

PRAISE FOR ELIZABETH CROWENS

“*Silent Meridian* is a delightful genre-twisting romp through time and possibilities. It takes all sorts of unexpected turns and arrives exactly where it needs to be. Highly recommended!”

Jonathan Maberry, New York Times best-selling author of *Kill Switch* and *Rot & Ruin*

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“How to describe *Silent Meridian* by Elizabeth Crowens? It’s time travel, magic, and high-pressure Steampunk excitement. It’s literary giants meeting fabulous fictional characters for historical adventure and mad bursts of futuristic drama. It’s a fantastic and fantastical entertainment. So, like our intrepid hero, John Patrick Scott, sit yourself down in your ‘thinking chair’ and let him crank up the time machine. He had to invent his. All you have to do is open this terrific book.”

William Martin, New York Times Bestselling Author of *Bound for Gold*, *Back Bay* and *The Lincoln Letter*

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“Elizabeth Crowens takes aim at what we’ve found familiar and adds a twist of surreal adventure that is fun, entertaining and delightfully different from what is expected. *Silent Meridian* is a rollercoaster ride with a side of the sublime. Highly recommended!”

James A. Moore, best selling author of the *Seven Forges Series*, *Aliens: Sea of Sorrows* and the *Serenity Falls Trilogy*.

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This is one of the most unusual and offbeat novels that I've read in years. It bridges several genres in a seamless and cohesive fashion. Devotees of Conan Doyle, H.G. Wells, Freud, Jung, Harry Potter, Ninjas and Samurai, and the Edwardian Era will all find something of great interest here. The book constantly turns in unexpected directions and holds the interest from start to finish. Be prepared for a rollicking journey down a complicated and fascinating route, beginning with the surprising, ending with the unexpected and leaving all wanting a sequel.

Robert S. Katz, MD, BSI (Sherlockian and Co-Editor of *Nerve and Knowledge: Doctors, Medicine and the Sherlockian Canon*)

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“A magical mystery tour of early twentieth century Europe that blends time travel, psychoanalysis and the occult. It’s a rare first novel that succeeds on every level, but Crowens pulls it off with panache. An intriguing and original debut!”

Alan Smale, Sidewise Award-winning author of the *Clash of Eagles* trilogy

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“Just when you thought time travel has been exploited so often, Elizabeth Crowens takes you to totally new places with a mash-up novel worthy to place beside Nicholas Meyer’s works (including *The Seven Percent Solution* and *Time After Time*) with a soupcon of Tim Powers. Take all your favorite Victorians and mix them in a TARDIS-like cocktail shaker, and you’ll be in a time loop -- revisiting this wonderful debut of the Time Traveler professor series until the next installment comes out. A wild, engrossing book that

will delight you as it takes you to worlds and events unexplored, until now.”

Jim Freund, Producer/host of *Hour of the Wolf* over WBAI-FM in NYC since 1972.

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“In his lifetime Conan Doyle seriously investigated spiritualism and ... things that go bump in the night... In *Silent Meridian* Crowens extrapolates what might have happened if he had joined forces (quite literally!) with a paranormal investigator with unusual powers of his own - a psychic archaeologist who travels in time! What they uncover about the past - and a possible future - will leave you wondering what karma you unknowingly carry with you. It’s a fine romp through time and space and the infinite dimensions of the mind.”

Robert Stek, PhD, Transpersonal psychologist, Baker Street Irregular, lecturer on Conan Doyle, *I Hear of Sherlock* contributor

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Silent Meridian: Book One Time Traveler Professor by Elizabeth Crowens is a detective-archeology mystery where time travel and storytelling cross. Set at the end of the Victorian period in England, the story of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, an author, and friend Professor John Patrick Scott, musician and paranormal investigator, travel through time to find a missing red book. References to spiritualism, and secret, underground schools set the stage of this novel. Add a time machine and traveling to the past is an exciting adventure. Well written and detailed the book is reminiscent of stories by the 19th Century great literary authors. Written and edited very well. Style of writing is entertaining and paced perfectly. Author research throughout is very impressive. Dialogue

between characters is done very well including use of dialect from era. Overall one of my favorite reads.

Independent Book Publishers Association

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“A case of mistaken identity (or was it?), a secret society and a mysterious red book propel a young music student and Arthur Conan Doyle into an adventure through time and the paranormal. *Silent Meridian* is the first-rate first novel in a new series by Elizabeth Crowens. I can’t wait for the next installment!”

S. P. Hendrick, author of *The Glastonbury Chronicles* and *Tales of the Dearg-Sidhe* series and *Raven’s Daughter*.

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The first volume in author Elizabeth Crowens' Time Traveler Professor series, *Silent Meridian* is a consistently entertaining and deftly crafted novel that is very highly recommended for community library Science Fiction/Fantasy collections.

**James A. Cox, Editor-in-Chief,
Midwest Book Review**

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BOOK ONE: SILENT MERIDIAN

THE TIME TRAVELER PROFESSOR



ELIZABETH CROWENS



Second, revised edition published in 2019

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Elizabeth Crowens

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*To Lola Levitt,
Without whom this book wouldn't be possible*

*Sir Author Conan Doyle,
Then, now and in the future*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

These are sample chapters from the second, revised edition now titled *The Time Traveler Professor, Book One: Silent Meridian*, published by Atomic Alchemist Productions LLC.

Launch date: June 12, 2019

The first edition of **Silent Meridian** was released by MX Publishing in London with a different cover and ISBN number.

The author strongly suggests reading **Book One: Silent Meridian** first to understand the main characters, their backstory and the book's theory behind time travel and metaphysics before proceeding to **Book Two: A Pocketful of Lodestones**. Therefore, Atomic Alchemist Productions LLC will be offering discounts on E-book versions of **Silent Meridian** as an incentive.

There were debates about certain Victorian Scottish/English spellings and vernacular versus modern usage. It's always a tough call when one has an international readership in the 21st century and needs authenticity as well as reliability for today's audience when depicting 19th century characters. Therefore, the author has

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used combinations such as spelling whisky without the “e” or in the Scottish way as opposed to whiskey, which is the common American spelling or moustache versus mustache or likeable versus likable.

The Time Traveler Professor series is a mixed genre epic science fiction/fantasy, technically subcategorized as an alternate history/fictional memoir of the protagonist character of John Patrick Scott. All characters appearing in this work are fictitious or used fictitiously. Except for certain historical personages, any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

The Time Traveler Professor, Book One:

First Prize: CHANTICLEER REVIEW'S GOETHE AWARD FOR TURN OF THE CENTURY HISTORICAL FICTION

First Prize: STEAMPUNK, INDEPENDENT PRESS AWARDS

Finalist in the Eric Hoffer Awards, Cygnus Awards (Time Travel), Paranormal Fiction Awards and Ozma Awards (Gaslight Fantasy).

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EDINBURGH



1898



Scotland was just barely crawling its way out of the nineteenth century. I was a naïve, but ambitious student studying music at the University of Edinburgh hurrying over to meet Arthur Conan Doyle, the man who would change my life forever. “John Patrick Scott, sir,” I said and approached Mr. Doyle, who was already seated at a back corner table of the Deacon Brodie, the pub that inspired the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

I extended my hand to greet him and removed my rain-soaked hat, while my overcoat slipped out of my hands and fell on the floor by accident. It was still hard to believe that good fortune finally brought us together, but we were both nervous. “Mr. Conan Doyle,

or should I call you Doctor Doyle?" I was unsure how to address him.

Doyle scrutinized me from top to bottom as he signaled the waiter. "John, call me Arthur."

"Sir, I'm so honored that you agreed to discuss this matter. Perhaps you can enlighten me in a way that I've failed to comprehend."

I wanted to ask him about my unusual turn of events straight away but he caught me off guard and was dead set on pulling me into the swift current of an unexpected conversation.

"Can I assume you believe in the transmigration of souls?" he asked.

"Until now, I haven't given it a lot of thought," I said, unsure as to which direction he was leading.

"Did you ever read those books about that Swiss doctor who felt his body and soul had been taken over by a Benedictine monk? That presented a curious case. He claims that he was approached by the spirit of an elderly monk before he died, and that the monk needed to *rent* his body to continue his spiritual mission."

"Rent?" I choked in disbelief.

"We truly don't take anything with us when we pass on, do we? This monk knew he was dying and therefore needed to replace his physical body with something more youthful and vital."

"That's incredible. It debunks the theory that you need to die and be reborn as an infant to carry on your spirit."

Mr. Doyle had the tinge of excitement in his voice.

"John, here's another instance. I've had my suspicions about a famous musician who had an obsession about a notorious and controversial mystic. You'd surmise by his overwhelming attraction to that person he might've been him in a previous lifetime, but facts were clear he was born three years before the mystic died. My understanding is the mystic was aware he didn't have long in his present incarnation. Therefore he made plans for some sort of partial soul transference while he was still alive to imprint his essence upon the child. That would've allowed him to carry on and accomplish unfinished business, which couldn't have been executed

otherwise. Essentially he had the ability of being two places at once.”

“Sounds more like Spiritualism,” I replied.

“Honestly, John, I don’t think there are any steadfast rules when it comes to this matter. That’s what makes it so intriguing.”

I sensed he had a secret agenda.

Doyle reloaded his churchwarden pipe with fresh tobacco and continued, “This is not at all like anything you’ve ever read from H.G. Wells or Jules Verne. We’re poking holes in every treatise written on the subject — the idea of being able to reincarnate a part of yourself while you are still alive into another soul.”

Our conversation was quickly becoming like a speeding train ready to jump the tracks. Realizing this, Doyle slowed down the pace and took a deep breath. He carefully composed his next statement.

“Fiction it may seem to be but it’s not hocus pocus. Don’t you also find it strange that you somehow found yourself initiated into a mystical order on a commuter train bound from London to Edinburgh when the instigators kept on mistaking you for me? There are no accidents.”

I became silent for a moment, stalling for time as I slowly raised my glass of ale to my lips. As soon as I fished a small red book out of my coat pocket and placed it on the table in front of us Arthur eyed it intently. It had been the source of intrigue, which led me to Doyle in the first place and piqued his curiosity as much as it did mine.

“Could I have done something terrible in my youth that caused this to happen?”

“You have no recollections, John?”

“I remember so little of my childhood. I wish I could.”

“You’re a smart young man. I’m sure you’ll come up with a clever deduction.”

Mr. Doyle paused to relight his pipe. He had an unnerving look in his eye, which I vainly tried to read into, but he took me for a spin when he brought up the next topic.

“On another note, John, have you ever considered that people

are capable of communicating without speech, and I'm not talking about writing letters?"

"Pardon me?"

"Imagine communicating by mere thoughts. I've always wanted to experiment with someone open to these concepts. God knows — my brothers at the Society for Psychical Research certainly talk enough about it. My wife, Touie, has been an unwilling subject and is not the most objective choice."

I looked at him, somewhat perplexed. "Are you asking me to accurately guess what you're thinking?"

"Come now. We'll play a game. I'll form an image in my mind, and for the next minute I will try to project it into yours. Clear your thoughts of any distractions and be as receptive as possible," he explained.

As much as I tried, I couldn't have been more preoccupied. Images of that fateful event flashed through my brain. My recollections revealed my rain-soaked train ticket. I kept arguing with the steward about putting me in the wrong cabin. An erroneous judgment had been made when three strangers insisted I was Arthur. We were so different in physical appearance. He was a large, athletic man with a distinguished moustache. On the other hand, I had baby smooth skin and couldn't grow facial hair to save my life. I was nearly twenty years younger and much shorter with wild auburn hair that resembled Maestro Beethoven's with the exception of premature strands of gray.

So why was I singled out? Was there laudanum in my brandy? Details spun like a whirlwind. I must've been in a drug-induced stupor but I was initiated into some secret Masonic-like society, and when it was all over those mysterious men were gone. What remained were an engraved silver ring on my finger and an ominous red book on the seat beside me.

"Looks like you've seen a ghost." Arthur broke my trance and realized my thoughts had been elsewhere.

"I felt like I had." Barely able to articulate, I tried to tame my wild mane in place. Visions faded in and out. Timelines jumped. So I gulped down another swig of ale to focus on the present.

Arthur leaned in closer. “I can see you’re still worried about that event on the train. Those men have been after me for some time. Why? It’s hard to fathom. I’ll dilly dally with notions here and there about Sherlock Holmes and his partner, Watson, who fancy themselves as detectives. Me? I’m just a simple doctor and writer with interests in Spiritualism trying to find scientific explanations for the unknown.”

“Arthur, what would anyone want with an unassuming music student like me?”

“Personally, I don’t think this was *A Case of Identity*,” Arthur replied with a smile.

Obviously he meant to say my dilemma was not a case of *mistaken identity*, not the name of one of his famous Sherlock stories. He was pleased I caught the humor of his play on words.

“Perhaps it has something to do with that book,” he said pointing to the one I brought.

“I’m concerned it’s dangerous, that it’s a curse. I wish I had never found it.” I shoved it back into my pocket and drained my glass.

* * *

ONE WEEK later as I was returning home from school, my landlady, Lydia Campbell, yelled from the kitchen as I trudged my muddied shoes through the front door of her boarding house. “John, a letter from Undershaw arrived for you today! I wonder whom it could be from? You don’t know anyone from Undershaw, do you?”

Oh, yes I did. I grabbed the letter and ran upstairs so fast I nearly tripped on my muffler and fell on my face. I poured myself a glass of port to calm my nerves, doffed my wet garments and sank into my most comfortable brass-studded leather chair I affectionately named my *thinking chair*, where I created many a melody in my head, could think deep thoughts, and drift off to dreamland.

* * *

DEAR JOHN,

I wholeheartedly enjoyed our conversation at the Deacon Brodie and kept my promise of a prompt reply. By now, you are well aware of my passion to explore the realms of Spiritualism and related paranormal phenomena far surpasses any personal interests involved with Sherlock Holmes. Public demand for my writing, however, exerts a strain on how much I can overtly reveal to even my most trusted colleagues. Whenever I indulge in any activity, be it a simple séance, investigating a revered medium or attending a meeting of the British Society for Psychical Research, it never fails to raise the eyebrows of my wary publishers and critics. It's God's honest truth that I believe in many of these inexplicable accounts. Even my father painted beautiful renditions of fairies, which I trust he witnessed with his own eyes. The betterment of mankind rests on embracing such theories once they are proven to exist by the scientific community. Thus, I'll have to continue more controversial and debatable endeavors in utmost secrecy, or at least for the time being until more evidence can be brought to light.

Since you seem to be an open-minded young man who has already experienced some effects of the preternatural, this is my proposal: At midnight every night, we should conduct a variety of remote operations with the primary purpose of communicating through means of telepathy. Since I have a tendency to travel, we'll have to make some sort of adjustment to take into account the different time zones. Of course, you must share this secret with nobody. Besides us, only my wife will know, although she will not participate.

When you shared the account of the strange commuter train incident that was enough to convince me that you would be the perfect partner for this private undertaking. Most assuredly, there was something you did in the past in the realm of the arcane to warrant such a chain of events. That was not mere happenstance, and now since you possess that enigmatic red book,



I'm sure it will affect your life in ways you've never imagined.

My intentions have been to perform similar trial and error enterprises with Harry Houdini, a rising star whose stage performances have been astounding audiences, but his busy schedule has made it nearly impossible to coordinate such engagements with any sort of regularity. One of these days we'll catch up. Meanwhile, I collect whatever news comes from across the herring-pond. At one point, he and I will develop a special relationship based on mutual interests.

Regarding the two of us, however, we'll back up our observations with letters or telegrams as often as possible as proof of results, but those must be destroyed as soon as they are read. Once again, I cannot over emphasize the importance of confidentiality. Regardless, we must keep a faithful agreement, as skill will come with practice.

If you are willing to put aside any apprehensions regarding trains, I'll pay for you to travel down to Undershaw and visit me on weekends whenever possible. My driver can meet you in London at a pre-arranged time. You'll stay in one of our guest bedrooms, and as long as you don't mind the children and can tolerate what our kitchen staff provides, you'll be well taken care of. That'll give us the opportunity to expand our repertoire and commence further psychical experimentation with ectoplasm, spirit photography and astral projection. And bring the red book. I'd like a chance to look at it.

I've also desired a partner to accompany me for ghost sightings and occult investigations. For all we know with the knowledge gained, we might even break through the barriers of time. That would certainly give Bertie (H.G. Wells) a shock to the senses, proving his imagination does not merely dwell in the realm of fiction. We've been at odds on this topic for years.

Regarding telepathic technique, I can only suggest you conduct yourself in a way as you see fit. Personally, I don't give credence to things like magical amulets, but if it helps to have an etheric link, use this letter you hold in your hand, as it contains my heart, soul

and signature with a drop of blood, which I added to the ink. You might wish to reciprocate.

Let's raise our glasses to honor the quest of conquering the unknown.

Arthur Conan Doyle

* * *

So, Arthur was serious when he first brought up the subject. When he and I left the pub, I really didn't know what to think. After all, he was a famous author, and I was merely a student. What possessed him to choose me for such an engagement?

I shuffled through my schoolwork to find my pen and ink and a fresh sheet of paper. Blood, I needed blood. Ah, my razor! That would work. I fetched my shaving kit and winced as I drew a few drops. I scribbled a swift, affirmative reply with the blood-tainted ink, mailed the letter the following day and looked forward to our first otherworldly encounter.

CONSCIOUS SLEEPWALKING



Since Arthur firmly believed death was not the ultimate finality, who was to say the two of us hadn't experienced a significant encounter in a previous existence, and this wasn't the first conscious time we set foot on earth? Time travel became a never-ending fascination. I was unstoppable. My curiosity was limitless, and I desperately sought ways to find proof. Considering the fact one of my favorite stories was H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, I took it upon my own initiative and built my own construction, which was no easy undertaking. There were many thwarted attempts before I could confidently say that I achieved any success whatsoever.

How this time machine worked was another mystery. What I never expected was in my pursuit of perfecting this invention; I got more than I bargained for. Metaphorically speaking, it was like saying I was attending the university to get a degree, but I unwittingly learned how to sprout wings and fly to the moon in the process. Once enough magic doors were opened whether I liked it or not things changed. I began to transform into something unexpected, which I was assured was for the better, although often I begged to differ. Personal ambitions unraveled. Friendships and associations fell apart or felt shallow and worthless. Nightmares

appeared more real than they had before and manifested in physical form on my doorsteps. Many times I'd venture either into the past or the future, and I'd bring back a souvenir. Sometimes it was a tangible object. Other times it was merely unlocking a long obscured memory, and often it wasn't welcome.

The recently discovered Neptune was considered the planet of dreams. Whether or not you believed in astrology, it induced many prominent Victorian scholars to explore new frontiers. Darwin's theory of evolution toppled religious dogma, but in reaction to the Industrial Age, that mysterious planet also influenced an interest in exploring the depths of the human mind and the realm of the unknown, challenging the limits of scientific knowledge. It was like having a clever stage magician swiftly yanking off the tablecloth of perceptual reality, but leaving the candelabra intact with all observers wondering how it was done.

Discovering facts about the past was amusing, but even more exciting was being able to capture glimpses of events to come. The future was never absolute. It could change with the blink of an eye. It was mutable and quite dependent on volition and free will. Nonetheless, it was an obsession, and I'd conduct test runs in any which way possible using a variety of techniques, some benign and others not, but regardless I was always treading into dangerous waters to see what the future might bring.

I hurried back to my flat after class and dumped my book bag atop my cluttered worktable causing a haphazardly stacked pile of books to tumble to the floor. These books were atypical of a student aspiring to become a composer and concert pianist — ones on elementary physics, astronomy, earth science and, of course, a brand new copy of H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*.

With my motley assortment of research material, sundry gears and machine parts, lamp fixtures and the guts from broken clocks, I meticulously set up my own version of a time machine fashioned from an old hand-cranked electroshock device. I jerry-rigged a mechanism consisting of an old leather belt with magnets running alongside both lobes of my brain facing their polar opposites. However I wanted the magnets to move and not simply bolted or

glued, so I inlaid small grooves with a set of gears that would move them side by side almost like a tiny train going down its own track. To power that motion I'd drop in special indescribable mineral pellets. The man who sold them to me refused to reveal their mysterious makeup but said once I tossed enough of them into water they would instantly cause the water to boil and create steam, and that's what would cause those tiny gears to move the magnets along their course. It wasn't vital that such an elaborate construct was necessary, but if in theory it could give a boost to my currently developing psychic abilities, then I was all for the chance to test it.

In fact, my flat was beginning to look more like an alchemist's den. Of course, I still had my upright piano in the corner with its metronome perched on top, as well as, scores of sheet music and books on music theory. How could I not? But now I was gradually collecting a strange assortment of rare books, mostly procured from back alley establishments as well as trinkets found in curio shops. There was also unconventional laboratory equipment, as well as herbs and minerals from the medical and science colleges, often acquired by bribing the lab assistants for their discards. Alas, I continued to curse the day when I elected not to take a chemistry class. It would've been reassuring if I fully understood the nature of these elements and not feel like I was groping blindly in the dark.

Lydia, my landlady, was beginning to wonder if I was becoming an eccentric. So, I requested that she knock first before bringing tea, rather than barging in without warning. This put me in the habit of locking my door more often, something I hadn't considered previously.

The very first time *it* happened, it was like watching a novice weightlifter struggling with barbells way beyond his capacity. I looked to see how long, if at all, it would take for my time travel experiment to work, and the first thing I noticed was the second hand of my timepiece started wobbling like the needle of a compass near a lodestone. Almost like Atlas shouldering the burdens of the world (and very similar to the experience when I encountered a strong headwind the other day, catching me dead in my tracks

unable to advance forward), my watch's second hand, against all odds, started to spin backwards. Its minute hand followed suit using leaden baby steps, eventually pulling the hour hand in tandem.

My lungs were barely able to function. At first I drew a few quick breaths through my nostrils and choked down a few gulps of air, fighting against suffocation. Instinctively I dispelled my panic, slowed down my heart rate and took very long, slow, controlled breaths deep from my abdomen. Although everything around me seemed to be spinning out of control, I needed to operate in slow motion. Houdini knew this technique. I was certain of it. This was one of those magician's secrets whereby slowing your vitals and heart rate you could survive the odds of extreme heat, severe cold or being buried alive. Hindu mystics even performed this when averting pain while lying on a bed of nails.

Perhaps, one day I wouldn't need an elaborate or expensive scientific contraption to catapult myself beyond conceivable physics. Wouldn't it be great to prove H.G. Wells wrong and traveling through time was more of a mental journey? Maybe he just romanticized it as a physical machine in order to make it more believable. It was reassuring, yet scary nonetheless, to know it was a lot easier than depending upon an elaborate assemblage.

Not to say I didn't love science. I loved science, but I was never a man of science like Arthur who was impressively trained as a physician. I understood music theory, tempo and a scientific explanation behind sounds. I was also willing to accept ideas that tonal vibrations had their intrinsic metaphysical qualities linked with planetary rhythms, which scientists failed to understand or find proof. It might've been an act of faith on my part combined with so much arcane material handed down by the ancients, but time travel defied all rationale. Deep down inside I knew the possibility of it existed on some level or another. In that effect, one might have accused me of being as mad as Arthur was in his quest for proof there was life after death, that spirit photographs could be made of the dearly departed, and ectoplasm could be documented spewing forth from mediums' mouths.

Even Houdini's head would turn if he were able to experience what was happening to me now. My first results took me back only five minutes, which didn't seem all that significant except for the physical sensations of fighting an enormous force of gravity. Each successive exercise became a little bit easier, and as long as I was able to achieve the proper state of mind, projecting into alternate dimensions became as easy as slipping on a fresh change of clothing.

Was I prying open the door to my past that wished to remain shut? My subconscious unlocked a vault pointing to another institution of knowledge, not the University of Edinburgh, but one arcane and forbidden, but as much a part of my soul as the blood coursing through my veins. Finally, I was remembering.

Not too long ago, I was having a fitful and sleepless night. My landlady's cat woke me hours before sunrise. Drowsiness caused rationality to fly right out the window. But as I reached for my diary to jot down an account of the perplexing dream I woke from, my attention diverted to that peculiar red book I acquired after an unsettling *incident*. Something about that book transcended the barriers of time, but left a permanent impression I'd carry back with me to the present.

In my dream I stepped back into the past. No longer did I look like a red-headed Scotsman. Instead, I appeared slightly older as an employee of the Imperial Palace in ancient China named Jiang Pan Sheng.

"Jiang, you were supposed to have attended the arrival ceremonies of the emperor's third cousin from Nanjing!" Li Zhi Wen shouted as he stormed into the room.

Calmly, Jiang Pan Sheng, a revered scribe of the court, placed his brush and bottle of ink aside. He had been fastidiously working on a lengthy book, one of many for the collection of the imperial family. This book, quite different from most, was an elaborate anthology of fables. Some were about mythical creatures. Others were about people from foreign lands. This one told the story of a young explorer, and he titled it in Japanese, not in his native

tongue. Its title was *Shokunin, The Thief of Tales — the same book I owned back in Scotland!*

Undaunted, Jiang went over to a washbasin to remove excess ink that spilled on his fingers, then returned to sit upon his silk cushion.

“She was the fifth cousin to his grandmother on his mother’s side, not the emperor’s third cousin. Besides, no one informed me about it, so I remained here and continued my writing,” Jiang replied.

“All imperial affairs demand your presence no matter who they’re for!” said Gao Xun An, the other man from the welcoming party.

“I was never notified. Therefore, I’m blameless. Perhaps, one of you should take the fall if questioned?” Jiang suggested.

His two associates looked at each other in horror. Such an indiscretion, depending on the emperor’s mood, or one of his aides acting in his behalf, could come with the penalty of death.

Li spoke first. “Jiang, your apathy may one day cost you your life.”

“I do not fear I will die from an insult to the imperial court. I fear I might die of a broken heart, instead,” Jiang replied as he smiled and carefully folded his hands in his lap.

His two colleagues looked at each other, rather disturbed. Imperial court servants were always under the watchful eye of someone above them who monitored and observed their personal affairs down to the very last detail. Being part of the court carried way more privileges than being a simple farmer or a town merchant, but restrictions came hand in hand.

Li Zhi Wen took out his fan, a hand-painted one edged in gold with a long red tassel dangling from the end. He whipped it around and struck Jiang across his forehead.

“Ouch!” cried Jiang. “What’s that about?” He rubbed his head. A stinging red mark remained.

“Next time it could be worse!” his friend warned him, but suddenly they were interrupted by a fairly large group of children ran into the room chasing a small monkey with a ball. Li and Gao

exited in haste and left Jiang to contend with this unexpected surprise.

Amused, Jiang arose from his comfortable seat as the children filled the room following the monkey that stole one of their toys. He gathered his brushes and his ink to prevent the children from knocking them over and proceeded to carefully take his manuscript with its ink still wet and place it out of harm's way. Like a lively circus parade, the children circled his study several times before they chased the monkey out of the room. Just as Jiang reached over for his workbook and was ready to return to his tasks, another uninvited and quite peculiar group of youngsters wandered into his room.

At first glance, Jiang noticed a remarkable contrast in their attire. They were not Chinese, but foreigners from different lands, ones he had never been to and didn't know much about. Their garments were made from cotton and wool, not silk, and it was clear they were neither acquaintances nor members of the imperial court. They looked more like peasants or villagers, but certainly not from anywhere nearby.

The children, on the other hand, eyed Jiang Pan Sheng as strangely as he must have looked at them. They entered his chambers and examined the novel objects and surfaces while running their fingers over the unfamiliar textures of silk, porcelain, carved cinnabar and jade, and of cherry wood and imported teak. They spoke in languages he failed to comprehend. Some had dark hair, but nowhere near as black and silky as his, and they all wore it much shorter in a variety of coifs but in hues of chestnut, red and even gold — colors he never saw before nor knew hair could be.

Spellbound, Jiang returned to his cushion and observed them in quietude unsure if these were ghosts, or perhaps fantastic human-like creatures that stepped from the pages of folktales and legends — the characters of dreams and of flights of fancy.

"Come, we should go," the oldest boy called out as he gathered the group together from exploring Jiang's private quarters. "We shouldn't be here, and we don't want trouble."

As the other children rallied to his side, Jiang put his finger to

his lips indicating he wouldn't breathe a word about them to anyone else, but before they parted, one last boy, a precocious little lad, who was a bit shorter than the rest and had a head of curls like Jiang had never seen, approached Jiang. He pulled a strange coin from his pocket. It appeared the child was trying to offer him the coin, but as soon as Jiang reached for it, it disappeared.

Confused, Jiang shook his head. He looked down on the floor to see if it slipped out of his fingers, yet he never heard it drop. Then the curly-haired boy held out his closed hand. Slowly, he opened his fingers to reveal the missing coin. There was a huge grin on the child's face when he saw Jiang's look of surprise. Once more, the boy handed him the coin but somehow magically, the coin would disappear and then reappear again in the boy's hand.

"Erik, come!" The oldest of the bunch shouted.

The precocious boy was intent on tricking Jiang one last time and ignored the plea.

"Erik Weisz, come here at once!"

Finally the small lad ran off to join his friends, and they scampered from the room. Jiang was now alone and unsure of what transpired and from where those foreign youngsters came. Then an imperial messenger arrived and spoke with a sense of urgency.

"Jiang, a captive has arrived from Japan. You've been summoned to assist the prison wardens. They suspect he was the sole survivor of a shipwreck."

"Very well," Jiang replied and reached for his hat and heavy silk outer garment. Japan was one of the very few countries Jiang was familiar with, as he traveled there several times with the court as a goodwill ambassador. He was also the only member of the imperial court who studied and learned their language, which looked similar when written, but sounded very different on the tongue. With that, Jiang reached for a scroll bound with colorful red string and followed the court messenger out the door.

* * *

AFTER I ENTERED these accounts in my diary, I stared at the

ominous red book once again, but this time it bothered me so much that I put it away and hid it in a drawer. My mirror revealed that not only had my auburn hair shown more gray, but I must have appeared twenty years older than my actual age. The cat hopped onto the credenza and pawed at it wildly, as if trying to tell me I was supposed to turn my mirror around facing the wall. I eased back into my favorite chair, the one I called my *thinking chair*, and became lost in my thoughts thinking about all of the strange dreams I had for more years than I could remember.

Soon I began to feel the soft, warm fur of Lydia's cat rubbing up against my side, but she started to scratch and dig her claws into my left pants pocket. I threw her off, but she insisted on jumping back on my lap. There was no food; so what could she have wanted?

Something, which I didn't recall being there before, dug into my thigh. I reached in and touched upon a smooth, round metallic object — a coin, but not one I'd normally be carrying. United States of America was engraved upon it, a place I had never been, and on its face was the head of one of the American presidents. I soon learned that often, when I traveled in time, I'd bring back a physical memento to prove I actually had gone elsewhere or elsewhen.

"Erik Weisz, the curly-headed child from the dream? Wasn't that Harry Houdini's real name?"

Dreams? Dreams powered my time machine, or so I was beginning to suspect. There was an etheric alchemical power tied into the workings of the universe. Not steam, not interlocking gears, clock mechanisms or bizarre sundry gadgets I'd construct. This limitless force was way beyond that.

PARTNERS IN CRIME



It was way past midnight, cold and damp with the fog so thick I could barely see my feet, and I felt like the village idiot. While all the sensible and sane residents of Edinburgh had crawled under their covers to go to sleep, I was shivering in front of *Bluidy* George Mackenzie's mausoleum at Greyfriars Cemetery.

I threw my waistcoat over my nightshirt, donned my overcoat, wrapped my muffler tight around my neck and did a miserable job of hiding the pieces of my homemade time travel device under my tatty top hat. There were popular rumors that his angry spirit haunted the kirkyard. I closed my eyes, took out my grandfather's heirloom silver timepiece and focused my concentration to make the second, minute and hour hands of my watch go backwards against all odds, as I was determined to find this ghost, jump back in the past, and meet him when he was still alive.

That plan backfired.

"John, open your eyes!"

I must have leapt three feet in the air.

"You're not *Bluidy* Mackenzie!" I shouted, but realized at once I had to tone it down not to alert any of those amongst the living.

"Who do you think you are? Some kind of Time Traveler

Professor?” Finn laughed. “Don’t you think you ought to be in bed at this hour?”

Quickly, I tore off my miniature brain launcher and stuffed it into my threadbare overcoat pocket.

“Do you always have to follow me around?” I argued.

“You’re quite aware you can’t go anywhere without me.” Finn hopped off the adjacent headstone. He was so tall and lanky compared to me, I felt like I was standing next to a skeleton.

“John, I honestly don’t know why you’re wasting your time trying to contact Mackenzie. You have no debts to pay off to that man. Why don’t you plan your travels where they may better serve you?”

“Come again?”

He wiped his filthy hand on my shoulder. It was full of damp moss and mud from the rain-soaked tombstone. “You were meant to break the barriers of time, and your success was not meant to be for entertainment. Otherwise, I would’ve never permitted you to continue.”

I shoved my mechanical apparatus a bit further into my pocket as it kept inching out.

“You mean to tell me it wasn’t pure ingenuity that helped me discover the secrets of time travel?”

“There are smarter men and women than you are out there, and they’ve never managed to do it,” Finn replied.

“Then why was I one of the lucky ones?”

“I’m not saying the task is easy, John. It’s not, and in your case, you weren’t an easy specimen. You had to return quite a few times after death.”



“Specimen? Now I sound like I’m a science experiment! How many times have I lived before?”

“More than you’ve realized,” Finn replied. “Oh, and one more thing. Do yourself a favor. Next time you’re ready to meet your Maker, don’t have any regrets. If you entertain any thought whatsoever that you never had time to do this, or you wish you would’ve done that instead, that’ll almost guarantee you’ll transmigrate and have to play the game of life with all its suffering once again.”

I was perplexed, and Finn made a hasty exit.

So, who was this intruder, and why the bloody hell was I sitting in a graveyard attempting to contact an infamous man known throughout Scottish history for witch trials and persecutions? My ungovernable meddler was Finneas Fertle. Some could’ve called him my invisible friend, but he claimed he was assigned to me from the beginning of time. Yes, and that meant long before I remembered taking my first baby steps upon the cobblestone streets of Edinburgh. There was a belief I’d lived many lives before this one, and he was some sort of trustee — someone responsible for keeping me on the straight and narrow whatever that was supposed to be. Every person had one although most weren’t aware of it.

My memoirs would never be complete without introducing my other partners in crime. Besides Arthur Conan Doyle and Finneas Fertle, I needed to include Whit and Wendell Mackenzie, not to be confused with the ghost I just tried to contact.

ALLEGRO NON TROPPO



Frost bit my hands and nose as I cut across the University of Edinburgh's misty grounds seeking refuge in the library. My course load was overwhelming, not only with academics, but I was also diving headfirst into my musical studies and vying for several coveted scholarships. I looked at my timepiece knowing I had precious little time to dwell on my impending literature assignment.

"Can I be of assistance?"

"As a matter of fact, I do need help, but I didn't realize books could talk," I replied, not sure from where the voice was coming. All I could see was a partial head of brown curls hidden between two stacks of books.

A male university student, who was about three fingers shorter than I with a conspicuous high forehead and glasses that couldn't get any rounder, emerged with his shirtsleeves rolled up, his waistcoat unbuttoned on the bottom three rows and tie askew.

"You look lost in the modern literature section."

"I'm afraid I'm lost in any literature section," I replied.

"Ah, John Patrick Scott!" He struggled to balance the stack of books he was carrying so he could shake my hand.

"And whom should I have the pleasure of meeting?"

“Charles St. Andrews Whitcomb, III.”

“Do you ever go by an abbreviated version?”

“My friends call me Whit, for short.”

“Then Whit it is. I don’t recall ever seeing you in the music department before. How do you know me?”

“From our Great Britons of Literature class with Professor McKnight. I sit three chairs behind you. When I first noticed you, I assumed you must’ve been one of the professors.”

“Oh, that class.” I pointed to my head and blushed. “It’s hard not to notice the only student in the class who has a few gray hairs on his head, am I correct?”

“Oh, I hope you didn’t take any offense,” he said taking pause. “You don’t like that class?”

“You must have the power of reading my mind.”

“Not exactly,” he laughed, “McKnight is brilliant and extremely knowledgeable in more subjects than you can possibly imagine. How can you not like his class?”

“I’m a music major, and my mind is on other things.”

“Ah, I understand. You see, my interest is in literature, so for me this is all fascinating. He also teaches history — another passion of mine.”

“As long as he doesn’t have you chasing dragons from lost continents, I guess you’ll be fine. There are quite a few rumors on campus about him including ones where he engages in falconry in the Highlands, but those hawks have been known to fetch more than game.”

“Fair maidens and a wee bit of Robin Hood derring do, so I’ve been told. Can I help you find anything?” Whit asked. “I work here part-time and know this place fairly well.”

“How about finding my soul and my salvation?”

My witty remark sent both of us laughing in unison.

“The best I could offer is help as a study partner,” Whit replied. “Unfortunately I’m not a theology major.”

“I might take you up on that offer. All right, let’s see how smart you are. I have an upcoming assignment on mythology in modern literature and honestly don’t know where to start.”

Eager to seize the opportunity, he pulled a book off the shelf and led me over to a table where we could both sit down.

“Try *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. It’s a variation of *Faust* and rather entertaining. Wilde has a promising career as a modern writer.”

I paged through the book, mostly paying attention to its illustrations.

“*Faust*, you say?”

“Yes, a fascinating interpretation of a mythological concept.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“You don’t care for other suggestions?”

“No, that will suffice. Let’s make this as simple as possible. As it is, I have to learn both German and Italian this semester. I have enough dialogue prancing around in my head.”

“John, what instrument do you play?”

“Pianoforte, mainly. Although I’ve had some training in violin, I don’t take it too seriously beyond helping me with original compositions. I wouldn’t dream of playing violin in public. Why?”

Whit took the Oscar Wilde book from my hand and led me to the back of the library.

“Excuse me for a moment.” He unfastened a latch on one of the bookcases, which revealed a hidden doorway and slipped through.

“What on earth is in there?” I asked, but the door slid shut. As his voice was silenced, a feminine one replaced it.

“You won’t learn a thing by simply staring at books.”

I spun on my heels and turned around. “I beg your pardon?”

That’s when I came face to face with a freckle-faced lady student with red hair almost as crazy as mine. Hers, however, was much longer and pinned up, but curls fell down all over.

“Oh, I know you.” I recognized her from Professor McKnight’s class, “You’re...”



“Sarah Elizabeth Chandler! You really don’t know my name, do you? I overheard you’re looking for a help with a book report?”

“Whit just volunteered.” I was oblivious to the fact she was flirting with me and tried to catch my attention.

“And you’d refuse a lovely lady’s generous offer?”

The hidden door reopened and Whit emerged, who was covered with dust all over his ridiculously curly hair and impishly round glasses.

She gave him a mean stare and turned back toward me. “Shame on you! Perhaps you’re as heartless as a piano without its player.”

Then she stormed off in a huff.

“What was she upset about?” Whit tried not to laugh.

“I have no idea. But where did you go?”

“You’d be surprised what’s hidden there. There are all sorts of depositories, secret passageways and cubbyholes hidden in the Edinburgh University library.”

“Is that so?”

“John, beware of strange books. You never know where they’ll take you.”

I contemplated on that for a few moments as we continued advancing towards the checkout desk.

“So, John, as I was about to say, I belong to an extracurricular club, consisting mostly of literature majors, called the Bookworm Society. We engage in lively debates and literary criticism once a week and are sponsoring an upcoming fundraiser, but we are at a loss for entertainment. We meet in a basement recreation hall at one of the local churches. They have a piano and...”

“Are you requesting my assistance?”

“That would be much appreciated.”

“I don’t think I’d be much of a contribution otherwise. I doubt if I could hold my ground in the presence of a group of literary scholars.”

“That’s not necessary. Please do us a favor. Time is short, and we are running out of options.”

“And what would I get out of it?”

“Perhaps an English tutor for the rest of the semester. I can

guarantee you will get a respectable grade. That's, of course, as long as you're compliant."

I held out my hand to shake on it. "You have a deal. Tell me where and when."

"You won't let me down?"

"No, I will honor my word. Just curious, but what do you plan on doing after graduation?"

"Oh, I don't plan on remaining in Edinburgh. I'll be going to London where there will be opportunities to work at a publishing house. And you? What are your plans?" he asked as he began processing my paperwork.

"Ideally, I'd like to establish myself as a concert pianist, compose original scores and one day conduct a symphony orchestra."

"You have high hopes and noble plans. I wish you luck."

As I began to leave, Whit stopped me.

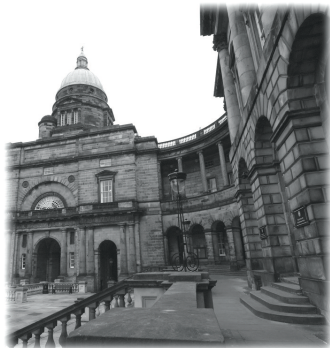
"Give me your address. You'll need the details about our party. Maybe you should invite that girl. I think she likes you."

"What girl?" I tried to play the innocent. Whit gave me a funny look, and I winked back as I scribbled the information on a scrap of paper and handed it to him.

"I'm counting on you, John."

"And I'll be counting on you to get me through my literature class," I replied as I left the library.

At full gallop, I cut across the Quadrangle to meet my friend, Wendell Mackenzie, at our favorite tea and pastry shop around the corner from the University of Edinburgh campus. He was already seated with lunch and waiting. I was famished, but my student's stipend only allowed me to indulge in a cup of tea with an extra lump of sugar.



"John, *The Scotsman* has commissioned me to do an article on H.G. Wells, and he's agreed to meet me in London. Last year *Pear-*

son's *Magazine* serialized *The War of the Worlds*, and the entire story will be released in a book this year. If I depart Friday afternoon I'll be free the whole weekend before I commence my assignment on Monday. You're always pleasant company, so I'd like to extend my invitation."

It was hard to hide my jealousy regarding my friend's accomplishments. Wendell had been a medical student and studied under the famous Doctor Joseph Bell, Arthur's former professor and inspiration for Sherlock, before taking a detour in his studies to explore other options with journalism. By now, he already published at least a dozen articles in various professional newspapers and journals in addition to being on staff on the university's paper.

My credentials were paltry in comparison. I'd been featured in several local concerts, including the venue at St. Cecilia's Hall and placed third at the University of St. Andrews Composition Competition. Hesitant to answer, I pulled out my timepiece to make sure I hadn't lost track of time, as I couldn't be late for my next class. That particular instructor had a nasty reputation of locking the door and banning students from entering his classroom if they were a mere two minutes late.

"John, it'll be great fun, and I can cover your train and lodging." Then he bit into a fresh bun that dribbled crumbs everywhere.

"I'm assuming that means we're rooming together?"

My colleagues already had too many suspicions about me regarding women, and I hated getting teased. On the contrary, with Wendell plans were often brushed aside if a lassie entered the picture. I just couldn't seem to be interested and preferred the intellectual engagement of male conversation, instead.

Moments after a fair young lady entered the bakery, her intoxicating perfume of fresh garden lilacs overwhelmed the aroma of baked scones and crumpets. Wendell dropped his bun on its saucer and whirled around, hypnotized by the presence of an attractive female and potential bedmate. I never could understand how Wendell, who was a reasonably handsome man, but certainly no Casanova, could amiably capture the heart of nearly any woman he

set his mind to. I, on the other hand, seemed to be married to the keyboards of my pianofortes and harpsichords in order to arouse the finer sensibilities of my emotional constitution.

Her chestnut eyes peered around the shop to find an empty seat. She had soft brown hair with a slight wave, pinned and upswept in the current fashion and was wearing a delicate cameo on her high-necked blouse trimmed with tiny bands of lace. Before I could comprehend the subsequent events, Wendell leapt to his feet and pulled out the chair at the table next to us for her to sit down, all with a chivalrous bow and a gentleman's smile. He captured hearts despite the fact he only had a few more pence in his pocket than I did at any given time. What was even worse was Wendell would routinely taunt me and inquire whether or not my lack of conquests revealed a secret attraction towards men.

"Posing as a potential suitor, I presume?" I wiped my upper lip with a crisp linen napkin while noticing my feeble attempt to grow a moustache was going awry. Whiskers sprouted in an orange-red color and were offset by my auburn hair, which started turning gray when I was a mere child. When the sunlight struck them with a sideways glance, they glistened like shards of amber.

"And why not?" he asked.

"She's probably way above your social station." I was starving and tried not to stare at the uneaten half of his bun.

"Why should that stop me?" He settled back into his seat, glanced over to the lady beside us with a flirtatious smile and then resumed our conversation. "*Tu conciliandos sexualem subactam?*"

My face flushed, cognizant that my noble friend's passion for controversy was equal to his love of conquest.

"So, about London... where would I stay?" I was skeptical and aware of his behavior from previous excursions.

"In my room, of course."

I cut him off before he went any further. "Perhaps you forgot what happened the last time you and I shared a room?"

"Yes, I know, I put you out to entertain a lady friend. You had to sleep on a bench in Soho Park overnight. A constable mistook you

for a vagrant, whereby I had to pick you up from jail the next morning.”

Wendell grabbed my right forearm assuring me he was a man of his word.

“You won’t have to sleep in the park again. I promise.”

Something even more important happened the last time we traveled to London together, making my distaste regarding Wendell’s sexual proclivities trivial in comparison. He remained in London for a few extra days, but I needed to return to the university so I hurried to make my train connection at Kings Cross. Affording another night’s lodging was out of the question. Had I missed my train, I would’ve wound up sleeping on a bench in the station overnight and was not eager to repeat history.

I dropped my ticket on the pavement by accident, which got soggy from the rain. The ink bled, and it was hard to make out the number of my reserved seat. After I misinterpreted it twice, a uniformed attendant took the ticket and led me to a cabin, insisting it was my assigned seat. So, I took off my overcoat, hung up my umbrella, and tried to make myself comfortable for the long ride.

Exhausted, I sat back in my seat, closing my eyes and thinking about events from the last few days. Then the doors to my cabin opened and three other men entered, creating a ruckus banging about their luggage. One of them leaned over and pulled the curtains shut, blocking the sunlight. That’s when a rude gentleman with distinguishing muttonchops, wearing a houndstooth plaid waistcoat with a louder than usual ticking pocket watch seemed hell-bent on disturbing my much-needed nap.

“So, Arthur, we finally caught up with you.” He bent over me so close that his foul-smelling saliva dripped onto my eyelids.

“I’m not Arthur,” I mumbled, semi-conscious and dog-tired from my long weekend with Wendell. I wiped off his disgusting spittle and turned my head away to resume sleep.

Well, I suspected I was in the wrong seat to begin with, but now these three strangers had mistaken me for the fourth man in their party. So much was happening so quickly it was difficult to comprehend the events that followed. They might’ve offered me a

drink, but it was more like I'd been drugged. They donned costumes reminiscent, perhaps, of Freemasonry and began to perform an ancient rite based on Egyptian magic. The details were a bit hazy, but I was wrapped in a shroud and placed inside a tomb. God knows how they managed to drag a coffin on to a train! So, it must've been one of their steamer trunks, but for the life of me I couldn't tell. Then, once the ceremony was underway, I felt like I died and had been reborn to become an initiate in some sort of secret order. When I came to, the men appeared to be dressed in their original garments, were ensconced in a lively game of cards and offered me a glass of brandy.

When I was able to focus my eyes, I noticed an engraved silver ring on my left hand. I darted silent glances at each party in the room, mentally questioning them where it came from, and the man with the muttonchops smiled. Numb and speechless, I drifted off to sleep, possibly this time aided by laudanum in the drink I accepted.

When the train arrived in Edinburgh, I woke up and looked around, but those three strangers were gone, and a red book had been left behind on the leather seat beside me. As I gathered my belongings together, I grabbed a train attendant mentioning that someone might've forgotten the book by accident, but he seemed busy clearing out the passengers rather than attending to my concerns. So I stuffed it into my coat pocket, disembarked and headed back to my flat.

MANY ARE CALLED



FEW ARE CHOSEN

I rubbed my bloodshot eyes and twirled the hairs of my brows when Whit tugged at my shoulder. “John, are you all right?”

“Absolutely crapulous!” I said, unenthusiastic and sore in the head from highballs and hijinks with Wendell last night. Partnered like Watson to Sherlock, we made our rounds about Old Town. Whit attempted to tutor me for my English exams, but my attention was absent.

Besides, I already performed my end of the bargain. I prepared to play Chopin’s Etudes, Opus 10 for the Bookworm Society soirée when Cupid’s arrows struck. A young lassie by the name of Isabelle made her appearance and captivated the hearts of every man with a pulse. The moment I placed my hands on the keyboard, Whit, overzealous in wanting to impress the girl, insisted that I play her choice, which to my regret consisted of frivolous popular ballads more fitting for dance halls and cotillions. When she requested a polka, it would’ve been enough to make even Gilbert and Sullivan writhe in agony.

Whit hummed the songs off key while she feebly sang along. I hammered away on the sharps and flats, but the notion of replacing

the music of a maestro with fashionable nonsense was like bitter medicine to my esthete sensibilities. Obligation fulfilled, I chose not to back myself into a corner like that again, but now Whit insisted on upholding his end of the bargain and scolded me for my inattentiveness and lack of enthusiasm. With my musical studies, extracurricular ventures in time travel and countless speculations about my forthcoming studies with Arthur, I was caught in a barrelful of distractions.

* * *

RECENTLY ARTHUR PUT me on the spot about my lack of childhood recollections. So I put on my own deerstalker cap and become a detective. However, my methods of deduction and reasoning involved magic and odd science, ones Sherlock Holmes would have considered utter nonsense and balderdash. Nonetheless, they worked for me.

Once again, I dared to travel back in time. One of the frightening results of time travel was that I was rarely just an observer. Every so often, Finneas, my ever-persistent sidekick, would lead me by the hand to what appeared as a theater, but by and large I would almost always find myself wearing a different costume and pair of shoes, so to speak. Needless to say, this could prove to be disturbing. The mere thought of becoming a small child again made me feel vulnerable, but I summoned the courage to find out the truth. Once more, I cranked up the crazy time-defying contraption and catapulted back to Edinburgh, Scotland in 1886.

* * *

THAT'S when the deep well of lost memories brought forth highlights from that forgotten childhood I was striving to recapture. Then I found myself back in my old house in the midst of a heated family argument.

"I cannot believe John hasn't listened to us again," my mother lamented with worry carved upon her forehead.

My father rushed over to the mantelpiece where he grabbed my metronome.

“Edward, don’t! He needs it for his musical studies!”

“It’s an instrument of evil, I say.” Father put it back in its comfortable, usual spot. He had all the intentions in the world of destroying it, but he backed away following Mother’s advice.

“You must keep an eye on the boy. He cannot continue to play in the graveyard. That’s where the trouble started! That, and those damned time travel ideas he’s had in his head. What’s gotten into him?”

Then my parents both grabbed me under my arms dragging me into the other room, and as soon as they lowered me into the tub of scalding water, I shattered their eardrums with piercing wails, as my skin turned beet red with burns. Mother then poured a pitcher full of icy cold water over my head, which made me scream in agony even more. When the steam penetrated my lungs, I almost forgot how to breathe.

“Edward, you need to keep a better eye on him. He could have died!” my mother, Maud cried, distressed and completely unnerved. “May I remind you of when John nearly poisoned himself by eating those mushrooms he found at Princes Street? We were lucky the doctor was available to rush over on Sabbath day.”

I had a secret place where I’d climb one hillside leading up to Edinburgh Castle. There was an overgrown root, which reminded me of forks and tributaries of a river but almost with an animated human quality. Under that root, I always imagined there lived a small family of gnomes; good ones of course, underground workers who would keep the grounds and protect the castle. Hidden by some of those roots were magic mushrooms, pale white ones, tinged with red, which had tiny purple dots. I collected some and hid them in my bedroom, allowing them to dry. Then, I took a mortar and pestle, created a fine powder and mixed them with a shot of my father’s brandy.

Immersed in the world of phantasmagoria, I climbed a wall in my back garden, spread out my arms like wings, gazed up at the dancing clouds overhead and, with visions of grandeur leapt into a

clump of rosebushes below. Father extracted me from their thorny embrace and rushed me into the house, immediately administering some evil tasting syrup which made me vomit violently, forcing me out of my euphoric dreams.

He pushed my head under the unbearably hot water and held it under for a few seconds. I struggled against his strength and surfaced, coughing and sputtering.

“That should bring him to his senses,” my father concluded and stormed out of the room.

Mother cradled my head in her arms as I nearly fainted. After being enveloped by hazy dreams of water spirits and otherworldly beings, I woke several hours later, naked and wrapped up in blankets, not exactly sure how I got from the bath to my bed. I was famished and dragged trails of bed covers with me as I made my way to the kitchen to get something to eat.

“Welcome back to the realm of the living,” Father said, as he saw me gulping down cold leftover porridge.

I was more interested in filling my aching belly than answering his questions. Mother entered and straightened my blankets, since I was stark naked underneath.

Father began pacing the room. “Maybe we should consider sending him to a stricter school with more discipline. I thought piano lessons would keep him on a straight path. Maybe he should take up violin instruction as well.”

“When will he have time for his regular studies?” my mother asked. “He already practices the piano here and at St. Martins several hours a day.”

Yes, I had talent. At eight years old, one could say I was a child prodigy. I started giving public piano recitals at the age of six. My instructor would always tell my parents that God’s angels gave me their special blessing. It wouldn’t be until years later I’d understand words such as *déjà vu* or reincarnation, and that mastering the art of music wasn’t a new experience. There must’ve been a map within my memories I took with me from some far away, uncharted place. I wasn’t sure where it was or what it was, but I knew I’d been there before. I also believed access to this special

realm would allow me to converse with angels, although my father considered them demons, and therefore they'd help me find out why I was so special. However, that path wasn't without its risks or dangers.

These exploits of trial and error would consist of mixing chemicals and herbs and ingesting them, or breathing in the vapors until I would faint or lie near death. Other times I'd try to visualize spirits dancing in the flames of fire. This time I almost killed myself by jumping into the river and holding my breath as long as I could to communicate with water spirits. What nearly did me in was the coldness of the water, and that's why my parents threw me in a tub of boiling water to ward off the chill.

What I didn't dare tell them about was the spell book left behind the organ at church, nor did I say a word about my journal with details of those spells I'd try for myself. Oh, should I mention the times I got caught sneaking into the cemetery behind St. Martin's trying to raise the spirits of the dead? My parents didn't take kindly to those incidents, either.

"John Patrick Scott," he raved in anger, "what do you have to say for yourself this time?"

Mother intervened. "Edward, leave your son alone. Let him eat and regain his strength. We'll deal with it tomorrow morning. Yelling will only give him more gray hairs!"

That's right. Gray hairs. I was an eight-year-old child already sprouting gray hairs and another reason why my father was convinced I was conversing with fallen angels.

Well, the next morning, when I awoke and scrambled straight for the kitchen, starving as usual, a strange visitor was sitting at the table with two traveling bags by his side. I stood in my nightshirt, staring at him from the bottom of the stairs, hesitant to approach nearer.

"John, meet Professor Mockingbird. Your mother has already packed your bags. After breakfast he will accompany you to your new school."

"New school?" I asked, surprised, "I don't want to go anywhere.

I like my old one. I don't want to leave my friends or my music lessons."

"You'll continue your musical studies at your new school," Mother assured me, "and I'm sure you'll have no trouble making new friends."

"When will I be able to come home to see everyone? Not until Christmas?" I asked between mouthfuls.

"You won't," Father interrupted. "You'll be staying at your Uncle Thomas and Aunt Maggie's place from now on. Your mother, brother, sister and I will be moving to Ireland."

The news came as a shock. I ate breakfast with apprehension while Professor Mockingbird went into the other room to discuss arrangements with my parents. Back in my bedroom was a set of street clothes laid out on a bench, which my mother must have prepared. Then I looked under my mattress for my secret spell book, but it was gone! One of my parents must have found it since I remembered a burning smell near the oven this morning. What about my journal or personal spell book? This contained my private recipes and accounts of experiments gone right or gone wrong. I removed a loose brick from the wall near my fireplace, and there it was safe and sound. I placed it in a leather satchel with several stacks of sheet music, grabbed my hat and coat and scampered downstairs. If my parents would sell this old house, there was no way I wanted the new owners to discover it.

By the time I returned to the kitchen, I could hear the horse whinnying outside. I asked my parents as to why they were moving to Ireland, but they refused to give answers.

Both of my parents bid their final farewells, but as Professor Mockingbird led me outside, Father shouted, "Son, wait! Your mother forgot to pack this."

He placed a smooth metal object in my hand and closed my fingers tightly over it. It was my grandfather's silver pocket watch on a well-crafted chain.

"Take good care of it, son. It will serve you well."

"I will, Father," I replied with a tear in my eye, "It gave me good

luck at my first public recital," but before I could say another word, the professor whisked me out the door.

I bit my lip and tried with all my might to hold back more tears as the carriage trotted away with a strange older man, who was neither friendly nor conversable. As our driver took us to the outskirts of town, several graveyards dotted the landscape, and sleepy residential neighborhoods gave way to verdant pastures filled with cows, sheep and goats. After humming Beethoven's *Pastoral*, or what I could remember of it, I dropped off the sleep. Once again, I entered into the land of dreams and witches, goblins and monsters from kingdoms unimaginable.

* * *

WHEN I TOOK Wendell up on his offer and accompanied him to London, he seemed to be more interested in mimicking H.G. Wells' free love ideology rather than interviewing him for a newspaper. At least I didn't wind up sleeping in the park again. Although debatable, I indulged in one too many drinks at the closest public house while unable to enter our hotel room. Yet, while I bided my time, I sensed the distinct impression another patron was watching me.

Saturday morning, Wendell must've slipped out of our room for another manly pursuit while I was sleeping off my brandy. Since Arthur's driver wasn't due to meet me at the hotel until 2:30, I set forth in search of an affordable café for tea and the morning news, breathing in the atmosphere of the waking city. Sounds from local shops on Shaftesbury Street amplified like a smooth crescendo. A puddle below showed my reflection rippling against the sky, distorting my heavy wool overcoat, top hat and customary gentleman's walking stick like a carnival mirror or a storybook hero. What other characters would pop from the pages of novels and join me on my afternoon stroll? Doctor Watson and Sherlock Holmes?

After the restaurant patron next to me left their seat, I swallowed my pride and snatched an uneaten muffin from his plate and plopped it onto mine. When would the day come when I would be beyond such petty thievery to assuage my growling stomach? This

wasn't stealing. It would be tossed to the dogs, anyway. Ah, to be a successful concert pianist in London! My wishes rode on fantasies, but I was certainly determined.

* * *

ARTHUR'S DRIVER arrived at the appointed time and took me down to his estate. Soon thereafter, I had so many questions it was hard to decide where to start.

"Do you ever wish you could predict the future?" I asked.

It was way too soon in our relationship to share the secret about my working time machine. Wendell knew, and of course there was no hiding anything I did from Finn. Arthur was busy going through papers on his desk while I tried to be as patient as possible.

"Why should I be concerned?" he replied, "Spiritualists believe death is not the end for us."

"Sir, I wasn't referring to looking far into the future. Did it ever pique your interest as to whom your children will marry, or whether certain books of yours would be published?"

"Not as much as what will happen in the afterlife, John. It's much easier to deduce the other outcomes. What happens to us after we die is a greater mystery."

I was careful not to reveal too many secrets. "I've had glimpses of the future where I was much older and, instead of being an internationally famous concert pianist, I was stuck as a professor back in Edinburgh. The thought of that sounds dreadful. Don't you agree?"

Arthur ignored my comment and read over a letter. I was getting fidgety and continued to jabber away.

"Speaking of enigmas, I experienced the strangest occurrence the other day. I borrowed a book from the university library, which I needed for a report. I knew for a fact I deliberately put it on the table, which was always next to my *thinking chair*. That night, I must've had too much wine and nodded off in that chair instead of my bed. Despite the fact there was no possible way anyone else

could've entered my room, when I awoke the next morning the book was missing.

"What was I going to do? I scrounged about my flat for spare change, but maybe I'd be lucky to find a used copy and none would be the wiser if I replaced it. Instead of devoting time for piano practice, I spent a good part of the next afternoon scouting several secondhand bookstores and found one over on Victoria Street. Then I hurried home, placed it on the same table where the other one should've been and tried to catch up on my studies.

"When Lydia knocked with biscuits and tea the following morning, I was shocked to find two identical books lying side by side on the table top."

"I suppose at some point you stepped out to use the lavatory down the hall. Someone could have borrowed and returned it when your back was turned."

"Impossible. No matter where I go, I always lock that door. This was more of a paranormal affair. It was as if there was a crack that opened up into another space or hidden world where something could slip through. Does that make sense?"

Arthur sat back in his chair and laughed. "That happens to me all the time. My wife is always complaining some sort of imp or fairy is stealing her hats, and they turn up in the strangest places. Several times we found her hats perched up in trees far away from the house or in our garden. Another time we found one under our bed. Our children swore they weren't up to pranks, and our house staff denied every bit. Not that any of them would be scolded, mind you, but I find it amusing, nonetheless."

"You don't think that's out of the ordinary?"

He shook his head.

"Arthur, this felt like a preternatural experience. It was as if the book slipped through a mysterious and invisible mouse hole hidden between two walls inside my house. When the hole reappeared, the book returned on its own accord without warning."

I was surprised Arthur wasn't in agreement. That's when I reached into my jacket pocket, pulled out a red book and placed it on Arthur's desk.

Curious, he leaned in closer to examine it. “Is that the book which disappeared and reappeared inside your flat?”

“No, it’s the bizarre red book I found left behind on the *train*.”

“*Shokunin, the Thief of Tales?*”

“Odd title, right? All I can say is that extraordinary events have been chasing after me like iron filings to a magnet since I found it. That’s not to say my life wasn’t a wee bit unusual before it entered the picture.” Then I put the book back in my jacket pocket.

“The world as we know it is out of the ordinary. So much of it is beyond our wildest perceptions.” Arthur resembled a disappointed dog being teased with a bone he’d never catch, fascinated by the odd book and was well aware I was withholding information on purpose. The problem was that I knew little more than he and didn’t want to bear the responsibility if something terrible were to happen.

“John, I’m a doctor and a sportsman, athletic and fit. I can look after myself and a simple book wouldn’t pose a threat.”

He rose from his seat and led me out of his study and into another room.

“Come, I apologize for any delays. We have so much to do with so little time left this weekend. Later after supper, several others will be joining us for a *séance*. Accompanying them will be a medium from France, whose accuracy is astounding. John, have you ever been to a *séance*?”

“I can’t say I have.” I tried to hide a yawn. It had already been a long day, and the previous night was spent drinking in excess while waiting for Wendell to let me back into our room.

Arthur’s spirits perked up, and his enthusiasm returned. “Then consider it your first encounter in speaking with the dead. Let’s see what news they have to share.”

WHAT BOOK?



*A*fter returning to Edinburgh, my obsession with time travel continued with little concern for the consequences. There was always a new gadget to try with many hit-and-miss attempts on the road to perfection. It was indeterminate whether I was poisoning my perception by daring to traverse the forbidden and unknown depths of improbable science, but I encountered the oddest occurrences. Beyond temporal astral projection in the present, or dipping my toes into the inviting waters of the recent past, I began a series of enterprises projecting myself into a context of events and circumstances which had not yet occurred — ones more like scenarios from the creative imaginations of writers such as Wells or Jules Verne. From all appearances, it seemed like I was traveling into the future.

One would think such an accomplishment would be exciting, to say the least but; in my case it was disconcerting. When I'd take the leap, I'd appear as someone of the opposite sex. I appeared the same age, but in the guise of a woman — a woman who called herself by the unusual name of Aliskiya Lleullne. This was inexplicable, and I kept this secret from Arthur fearing he'd think I was two-bricks-short-of-a-load and terminate our friendship. Yet, my curiosity outweighed my trepidations, so again, I

strapped on my equipment, drained the last drop of brandy and succumbed to the nickelodeon-like visions that penetrated my consciousness.

September 2228

“What do you mean you can’t find my luggage?”

Aliskiya slammed her backpack on the counter refusing to take no for an answer. Sheayank Spaceport officials called security, insisting she move aside so they could help the next distressed passenger.

Worried about making her flight back to college on time, she hurried from the diner where she worked that summer. She wasn’t thinking clearly when she stuffed her valuables in her check-in bags, where they could get stolen. What was lost? Her warm clothing, her Peregrine Academy Student ID, textbooks on investigative journalism and film history and the Ouija board she used to play psychic games with her best friend, Wanda MacDowell, amongst other things. All that was replaceable, but she couldn’t believe she was so stupid as to put her *tip chip* in her baggage. Now, her money was gone.

As soon as she took a moment to assess what to do next, I did the same. After all, now I was inadvertently wearing her shoes. These futuristic surroundings looked like nothing I ever encountered. Gone were the commonplace Victorian appurtenances, diurnal trivialities, *occurrences quotidiennes*, *die tagesordnung* I took for granted — horses and carriages, engineering inspired by Playfair, customary walking sticks for every gentleman with parasols for the ladies and the familiar aromas, both pleasant and disagreeable from the heart of Edinburgh.

There were foreign metals, polished white for the most part, instead of lush, rich wood finishes or the scent of cool, damp stone masonry fresh after a morning’s rain. In fact, there was metal everywhere, even objects resembling birds only because they flew through the air. Although they were not at all like familiar balloon-like airships, people were getting in and out of them. My five senses

were overwhelmed with so much novelty it was a tough to concentrate on the dilemma at hand.

Suddenly, I realized this young lady was using terminology and language quite different from what I was used to, and yet I could understand each and every word she was saying. If I didn't, then I needed to pick it up and didn't have a lot of time to do so. Her problems became my challenges.

She rummaged through her pack. There were heavy, old dusty volumes of the Sherlock Holmes stories, *The Final Problem* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which she picked up in an antique shop. I suppose the volumes were antique for her from her *punctum visus* or futuristic point of view. Then she pulled out an unidentified flat metallic object with the symbol of an apple embossed on its surface, which seemed pretty useless as far as I was concerned. She said something or another that it had a dead power supply, as she kept stroking her fingers over it.

Honestly, I had no idea what she was doing, or what this contraption was, but I was thrust into the thick of it, and she fretted over it as if it was important enough to have resolved her predicament.

Also included were a few candy bars, something labeled as a meditation recording, although I wouldn't have recognized it as such, and two toy magic wands she purchased from Apollonius's Astral Emporium. She muttered something to the effect it was surprising Interspace security hadn't stopped her except one of them was in its original packaging so it looked like a gift. Last, she uncovered an ominous, crumpled booklet. Buying those wands made her eligible to win a Mearden Scholarship to the Underground University of Magic and Alchemical Science, and that was the receipt for her purchase.

"Stranded with no money at Sheayank Spaceport. A sweepstakes ticket isn't going to bail me out of this jam!" she said, all upset.

She looked around the bustling spaceport to see if she could recognize any students arriving on other flights. Happy families were picking up students from other universities, but her home-

coming met with emotional pain. Where was her family when she needed them?

Suddenly, someone grabbed her from behind. “Sister Sylvania, you scared me. What are you doing at the spaceport?”

It was reassuring to recognize the familiar fashion of a sister of Peregrine Academy, the starkness of the blacks, whites and grays, the long flowing frocking capped with a hooded cowl.

“Can you use a lift?” she asked.

“Back to the academy?”

“Follow me.” Sister Sylvania picked up the remainder of the girl’s belongings.

A cruiser pulled up alongside the curb, piloted by yet another *bon*, or instructor from Peregrine Academy. Although relieved to get a ride back to school, she couldn’t get a straight answer how Sister Sylvania showed up to bail her out. When she kept inquiring how were her roommates? How was her best friend, Wanda? She realized she was wasting her breath on unanswered questions. Her suspicions became an itch in a place that couldn’t be scratched.

Autumn hadn’t quite fallen. The red roninalia and wild strawberries still sprinkled the valley like a case of prickly heat with a good deal of snow on the mountaintops. This was not Edinburgh, but in a place called Kscandria. A damp chill crept through the thin fibers of Aliskiya’s clothing, adapted for San Scientia’s dry, warm climate where she just spent her summer vacation. Peregrine enforced a strict policy regarding students arriving on campus out of uniform. There was no doubt she’d be reprimanded for her stolen luggage.

All the fortress-like, antiquated buildings stood proud in their stone grandeur, hidden away from the rest of the civilized world by the guardian Mountains of Mekura, which were about a mile above sea level. Mechanization and renovation had not yet destroyed the local landscape. Peregrine still maintained its traces of untouched and pristine paradise, cathedral-like auditoriums and the architectural renderings of a gothic monastic community hallmarking many years of tradition.

After passing security checkpoints, their vehicle stopped in

front of a building which centuries before had been an old brewery. Before them was a massive oaken door secured by three strong wrought iron bolts of divers designs and surrounded by a stone brick arch. Atop the door, bricks formed a triangular design enclosing sculptures, which resembled drunken brew masters frozen in stone.

Between the weight of her heavy backpack and her inappropriate clothing, words couldn't describe her discomfort. Sister Sylvania unlocked the door and the girl followed.

"Wait there," Sister Sylvania commanded in a harsh tone pointing to a threadbare couch outside of Sister Anna's office.

Sister Anna was Aliskiya's *bon consilium* or counselor, and all Peregrine students had one. Aliskiya feared there would be serious repercussions for showing up on campus without her Fourth-year uniform. It was always complicated to get a new one at a moment's notice. But, she was so drained from her long flight and disheartening ordeal at the spaceport that she slumped into the sagging couch and passed out. Slipping into a world of her own, she had the most peculiar dream.

Strangely enough, this dream seemed to take place in *my* present time, 1898, or three hundred and thirty years earlier. Even more shocking was it touched upon real events in *my* life that, in fact, happened, as if now I'd be watching actors on a stage playing the roles both Arthur and I had already experienced. Once again, both of us were back inside the Deacon Brodie the day we first met, but this time I was reliving it in this young woman's subconscious mind.

"John Patrick Scott, sir." I extended my hand to greet Arthur.

"The pleasure is all mine," he replied.

"How should I address you, sir?"

He signaled the waiter for drinks. "John, call me Arthur. I prefer being informal."

"It's quite fortuitous you happened to be back in Edinburgh on business. I'm honored you would meet and discuss this matter, which I find so disturbing."

Arthur put fresh tobacco in his churchwarden pipe. "Can I

assume you believe in the transmigration of souls?”

“I suppose that I do.”

Our waiter placed two glasses of ale on the table.

“My publisher forwarded your letter, and I read it at least three times before deciding it was best to meet in person. Don’t you also find it strange that you somehow found yourself initiated into a secret society on a train heading to Edinburgh? Regardless of your theories on a case of mistaken identity, there are no accidents. Can you think of anything you did in the past, which could’ve been of keen interest to these gentlemen?”

Details were elusive. I boarded a train with a rain-soaked ticket, so wet that the print bled, and I couldn’t find my correct seat. Then I was caught up in a soporific course of events. What remained were an engraved silver ring on my finger and a mysterious red book.

* * *

ALISKIYA WOKE when an armful of new Fourth-year student clothing was thrust into her face.

Sister Anna pointed towards the nearest restroom. “Get changed!”

When Aliskiya returned properly dressed and resumed a seat on her couch, the sister threw the pack into her lap. It was unzipped and obvious someone inspected its contents. Attendants surrounded her, and the door shut. Fear formed a stone in her throat. Sister Anna glared right at her with pale blue eyes as hard as bullets, almost hidden in the flesh of her face. Her stare was razor sharp and cutting.

“Where is your book?” Sister Anna asked.

“What book? The Sherlock Holmes books?”

Outside of being reprimanded for losing her school uniform, Aliskiya wasn’t aware she was supposed to be carrying special books. *What book?*

Sister Anna arose from her chair, approaching her with an outstretched arm.

“Aliskiya, your book!”

Aliskiya thought to herself, “Wanda was a *Bosch2* book and film fan. I bought both of us toy magic wands on the Connection making us eligible to attend a special school of alchemical science. Could she have been referring to the receipt in my backpack to enter a contest for a Mearden Scholarship?”

Then, Sister Anna leaned over so close that her breath flushed the girl’s face. “Aliskiya, do you pledge to transmute your soul into that of an ultimate spiritual warrior?”

“I do... Wait! What are you talking about?”

One of her attendants thrust a book into Aliskiya’s arms. Pulling a knife from under her frocking, Sister Anna sliced the girl’s finger while three drops of her blood tumbled on to a page. She shoved a ring on one of the poor girl’s fingers — a silver engraved ring identical to the one I received when three strangers accosted me on the Edinburgh-bound train from London.

Aliskiya swallowed hard and shouted in defiance, “The spaceport authorities lost everything I brought from San Scientia. The Ussurian government and Mugrayanian insurgents took my parents from me, and you confiscated my backpack. I have nothing. All I have left is myself!”

Sister Anna kept talking to herself and shaking her head as she rummaged through the backpack discovering the *Bosch2* wands. After careful examination, she found the souvenir receipt for the Meardon Scholarship. Meanwhile, Aliskiya clutched her wounded hand trying to stop the bleeding.

The sister took in a deep breath with her sight fixed on the horizon as she gazed out the window. “There are people and powers who control the destiny of the universe, and sometimes they force us to re-evaluate what we envisioned as our original plans. Being given the gift of life is an initiation, and what we do with it is what counts.”

She pocketed the booklet and handed the girl an admission pass with rapidly fading disappearing ink. “There’s been a slight change to your schedule this semester.”

Puzzled, Aliskiya examined it. It said she won the Meardon

Scholarship.

“Sister Anna, I’m not sure this was part of my curriculum.”

“All of us sign up for this course, whether we like it or not. Education never ends. It is a series of lessons, with the greatest for the last.”

Sister Anna had quoted a line from Sherlock Holmes with impeccable timing. Then she handed the girl a strange object that looked like a crystalline seashell.

“Consider this amulet your library card. It’s also a passkey that will admit you to commuter transportation necessary for travel. Meet me at Hermann Willington’s engine room tomorrow at three.”

“Can’t we make it another time? 3:00 p.m. is when I have my Film History class.”

“That class is not important. This is. Cancel the other,” she replied as she began to focus her attention on work piled up on her desk. “One last thing, if your classmates get too curious as to your whereabouts, inform them this is an *extracurricular activity*, and leave it at that. Aliskiya Lleullne, welcome back to Peregrine Academy.”

* * *

I YANKED off my time travel apparatus, making a beeline for my washbasin while breathing so fast I thought my lungs would leap out of my chest and run down the street. Cold water helped me snap to my senses. Who was Aliskiya Lleullne? What was this mystifying book Sister Anna was looking for? Where was she from, and why was I barging in on her life in this futuristic theater?

It was as if my brain was a decrepit old mattress and my memories were poking through the surface like worn out springs. Had I suppressed that much of my past and was I forced to travel to the future to see the consequences of my actions? Behold the comparisons! Why was I being told this woman had undergone some sort of initiation like what I went through before I met Arthur?

“What is this all about?” I shouted loud enough to alert my

meddlesome landlady downstairs.

Exasperated, I ran my hands through my disheveled, gray-streaked auburn hair. A knock came from the door. Oh horrors! My time travel equipment was all over the place. A neighbor must have called the police.

“Who’s there?”

My visitor made an unconventional entrance passing through the door and materializing on the nearer side, like an apparition.

“Sherlock?”

The ghostly man increased in solidity.

“John, I wish you’d stop calling me that. I am not Sherlock Holmes.”

“Finneas Fertle, you scared the Dickens out of me!” I cried.

“As usual, I presume.”

“So, what’s the nature of this unexpected visit?” I asked, trying to calm myself down by slowing my breathing to a steady beat.

“Poking your noggin into the future, aren’t ye lad? Don’t you think you should excavate the past, instead? Why on earth did you want to jump into the 23rd century?”

“Good God! How come there are so many odd similarities?”

“Consider the fact maybe you did something in your past that brought you to the situation you’re in now?”

I rose to my feet, but Finn disappeared as quick as he had entered. Finn seemed more spirit than human, and somehow I was stuck with him — forever! Yes, I did say forever. He’d give me hints he’d been assigned, by a secret council, to make sure I stayed out of trouble, but he’d never explain who they were or from where they came. What I could never comprehend was when he told me he had been by my side since the beginning of time, way longer than just my childhood.

He called himself some sort of guardian angel. But, I begged to differ. If I had been born Irish instead of Scottish, I would’ve regarded him to be some sort of ridiculous leprechaun, but much taller. Since he always dissected and analyzed every bloody move I made, I gave him the moniker of Sherlock, named after that famous character.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Crowens has worn many hats in Hollywood for over 20 years, is a black belt in martial arts, a Sherlock Holmes enthusiast and is a regular contributor of author interviews for **Black Gate**, an award-winning speculative fiction online magazine. She also writes non-fiction articles on a variety of subjects including martial arts and has published short stories in the Bram Stoker Award nominated anthology **A New York State of Fright** (Hippocampus Press, 2018) and **Hell's Heart: 15 Twisted Tales of Love Run Amok**. She also writes in the Hollywood mystery/suspense genre.

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