

THE  
HAUNTING  
OF AVIS  
LOVELOCK

Also by MK Hardy

*The Needfire*

# THE HAUNTING OF MIVIS LOVELOCK

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## Prologue

ALOYSIUS HOOD TURNED the pocket watch over in his hands, then closed his fingers around it. They were lean and pale, with a dusting of dark hairs Avis found curiously repulsive. Across the knuckles of his left hand, arcane symbols were etched in ink; she recognised one as John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica* and schooled her lips into a serious pout lest she somehow betray her derision.

She glanced around the table at the flickering faces of the other sitters. There were six today, in addition to Avis and Hood, bringing the total to eight. Hood was a traditionalist, insisting upon “a precise balance of masculine and feminine energy”, and indeed it was on this basis that Avis had been able to insinuate herself as an extra body—the manager at the Egyptian had got wind of it somehow and secured her a spot in an uncharacteristic fit of helpfulness.

Sitting between the medium and Avis herself was the host of their afternoon activity, one Sir Reginald St Simon, in whose gloomy London townhouse they presently sat. He was a gaunt man with a hooked mouth who looked as though he viewed dissatisfaction as a hobby rather than a thing to be avoided, an impression borne out by his wife's pinpoint pupils. She was directly across the table from Avis, and kept looking at her with a benignly curious expression. Avis had a feeling that she had a sharp mind, dulled by the laudanum she used to tolerate

a husband who would hire a psychic medium but would not pay for enough staff to keep their London residence properly cleaned and maintained. She must have been quite isolated if she had not been able to find friends of her own to balance out the female half of the company. Anger stabbed at Avis's stomach. She would enjoy dismantling this man's purchase.

Hood's eyes rolled back in his head 'til only a flickering crescent of iris remained, the rest just bloodshot sclera. Avis rolled her own eyes heavenward and folded her arms; time for a fishing expedition, apparently.

"Yes, this item is very charged, the spirits are very active. It means a great deal to you, this watch." The medium's voice was breathy, pitched so that the guests around the table had to lean in to catch his words. All the better, for the position would give them a restricted view of his hands and feet, obscured as they were by the dark table covering.

His target, a soberly dressed man with a stiff, dark moustache, gave a short nod. "It does."

"It is not new—it belonged to someone very dear to you."

At this the man sucked in a breath and Avis resisted a groan. From what she had glimpsed of the watch before it disappeared into the medium's tattooed grasp, it was a dull gold covered in worn engravings. Obviously it wasn't new; even a child could have gleaned as much.

"A father figure of sorts..."

"Yes, my uncle! He was very close to my family, after my father passed."

"Ah, yes, of course, an uncle. He's close to us now. His spirit is still very strong. It has been mere weeks since his passing?"

The moustache quivered. "That's right! Just last month."

"I can feel him trying to reach out to you, to speak to you..."

The mark leaned forward eagerly, as if physical proximity would make any difference at all. "I'm here," he said beseechingly.

"Your uncle wants you to know... that he's sorry. So very sorry."

The man shook his head. Avis was surprised to see his eyes

bright with unshed tears. She hadn't pegged him for a crier, but then, he had come along tonight, hadn't he? Anyone who voluntarily put themselves in the hands of Spiritualists was in need of something—even if she personally thought that something was a firm shake and perhaps a slap.

“He has nothing to apologise for. Nothing at all.”

“Still, there is unfinished business.” It was a crude, calculated gamble—again, the man had come for some reason, even if he didn't quite know it yet himself. Avis watched the medium watch his target, and when the man frowned, shifting in his seat, the performer immediately continued. “For leaving you, and your family, as your father did before him.”

“I... He was old. It was his time.”

“Yes, yes, but still, you did not get to bid him farewell. But you can do so now. He's here. He's listening.”

The man was shaking his head now; Hood was losing him, and Avis fought a satisfied little smile. “I was at his side when he passed.”

Suddenly there was a sharp report, like someone had struck a cane against a door-frame. The man jumped, and now it was the medium's turn to shake his head, his features shaped into a rueful expression. “The spirits insist! He says there is still something left unsaid... something he wished he could have told you. Something about your sister...”

“I—”

“No, your brother. Yes, that's it. A warning he needs to pass on.”

Damn, he had him. The mustachioed man leaned in, a fish willingly gaping for the hook. Their host was drinking this in with interest. A gossip, then. Avis had been wondering what was in this for St Simon—she had not identified any particular unfinished business on his part—and it seemed to be a simple enjoyment of seeing others exposed, their linens hung out in public view, clean and dirty alike. What an unpleasant little man.

Avis unfolded her arms, slipping her hands into the pockets

of her skirt. She felt the room's shadows darken, and quietly braced herself. The outline of a figure flickered in her vision, standing on the other side of the table, but did not come into focus. Patience.

“What about my brother?”

“Your suspicions about him. They are correct,” the medium intoned.

*They are not.*

“He has betrayed you.”

*He has not.*

Patience was here now, and insistent, her dark gaze boring into Avis's from across the room. Avis set her mouth, kept her attention on the matter at hand. She had become quite practised at ignoring this particular distraction.

The grieving man took several short breaths one after the other, each an attempt to find words to speak, but Hood reached with a clammy hand to grab his as the table began to shake between them.

“*Hear me,*” the medium croaked. “*Listen to your Uncle H...*” He broke off with a hacking, guttural cough. “*Your Uncle Hhhhh...*” He appeared to be struggling to speak.

Only initials on the watch, then. It mattered not, for the mark was in deep and happy to help at this point.

“*Henry!*” the man cried, tears rolling down his cheeks, clutching at the medium's hand. “Uncle Henry, please!”

Avis had seen enough. “Oh for— Stop, stop this immediately. And turn the lights on!”

The medium's hacking choked to silence; all that was left were the man's sobs, though they faded as well in the awkward seconds that followed. Avis waited and, when no one obeyed her order, strode to the wall and began to twist the knobs to bring the lamps back to full brightness. The illumination

revealed the full extent of their surroundings: a large room panelled in dark wood, heavy curtains hung over the windows obscuring Belgravia's streets. The gathered guests were spaced around the table like pearls on a necklace, their hands linked in accordance with the medium's instructions.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Sir Reginald St Simon had a long face that was growing redder by the second, and a calf's lick that refused to bow to his no doubt mighty will. Avis offered him her best impression of a charming smile as she returned to the assembled group.

"I'm afraid you are playing host to a charlatan, sir, and I for one simply could not let it go on a moment longer."

"A charlatan? How dare you!" This from Hood, who dropped the pocket watch to the table with a dull clunk. He didn't rise, however, and Avis knew she'd won.

"While I could list all the ways in which your 'communications' from the spirits were nothing more than guesswork helped along by a willing victim, I think this should prove more than sufficient to demonstrate my claims." She dropped to her knees, drawing gasps from the society gentlemen and ladies, and delved beneath the cloth that dripped over the table and down to the floor.

"He insisted on entering the room alone, didn't he?" she asked, tipping her head to catch St Simon's eye. "Alone and in good time, ahead of the arrival of the guests."

"Er... yes. Said he needed to attune himself to the... resonances of the room." St Simon was desperately trying not to be distracted by the flash of ankle she'd exposed as she tussled with the tablecloth.

"Of course he did. Whereas in actuality, he was preparing his little tricks."

"Excuse me!" Hood cried as her fingers found his shoe. "Unhand me! This is unacceptable, I must insist—"

"Oh shush, I'm nearly finished. Just... here!" Avis rocked back onto her heels, pulling a long silver wire from beneath the table. "Correctly attached, it can help its owner do all sorts

of tricks—agitating the table, for one, and causing strange noises. Quite a helpful little thing, but a spirit it’s not.”

From there matters unravelled much as Avis would have predicted, after all, it was quite hard to surprise her. The mustachioed man punched the medium, and would probably have beaten him to a pulp had he not been pulled away and subdued. The medium blustered and argued and went through various stages of attempted denial, then an admission of guilt—but *only* to the wire, not to his contact with the departed—and then simply thinly veiled blackmail, implying that he knew a great deal about the St Simon family that might prove embarrassing to all should any of the events of the evening escape that room.

Strangely, nobody was ever *glad* when Avis exposed these spirit mediums for the fakes they were. She couldn’t understand it personally: surely it was better to be in possession of the facts, even if said facts were embarrassing in the moment? But no. Those fortunate souls she disabused of their beliefs were only ever angry with her, or at best merely annoyed. They never said thank you.

Only one person spoke to her again that whole night. As she emerged, still buttoning her coat, from the dim townhouse and into the cool, still air of an early spring evening, a tall, passingly handsome man who could have been aged anywhere from thirty-five to a well-preserved fifty, caught up with her.

“That was quite the show,” he said. “Not necessarily the one folks expected, I think.” He hadn’t spoken at all during the *séance*, so this was her first encounter with his distinctive drawl.

An American. Lord spare her. “Well. Thank you. I think.” She trotted down the building’s front stairs, but he fell into step beside her.

“I’m very sorry, Miss Lovelock—I know you by reputation, but I didn’t introduce myself,” he said, rounding neatly on her as they reached the pavement. “My name is Carlton Brooksbank,

and I have a proposition for you.”

Avis took his proffered hand but laughed at his words. “Oh, I shan’t be needing any of those, Mr Brooksbank.”

An easy, white-toothed grin. “You misunderstand me. I’m impressed with your skills, but don’t you think they’re wasted here in England?”

That, at least, was true enough. “Without wanting to seem ungrateful, sir, please make your point, for I think I hear a hackney approaching.”

“Come to America! I have a number of contacts in New York and Massachusetts who would be delighted to make your acquaintance, and I don’t mind saying I’d very much enjoy introducing you to them. I think you could really shake things up.”

This was new. Avis frowned. “As flattered as I am, I don’t think that will be possible.” She wasn’t about to admit it, but the sad fact was that the earnings of a theatre performer with the hobby of irritating every credulous aristo in the country didn’t exactly stretch to transatlantic jaunts.

“Without wanting to sound indelicate, Miss Lovelock, I’d like to make it possible. There’s a passenger liner, *Excambion*, leaving from Portsmouth on Tuesday. I’ve got a first-class ticket with your name on it, if you’ll take it.”

It wasn’t often that Avis was rendered speechless. Fortunately, it was only ever a temporary affliction. “I can’t possibly accept such kindness from a stranger,” she said.

“Then don’t be a stranger. Let me take you to dinner. I’ve a booking at the Savoy.”

“Mr Brooksbank, whatever you’re expecting here, I must warn you—”

The man held up his hands in surrender. “No expectations, I promise. Except that you’ll make for interesting company, and perhaps hear me out.”

Well. It had been some time since she’d dined at the Savoy.

“NOW, MR BROOKSBANK. I think it’s best we get right to it so that I might enjoy my steak. What’s the catch?”

Brooksbank lifted his neat, dark eyebrows. He was well dressed and well manicured, and had an easy sophistication to him that spoke to a relatively affluent background. Avis was no expert in the American vernacular but to the best of her knowledge he sounded as though he was from the Northeast. Not Boston, though. Upstate New York, New Hampshire, or perhaps the one in the middle—Vermont? “You assume there is a catch.”

“You and I both know there’s no such thing as a free lunch, as your countrymen would say. Come on now, out with it.”

Brooksbank sighed. “I was operating under strict instructions to broach my further request only once you were on board.”

“Well, I don’t know why you thought that would work.”

“Yes, in hindsight I’m realising that was wishful thinking.” Brooksbank lifted his wine to his lips; he held his glass like one would a tumbler and looked at it as he set it back down for fear it might imbalance on its long stem. Not usually a wine drinker—did he think one had to here, to move in polite society?

“This is *Excambion*’s swansong,” he said at length. “Her final voyage. As part of the Hamburg Line, at any rate. She’s been sold. Or, well, nearly.”

“Congratulations?”

“The buyers are... superstitious.”

“They definitely shouldn’t buy a boat then. Who are they?”

“I don’t know. I don’t!” Brooksbank protested when Avis lifted her eyebrows. Again that gesture of surrender. “I’m just an agent from the owner’s investors; I’ve never so much as spoken to the buyer. All I know is that almost a dozen men resigned from *Excambion*’s crew in Cherbourg, and several more in Portsmouth. When I left for London yesterday, they were still scrambling to replace them.”

Avis had a sinking feeling—pun intended. “Why?” she asked, although she already knew the answer.

“They say *Excambion* is haunted.”

The bark she let out was as far away as one could get from “ladylike” and still use the same alphabet. “Mr Brooksbank. Please. Remember to whom you’re speaking. You may as well tell me the hull is constructed of Swiss cheese—in fact, I’d more readily believe that, knowing next to nothing about naval engineering as I do.”

“I’m not saying I believe it myself,” Brooksbank replied, though there was a waver to his voice that told Avis he didn’t quite *not* believe it, either. “Only that the buyers are concerned with the rumours and want them laid to rest before the sale is completed.”

“So I’m to, what, certify this tug is completely spectre-free so that a bunch of investors can get richer, is that it?”

“Ideally, yes.”

“Well, that’s simple enough. I can do that for you now. Your boat isn’t haunted.”

“Technically it’s a ship.”

“Regardless. Still.” Their food had arrived. Avis took a moment to saw a corner off the thick wedge of meat seeping juice onto the pristine white plate. “I suppose I have no fixed plans.” After all, what was stopping her? There was nothing keeping her in England. Not any more.

## One

“MISS LOVELOCK? AVIS Lovelock?” The porter who greeted her was red-faced, no doubt just having run down his fiftieth flight of stairs in order to meet her at the embarkment point. Luckily for him, Avis travelled light; there was only a small monitor trunk sitting beside her on the dock.

“That’s me,” she said, and he needed no more prompting to heft her trunk easily and nod up the gangplank.

“I’m told I’m to give you a tour through the main living areas,” he told her, his somewhat shrill voice echoed by the cries of the gulls overhead. “If you’ll follow me.”

Avis strode after him, pausing midway to cast a final backwards glance at dry land. The harbour was a hive of activity; first, second, and third class alike buzzing with anticipation—and nerves—ahead of boarding SS *Excambion*. And no wonder—it was an enormous ship, its painted metal sides looming over the pier like an encroaching tidal wave. And here she was, walking up the gangplank towards the shadowed gap in its side, ready to be swallowed alive.

*The ship might want to reconsider. A meal as sour and tough as you might give it indigestion.*

Avis ignored the voice, refusing to search the gangplank for a dark, hovering figure out of place and out of time. Stalwartly she marched onward, following the porter through the hatch and stepping foot on board *Excambion* with her head held high.

Inside the ship was no less lively, though the noise and activity were dampened by the thick carpet underfoot. Avis followed the porter up a flight of stairs, then another, and lost count of the twists and turns they took around bulkheads covered with polished wood and past panes of carefully wrought stained glass inset in the doors. She was puffing by the time they emerged into a foyer of sorts, its ceiling soaring far higher above them than the constraints of a ship should've allowed.

"Is this what all first classes look like?" she said, her voice echoing off the domed skylight above. Black lines traced their way to the centre like spokes on a wheel, and the elaborate designs sandwiched between them were picked out in gold. "Like Sedding himself was sick all over them?"

The porter chuckled, slowing his steps a little to allow her to catch up. "I've heard some of the new White Star Line are even grander, if you can believe it."

"I've no reason to think you a liar, so I suppose I have to." Avis took in her companion with an up-and-down glance, automatically noting and cataloguing the little details that loomed large to her critical eye.

His uniform was clean and neat, as would be expected from a first-class porter at the start of a voyage, save for a smear of white paint on one of the cuffs of his jacket. No doubt there were small touch-ups and repairs happening even now, and he'd happened to brush too close on one of his many trips through the corridors. Avis would have to be wary lest her own skirts became mottled.

His chin was smooth and close-shaven, but his moustache, while well-groomed, was just slightly shorter on the left than the right. This was commonplace in men who rarely visited the barber, relying on their own hand to keep their facial hair trimmed. She knew *Excambion* contained both first and

second-class barber shops, but it seemed the crew had to make do on their own.

He wore no jewellery save for a pair of cufflinks; at a closer look they did not bear the *Hamburg* insignia that she had noticed on other crew but instead sported a pair of proud horse heads wreathed with a golden horseshoe. A racing fanatic, then. She wondered if the habit left him with money to spend, or if he was one of the unlucky types always scrambling to pay his debts. If so, she supposed work aboard a steamship might provide a welcome escape from hungry creditors.

*And look. Tucked in his breast pocket—not a handkerchief but a note. “To Thomas, my love.” It seems it’s not just creditors he’s left behind. Perhaps he’s running from her as well.*

Avis rolled her shoulders and shook her head, though of course it did nothing to dislodge the voice in her ears or shake the tightness in her chest.

Running away only worked when your problems weren't yoked to your soul.

In hopes of distraction, she focused on her surroundings as Thomas whisked her from the grand foyer into the rooms beyond, each more opulent than the next. Sensing her deep and abiding curiosity, he described the function of each room. The main dining saloon was trimmed with polished walnut and coated in white enamel, giving it a stark character that reminded Avis of a hospital ward. It boasted the largest footprint of any room on the vessel, presumably to underline the grandiosity of the first-class experience, and the portholes were covered by faux windows, erasing any evidence that they were aboard a ship at all, save for the swaying beneath their feet.

“It doesn't make a great deal of sense, does it? Surely people who've bought tickets for a transatlantic journey know very well they're on a ship. Why go to all that trouble to cover it up?”

Thomas Surname Unknown shrugged; she got the feeling she might've voiced a pondering he'd had himself. His voice

when he spoke, however, was studiously neutral. “Some folk don’t like the idea of being out on the open sea. It can be disorienting, being surrounded by all that water.”

Avis snorted. After the close press of the buildings and streets of London, the idea of an unbroken expanse of ocean was an intriguing change of pace, not frightening. But then, very few things worried her. She’d hardly be able to do what she did if she was easily scared.

“Out those doors is the garden verandah. It sits on both sides of the A deck and is fully enclosed from the elements.”

Peering through the windows, Avis could make out a riot of greenery and wicker. “Heaven forfend the ladies get their hair mussed,” she murmured, leaning closer until her nose was all but pressed against the glass. There was bronze trim everywhere, and chequerboard floors that recalled Parisian cafés (or so she assumed).

“The smoking section is here on the port side,” Thomas said, gesturing, “and the non-smoking is on the starboard. In case that’s of interest.”

“I don’t smoke. Ghastly habit,” Avis told him. “But I’ve no objection to those who do. We all have our vices, eh?” Her eyes flicked down to his cufflinks and she watched him stiffen, his smile growing fixed. She hadn’t meant it as a rebuke, but men were so touchy about their little foibles.

“Mm. The verandah is only one of the gathering spaces available to guests; we also have the reception room, the lounge, the reading room, and the men’s smoking room towards the aft,” he said, beginning to walk once more. They left the saloon and descended another set of stairs to the living quarters, which looked like nothing so much as the corridors of a fancy hotel. “And promenades for all classes, though they’re not always used. If you’re keen to stretch your legs, you might also make use of the gymnasium or the swimming pool or the squash courts.”

“Hang on,” Avis said, raising a hand. “There’s a swimming pool. On the ship.”

Thomas nodded. He had sped up his steps as they walked.

Keen to offload her, or just eager to set her trunk down? It wasn't all that heavy, though she had included a stack of pulp magazines that might have added to its heft. "Some guests enjoy the opportunity to maintain their exercise routines on the crossing."

"Well, now I've heard everything."

Any further thoughts on the absurdity of a swimming pool in the middle of the Atlantic were forestalled as she caught sight of a familiar lanky figure: Carlton Brooksbank, her sponsor. He was loitering near one of the stairwells, presumably one which led to the lower decks, and as she watched a dark-haired officer in a natty uniform emerged from below and leaned in to speak to him, their heads close. It was impossible to catch what was being said but it was clear from the way they canted towards each other that they were not strangers, and that their discussion was intended to be a private one.

Avis liked nothing more than inserting herself where she wasn't invited, and she peeled off from Thomas's tour to aim herself at the murmuring pair. "Ahoy there, Brooksbank!"

They sprang apart as if singed, the officer nearly stumbling backwards down the stairs. Brooksbank put a hand out to grasp his forearm, though as soon as the officer had stabilised the hand was removed and shoved into a pocket. "Miss Lovelock," Brooksbank said smoothly, as if she hadn't just interrupted what had apparently been a clandestine conversation. He turned towards her, smile wide and apparently genuine. "You're aboard."

"Very well observed. They should put you in the lookout tower, we'd be safe as houses."

"Navigation aboard the ship is actually a much more complex operation than just watching from the crow's nest," the officer said. He was a nervous-looking chap with high cheekbones and low-set eyebrows, giving him the countenance of a man always squinting towards the horizon. Brooksbank favoured him with a knowing look. Avis's suspicions sharpened.

*They could just be friends, you know. That's a thing people have.  
Well, most people.*

“I’m sure once Miss Lovelock has gotten her bearings she’ll want to hear all about it, but for now, we shall let you return to your duties, Third Officer Baynes.”

Avis watched as the officer hesitated, turning towards the stairs before shaking his head and reorienting himself in the direction from which Avis and Thomas had just come. “I’ll just... this way, I think,” he said, his voice quivering. “Welcome aboard, miss, and goodbye.” His gait was a nervous, ungainly thing, like a hoop bent out of shape and wobbling a strange orbit.

“What a strange man,” she remarked, once he was—probably—out of earshot. “If that’s who’s in charge of the ship, perhaps I should be worried.”

“The crew are impeccable,” Brooksbank assured her. “Nothing at all to fret about. You’re on your way to your cabin, I take it?”

“Yes, and my expectations are quite high, I must say. Thriving gardens, haute cuisine dining, swimming pools... Perhaps I won’t disembark at New York but commit myself to eternally crossing back and forth across the Atlantic in the finest of fashions.”

He chuckled, and gave a gesture to Thomas that he should go ahead with the trunk to Avis’s room. He had an easy charm to him, and even the elevated status that allowed him to dismiss crew members with a wave sat well on him, rather than rankling Avis’s sensibilities.

“Somehow I have the feeling you won’t be able to resist the big city. Nor it you. But certainly, while we’re here, you should take advantage of everything available to you.”

“You make it sound like I’m to be a lady of leisure.” Avis tsked. “But I have important work ahead of me, Mr Brooksbank, and I shall not be distracted from it. Except by free champagne. And perhaps a Turkish massage or two.”

“Quite. And I have no doubt that you will perform your duties admirably,” he said. “But first, let’s get you settled in. Your berth is this way.”



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