THE MOON'S MORE FEEBLE FIRE

A DR JACK CUTHBERT MYSTERY

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For those who die without names

concipit illa preces et verba venefica dicit
ignotosque deos ignoto carmine adorat,
quo solet et niveae vultum confundere Lunae
et patrio capiti bibulas subtexere nubes.

Now she invokes the Daughters of the Night,
Does noxious Juices smear, and Charms recite;
Such as can veil the Moon's more feeble Fire,
Or shade the Golden Lustre of her Sire.

Ovid Metamorphoses Book XIV.
Trans. Samuel Garth, 1794

Chapter 1

London: 22 February 1930

The acid-yellow light of the advertising sign overhead shimmered in the gutter at her feet. She watched as the night wind caught the surface of the puddle and twisted the inverted words. When a car sped past, she stepped back to avoid the worst of the splash. Momentarily, the electric reflection was shattered. Cursing under her breath, she wiped stray drops of dirty water from her stockings.

It was after midnight, and she was too tired to call out after the driver. Instead, she straightened her clothes and repositioned herself under the gaslight at the corner of Gerrard and Wardour Street. Working girls like her were carefully spaced along the pavements, making sure they did not stray into each other's patch, and there were still people hurriedly coming and going from the private clubs, the lone men furtively seeking whatever Soho had to offer for sale that night. And being London, there were always cars, and noise and smoke – the stench of a night so sour that you could taste it.

She shivered. Her blouse was low cut and her coat too thin to offer any real warmth or protection against the rain. She had no umbrella, only a cloche hat that framed her face and red curly hair.

As each car drove by and slowed to turn the corner, she raised her painted eyebrows and forced a smile. And any man on his own who came within earshot would receive her whispered invitation. Three that night had already accepted, but she needed the same again if she was to pay her rent that week.

There was a sudden squeal of high-pitched laughter. A group of fashionably dressed men and women exploded onto the pavement from the nearby jazz club. Before the door swung closed behind them, a blast of heady music from within escaped. There were many like them – toffs who enjoyed a night of illicit pleasure in the city's underbelly. They would go home now with tales of how frightfully ghastly and yet simply thrilling it all was.

As they reeled towards her, she caught the eye of one of the men. She thought she recognised him and made it plain what she was selling. She could see there was interest in his eyes, despite the silken glamour of the young woman he had his arm around. The others in the group were oblivious to her as she stood in the gaslight, but she hoped he might be back soon for something he had never tried before. However, only a few yards on down Wardour Street, still laughing, they all disappeared into a taxi. It would whisk them back to their real world, to some smart apartment in Mayfair or Knightsbridge where they could gasp over more cocktails at how daring they had all been.

They were gone now, and she was alone again, waiting for some man with beer on his breath to slip five shillings into her hand so he could use her for a few minutes of pleasure. His, not hers.

Across the road, she saw one of the regular girls she knew well. She had some trade and was sweet-talking him into coming back to her room around the corner rather than the alleyway he was pulling her towards. She could not hear what

was being said, but she could imagine. So often they wanted you up against a wall, but even here the girls had standards. Besides, they could always charge more for a bed.

She made no move to help because that was not the way on the street. You had to learn to handle your own trade. Nevertheless, she felt in her bag for the small knife she kept there. She had never used it in anger, but just knowing it was there had helped her stand night after night on that corner.

Across the road, the tussle suddenly turned to mirth. Whatever the girl had promised, the man had calmed himself, and now laughing was being led meekly away. It would not be long before he was scurrying home to wife and children, the girl back on the street waiting for the next punter.

The bars had long since closed for the night, but there was an illuminated clock above one of them. She tried not to look at it. Watching the minutes drag by just made the night even longer. Instead, she tried to think about happier times. But that was not so easy any more. It had been a long time since anything in her life might have been described as happy. No, better to think about the here and now, she decided. It could be worse. She could be working the docks. Or the ponces could be all over her. But she was too old for them. Those bullies with their cheap suits and quick fists knew the amount she could make in a night now was hardly worth their trouble.

She did have to wonder though: what would be next for her? How long could she keep on this game? She still had her figure, but her looks were fading fast. Lately, she could see the men eyeing her up and down and deciding more and more to move on to the younger ones up the street. She remembered starting out and how the old drabs would talk. Back then they had seemed ridiculous to her – old women trying to sell their bodies. But now she realised they had been no older then than she was now.

She closed her eyes, trying to rid herself of the thought, but was startled by a sudden chill. She turned away, trying to avoid the damp air that was blowing along the street. It was then that she saw some movement up ahead. A black car had slowed and stopped in the shadow beneath a broken street lamp. Someone was getting out. From this distance, he looked well-dressed, and she wondered for a moment if she had hooked that young toff after all. Perhaps, after taking his girlfriend home, he had come back to Soho to see what the place really had to offer.

But as he approached, she saw that she was wrong. It was not him, but whoever it was, was now coming in her direction. She broke her rule and glanced up at the clock. It was half-past midnight. When she looked back, the elegant figure in black evening dress was now beside her and whispering in her ear. This time there was no need for her to give her usual come-on. This one knew and understood the terms exactly and took the lead. She was surprised but not enough to show it, and she put her hand through the arm that was offered.

Together they walked in silence along the wet pavement of Gerrard Street. The illuminated sign above the café door advertised Real Italian Coffee. The irregular flashes of shocking pink light caught the sheen of a silk hatband and the detail of a silver topped cane. What had made this one choose her?

It was impossible in that light to see the door properly, but it was certainly not an entrance to anywhere respectable. The paint was peeling, and the woodwork so badly cracked that the gaslight in the hallway beyond was shining through the panels.

She pushed it open with her shoulder and led her trade into the narrow hallway and then by the hand up the creaking staircase to the first floor. There, the floorboards were covered in old newspapers, and three doors led off the landing. She unlocked the middle one, and there was nothing inside but darkness and the sour smell of men's sweat.

With a match, she reached up to light the gas mantle. The faint yellow light from the hissing pipe soon found its way into the corners of the room, revealing its squalor. Although she could see that this room was not what was expected, it was all she had to offer, and besides it was reflected in the price. If they wanted a Mayfair tart, they could go and pay for one.

She went to the door and slipped the key back into the lock but made sure, as she always did, that the door stayed ajar. It was the first rule of safety she had learned; after seeing the state of some of the girls on the street who had forgotten it, she was not about to do the same.

A black hat and a white scarf were removed and placed on the side table. A bow tie was loosened, tailcoat and waistcoat slowly unbuttoned. Now, in the dim light, she could see at last who she had brought up her stairs and at once knew what this one would want.

She turned away to ready herself, wordlessly removing her hat, unbuttoning her blouse and pulling up her skirt before lying on her back on the unmade bed. But as she did so, the trade, watching her intently, leant back on the door and closed it. With one gloved hand, the key was turned in the lock. Then, the other hand reached up and the gaslight was turned off.