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THE THIRTEEN CHIMES

The Fence Torn Down I

— Never tear down a fence without first knowing why it was put up. — G. K. Chesterton

EDINBURGH

Morning of 23 December 1869

—Well... what can I say? We'll have to call a medium, won't we, Mr Fawkes? —Malcolm Fraser was leaning against the window, gazing out at the street with disinterest.

Outside, the thick fog did not recede when the window was opened; on the contrary, it seemed to peer into the room like a curious cat.

Edinburgh was dawning—if one could call it that—as the light barely managed to pierce the veil of pollution shrouding the atmosphere.

Above, the rooftops were blackened by soot. Down at street level, Leith was waking to its symphony of misery: a motley market of sorrows beneath the fog.

From up there, Fraser gazed at symbols scrawled in chalk, marking the houses condemned for sanitation reforms. On the pavements, the evicted.

Everything smelled of coal and dead fish.

'Pardon?' Chief Inspector Fawkes grunted, sitting up with the puff of a steam engine. His knee—a small reminder of the Navy—punished him relentlessly as soon as winter arrived.

He leaned on his cane. "Excuse me... what were you saying?... Good heavens," he snorted, "I'm getting more and more deaf every day."

"I was saying," Fraser raised his voice, "that we'll have to call in a medium to tell us what the hell's gone on here." As he pushed the window wide open, Fraser found himself half out of the room. The wind swept past his back into the room, fluttering shreds of wallpaper that hung like flaps of skin.

'You can't deny,' he continued, 'that the scene has a certain... theatrical quality to it, doesn't it?

'So what?' grumbled Fawkes, brushing the dust off his trouser legs. *Margaret's going to kill me*, he thought.

Without waiting for a reply, he strode towards the narrow corridor. 'Constable Doves!' he bellowed. 'Come up here at once, for God's sake! And help with the body!'

"A medium?" Fawkes continued to grumble, now outside the room. "And what's next? Will the fairies of

Greyfriars Cemetery perform our autopsies? You've got some ideas..."

Fraser kept staring out at the street. He lowered his voice, as if speaking to the fog itself.

"If they do the job better than the coroner, why not?" A half-smile crossed his face as he thought of his friend, the coroner Lyle MacLintock. "You know, Inspector," he raised his voice again, "spiritualism is all the rage across the country. What we have in here"—he waved his gloved hand as if shooing away flies—"is slipping through our fingers."

"Don't talk nonsense, Mr Fraser," came a voice from the doorway. "There must be a logical explanation for all this."

Fraser turned his gaze towards the bed that took up most of the room. On the horsehair mattress, a corpse lay with its hands crossed over its chest, like an embalmed mummy; its eyes remained fixed—like shattered stained-glass windows—staring at the blackened wooden ceiling.

Three wounds—possibly from a dagger—were visible on his bare torso, *the most likely cause of his death*, he thought.

‘Well, you’ll have to tell me how,’ he continued. ‘The room was locked from the inside; there’s nothing but this window— —which was also locked... and opens outwards.’ He looked again at the considerable height separating them from the street, muttering, ‘...Short of an orangutan, I can’t think of anything.’

“An orangutan?” Fawkes looked at him, narrowing his eyes. “Mr Fraser, if I hadn’t known you for years and didn’t consider you the finest sleuth in the force, believe me, I’d kick you out of here for such nonsense.”

This man hears only what he wants to hear, he thought. A coachman drove past, tearing through the street fog as he turned ruthlessly down the road.

‘What a morning temper, Mr Fawkes...’ Fraser offered an affectionate smile without taking his eyes off the carriage as it vanished into the fog. ‘I was referring to a story by Mr Poe. Paris, a locked room... you know... orangutan.’

The Chief Inspector did not reply. His footsteps were already crunching down the old staircase. ‘Constable Doves! Come up at once or go home!’

‘I’m coming, sir!’ Doves’s voice came back, trembling. A clumsy set of footsteps announced the arrival of young Doves, little more than a lad in a crumpled

uniform with a milky complexion. He stopped in the doorway, panting as if he'd run all the way from Calton Hill.

“Sorry... Mr Fraser,” he stood to attention, “...the crowd wouldn't let me through! Everyone wanted... wanted to know what's going on here...”

The moment he stepped into the room, the stench hit him like a hammer to the face. He said no more. His body convulsed once and he vomited what would have been his breakfast with a loud splash between the legs of the bed.

“Splendid!” Fawkes could be heard bellowing from some landing. “Mr Fraser? I don't envy the mess you'll be left with when I retire.”

Fraser stood motionless. He had barely heard those words. His thoughts drifted far away, towards the black plumes of smoke the harbour chimneys were belching out over the Firth of Forth.

His gaze wandered around the room, as if searching for something he'd lost. ‘Where is our dear Chief Inspector?’

A French-¹ —of dubious provenance—and a faded pink garter momentarily stuck to his boot.

She shook it off with a grimace; the object fell with a squelching *thud* onto the floorboards. Fraser raised an eyebrow at the sight.

‘He’s gone downstairs,’ said Doves, shrugging. ‘He said we should take the body...’ He glanced furtively at the ceiling and decided to change tack. ‘...that you should take care of it... that it won’t make a week’s difference either way.’

Fraser nodded impassively.

He turned to close the window when he saw her. On the corner, at the end of the opposite street, a woman was watching him.

Her face was of an almost childlike softness, and she wore a black muslin dress: translucent sleeves and a stiff collar. The dress hugged a petite figure, too well-proportioned to unsettle anyone. But what distinguished her most was her hair: a cascade of fire gathered in a high bun, which seemed to burn without being consumed.

¹ *A reusable condom made of gut or linen, tied with a string. It was considered an expensive item.*

From his vantage point up there, she looked like a living torch, a vision born of a feverish delirium.

His heart skipped a beat.

“Sir?” Doves’s voice snapped him out of his trance.

Fraser blinked. The corner was empty. All that remained was the mist, rippling as if someone had rushed through it.

Just as he’d thought... the visitor had wings. He concluded this as he looked down at the sheer drop to the cobblestones.

He closed the window. He couldn’t help feeling that the city itself was watching him. Something in the room—surely the emptiness that permeates everything where death has left its mark—suggested to him that a run of bad luck was coming his way.

I don’t have enough at home to get myself into another mess, he thought.

DR LYLE MACLINTOCK

The afternoon of 23 December.

They carried the body from the attic to a basement adjoining the town hall—the new morgue—as dusk was already falling.

Three officers carried it, wrapped in a sheet so stained and worn it looked like the sheet of a leper forgotten in a leper colony. They laid it on a marble table.

The night—with the dampness of the harbour—began to creep up the walls of Edinburgh when Fraser decided to pop into the mortuary. Lyle MacLintock was waiting for him there.

When he entered, the coroner had a scalpel in his hand and the expression of someone who had had to peer too often into the abyss of misfortune.

‘So... a room locked from the inside, is it?’ was his greeting. He didn’t look up from the corpse lying face-up on the central marble slab.

‘News certainly travels fast...’ Fraser approached the doctor. He placed a hand on his friend’s shoulder by way of greeting.

‘What do you suggest? A ghost?’ Lyle shifted the lifeless corpse. The wretch’s body gave a dull creak, like

the sound a damp log would make when turned over in a forest.

Fraser looked around without answering. That basement smelled of science. The place had been tiled over an old grain store, with the hygienic tiles advocated by Mr Littlejohn — an insufferable little man, but one with good ideas. According to the regulations, all floors had to be washable with quicklime; drains with grates had to be installed and the walls sprayed with bleach from time to time. *Well, all very modern*, thought the inspector, *and yet the air smelled of entrails*.

As he walked round the marble table, the gas lamps flickered in the corners, casting shadows that trembled as if the room were breathing.

‘Well, look,’ added Lyle with a gesture, pointing at the deceased, ‘what I can tell you is that this... this, he didn’t do it to himself.

He lifted the body onto its side. Between the shoulder blades was another wound: a large incision that had barely bled. It was a cut made with great precision, but with jagged edges.

“In case you’re wondering,” he said, laying the body back on its back, “this wasn’t done by the blade of any

tool. I'd say some sort of animal claw. At a guess, about fifteen centimetres or so; but what do I know... right?" Fraser snorted. The image of the orangutan mocked him in the back of his mind.

He slumped into a chair, away from the autopsy table. He didn't consider himself particularly squeamish—in his thirties, he'd seen more dead bodies than candles at a funeral—but he'd never got used to the sight of a body cut open. *Perhaps no one ever does*, he thought.

MacLintock, for his part, seemed to have been born for it. His scalpel glinted as it caught the light from the wall lamps. With it, he made a vertical incision from the sternum to the pubis.

Beside him, on a small table covered with a cloth, lay forceps, a hook and a pair of tweezers. Further on, on the adjacent table, coloured vials and a set of scales awaited their turn.

'Do we know if he had any family?' asked the doctor, spreading the ribs apart with the retractor until the body sounded like a piece of furniture creaking. 'Because if no one claims him, we'll put him in the mass grave'—his tone was as matter-of-fact as that of a merchant discussing the price of grain. "We don't want him to

spoil our *Hogmanay*², do we, Malcolm?” he winked at him.

Fraser glanced at him sideways. He wondered, just for a moment, if it might not be better to accept it as it was: as a case with no answer.

Deep down, he reproached himself for the indifference he was showing. Lately, he had settled into simmering away in his own particular misfortune.

Meanwhile, Lyle, for his part, leaned over the open chest. He felt the pericardial sac and extracted the heart with a slow movement. He held it aloft, as if he wanted that piece of flesh to confess something to him. From Fraser’s perspective, the coroner adopted a posture, as he weighed the heart, that reminded him of Shakespeare’s famous soliloquy. He smiled.

He placed the organ on the enamel tray with a *plop* that sounded... all too human.

“Curious...” he murmured, frowning. “No hypertrophy, nor any visible injury. Not even signs of

² *Scottish New Year’s celebration, famous in Edinburgh for its fireworks, music and rituals such as first-footing.*

exertion. I'd say it's as if his heart had decided to stop beating before he died."

Fraser felt a chill run down his legs. He glanced up the stairs to see if the door had been left open.

"And the strange thing about these incisions," added Lyle, pointing at the wounds as if tracing an invisible map in the air, "is that there was hardly any bleeding. If he'd been alive, this would have been a bloodbath. But like this..." he paused, "it looks as though they were made after he was no longer with us."

"He wasn't, what?" asked Fraser, crossing his arms and legs and rolling his eyes. They'd known each other for years and he knew when the doctor was about to get esoteric.

The coroner didn't reply straight away. He lifted the corpse's chin with two fingers and muttered:

"Look at that expression... clenched jaws, dilated pupils. We've seen them before, Malcolm... remember? This sort of expression was what the comrades we found dead in that bloody war had." He looked at him expectantly.

The inspector remained silent. What had happened to them in that remote place was something that eluded his

analytical mind and which he preferred to bury—albeit without much success—in oblivion.

A series of drops fell from the rusty pipe on the ceiling, bounced off the tiles and joined the trickle of water disappearing down the drain. Fraser shifted in his seat, not knowing what to say.

‘Fear is a silent surgeon, Malcolm. It operates where no one sees... and rarely leaves a scar.’

Fraser looked down at the corpse. He didn’t reply. The sweet smell of formaldehyde began to fill the room and he slowly started to doze off, dreaming of women with hair like fire.

ELEANOR "NELLY" WITHMORE

The afternoon of 23 December.

The excess of shapes and smells led one to believe, without a shadow of a doubt, that the house must be struggling to breathe.

The entire room was lined with wallpaper patterned with lyres and decapitated angels—no one knew for certain the origin of such aesthetic horror.

Down on the floor, a Persian rug covered the floorboards; it was woven with hunting scenes so faded that only a keen eye could make out what was a deer, a horse or a dog.

Above the fireplace—unlit despite the winter—a colonial ancestor watched over from another century. From the ceiling hung curtains draped in a fabric resembling black velvet, with crimson trimmings.

The room was suffused with the scent of lilies, West African gardenias and French musk sprayed onto embroidered cushions.

In the centre of the room stood a round table, surrounded by oak chairs and laid out for the séance: black lace, a bell and a bowl of ‘moon water’.

In Edinburgh, spiritualism had won the hearts of its inhabitants, from the kitchens of the lower classes to the drawing rooms of queens.

Not long before, Mr Daniel Dunglas Home had levitated tables before dukes, and even Queen Victoria—or so the gossip went—admitted to having attended ‘experiments’.

The whole city seemed enchanted by the idea of believing, or wanting to believe.

Mrs Weatherby, a meticulous hostess and the widow of a merchant—one who never returned from Calcutta—had arranged every detail with almost obsessive precision.

To entertain her guests, she had given centre stage to Miss Eleanor Withmore who, dressed in midnight blue, acted as the hostess's companion: the widow paraded her before her friends like a dangerous talisman.

There in the centre, seated at the table, Miss Withmore's calm demeanour filled the room. None of the guests spoke to her; they all knew what she did outside these gatherings.

The ladies avoided looking her in the eye.

The gentlemen did not know how to meet her gaze.

She, however, smiled faintly, as if the offensive comments being whispered were slights directed at strangers.

When everyone was seated around her, Withmore rolled up her sleeves slightly and, leaning back in her chair, spoke.

'Is there anyone among those present who truly wishes to speak... with the beyond?' she asked, weighing each syllable as she looked them in the eye.

The whole room held its breath.

Timid hands went up.

A compendium of grandmothers lost in distant mists, cousins lost overseas and the odd ex-husband with unfinished business began to appear to answer the audience's questions.

Miss Withmore closed her eyes at the questions and answered without gestures or theatrics:

“He’s not here.”

“He doesn’t want to come.”

“Someone else... is answering for him.”

A few nervous laughs amidst sighs of relief.

It was all harmless. Even comical.

Until it wasn't.

First there was a creak. Then, the light cast by the candles in the candelabra seemed to start beating like a racing heart. The embroidered tablecloth billowed, rising a foot off the table.

Eleanor blinked once, twice.

As if a puppeteer were pulling invisible strings, she was suddenly yanked from her chair onto the table. Up there, she crawled on all fours around the table with slow, undulating movements, looking the guests in the eye whilst her dress seemed to sway with a life of its own.

It slid down, leaving her shoulders and part of her chest exposed. The guests recoiled in their chairs: frightened, fascinated.

Several ladies stifled a scream and the gentlemen did not know whether to look or close their eyes. They were spellbound.

Then she spoke.

But that voice... it wasn't hers.

"How well-dressed you all are," she said in a broken voice, "... for a dinner with the dead."

The guests looked at one another in confusion.

"All of you," she continued, "play with names that do not belong to you; you have forgotten... our sacrifice.

In your homes the fire lies forgotten; —Eleanor's hair came loose of its own accord and began to dance like a sea of flames—, you have offered us neither bread nor salt for decades.

The temperature inside the house dropped sharply.

She turned her head with a sharp movement, fixing her gaze on the guests.

"The hooves of our horses can already be heard." —her face was less than a foot from one of the guests, who was livid with terror— "When you see us, your heads

will already be rolling on the ground and your souls will have joined our ranks.”

For a brief moment, Eleanor Withmore composed herself as if waking from a bad dream.

No one dared utter a word; in the background, the grandfather clock, silent throughout the day, struck thirteen times.

The medium, still on the table, arched her body; a crack was heard in her spine, like dry wood snapping.

She began to rise towards the ceiling, as if the invisible puppeteer controlling her were hoisting her by a string tied to her chest; her arms hung limply at her sides and her palms began to bleed.

The attendees recoiled in horror; one stumbled over his own chair and fell to the floor.

The lights went out and the table split in two in the darkness.

A shot fired from the side briefly illuminated the faces of the audience and part of the room.

When the lights came back on, Eleanor was standing on the floor. Her hands were clean. Unharmed. She had completely regained her composure.

Widow Weatherby stood beside her, pale, staring at the small bullet hole in the opposite wall of the drawing room; on the other side, Mr Hargrove was still holding a small revolver, its barrel still smoking.

‘Darling,’ she said, the colour returning to her cheeks, ‘I’ve told you not to bring that sort of thing into my house.’ Her scolding tone was feigned, as if she wanted to play down the matter.

“I... I’m so sorry, really,” said Mr Hargrove, flustered, as he put the small revolver back in his jacket pocket. “It’s just that it all felt so real...”

Someone laughed nervously, as if the tension needed to escape through some crack.

‘How did you do that?’ A woman in a lavender dress stared at the broken table, as if she were trying to find some hidden mechanism. ‘It was marvellous, truly.’

“Not even Mr Dunglas himself could have done better, my dear,” suggested another of the guests, a gentleman with a perfectly waxed moustache. “It was brilliant. Bravo!”

After a while, little by little, the guests began to leave, satisfied—they agreed—that it had all been a brilliant performance; a spectacle to entertain.

Once the two of them were alone in the corridor, the widow turned to Eleanor.

‘What on earth happened, Nelly?’ She didn’t seem angry, but amused.

‘I really don’t know, madam,’ she replied. ‘Something I didn’t invite has slipped into the session.’

‘Well, thank them if you see them again. I’ll be the talk of the town at these parties.’ She winked at her.

A short, plump man, dressed in a black butler’s uniform—an immaculate frock coat, a cloth waistcoat with gold buttons and white gloves—approached the women with an envelope in his hand.

Mrs Weatherby took the envelope with a distracted gesture

‘Thank you, Mr Pitts, you may take your leave. Here you are, Nelly. Don’t spend it all at once.’ She gave her a knowing smile.

Eleanor made her way towards the door. Before leaving, she paused and turned her head, looking at the widow.

‘By the way... tell Mr Pitts to come up tomorrow to check the clock in the drawing room.’

“Why’s that?” she raised her eyebrows.

“It struck thirteen times at midnight tonight.”

“That clock’s been silent for over five years, my dear.”

Eleanor looked out at the empty street, covered in a blanket of snow.

‘Well, today... it’s started speaking again,’ she murmured to herself.

The door closed behind her, softly, with elegance.

Eleanor was left alone with her thoughts—*she had to find out what had happened today*—as she made her way back to the brothel.

In the distance, in an alleyway near the *Lily of the Glen*, a dog howled in the mist.

CHIEF INSPECTOR LACHLAN FAWKES

Dusk on 23 December.

In Chief Inspector Lachlan Fawkes’s office, through the small window, the mist crept across the glass like a sentient

creature, searching for a gap to slip through. There, in the distance, one could hear the carriages on North Bridge and the bell of Calton Jail marking the long-awaited end of the shift.

Fraser slumped into the wooden chair in front of the desk. It was a mess of papers, letters with haughty letterheads, clippings from *The Scotsman* and th³, and objects... many objects that only Fawkes seemed to know how to find when he needed them.

It seems incredible that anyone could find order in this chaos, thought Fraser.

“Well?” Inspector Lachlan Fawkes exhaled the smoke from his oak pipe, filling the room with a faint scent of cloves and black pepper.

He was sprawled back in his armchair; he didn’t seem to be in any hurry. In fact, he never was; curiously, that was what made him a good detective: he analysed everything from different angles before making up his mind.

³ *Newspaper founded in 1817 in Edinburgh.*

The complete opposite of his protégé, Malcolm Fraser, who was guided more by an instinct inherited from who knows where than by patience when tackling a case.

‘Well... in short, Dr Lyle says he died of fright,’ said Fraser, sounding more weary than convinced.

“Fear?” He raised an eyebrow above the curling smoke. “Aha... and the stab wounds, were they courtesy of panic itself?”

Fraser shrugged slightly.

“Sarcasm doesn’t suit you, boss.”

“No,” he said, tapping the pipe against the palm of his hand to knock out the ash. “But this does.”

He took a bottle with no label from his cabinet and poured into two mismatched glasses. The liquid was the colour of amber.

“To the Christmas spirit,” he grumbled. “And to your future promotion and my release,” he concluded.

Fraser took the glass, unbuttoning the collar of his coat.

‘If no one claims the body... if no family turns up...’ he paused, searching for a decent way to put it, ‘I’d let it go,

you know? I don't feel like playing Mr Bucket⁴ at this time of year.' The image of his marriage flashed before his eyes.

"Who?"

"Forget it, boss," and he drank.

Fawkes watched him over the rim of his glass.

—Between reform-minded councillors, liberal newspapers and this time of year... one more dead body in Cowgate won't keep anyone in New Town awake at night, he said.

He swirled the liquor in the glass; he looked at it as if searching for an answer inside.

"This city..." he continued. "The Royal, the toilets⁵ ... it'll all be dissected. They're kicking half of *Old Town* out and still have the nerve to call it a clean-up."

He drank it in one gulp. The sound of the liquid could be heard as it went down his throat.

⁴ *Inspector Bucket*, a character from *Bleak House* (1853), is considered the first professional detective in English fiction and a direct predecessor of Holmes.

⁵ In *Edinburgh* in 1869, the closes were narrow medieval alleys, damp and poorly ventilated; they were usually overcrowded and associated with working-class life and poverty.

Fraser turned the glass in his hand, lost in thought. Fawkes spoke as he always did: lucid... and, *damn it, he was right*. As far as he was concerned, Fawkes was Edinburgh. Rough, blackened. When he was gone... what would be left?

‘Well,’ he said, standing up. ‘See you tomorrow, Chief.’

“See you tomorrow, future Chief Inspector Fraser,” replied Fawkes, saluting him with a mocking military gesture.

“Well, sarcasm certainly suits you, doesn’t it.”

He crossed the corridor, leaving Fawkes behind, who was also beginning to pack up. In the police station, the gas lamps flickered like sick eyelids. The smell of leather and damp followed him to the door.

And out there... the Edinburgh night; an old friend—blurred, damp, of coal and harbour. In its streets, the streetlamps cast long shadows, broken and reassembled to the rhythm of the wind pushing the fog. On the walls, the eyes of the houses, always crusted with damp, attended to the wishes of their inhabitants.

He descended the stone staircase, taking care not to fall. He stopped.

She smiled.

He was going to miss Fawkes. No, not just him.

She was going to miss a way of being in the world that, like the smoke from that pipe, was already beginning to dissipate.

LADY ESMÉ LILLIAN FRASER

The night of 23 December 1869

Lady Esmé Lillian Harroway de Fraser had sent Mrs Kenning away some time ago.

The old woman—a taciturn Irish widow—walked away wrapped in her moss-green cloak, smelling of camphor and vinegar, without looking back. She never stayed out after dusk; no woman walked alone through the alleys of Canongate. The stories about body snatchers, and those circulating in the parishes, did nothing to help matters.

Lady Esmé was clearing the table when she heard the latch.

‘Hello, dear Esmé. It’s me.’ Fraser’s voice, worn. As if the whole day were hanging from his shoulders.

She looked up. She smoothed her hair—blonde, almost white under the lamp—and gathered it into her usual bun with ritual precision.

She appeared in the hall carrying a plate of fruit; she forced a smile that was meant to be sincere.

“Hello, darling. How was work?” she said, setting the plate—a family heirloom—on the round hall table.

The living room was also full of heirlooms. A Georgian sideboard that smelled of turpentine; a clock that had marked the passing of time for three generations of Harroways. Ah, and the damask curtains, ravaged by time. Well, thought Fraser, *a living house... but with a weak pulse.*

The inspector leaned in to kiss her. She, graceful, stepped forward to take his raincoat. The kiss never happened. She hung the garment on the coat rack. A hollow ache settled for a moment in Fraser’s chest.

‘Shall we have dinner?’ she asked, without looking at him. The ash-coloured dress trailed behind her as if hesitating to follow.

Fraser leafed through *The Scotsman*, which lay next to the plate of studded oranges.

‘How was your day? Did you go out?’ he asked, trying to piece together the mosaic of home life.

“Not much,” she replied. “A few errands, as usual.”

“No, if you don’t mind...” Fraser lowered his voice, letting the sentence trail off, swept away by an inexplicable sense of guilt.

She smiled with an audible effort.

“Look what Mrs Kenning has left us. Her grandmother’s recipe. Passed down from mother to daughter on her wedding day...” A brief silence. “How lucky.”

On the table lay the *hodge-podge*⁶, apples with honey, black bread, and the harsh ‘mass’ wine. All very humble, but, on Fraser’s salary, almost a feast.

At times like this, Fraser wondered how the daughter of someone with so much power could have ended up with someone like him. Far from feeling lucky, he found himself locked in an incomprehensible cage of his own making.

⁶ Soup or stew, usually made with diced lamb

‘I wish my mother had taught me to cook dishes like this...’ he said, almost in a whisper. ‘Perhaps then you’d love me more.’

Fraser looked up, taken aback by that revelation. Sometimes he thought she was trying to make his life miserable on purpose.

‘I do love you, Esmé. It’s just that I don’t understand you sometimes. I hate seeing you languish at home; it makes me feel guilty. I’ve offered to pull strings so you can go to university or join a book club, if you wish. And, if you don’t trust me, your father can achieve the impossible.’ He moved closer to the table. “In Edinburgh,” he continued, “there are young ladies even at anatomy lectures. If you want to get out of this ‘castle’”—he gestured with his napkin—“tell me how, and I’ll be delighted to help you.”

‘Forgive me, dear. You know I get melancholic in the evenings... Don’t worry about me.’ A cry for help echoed inside her.

They were dining at opposite ends of the table. As the cutlery moved, the table seemed to grow, threatening to become a dark ocean, whilst Fraser’s words—bridges

thrown out at random in an attempt to reach the other side—sank before reaching the opposite bank.

It all began on that fateful wedding night. They slept in separate rooms. They had never touched each other again, nor even mentioned it. He accepted it, perhaps out of love... or out of that resignation that smacks of duty, of acknowledging one's place.

The clock in the drawing room struck the hour with a sharp chime. Once again, something deep inside Lady Esmé cried out to be released, but she suppressed it at once.

LILY OF THE GLEN

Late evening of 24 December.

In Leith, the harbour was teeming with life: life there was like a stew of ingredients rising and falling to the rhythm of the boil, swirling, clumping together, separating or sinking to never return.

Carriages crammed with barrels—rum and herring for the tables of the notables—circled up and down, whilst in the doorways ragged shadows, ‘ ’ jostled tooth and nail for the warm scraps dispensed by the charitable parishes.

‘I hate Christmas!’ growled Buck. A mass of ebony-coloured muscle guarding the door of *the Lily of the Glen*, the most notorious, eccentric—and profitable—brothel in all of Leith.

It had once been a tea room for widows; now, under the command of Madame Vernet, it was a temple where sin was traded with salon manners.

Buck, the doorman, once a docker in the Bonny Bay, had fallen from grace following an accident that left him with a lifelong limp. He accepted his role as doorman without resentment and, in his spare moments, played the part of a cheap philosopher: he would wander the pubs, singing or drinking with other ‘enlightened’ patrons.

Outside, the snow was beginning to fall heavily, promising to cover everything with a bridal veil before nightfall.

‘I don’t know if it’s the cold or human folly, but this time of year...’ He spat decisively into the spittoon, whilst peering out at the street through the sliding peephole. ‘...I’ve never

liked it. And with this storm, on Christmas Eve, what can I say? Not even Christ himself— —is going to come here. Mrs Vernet would do well to give us the night off... by Christ's nails!

“Ha!” came a sing-song voice from the inner corridor of the brothel, drawing closer to the entrance. “You’re certainly a Christian when it comes to that, aren’t you, black man?”

Eleanor Withmore appeared barefoot in the corridor, her long hair cascading over her shoulders like a raging fire. She wore a corset embroidered in green and gold that seemed to hug her small breasts. A crimson skirt, slit up the side, revealed the white curves of her legs.

“Thanks to good old Mr Dickens, we can celebrate this marvellous occasion,” she continued with a frank smile on her subtly childlike face. In contrast to the chill emanating from the street door, the warmth of her body seemed to evaporate the icy air. “Don’t be a Scrooge,⁷,” she said, resting her hand on the big man’s shoulder. “Besides, being here gives you an excuse to be with Maggie; no one will say a word if you slip away for a while, you know what I mean...”

⁷ *Ebenezer Scrooge, the protagonist of A Christmas Carol (Charles Dickens, 1843), embodies the miserly businessman redeemed by charity and the Christmas spirit.*

she winked at him, sticking the tip of her tongue out from the corner of her mouth.

“Apart from the day off, I don’t see much charm in this day,” he grumbled, adjusting his coat, as if that could ward off anything other than the cold. “And don’t give me any of that nativity scene and peace stuff...”

“You? Not even with that, or the turkey, or the mistletoe; I wouldn’t dream of it, you insensitive brute,” added Nell, amused. “But the Christmas spirit does exist. Mind you, in its own way...”

She leaned towards him and spoke in a tone that sounded as if she were reciting a spell:

‘Because now... at this time of year, everyone thinks the same. Souls, even the most tainted ones like yours, align themselves with something older than winter for a common purpose. And that, that gives us licence to live another year just as filthy as the last, my friend.’

Buck chuckled under his breath.

“I always forget how strange you are, Nell. And with that hellish hair... no wonder only eccentrics come looking for you.”

He pulled a sooty cone out of a large pocket in his raincoat. He held it out to the girl.

“Chestnuts. To warm that unbearable spirit of yours.”

“Thanks, big guy,” she replied, accepting the cone as if it were a tribute. “And don’t forget: the eccentrics pay better. One day I’ll make a grand exit... maybe I’ll take you along as my porter.”

A mocking remark was her farewell as she returned to the stairs in the lobby, slipping through the dimness of the corridor.

When she reached the lobby that divided the building into two floors, she heard in the distance, from the staff kitchen downstairs, the murmur of the other girls handing out tea and leftover cake. Every now and then, one of them would peek out through the back door and leave a few coins wrapped in paper for the kids on the quay who came, year after year, for ‘the night ladies’ Christmas treats’.

For a moment she thought she heard something upstairs; she stopped, everything seemed to be silent.

Upstairs, apart from Madame Vernet’s private room, there was only one client, who, moreover, was waiting for her.

Eleanor was about to climb the stairs when she suddenly felt a chill. She shuddered, but the sensation was immediately forgotten as she realised she'd forgotten the ropes; her chatter with Buck had distracted her. Resigned, she turned on her bare feet to go and fetch them.



Meanwhile, young Constable Doves stood frozen in front of the door of *the Lily of the Glen*. If they didn't open up, he'd end up like a snowman. *The worst fate for a policeman*, he thought. His cousin Moira came to mind, offering him comfort.

He considered ringing the bell—the door handle was frozen solid and he didn't want to touch it again—when the wooden peephole slid open and a pair of eyes bore into him.

“The second moon?” said the doorman from inside in a deep voice. The question sounded more like a password than a greeting.

Doves swallowed hard, realising that the cold had robbed him of even the strength to speak.

“Er...” he began. “I’m Constable Doves. We’ve received a report at the station about an incident that occurred tonight in this bar...”—he corrected himself immediately—“in this establishment, sir. I’ve been asked to come and check it out.”

He was rubbing his hands together as he spoke. The officer’s clothes were completely white with snow. Buck had to stifle a laugh at the sight of the little mounds piling up on the officer’s shoulders and cap; he was certainly starting to look like a snowman.

“Nothing’s happened here, little bird. Go back and get some shelter, officer, or I’ll catch a cold.”

Doves replied sharply:

“We’ll both end up covered in shit if I go back empty-handed and Chief Inspector Lachlan Fawkes has to come out here on Christmas Eve... don’t you think?”

No sooner had he finished the sentence than he was taken aback. Had he said that out loud to what was surely a hulk standing guard outside the brothel? *Perhaps the cold has short-circuited the filter between my head and my tongue*, he thought. Or perhaps I simply didn’t want, under any circumstances, to stay out there any longer, exposed to the elements.

The peephole snapped shut. A silence, brief but deadly... and the door—without a creak, without warning—swinged open to the officer with a blast of heat.



Eleanor was crouched in front of the opening of a false panel fitted at the foot of the stairs. Inside was a wooden box that seemed to contain the arsenal of a mad hatter: ropes of various thicknesses, pliers with padded jaws, small metal counterweights. She gathered them up.

Back on the stairs, she heard the door open. Buck must have been receiving a visitor: a lonely widower who preferred the shadows of the Lily to the pain of seeing bright family dinners in other people's windows. Eleanor thought these men were driven by society's etiquette and courtesies. She knew of sons, brothers-in-law or brothers who passed each other in those corridors without looking, as if ignoring the other could erase their shared guilt.

Distracted, she pulled down her bodice for a moment to free her breasts; out of curiosity, she wanted to try hanging small weights from her nipples to see how it felt. Up there, as she climbed, watching the weights swaying to the rhythm

of her hips, her thoughts were interrupted by the hurried sound of swift, desperate footsteps rushing down the stairs.

Madame Vernet appeared before her, covered in blood, her dark curls clinging to her face like wet tentacles, and without giving her time to utter a word, she lunged at her, grabbing her by the shoulders with unusual force.

“What have you done to him, you fool?” she hissed through clenched teeth, shaking her.

Without waiting for an answer, she dragged her down the stairs by the hand.



Isadora Vernet had poured herself a drink. Sitting in the dim light of her study, she set the glass of absinthe down on a blackened mirror with a weary gesture. She delicately placed a slotted spoon on the rim of the glass; on top of it, a sugar cube. She poured in ice-cold water drop by drop. She watched as the green liquid turned milky, cloudy, *like a man's judgement*, she thought.

She took a slow, generous sip —*to ward off the cold*— she told herself.

‘We won’t make half a guinea today, I can see it coming,’ she muttered to herself. ‘I’m about to tell the girls to stay in their rooms if they wish.’

She opened the false drawer in the writing desk, where she kept the book of reservations and the master key, and consulted it. That night there was only one name: Sir Alistair Baine, an old devotee of Nell’s. A gentleman with a penchant for games that would have made even the most tolerant clergyman blush: according to Nelly, he liked to be suspended upside down, like a gutted deer, with weights hanging from the places where pain becomes a promise and pleasure a threat. Nelly was an expert in such matters, and he had made her his personal tormentor.

A fleeting thought struck her. The rest of the girls would be downstairs, in the kitchen, devouring ‘their’ larder instead of lining ‘their’ pockets with guineas — she felt disgust for them; she felt guilty for it.

No, Christmas was never a good business, she thought bitterly. And even less so since that second-rate writer had consecrated it as a shrine to family.

‘Stupid Dickens!’ she toasted aloud. ‘I hope the turkey chokes you and you die.’

She drank the rest of the glass in one gulp.

A faint crash in a room at the back, near the staircase, made her spin round: broken glass?

With more resignation than anger, Isadora made her way to the only room occupied by Nelly and Sir Alistair.

“I swear,” she muttered, “if that twisted bastard’s broken something, I’ll let Buck loose on him to give him a beating...” She thought better of it. “No, he might actually like it.”

She smiled at her own thought with a cynicism she no longer knew whether to regard as a shield or her moral ruin.

When she arrived, she checked that the door wasn’t locked—an unbreakable rule for the safety of her girls—and entered without hesitation, believing that, at this stage, nothing could surprise her.

How wrong she was.

The room was a *sanctum-sanctorum* modelled on a medieval dungeon. Padded iron hooks were embedded in the stone; pulleys concealed within gilded mouldings; a carved wooden rack bearing inscriptions that looked like prayers. Whips,

leather masks and artificial limbs made of polished wood and ivory were scattered about the room.

The air smelled of incense, iron and something else, indefinable.

And there, in the middle, on the floor... Sir Alistair Baine.

Face up. Gutted like a fish. He was still gasping desperately, as if trying to bite the air he could no longer swallow. His eyes met hers first, terrified, and gradually faded, his gaze drifting towards the ceiling and beyond. She, stunned and motionless, watched them freeze: crystalline and hollow, like broken mirrors that no longer reflected any image.

It was then that Madame Vernet noticed the window open inwards.

Broken glass covered the floor and the aristocrat's entrails, whilst the blood slowly claimed its space, black and viscous.

Instinctively, the madame tried to leap towards the window, searching the street for the face of an assailant. In her mind she leapt; her old body, not so much; she stumbled.

The impact sent her crashing face-first onto the corpse. The viscous warmth of the entrails cushioned her fall; the pale

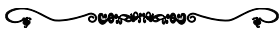
satin of her dress absorbed the blood like a thirsty man finding an oasis, soaking the lace right down to the hem.

‘You piece of shit!’ she roared, kneeling, her fingers slipping in blood and guts. ‘Look what you’ve done to my dress!... No, you’ve probably died enjoying yourself like a pig...’

The sentence hung in the air, broken, because a thought burst in with the violence of a lash: *Nell?*

Panic made her spring to her feet. She searched desperately, scanning every corner, every shadow, hoping to find a small, lifeless body. It wasn’t there. A brief flicker of relief comforted her: her investment must be alive. Almost immediately, panic seized her again.

Buck sprang to her mind as a source of salvation. Rolling up her skirt, she went out in search of him, bumping into Nelly herself halfway there, who, smiling, was climbing the stairs with her corset undone, playing with small weights dangling from her nipples.



‘It’s freezing out there, sir,’ said the young agent Doves, coming in and rubbing his hands together.

“It’s this bloody period piece,” Buck growled at him. “I can’t wait for it to be over already... Well, what’s the news?”

“Well, it turns out...” began the young man, peeling off layer after layer; the porter thought he looked like an onion, “that tonight a sir... damn it!” He glanced at the ceiling for a moment. “I can’t remember his name right now... Anyway, the man came to the station saying that here”—he nodded towards the interior of the building—“something had happened which he described, word for word, as ‘a settling of scores’.” I went to tell Inspector Fawkes, who hadn’t left yet... but he... well, he brushed me off, saying he was already on his way home and not to bother him with nonsense.

“To protect and serve!” Buck laughed sarcastically, accompanying Doves down the corridor towards the lobby.

‘I must tell you, sir, that the truth is the bloke who came in was acting strangely. Absent-minded, I’d say. Or, more likely... drunk. Quite normal at this time of year, mind you, don’t you think? Well, be that as it may, the inspector said to sort it out myself and that, if I saw it really was an emergency, I should notify Inspector Fraser. He’s my line manager, you see?’

“Good heavens, lad,” Buck interrupted, stopping almost at the end of the path; he was beginning to like the lad. “If you want my advice: for a policeman, you talk too much; let the others do the talking.”

Doves blushed to the tips of his ears.

“Thanks, sir, I’ll do that.”

They were about to step out into the lobby when they came face to face with two women.

One was covered in blood as she dragged along another, much younger woman, two small weights dangling from her pink nipples and an ambiguous smile on her face.

Doves’ eyes and mouth fell open, unable to utter a word. His eyes sought an answer from Buck.

Buck rolled his eyes.

A restrained blow from his fist landed with a sharp crack, like thunder in a closed room.

Doves fell to the floor without uttering a sound, at Buck’s feet.

“What a disgusting night,” he muttered.