Fragile Things

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Extract

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1. The New Friend

Fresh From Their Stupendous European Tour, where they performed before several of the CROWNED HEADS OF EUROPE, garnering their *plaudits* and *praise* with *magnificent dramatic performances*, combining both COMEDY and TRAGEDY, the Strand Players wish to make it known that they shall be appearing at the *Royal Court Theatre*, *Drury Lane*, for a LIMITED ENGAGEMENT in April, at which they will present '*My Look-Alike Brother Tom!*' '*The Littlest Violet-Seller*' and '*The Great Old Ones Come*' (this last an Historical Epic of Pageantry and

> Delight); each an *entire* play in one act! Tickets are available now from the Box Office.

It is the immensity, I believe. The hugeness of things below. The darkness of dreams.

But I am woolgathering. Forgive me. I am not a literary man.

I had been in need of lodgings. That was how I met him. I wanted someone to share the cost of rooms with me. We were introduced by a mutual acquaintance, in the chemical laboratories of St Bart's. 'You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive.' That was what he said to me, and my mouth fell open and my eyes opened very wide.

'Astonishing,' I said.

'Not really,' said the stranger in the white lab-coat, who was to become my friend. 'From the way you hold your arm, I see you have been wounded, and in a particular way. You have a deep tan. You also have a military bearing, and there are few enough places in the Empire that a military man can be both tanned and, given the nature of the injury to your shoulder and the traditions of the Afghan cave-folk, tortured.'

Put like that, of course, it was absurdly simple. But, then, it always was. I had been tanned nut-brown. And I had indeed, as he had observed, been tortured.

The gods and men of Afghanistan were savages, unwilling to be ruled from Whitehall or from Berlin or even from Moscow, and unprepared to see reason. I had been sent into those hills, attached to the ___th Regiment. As long as the fighting remained in the hills and mountains, we

fought on an equal footing. When the skirmishes descended into the caves and the darkness, then we found ourselves, as it were, out of our depth and in over our heads.

I shall not forget the mirrored surface of the underground lake, nor the thing that emerged from the lake, its eyes opening and closing, and the singing whispers that accompanied it as it rose, wreathing their way about it like the buzzing of flies bigger than worlds.

That I survived was a miracle, but survive I did, and I returned to England with my nerves in shreds and tatters. The place that leech-like mouth had touched me was tattooed for ever, frog-white, into the skin of my now-withered shoulder. I had once been a crack-shot. Now I had nothing, save a fear of the world-beneath-the-world akin to panic which meant that I would gladly pay sixpence of my army pension for a hansom cab, rather than a penny to travel underground.

Still, the fogs and darknesses of London comforted me, took me in. I had lost my first lodgings because I screamed in the night. I had been in Afghanistan; I was there no longer.

'I scream in the night,' I told him.

'I have been told that I snore,' he said. 'Also I keep irregular hours, and I often use the mantelpiece for target practice. I will need the sitting room to meet clients. I am selfish, private and easily bored. Will this be a problem?'

I smiled, and I shook my head, and extended my hand. We shook on it.

The rooms he had found for us, in Baker Street, were more than adequate for two bachelors. I bore in mind all

my friend had said about his desire for privacy, and I forbore from asking what it was he did for a living. Still, there was much to pique my curiosity. Visitors would arrive at all hours, and when they did I would leave the sitting room and repair to my bedroom, pondering what they could have in common with my friend: the pale woman with one eye bone-white, the small man who looked like a commercial traveller, the portly dandy in his velvet jacket, and the rest. Some were frequent visitors, many others came only once, spoke to him, and left, looking troubled or looking satisfied.

He was a mystery to me.

We were partaking of one of our landlady's magnificent breakfasts one morning, when my friend rang the bell to summon that good lady. 'There will be a gentleman joining us, in about four minutes,' he said. 'We will need another place at table.'

'Very good,' she said. 'I'll put more sausages under the grill.'

My friend returned to perusing his morning paper. I waited for an explanation with growing impatience. Finally, I could stand it no longer. 'I don't understand. How could you know that in four minutes we would be receiving a visitor? There was no telegram, no message of any kind.'

He smiled, thinly. 'You did not hear the clatter of a brougham several minutes ago? It slowed as it passed us – obviously as the driver identified our door, then it speeded up and went past, up into the Marylebone Road. There is a crush of carriages and taxi-cabs letting off passengers at the railway station and at the waxworks, and it is in that crush that anyone wishing to alight without being observed will

go. The walk from there to here is but four minutes . . .'

He glanced at his pocket-watch, and as he did so I heard a tread on the stairs outside.

'Come in, Lestrade,' he called. 'The door is ajar, and your sausages are just coming out from under the grill.'

A man I took to be Lestrade opened the door, then closed it carefully behind him. 'I should not,' he said, 'but, truth to tell, I have not had a chance to break my fast this morning. And I could certainly do justice to a few of those sausages.' He was the small man I had observed on several occasions previously, whose demeanour was that of a traveller in rubber novelties or patent nostrums.

My friend waited until our landlady had left the room, before he said, 'Obviously, I take it this is a matter of national importance.'

'My stars,' said Lestrade, and he paled. 'Surely the word cannot be out already. Tell me it is not.' He began to pile his plate high with sausages, kipper fillets, kedgeree and toast, but his hands shook, a little.

'Of course not,' said my friend. 'I know the squeak of your brougham wheels, though, after all this time: an oscillating G sharp above high C. And if Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard cannot publicly be seen to come into the parlour of London's only consulting detective, yet comes anyway, and without having had his breakfast, then I know that this is not a routine case. *Ergo*, it involves those above us and is a matter of national importance.'

Lestrade dabbed egg yolk from his chin with his napkin. I stared at him. He did not look like my idea of a police inspector, but then, my friend looked little enough like my idea of a consulting detective – whatever that might be.

'Perhaps we should discuss the matter privately,' Lestrade said, glancing at me.

My friend began to smile, impishly, and his head moved on his shoulders as it did when he was enjoying a private joke. 'Nonsense,' he said. 'Two heads are better than one. And what is said to one of us is said to us both.'

'If I am intruding—' I said gruffly, but he motioned me to silence.

Lestrade shrugged. 'It's all the same to me,' he said, after a moment. 'If you solve the case, then I have my job. If you don't then I have no job. You use your methods, that's what I say. It can't make things any worse.'

'If there's one thing that a study of history has taught us, it is that things can always get worse,' said my friend. 'When do we go to Shoreditch?'

Lestrade dropped his fork. 'This is too bad!' he exclaimed. 'Here you were, making sport of me, when you know all about the matter! You should be ashamed—'

'No one has told me anything of the matter. When a police inspector walks into my room with fresh splashes of mud of that peculiar mustard-yellow hue on his boots and trouser-legs, I can surely be forgiven for presuming that he has recently walked past the diggings at Hobbs Lane, in Shoreditch, which is the only place in London that particular mustard-coloured clay seems to be found.'

Inspector Lestrade looked embarrassed. 'Now you put it like that,' he said, 'it seems so obvious.'

My friend pushed his plate away from him. 'Of course it does,' he said, slightly testily.

We rode to the East End in a cab. Inspector Lestrade had

walked up to the Marylebone Road to find his brougham, and left us alone.

'So you are truly a consulting detective?' I said.

'The only one in London, or perhaps the world,' said my friend. 'I do not take cases. Instead, I consult. Others bring me their insoluble problems, they describe them, and, sometimes, I solve them.'

'Then those people who come to you . . .'

'Are, in the main, police officers, or are detectives themselves, yes.'

It was a fine morning, but we were now jolting about the edges of the rookery of St Giles, that warren of thieves and cutthroats which sits on London like a cancer on the face of a pretty flower-seller, and the only light to enter the cab was dim and faint.

'Are you sure that you wish me along with you?'

In reply my friend stared at me without blinking. 'I have a feeling,' he said. 'I have a feeling that we were meant to be together. That we have fought the good fight, side by side, in the past or in the future, I do not know. I am a rational man, but I have learned the value of a good companion, and from the moment I clapped eyes on you, I knew I trusted you as well as I do myself. Yes. I want you with me.'

I blushed, or said something meaningless. For the first time since Afghanistan, I felt that I had worth in the world.

2. The Room

> *Victor's 'Vitae'!* An electrical fluid! Do your limbs and nether regions lack life? Do you

> look back on the days of your youth with envy? Are the pleasures of the flesh now buried and forgot? *Victor's 'Vitae'* will bring life where life has long been lost: even the oldest warhorse can be a proud stallion once more! Bringing Life to the Dead: from an old family recipe and the best of modern science. To receive signed attestations of the efficacy of *Victor's 'Vitae'* write to the V. von F. Company, 1b Cheap Street, London.

It was a cheap rooming house in Shoreditch. There was a policeman at the front door. Lestrade greeted him by name, and made to usher us in, and I was ready to enter, but my friend squatted on the doorstep, and pulled a magnifying-glass from his coat pocket. He examined the mud on the wrought-iron boot-scraper, prodding at it with his forefinger. Only when he was satisfied would he let us go inside.

We walked upstairs. The room in which the crime had been committed was obvious: it was flanked by two burly constables.

Lestrade nodded to the men, and they stood aside. We walked in.

I am not, as I said, a writer by profession, and I hesitate to describe that place, knowing that my words cannot do it justice. Still, I have begun this narrative, and I fear I must continue. A murder had been committed in that little bedsit. The body, what was left of it, was still there, on the floor. I saw it, but, at first, somehow, I did not see it. What I saw instead was what had sprayed and gushed

from the throat and chest of the victim: in colour it ranged from bile-green to grass-green. It had soaked into the threadbare carpet and spattered the wallpaper. I imagined it for one moment the work of some hellish artist, who had decided to create a study in emerald.

After what seemed like a hundred years I looked down at the body, opened like a rabbit on a butcher's slab, and tried to make sense of what I saw. I removed my hat, and my friend did the same.

He knelt and inspected the body, examining the cuts and gashes. Then he pulled out his magnifying-glass, and walked over to the wall, examining the gouts of drying ichor.

'We've already done that,' said Inspector Lestrade.

'Indeed?' said my friend. 'What did you make of this, then? I do believe it is a word.'

Lestrade walked to the place my friend was standing, and looked up. There was a word, written in capitals, in green blood, on the faded yellow wallpaper, some little way above Lestrade's head. 'R-A-C-H-E . . .?' said Lestrade, spelling it out. 'Obviously he was going to write "Rachel", but he was interrupted. So – we must look for a woman . . .'

My friend said nothing. He walked back to the corpse, and picked up its hands, one after the other. The fingertips were clean of ichor. 'I think we have established that the word was not written by His Royal Highness—'

'What the Devil makes you say—?'

'My dear Lestrade. Please give me some credit for having a brain. The corpse is obviously not that of a man – the colour of his blood, the number of limbs, the eyes, the

position of the face, all these things bespeak the blood royal. While I cannot say *which* royal line, I would hazard that he is an heir, perhaps . . . no, second in line to the throne . . . in one of the German principalities.'

'That is amazing.' Lestrade hesitated, then he said, 'This is Prince Franz Drago of Bohemia. He was here in Albion as a guest of Her Majesty Victoria. Here for a holiday and a change of air . . .'

'For the theatres, the whores and the gaming tables, you mean.'

'If you say so.' Lestrade looked put out. 'Anyway, you've given us a fine lead with this Rachel woman. Although I don't doubt we would have found her on our own.'

'Doubtless,' said my friend.

He inspected the room further, commenting acidly several times that the police, with their boots, had obscured footprints, and moved things that might have been of use to anyone attempting to reconstruct the events of the previous night.

Still, he seemed interested in a small patch of mud he found behind the door.

Beside the fireplace he found what appeared to be some ash or dirt.

'Did you see this?' he asked Lestrade.

'Her Majesty's police,' replied Lestrade, 'tend not to be excited by ash in a fireplace. It's where ash tends to be found.' And he chuckled at that.

My friend took a pinch of the ash and rubbed it between his fingers, then sniffed the remains. Finally, he scooped up what was left of the material and tipped it into a glass

vial, which he stoppered and placed in an inner pocket of his coat.

He stood up. 'And the body?'

Lestrade said, 'The palace will send their own people.'

My friend nodded at me, and together we walked to the door. My friend sighed. 'Inspector. Your quest for Miss Rachel may prove fruitless. Among other things, "*Rache*" is a German word. It means "revenge". Check your dictionary. There are other meanings.'

We reached the bottom of the stair, and walked out on to the street. 'You have never seen royalty before this morning, have you?' he asked. I shook my head. 'Well, the sight can be unnerving, if you're unprepared. Why, my good fellow – you are trembling!'

'Forgive me. I shall be fine in moments.'

'Would it do you good to walk?' he asked, and I assented, certain that if I did not walk then I would begin to scream.

'West, then,' said my friend, pointing to the dark tower of the palace. And we commenced to walk.

'So,' said my friend, after some time. 'you have never had any personal encounters with any of the crowned heads of Europe?'

'No,' I said.

'I believe I can confidently state that you shall,' he told me. 'And not with a corpse this time. Very soon.'

'My dear fellow, whatever makes you believe—?'

In reply he pointed to a carriage, black-painted, that had pulled up fifty yards ahead of us. A man in a black top-hat and a greatcoat stood by the door, holding it open, waiting,

silently. A coat of arms familiar to every child in Albion was painted in gold upon the carriage door.

'There are invitations one does not refuse,' said my friend. He doffed his own hat to the footman, and I do believe that he was smiling as he climbed into the box-like space, and relaxed back into the soft leathery cushions.

When I attempted to speak with him during the journey to the palace, he placed his finger over his lips. Then he closed his eyes and seemed sunk deep in thought. I, for my part, tried to remember what I knew of German royalty, but, apart from the Queen's consort, Prince Albert, being German, I knew little enough.

I put a hand in my pocket, pulled out a handful of coins – brown and silver, black and copper-green. I stared at the portrait stamped on each of them of our queen, and felt both patriotic pride and stark dread. I told myself I had once been a military man, and a stranger to fear, and I could remember when this had been the plain truth. For a moment I remembered a time when I had been a crack-shot – even, I liked to think, something of a marksman – but my right hand shook as if it were palsied, and the coins jingled and chinked, and I felt only regret.

3. The Palace

> *At Long Last* Doctor Henry Jekyll is proud to announce the general release of the world-renowned *'Jekyll's Powders'* for popular consumption. No longer the province of the privileged few. *Release the Inner You!* For Inner and Outer Cleanliness! TOO MANY

> PEOPLE, both men and women, suffer from CONSTIPATION OF THE SOUL! Relief is immediate and cheap – with *Jekyll's powders!* (Available in Vanilla and Original Mentholatum Formulations.)

The Queen's consort, Prince Albert, was a big man, with an impressive handlebar moustache and a receding hairline, and he was undeniably and entirely human. He met us in the corridor, nodded to my friend and to me, did not ask us for our names or offer to shake hands.

'The Queen is most upset,' he said. He had an accent. He pronounced his *S*s as *Z*s: *mozt*. *Upzet*. 'Franz was one of her favourites. She has so many nephews. But he made her laugh so. You will find the ones who did this to him.'

'I will do my best,' said my friend.

'I have read your monographs,' said Prince Albert. 'It was I who told them that you should be consulted. I hope I did right.'

'As do I,' said my friend.

And then the great door was opened, and we were ushered into the darkness and the presence of the Queen.

She was called Victoria, because she had beaten us in battle, seven hundred years before, and she was called Gloriana, because she was glorious, and she was called the Queen, because the human mouth was not shaped to say her true name. She was huge, huger than I had imagined possible, and she squatted in the shadows staring down at us, without moving.

Thizsz muzzst be zsolved. The words came from the shadows.

'Indeed, ma'am,' said my friend.

A limb squirmed and pointed at me. *Zstepp forward*.

I wanted to walk. My legs would not move.

My friend came to my rescue then. He took me by the elbow and walked me towards Her Majesty.

Isz not to be afraid. Isz to be worthy. Isz to be a companion. That was what she said to me. Her voice was a very sweet contralto, with a distant buzz. Then the limb uncoiled and extended, and she touched my shoulder. There was a moment, but only a moment, of a pain deeper and more profound than anything I have ever experienced, and then it was replaced by a pervasive sense of well-being. I could feel the muscles in my shoulder relax, and, for the first time since Afghanistan, I was free from pain.

Then my friend walked forward. Victoria spoke to him, yet I could not hear her words; I wondered if they went, somehow, directly from her mind to his, if this was the Queen's Counsel I had read about in the histories. He replied aloud.

'Certainly, ma'am. I can tell you that there were two other men with your nephew in that room in Shoreditch, that night. The footprints were, although obscured, unmistakable.' And then, 'Yes. I understand . . . I believe so . . . Yes.'

He was quiet when we left the palace, and said nothing to me as we rode back to Baker Street.

It was dark already. I wondered how long we had spent in the palace.

Fingers of sooty fog twined across the road and the sky.

Upon our return to Baker Street, in the looking-glass of my room, I observed that the frog-white skin across my

shoulder had taken on a pinkish tinge. I hoped that I was not imagining it, that it was not merely the moonlight through the window.

4. The Performance

> LIVER COMPLAINTS?! BILIOUS ATTACKS?! NEURASTHENIC DISTURBANCES?! QUINSY?! ARTHRITIS?! These are just a handful of the *complaints* for which a professional EXSANGUINATION can be the *remedy*. In our offices we have sheaves of TESTIMONIALS which can be inspected by the public *at any time*. Do not put your health in the hands of *amateurs!!* We have been doing this for a very long time: V. TEPES – PROFESSIONAL EXSANGUINATOR. (Remember! It is pronounced *Tzsep-pesh*!) Romania, Paris, London, Whitby. *You've tried the rest – NOW TRY THE BEST!!*

That my friend was a master of disguise should have come as no surprise to me, yet surprise me it did. Over the next ten days a strange assortment of characters came in through our door in Baker Street – an elderly Chinese man, a young *roué*, a fat, red-haired woman of whose former profession there could be little doubt, and a venerable old buffer, his foot swollen and bandaged from gout. Each of them would walk into my friend's room, and, with a speed that would have done justice to a music-hall 'quick-change artist', my friend would walk out.