kindle, or enjoy *Before the Flood* in paperback.

John Houlihan is also editor of *Dark Tales from the Secret War*, a collection of thirteen dark Cthulhu mythos-influenced World War II stories published by Modiphius, which you can find at Modiphius.net

DARK TALES FROM THE SECRET WAR

Dark Tales is a collection of thirteen stories set in Modiphius' Achtung! Cthulhu universe, a world which mixes the terrors of HP Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos with mankind's darkest yet finest hour, the Second World War. Thirteen unhallowed stories await within its covers, which range from the wilds of the South Pacific, to the dark depths of the Black Forest, to the icy wastes of Norway, and they come from a stellar cast of writers including David J Rodger, Martin Korda, Richard Dansky and the unsettling mind of horror master Patrick Garratt.

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It is 1943 and the war hangs on a knife edge. Set free by a leading Nazi occultist, an ancient evil stirs in the snowy fastnesses of the Norwegian border, threatening to unleash an ancient artefact which could not only alter the course of the war, but the fate of humanity itself.

A band of brave resistance fighters and a crack team of British special forces plunge deep behind enemy lines to confront this ancient horror. Yet is their strange civilian adviser, the mysterious Mister Seraph, truly on the side of the angels or pursuing some dark agenda of his own? Can the fearful Trellborg terror even be defeated by mortal men?

“A wonderfully evocative tale of blood, bullets and ice.”

– David J Rodger

Tomb of the Aeons

‘The sands of the desert seem as unchanging as the aeons, but they constantly shift reform and remake themselves, so that one is always looking at a frozen moment in perpetual chaos.’ – Commander Siegfried.

It is 1941 and as Ernst Rommel, the Desert Fox, swings his great armoured right hook to send the British Eighth Army scurrying back toward Egypt, the crew of Ingrid, a mark IV panzer pursue a lone British tank into the deep wastes, but are ambushed and knocked out.

Waking hours later, Ingrid’s commander and surviving crew begin the weary trudge back to their own lines, only to become lost in an sudden and unnatural sand storm. Stumbling upon a strange temple complex and a unit of dead Black Sun SS, they are forced to penetrate deep into the heart of the unholy ziggurats and recover a lost artefact, the Fangs of Set, by their guide and fellow captive Captain Seraph. Will they defeat this charnel house’s newly awoken inhabitants and can they survive the horror lurking at the very centre of this tomb of the aeons?

“The writing is excellent and the atmosphere well-maintained ... it deserves to be widely read.” – Sci-fi and Fantasy Reviewer

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Before the Flood

The year is 2034 and Britain is a drowning isle, after a cataclysmic wave destroyed her cities, killing millions, raising the sea level by 60 metres and changing the landscape forever.

The Flood has brought Albion to her knees and now the Devils, a race of malevolent sea creatures, haunt her coasts as the survivors retreat inland, struggling for their very existence.

Mankind learns to fear the sea and avoid the water.

Then a mysterious island surfaces off the coast of Wales, a small team of British militia under the command of the war weary veteran Sergeant Emma Stokes, is dispatched to investigate this new threat. But a chance meeting with the mysterious Major Seraph takes them on a dangerous odyssey through this drowned world, to the hidden fortress-city of Gwaelod, which seems to offer new hope in the battle against the creatures. Yet as humanity clutches on by its fingertips, who are the real enemies in this deadly flooded world?

“A cracking story. Pick up Before The Flood and devour it, then go onto the rest of the Seraph Chronicles. You’ll be in for a hell of a ride!”

– Sci-fi and Fantasy Reviewer

MON DIEU CTHULHU!

The d'Bois Escapades: Volume One

THE CRYSTAL VOID

The year is 1810 and as Napoleon's marshals chase Wellington's expeditionary force to the lines of Torres Verdras, dashing French Hussar Gaston d'Bois encounters the love of his life. But the fragrant Odette is soon abducted by the Marquis Da Foz, a ruthless and sadistic Portuguese nobleman.

Joined by a mysterious British Major, the hot-blooded Hussar is soon in deadly pursuit, but what strange horrors lurk within the shadows of Da Foz's ancient Moorish fortress? Can the heroic duo foil Da Foz's dark machinations, rescue Odette, and prevent the opening of the dreaded Crystal Void?

"Great story, interesting characters, lots of sword and musket action, and the potential for future stories in an underutilised setting." – Sci-fi and Fantasy Reviewer

FEAST OF THE DEAD

Dashing French Lieutenant Gaston d'Bois, leads a detachment of the XIIIth Imperial Death's Head Hussars – 'thieves on horseback' – into the Spanish interior, in search of intelligence, supplies and plunder.

Forced to take refuge in the Monasterio de St Cloud, d'Bois encounters the unworldly Doctor Malfeas and beautiful nurse Mademoiselle Brockenhurst. Yet this former house of the holy holds and an ancient and terrible enigma which Alone, deep behind enemy lines and beset on all sides, can d'Bois survive his first real command and prevent the horrible unravelling of the feast of the dead?

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