

Two weeks later Vondemonde boarded the 14.04 from London Paddington to Hereford. He sat alone in the small compartment of the passenger carriage, his long legs crossed, his posture upright and proper. He read the morning's Times as the carriage rocked gently from left to right. Behind the glass panel to his left, the world sped by in a blur of greens and blues. The journey would only take three hours to complete – *Hah!* - it was remarkable that a man could wake up on one side of the country and make to the other in time for tea. He had a particular love of travel, especially in such a technologically advanced era where rapid steam trains and powerful ocean liners were readily available. What was once an impossible voyage, fraught with dangers and lasting half a lifetime, could now be completed with speed, style, and most importantly, comfort.

The real blessing of the segregated travel compartment in which he sat was indeed just that; they were separated from the rest; one could travel in the comfort of one's own company, quiet and undisturbed. Whenever a bowler-hatted chump or flustered harlot reached for the compartment door, they would be met by a damning of stare neatly perched above the rim of Vondemonde's broadsheet. They would suddenly remember something - lost keys, a lost purse, a sudden urge to travel in any other carriage than this one –and wander off leaving him to sit alone in peace.

Of course this was never fully reliable, and that was why he travelled on a Thursday afternoon when the stations were quiet and the trains even more so. On the odd occasion an unwelcome visitor entered and took a seat, Vondemonde would continue his icy stare, watching them squirm under his uncomfortable gaze until they could bear it no longer. It wasn't that Vondemonde disliked other people, true though it was that he considered most of them fools, this was more a form of sport, a game he liked to play. One particular victim had lasted forty-nine minutes and twenty-three seconds by his count before feeling the urge to change carriage. On the other end of the spectrum he had perturbed a well-dressed lady just as rump touched seat. She was out of the compartment as quickly as if she had sat on a pin and Vondemonde himself was a vision of Hades. It was true to say that he had a way with people. It wasn't a particularly pleasant way, but it was definitely and distinctively *his* way.

However, there once was a time he rather enjoyed the company of others; the comradery spurred on by long voyages, the hero's return, the boastful respect freely given him. And, of course, the women. Every last one of them. But as time moved on, so did he. He became more

cynical about the state of the world; politics conquered reason, children grew not knowing the meaning of the word 'respect', pollution problems worsened. There would be a war or a revolution and this once great nation would ride to the devil in blazes! He had heard of such things starting to take shape in Russia. Things aren't as they should be, as they *used* to be. Vondemonde hated that fact.

He lit up a cigarette as a pert young lady wearing a well fitted bodice and floral hat walked through the carriage hallway. He glared at her and her pace quickened.

The women had dried up, also. And in more ways than one. Vondemonde considered. *Old age was a bitter beast.*

The journey was somewhat uneventful. The train had six stops before Hereford and the best time Vondemonde got was to a fat man with large sideburns smoking a bell-bottomed pipe. It took fifty-four seconds before he snuffed out the pipe with a respectful apology, then, with Vondemonde's continued stare, another minute and a half before he felt awkward enough to leave.

It was at Swindon Station when a young blond girl in her late teens entered the compartment. She had simply ignored his stare and took her seat. She was a pretty little thing, large eyed, smooth skinned and fashionably dressed; tight to reveal her petite, curve-less figure. Her face was stuck in a small mirror she had taken from her small bag, the only luggage she carried, and considered her looks with keen self-interest. Without breaking her gaze she spoke. 'Can I help you, old man, or are you just a filthy deviant?'

'And who the hell do you think you are talking...?' he paused, open mouthed, as a second girl entered. This one carried a large pack on her back which she dismounted onto the floor with effort and grunt. She was dressed for practicality over fashion, but in all other respects looked identical to the seated girl, who now stared at Vondemonde with heavy judgment. The new comer wore a smile, the other did not.

'Can't you see I'm trying to make my journey in peace?' he continued, 'Now please--'

'What's his problem?' the practical said to the fashionable.

'He was trying to get an eyeful of me. You know, to get the old engine running again.' She said, attention back to the mirror as she applied a fresh coat of lipstick to already rouged lips.

'What the..?' came his defence, but was once again cut off as the newcomer squirmed audibly where she stood. 'No, you are mistaken, I was merely...' he paused himself this time, the truth wouldn't shade him in any better a light.

'Do you think he's a pervert? Do you think he sneaks up on women when they're getting dressed?'

'Yes,' said her sister, now disinterested in the fuss she had caused. 'And men too, probably.'

'He makes me sick,' she turned to face Vondemonde, 'You make me sick!'

He was flustered now. Not only through the false accusation, but through the constant interruption, the wanton little bitches cutting him off any way they could. He stood and threw the newspaper to the ground, his voice raised, 'Listen here you arrogant sows! My business on this train is not to ogle, but to travel in peace! I did not make eyes at your sister, I was simply trying to make the insolent bitch piss off that I may be left alone!'

'I would rather you didn't use that sort of language around my girls, kind sir.' The voice was calm, yet demanding.

Perfect. Their father! But when he looked, he saw two men, both in long black shawls and white collars. Bloody Priest. And two of them! He had heard of men of the cloth going awry when it came to the sins of the flesh, and these two girls – he had to admit - however insolent and lewd, made a strong argument towards that particular sin. But every man needed an outlet, he supposed, and he wasn't one to judge.

This was in fact far from the truth. Vondemonde was one to judge. He did it with contempt and prejudice and took great pleasure from doing so. Still, being branded a pervert in the same matter, by Moonlighting Dirt no less, held particular sting.

Vondemonde, without apologising, picked up his paper and took his seat..

The two men entered, one in his fifties, the other considerably younger, an apprentice

more likely than not, possibly in his twenties. The latter nervously fumbled his hands as he took his seat next to Vondemonde. The older sat opposite and addressed the girls as the train set off. 'Now then, what is all of this about? Chantelle?'

Vondemonde sniggered at the name, once pretty, now poetic for the back-alley child of a common drunkard. 'The old man was looking at me, in a way that suggested something bad. It made me feel ashamed of myself, you know, unclean' came the young lady's reply. There was an element of fact in it, but twisted horribly. Vondemonde's face was a picture of disbelief, the old Priest turned a stern face in his direction.

'Lies!' He cried, 'My eyes were fastened on this article about--' he looked to the open broadsheet and read the first headline '--the growing popularity of Clairvoyance--' the vicar's eyebrows raised. '-- not something I personally go for - anyone who claims to speak with spirits are liars and fakes, the whole bloody lot!' this didn't impress the man of faith. Vondemonde sighed. He wasn't getting anywhere with this, so he sat down and sunk his face into the pages of the broadsheet.

Of course the girl argued against, but after a while gave up her case and was forced to apologise. Vondemonde took the apology sourly; lowering his paper just enough to give her a look which said *of course you're bloody sorry, but you're not bloody forgiven*, then returned the paper to mask his face once again.

'Now girls,' the older man spoke, 'you understand, Aunt Felicity lives in a place very different to our home. She... doesn't tend to entertain much, and the closest market is an hour's walk.'

There was a tut - no doubt Chantelle.

'Yes father, we understand, she lives in a forest,' it sounded like the sister, more enthusiasm in that voice, 'I'm going to build fires and go exploring!'

'No!' cried the man, Vondemonde lowered his paper, 'No, they will find you and...'

'Father?' Vondemonde interrupted, the Priest turned to him. He gave the group a scrupulous look. There were no direct similarities between the girls and either man, but the way

they acted and spoke gave the impression of a close family rather than a couple of men and their gillies. 'Are these girls yours?'

The Priest cleared his throat. 'yes, why do you ask?'

'I thought Priests weren't allowed children. You know, a life of chastity and all that?'

'And what gave you that impression?'

'I thought you couldn't marry.'

'That's catholic, my good man. We are protestant.'

'And your wife?' Vondemonde continued, too late did he realise he may have crossed a boundary.

The Priest cleared his throat a second time. 'I am unmarried. But the girls? Well, God moves in mysterious ways now, doesn't he? Now if you would be so kind as to excuse us, my children and I have important issues to discuss.'

Vondemonde raised his paper.

'Actually, sir, this is rather sensitive information. Would you mind...?' he nodded to the hallway door. Vondemonde, flustered, took hold of his briefcase, stood, folded his paper beneath his arm with violent movements, and stormed out of the compartment.

He walked down the mahogany-panelled corridor, searching for an unoccupied compartment. Each was taken, so he settled on one in which a fat man smoked a bell bottomed pipe. He entered with all the fury of the Erinyes and planted himself firmly on the seat opposite the alarmed man. He riffled through his paper and heard the grating sound of the man and his pipe.

Vondemonde's broadsheet lowered. 'OUT!' he commanded.

The fat man took up his luggage and left without question.

Upon his arrival in Herford, Vondemonde stepped into a local tavern - one he deemed worthy of his custom - and enjoyed an evening meal of sirloin steak and locally brewed ale. Then he located the Bed and Breakfast where he had reservation, and settled down for the evening.

The bed was glorious, and the breakfast even more so. Vondemonde could be a bitter old fool from time to time, but after a restful night's sleep and a full English, he could charm the panties off a nun. He smiled and bid his hosts - a busty brunette and her French husband - a dear farewell and headed to the nearest coach station.

The small coach to Ross-on-Wye wasn't particularly busy and the ride was pleasant. Today was a good day. Vondemonde was looking forward to finally using his talents in a professional setting rather than simply as a hobby, to gain recognition for a job well done, a talent well-polished. Even the depressing village of wrinkles and death seemed rather cheery; the old people hobbling around with smiles on their faces and well wishes for those they passed. It was nice. He lifted his trilby as the polite old folk went about their day, his smile kind and warm.

As the pleasant evening drew near he strolled past the stately home, taking in the beautiful sight of the old building, its flourishing gardens aglow in the pinks and purples of the setting sun. He picked an apple from an over-hanging tree and enjoyed the satisfying crunch and the crisp taste. He made his way down a long road of familiar houses as the last rays of light shimmered out of existence, making way for a new night. Then he climbed over a fence. Then another and another, nimbly and silently like a suited shadow with no weight or substance, only movement and purpose, making his way towards the Fransworth Residence.

He found a nice dark spot in the Lady's garden, sheltered by tree leaves and shrubberies, and opened the briefcase. He removed his jacket, folded it neatly and placed it inside. He wore a tightly knit sweatshirt and matching trouser as black as the night around him. From the case he pulled a black, cloth bag with pull strings that he cast over the shoulders. He also pulled a black knitted cap and matching gloves, a flask of tea that he had acquired passing through the town, and a sandwich.

He sat eating, and watching the house in silence. Watching the lights turn on and off as the

lady busied herself about the place, preparing for the evening ahead of her. He recalled the cab ride that night two weeks prior. She had enquired about his availability this night.

'An old friend of mine is holding a charity gala in aid of...' He couldn't remember what it was in aid of, it wasn't important. She continued to speak for a while as the cab jolted mercilessly along the uneven road. She seemed to him either passionately for or passionately against the cause. He couldn't recall, it wasn't important '...two weeks' time, the evening of the 7th...' That was important. The mental note was made. There was something about the host being heavily involved in an illegal gambling circle, not initially important but could be useful, then something about house pets dressed as waiters with trays strapped to their backs. Not important, not useful but delightfully cruel. '... So, can I presume to see you there?'

There was silence. Then he realised she had asked him a question. 'The 7th, you say? Of July?'

'Why, yes.' She leant towards him, making herself comfortable against his side.

'No'

A pause.

'I mean to say that I am unavailable that night. As much of a pleasure it would be to make your acquaintance once again,' he paused as she giggled, almost predicting the outcome of the night and implying a euphemism on the term "make your acquaintance". He continued, 'I am afraid *that* weekend will be a significantly busy one for me.' He left it there, and so did she.

In the deep dark of the Lady's garden, in the shadows of the great tree, Vondemonde sat cross legged on the cold grass. His gloved hands still wrapped around the flask of now tepid tea, trying to acquire what little warmth there was left. He watched the lights in the house before him, then consulted his wrist watch. It was half past ten. Half past bloody ten! The event started two bloody hours ago! What was she doing in there? And then it dawned on him; there must have been a change of plan. What if she had decided not to go to the gala? He would have to leave, try again another time. This could not be. His client was nagging him continuously as it was. Those letters

which arrived impossibly quick had lost their air of mystery and had become a plain annoyance. Being a stubborn soul, he had rejected their instructions. If they wanted a Vondemonde to do a job, they would damned well sit back and let him do it correctly. He had a plan and it was one he would stick to, and no amount of hassling would change that. There is a correct and proper time for all things. And now was that time.

The lights switched off and he heard the voices of an excited Lady Fransworth and not so excited maid girl as they locked up the large house and went on their way in a hired cab. *And about bloody time!*