

There is an old saying – “no good story starts with drinking tea”. Damned good job Vondemonde was on the brandy. He leant back against the sill of the great window as the party busied it's self around him. He took a long, deep drag on his thin cigarette, savouring the sensation as the smoke filled his lungs. *Simple things, he thought, are the true bearers of pleasure.* Slowly he exhaled, letting the smoke fill into his mouth before cascading upwards like a waterfall with a severe case of misdirection. Someone had once told him that cigarettes could kill. Bloody ridiculous! Why, Vondemonde himself had smoked for his whole damned life, and he was just as healthy at sixty-two as he was at twenty-six. Either way nobody here seemed to care and a number had lit up themselves.

One would be excused to think that the entire village was present; the manor house was jammed with old folk stumbling about and wheezing for breath. Grief, how Vondemonde hated Ross-on-Wye. The village was pretty enough; there was a nice view of the rolling countryside to wake up to, but the population must have an average age one-hundred-and-six. Worse still was the fact that every damned street had it's own funeral parlour and the market was littered with second-hand stores. This was clearly a place where the old came to die, and the marginally younger came to buy a new pair of slacks before reaching the end of the rope themselves. This was no place for Vondemonde, and though London was filled with grime and smog, at least it had life!

Still, there was the odd younger couple around. He supposed there had to be, otherwise who would carry the casket? But at tonight's party – be it a birthday, wedding or funeral, he didn't know and he didn't care – only a fraction were below the age of sixty.

Vondemonde himself was only there for business purposes. He took a snifter of brandy and felt the burning sensation on his tongue as the alcohol closed the pores opened by smoke - not wholly unpleasant. Then he refocussed on the real reason he was here. In the centre of the room, mostly obscured by the wandering elderly, sat the object of his attention.

She sat upright, perched with an air of dignity on the small couch between her young cohort and a dashing young top-hatted chap. The latter was in deep conversation with a busty redhead wearing a low-cut dress, and why the hell not? Good on him! These two sat with less dignity than the old girl, their bosoms rising and falling with each deep breath, exhausted from waltzing in the next room. Vondemonde assumed they were not associated with his target. He was safe, but he had to focus.

She drank from the smallest cup of tea he had ever seen, the little finger of her right hand extended as she lifted the cup from its saucer. She people watched, looking round the room smiling at passers-by and generally looking interested in the evening's event. The young lady on her left - the cohort seemingly dragged along to such events - slumped in place wearing an expression that said *Please, somebody, end my misery*. And Vondemonde would. Eventually.

He watched the old girl intently, unaware of those around him, focused in as though peering down a tunnel to a great light, all else shrouded in shadow. He was here for one purpose and one purpose alone; the old Lady Fransworth.

She wasn't a particularly pleasant lady to behold; a number of years older than himself, possibly in her seventies, her large eyes drooped lazily behind small round glasses, her petite mouth dwarfed by a proud, upturned nose. Her hair almost looked real, but was betrayed by the Lady's habit of lifting the false scalp to scratch the real one beneath. She filled out her dress more than generously, a dress which unsuccessfully hid a wooden prophetic leg. This was, Vondemonde believed, something she struggled with, and so had adapted the leg by adding two small wheels of clay to the heel. She didn't walk. She, in a very real sense, skated.

A round, bald-headed chap with a full moustache stumbled in Vondemonde's direction, catching and propping himself against the the window's sill by the old man's side. Vondemonde kept his keen gaze on the Lady, secure and unmoving.

'Jolly good do, this, ey, old chap?'

Vondemonde was silent.

'I don't believe -' he swayed a little and caught the sill again. 'I don't believe we have been introduced, sir. Are you -' he waved his left arm, Vondemonde glanced sideways at the clumsy gesture, barely disguising his judgement. 'Are you new to the area?'

Vondemonde returned his attention to Fransworth and took another deep drag of his cigarette. Why did the peculiar ones always come to him? He was in no more a mood to speak to the drunken fart than he was to stick the fire's dying embers in his eyes. He gave the man a look which any one else would have read *Continue speaking and I will tear your tongue out*. But the bald man must have only read the first part before opening his mouth again. Grief.

He watched her now, willing her to turn and look his way more than ever, hoping for his chance to be rid of his unwelcome guest. And as luck would have it, if you believed in such silly notions, she did. Lady Fransworth looked in his direction and met his stare with a start. He held her gaze for a heartbeat or two as the little bald man prattled on about this or that. *Thank goodness*, he thought, then he put out his cigarette, straightened his jacket and went in for the kill, leaving the conversationalist mid-sentence.

'Place this on the table, that's a good girl'

'Yes, m'lady.' Emily sat upright, took the teacup and saucer from her mistress and placed them on the elaborately decorated table before her. *Something the old hag couldn't do for herself, heaven forbid!* A moment of silence passed, one of many this night. Fransworth spoke first, looking about the room, but clearly addressing her maid.

'Oh I do enjoy these dinner parties, new people to speak to, new stories to tell and to hear and to be made.'

Emily sighed. Her employer didn't notice. 'Yes, m'lady.' Then Fransworth made a start, one so sudden Emily thought the old bat was having a heart failure.

'My my, who is that handsome young man?'

'Handsome young man, m'lady?' Emily sat straight and followed her mistress's gaze with her own. On the other side of the dimly lit room, through the crowds of people, she made out a man, tall and thin. His suit was plain, yet hung over his slender body with an air of sophistication and power. The smoke of his thin cigarette weaved before him in a rich volume that silently masked his face. Still, she could make out his determined eyes, sharp and firmly planted on Fransworth. *Young man!?* She thought and looked back to her ancient employer. *Only comparatively. He must be in his sixties, at least.*

'The mysterious man in the black suit back there. By the window.'

'Ah yes.' Emily thought she recognised his image from the papers. She had about his retirement from a career of exploration, the donation of his finds to the British Museum, and subsequently his rise to Curator, as quick as one does when wealth outweighs capability. 'I believe that fine young man is a Mr Vondemonte, m'lady, from London. He's only passing through the area.'

'Oh, such a shame.' The lady spoke without looking away from the man, she was captivated. 'Continue'.

Emily wasn't sure what to say, she wasn't the Who's Who personified! 'I believe he is the head of a department at the British Museum,' she offered. 'Interested in ancient relics, so he's bound to be keenly interested in you!' Emily didn't say the last part out loud. Or at least she hoped she hadn't. She hated these parties, and on the odd occasion her mistress was otherwise occupied, she would slip down a glass of wine or two. She wasn't drunk yet, she didn't think, but she was well on her way.

Her Lady made no remark, but continued to look towards Vondemonte, a disgusting twinkle in her elderly eye. Either the insult had gone unspoken, or the old bat was deaf than Emily had thought. Mr Vondemonte put out his cigarette and made his approach.

He strolled forward, not once pausing or moving as he passed through the crowd of guests. They seemed to disperse before him like vapour, although unaware of his presence.

'Lady Fransworth, I presume.' He bent low at the waist and gently kissed the back of her hand. She blushed as Emily watched, struggling to mask her disgust. 'My Lady, your elegance and abundance of ...' he paused 'character travels well before you. Allow me to introduce myself,' Fransworth waved a hand, a clear indication that Emily should leave. 'my name is Charles B. Vondemonte and it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.'

Emily rolled her eyes, but was glad to be freed of the sickening sight. She squeezed her way through the busy corridors, passed the ball room where the old couples danced square dances and the younger danced the waltz, and continued into the large dining room. All of the furniture had been moved giving it a strangely odd, yet strangely familiar sense of emptiness. Couples dotted the

seats around the quiet room, speaking in hushed tones. Emily could feel their eyes on her as she walked across the room to the bar. Alone.

She sat at the temporary bar, one that had been there every time she had visited the Manor House, and ordered a glass of white wine from the hired-hand. She rarely needed a drink, but some nights were too miserable to resist. How could any man take such a shine to the old hag she served? And for that matter how could any self-respecting lady allow herself to be wooed by such a creepy old man? His abundance of character had travelled before him also. He was a retired treasure hunter, and not the brawn, rugged type – more the skinny snobbish type who would step on the shoulders of real men in order to receive glory and fame.

Yet there was, however humiliating it seemed, a small sense of envy for the old lady. Emily couldn't remember the last time a man looked at her in that way, nor the last time she had seen a man she took interest in. It wasn't that she wasn't interested in men, just that she simply couldn't find the time to socialise. She spent most hours caring for her mistress and attending her 'dinner-parties for the elderly', as she came to refer to them, that she hadn't had the opportunity to find a real man for herself.

She rested her head on the bar. It was lucky for her that this room was so empty, she needed an escape from the busying crowds; a place to be herself, by herself. But watching the evident lack of skill displayed by the buck-toothed barman, she could hardly be surprised by the lack of business. As he stumbled around searching for the right glass, Emily thought on her own state of affairs.

She too was a hired-hand, working for Lady Fransworth as a zoo-keeper would an elephant; caring, cleaning, feeding and the like. All things the woman could do for herself, but Emily supposed she just needed the company in her old age. The thought saddened her a little, considering the attitude she displayed towards her employer – not a particularly nice one at best. She wondered if she was as bad at her job as the spotty barman was at pouring a simple drink. He seemed to care about his job as much as she did hers. *It's just a passing phase, she told herself, I only need to keep this job until I have enough money to escape to France.*

The sound of clay rolling along the wooden floor grew louder as Lady Fransworth glided towards Emily. She turned and addressed her Mistress with tired manner.

'My dear! It seems I shan't be needing your presence tonight,' she said with the giddiness of a school girl, 'Charles will be seeing me home this evening!'

*Goodness! That was quick work for an old man!* Emily was surprised but kept silent.

'You may head home when you are finished here.' She tossed over a coin or two as Mr Vondemonde rushed over to sweep her away. 'Have a drink! Enjoy the night!' And with that she was gone.

Emily turned back to the bar, taken back by her mistress's generosity. It turned out that the cobwebbed heart in the ancient woman's chest still played a beat! And what a dirty old man! She was rather impressed by the two, though sickened to think of what relations they would have. Still at least they are happy. And now she had the night to herself, alone with time to think on the bigger things in life. And dwell. And wallow. Alone.

The barman placed a glass of white wine on the bar in front of Emily, spilling it only a little. She looked up and saw the young man smile a smile filled with crooked teeth. Their eyes met and Emily smiled an awkward smile back.

*Oh bother, she thought, am I really that desperate?*

---

Vondemonde paid for the cab back to the Fransworth residence. It wasn't far from the manor house and would have been an easy gliding distance for the old Lady if he hadn't bought her those additional drinks. She couldn't go far without falling, especially on a dark night like this. Curbs were an issue, he had realised. Curbs and roadsides and any cobble. The cab was the easiest option.

It pulled up to a large detached house, one of many on this street – all similar to hers, but all smaller – and the couple fell out in the silly manner one gets after too much wine. Fransworth stumbled through the hedged garden up to the large wooden door that had been painted a garish

salmon. Vondemonde stood at the gate, studying the symmetry of the house's dark exterior. Four black windows stared back at him from either side of the over-sized door. Fransworth struggled with her keys; the air must have hit the alcohol, she seemed more drunk now than when they left the party. He approached, took the keys from her hand and let them both in.

Inside, the house seemed larger than the outside had suggested. There was an unnatural hum as the electronic lighting flicked into life, instantly illuminating a grand, immaculately cleaned foyer and its wide central staircase. Tall archways opened into spacious rooms on either side, Fransworth entered the one to the left, leaving Vondemonde to lock the front door.

'Electric lighting?' Vondemonde followed the Lady into what appeared to be her living room. A large fireplace adorned one wall, book shelves and cabinets devoured the rest. In the centre, two armchairs flanked a humble couch on which Fransworth sat, facing the unlit fire.

'Oh yes! It's the future, sir, especially for someone in my condition. I can't be expected to run around lighting gas lamps all of the time!'

He supposed not and went to take a seat.

'No!' she cried, just as he turned to sit beside her. She shooed a small white cat out of slumber and onto the floor. 'Excuse Mr Fluffsies,' she said, wiping the fine, white, matted hair off the seat. 'He has quite the ownership of this spot. You wouldn't find him sitting anywhere else. But tonight, you can take his place.'

Vondemonde didn't know how to react to this, her smile was suggestive and it felt odd. 'Thank you for your offer, but I shall be fine here' he sat on one of the hairless armchairs, what with the unthinkable threat of white hair on a black suit.

As he lowered himself into the somewhat uncomfortable armchair, Fransworth leapt from the couch with all the surprising agility of a supple youth. 'Where are my manners! What will you have to drink?'

She rolled towards one of the cabinets that housed a wide range of glasses and bottled drinks. She poured Vondemonde a cognac from a full bottle, and herself a martini from an almost empty one. She glided back, unexpectedly steady with drinks in hand. 'So, Mr Vondemonde, tell

me what brings you through Herefordshire.'

'Please, my dear, call me Charles. My work with the Museum means that every now and then I get to do a little travelling. I believe there is a small relic of great value held by a private collector not too far from here. I am passing through on business to confirm it's authenticity and, lets say, negotiate a price.'

Her eyes grew large as she listened to him speak. When he saw her that way her face looked younger, filled with the innocence of a young girl. 'And what is this piece, exactly?'

'I'm afraid I cannot say. The department has strict confidentiality rules, I'm sure you understand.'

'Indeed I do, Charles.' She savoured the name as it passed her lips. Vondemonde took a large swig of his brandy. 'Consider my mouth closed.'

'Thank you. This is a beautiful house, Lady Fransworth, Bright and warm even without the fire. Do you mind if I...?' He gestured the removal of his jacket.

'Oh, not at all. Please, allow me.'

Before he could refuse, she had slipped her hands inside his jacket and slid it off his shoulders. He could feel her breath on his neck as she moved around him, gracefully catching, folding and placing the jacket on the back of his chair. *Nimble little beast, isn't she?* It was then that the lady noticed the small piece of flat, circular stone that hung on a chain around his neck. He quickly took it in one hand and was about to slip it under his collar when Fransworth stopped him. 'Do you mind?' She asked, 'May I take a look?'

Reluctantly, he slipped the chain over his head and passed it to the lady. 'Excuse my naivety, but this is quite embarrassing. You see, this is a keepsake of mine, a good luck charm, if you will. One that was passed down from my father when I was a child.'

In reality Vondemonde did not believe in 'luck'. Any fortune was of your own making, not that of an inanimate object. The inscription on the disk was beautiful and elegantly eastern, but referred to Conjee; a sort of Chinese rice porridge. The pendant was by all accounts worthless, but with any hope it could open a very important door.

She took the stone from him with all the sensitivity and caring as if it were made of brittle glass. He watched as she inspected it and the intricate, oriental carvings it displayed.

She passed it back to him and smiled. 'Mr Vondemonde, I would like to show you something.'

She led him through the house, gliding over carpet and wood with distinct audible changes. He thought the staircase would have been a challenge for her, but with an energy and mirth Vondemonde found unnatural for an old lady with a wooden leg, she simply hopped up step by step. The old man had a job keeping up with her.

They entered a room towards the front of the house. It was a spacious room with a loud décor of beige and pinks, as sickly-sweet as the powerful aroma. A four-post bed occupied one wall with vanity chests on each side, both messily laden with overflowing jewellery boxes, wig mannequins and perfume bottles. But to Vondemonde the most strikingly odd thing about the room was that each wall was covered, inch by inch, with portraits of felines. Painting after painting of cats and kittens, alone or in groups, every colour, every breed, every angle.

Fransworth rolled towards the bed.

'Ah-hem, isn't it a little early for that, just yet? Maybe another drink?'

She looked at him perplexed then caught his meaning. Once again she blushed and looked at him with a twinkle in here eye and a poorly masked smile. 'No, Charles, *that* is not what I wish to show. At least not yet!' He gave her a dashing smile that quickly dissolved into hopeless worry as she turned her back. 'If you don't mind waiting in the hall, I'll be out in a moment.'

He complied, and not a minute later she emerged from the room waving a set of keys. She led the man down a long corridor decorated with more portraits of playful kittens. Suddenly she halted, turned to one – an oval portrait of a black cat wearing a miniature shirt, collar and tie – muttered something in an angry whisper, licked the pad of her thumb and wiped a tiny mark from the portrait's protective glass. She smiled at Vondemonde and they continued until she finally stopped at one door of many. She paused for a moment, then turned back to the door they had just passed. 'This, sir, is my old Junk Room.' She laughed to herself as she found the correct key and unlocked the door.

As it opened, a fantastic golden light spilled into the corridor. Vondemonde stood speechless; he could have slapped her right there and then! The Lady's 'Junk Room' was filled with treasures, a collection almost as vast as his own, but thrown together in a dusty clutter that gave the feeling of a storage cupboard. She walked in, Vondemonde still paralysed at the shock. It was truly amazing what one could find in an old girl's loft, or in this case, Junk Room. Pah! Junk Room?!

Ancient shields, carved African masks and intricate-yet-bizarre tribal instruments littered the room, covered in dust and set in ill repair. The room had a stale, dusky odour like that of an old tomb or temple in which most of these treasures belonged. Fransworth pushed her way to the back of the room, a bright golden light fell over everything, setting in Vondemonde a dream-like wonder. She turned and beckoned him in. Did she not know what she had here?!

'My dearest Lady Fransworth,' he started, having had the chance to take everything in, 'just what...' he paused again, a mixture of bewilderment, awe and disbelief.

'Oh, all of this? Just trinkets passed down from my father and the like.' She searched through an old oak desk, it's drawers filled with Roman coins and small carvings. Vondemonde raised his eyes. Before him hung a stunning chandelier, it's crystals shattering light in fragments across the room. At it's centre was the source of the golden light. The Orb of K'inich – the stone of the sun-eyed.

'Pretty, isn't it? Just a tad garish for my liking. After a while the gold hurts my eyes and there is no way to turn the damned thing off! No switches, no snuffer...' she looked up, clapped her hands loudly and said in a firm, clear voice 'Off', then looked at Vondemonde and gave a shake of her head. 'Nothing! Anyway! This is what I wanted to show you.' She held out her right hand, within it sat a pile of stone disks like casino chips. He took them and held them under the light at the perfect distance for him to focus properly. Usually he would have his glasses for this sort of thing. Each disk was fashioned similar to his Conjee pendant, but were inscribed with the names of gods and kings. This was indeed a true, albeit small, find. 'You may keep them for your own collection, as a reminder of tonight.' She gave him a smile, he couldn't resist giving an astonished one back.

They left the junk room, Fransworth replaced her keys and the two headed back down the stairs, she descending by sliding down the rail. Vondemonde had to admire her; she was indeed

old, but had the careless nature of a child. They sat and continued their drinks.

'I simply prefer the New,' she offered as they sat. 'There are great benefits of our modern technology; central heating, electric light, telecommunication. They are the things of true worth, Mr Vondemonde, not these old bits of cracked stone and wood.'

He was offended by the statement, but did not, in turn, want to offend her. 'Indeed, there are many marvels, many advantages, but...'

'But I cannot simply give those items away. Though they are old and broken and some of them are downright ghastly, they hold a certain sentimental value. They are memories of my father and his father before him. They were gifts from passed lovers and ex-husbands. Not the sort of thing one wants on show at all times, you understand.'

Who were these men? Her father? Ex-husbands? They all had access to ancient treasures and would pass them off as tokens of affection? He suddenly felt like a small, tomb-thieving fish in an entire ocean of archaeologists and excavators. 'Of course,' he said through clenched teeth.

She glanced at the tall-case clock in the corner of the room - it was almost midnight. She gave Vondemonde a smile and poured him another drink. 'Sit tight, I am going to freshen up.'

---

Once he was certain she had gone, Vondemonde put down the glass and rose to his feet. He ascended the stairs in a few elegant leaps and headed for her room. A well tuned voice sang out occupying all of the first floor, a voice which appeared to emanate from the room opposite the Lady's Chamber. As he drew closer he heard the sounds of rippling water overlapping the reverberated voice. *Well at least she'll be clean.* The old man shuddered. He entered the bedroom and made search for the key.

On the bed she had laid out a small lace dress, pearls and a red bob-wig with a feathered headdress. Vondemonde liked the new fashion, it was damned sexy, but the thought of her in such

attire left a bitter taste in his mind's eye. Then he spotted the prosthetic leg propped up in the corner. *Sweet mother of all that is right and pure*, he thought, *it goes all the way up!*

Quickly he scanned the room and silently inspected the drawers, careful not to disturb anything, until he found the keys hidden within the lady's oversized knicker drawer. As he turned to leave he jumped at an unexpected sight; the small white cat sat in his way. He looked at it with a peculiar stare, the cat looked back and cocked its head aside. It was a funny looking creature, more fluff than cat. Its features somewhat undersized, almost lost amidst a large puff of soft hair. Its expression was blank, emerald eyes appearing to look in different directions. Vondemond passed by quietly and continued down the corridor as silent as a wraith. The cat turned and, in a simple manner, followed.

He rushed through the house to the Junk Room, making a mental note of his surroundings. He had done this sort of thing before, and was damned good at it. When a new challenge presented itself he would sketch on the blank pages of his mind a blueprint indicating floor plans and obstacles. He would commit all things to memory – windows, hiding places, security systems, booby-traps and the like. It was always best to be prepared.

Three doors down the right hand corridor towards the back of the house - three doors and not four - stood the junk room. He unlocked and entered. Inside he took a closer look at the golden treasure. The glare of the orb masked how well it was bonded to the chandelier, and made it impossible to see how the chandelier was fitted to the ceiling. *Tinted spectacles*, he made the mental note, *and heavy duty gloves, just to be on the safe side.*

In the corridor the cat sat watching him and listening to the ladies song. Vondemond stepped passed the critter, locked the door and checked the next one down. He opened that into a small box room, dark and without windows. A terrible memory from his childhood flooded into his mind; the haunting darkness of the box room. He shuddered and tore himself away from the thought, then closed that door and opened the one opposite. He entered a small guest room with large bay windows and ran over to inspected them; panel windows with a diamond stained glass pattern held in place with a lead lining. He removed the pin-lock, releasing the lower portion of the window and slid it upwards. It moved with stutters and jerks and a terrible screeching sound that matched the voice in the hall. Sticking his head out of the window and surveyed the back garden and a large, sturdy, neighboring tree.

*Excellent.*

He closed the window, not bothering to replace the lock-pin, turned towards the door and saw again the silhouetted shape of the docile cat, curious of the man's wanderings. He exited the room, shooing the creature along, then made his way back to Fransworth's chamber. The cat plodded on behind with a mind full of warm fluff that tickled as it moved its head. It smiled.

The singing came to an abrupt end; she was exiting the bath. He ran silently down the corridor and slipped into the old Lady's room. He went straight to the knicker drawer and deposited the keys.

'My dear!' The voice caught him. He spun around so quickly he almost lost consciousness. There before him, his fate on crutches. Lady Fransworth was wearing nothing more than a towel. Not even a wig. 'If I had known you were this keen I wouldn't have kept you waiting!' The odd strand of natural hair wavered in the air as she giggled to herself. She gave him a cheeky smile and without moving, dropped the towel.

Of all the things he had ever done over his long career as treasure hunter and cat burglar there were few things that made him actually hate himself. Lying with Lady Fransworth was one of them.

---

The rays of morning light shone through a gap between the curtains and fell silently across the face of a sleeping Lady Fransworth. She stirred from a peaceful sleep, took a deep breath and snuggled deeper under the large duvet, as soft as clouds, as warm and inviting as a lover's arms against her naked skin. And then, as she thought on the wonderful evening before, she became well aware that she was, in fact, alone.

She lifted herself up into a sitting position and squinted in the morning light as she viewed her room. On the pillow to her right lay a folded piece of paper with her name written in a romantic script. She opened it and read.

"My dearest Lady Fransworth,

Please accept my deepest, heartfelt apology but work has a way of stealing one away from the comfort of a lover's side. Alas, urgent business must be dealt with urgently.

I can only thank you for your kind hospitality last night, and as Fate, in her wisdom, has brought us together once, I can only hope and pray that our paths cross again in the future.

Yours Truly,

Charles B. Vondemonde

P.S. You are a very, very generous Lady in the bedroom."

She lay back with a smile, succumbing to the simple pleasure of a comfortable mattress. Last night had been the best she had had in over two months, she tipped her hat to the sensuous Mr Vondemonde.