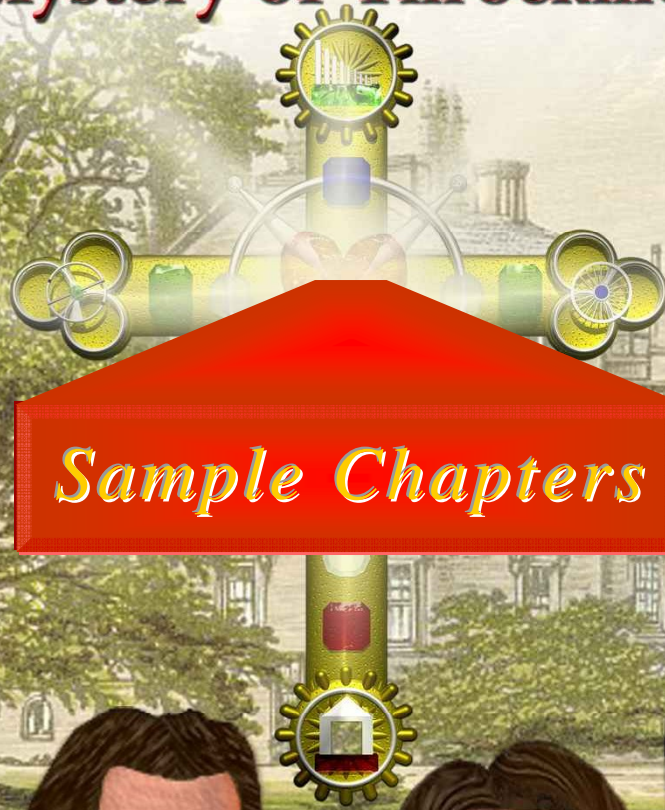


The Cross of Ramplet

The Mystery of Throckmorton Manor



Sample Chapters



A Novel by Garnell Thompson

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The Cross of Ramplet

By Cathrine Garnell and Tim Thompson

Nottingham, UK & Malden, MA USA

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The Cross of Ramplet – Sample Chapters

Foreword - The Knights Templar

On Friday, October 13, 1307, (“Black Friday”) forces authorized by King Philip IV of France (“Philip the Fair”) arrested the members of the order of warrior monks called the Knights Templar.

The captured Knights were accused of witchcraft and religious heresy, imprisoned, and tortured. Many confessed, only to recant later. Tragically, most were burned at the stake in what seemed to be an orgy of religious zealotry. Pope Clement V completely dissolved them through his Papal Bull, *Vox in Excelso*, issued on March 2, 1312, followed by the *Ad Proviendan (Ad Providam)*.

Many historians suggest that the cause of this tragedy was that King Philip IV moved against the Knights Templar to confiscate all their financial holdings and treasure. Others suggest that the Knights Templar had amassed social and political power that was dangerous to the Church.

Not all the Templars were captured. Some escaped to other parts of Europe.

Legend has it that they took with them the fabulous Cross of Ramplet, made of solid gold and platinum, encrusted with stunning and valuable jewels. Possibly their greatest treasure, it also held the key to the greatest secret in medieval Christendom, a secret that could change the world.

It mysteriously disappeared and was considered lost until...

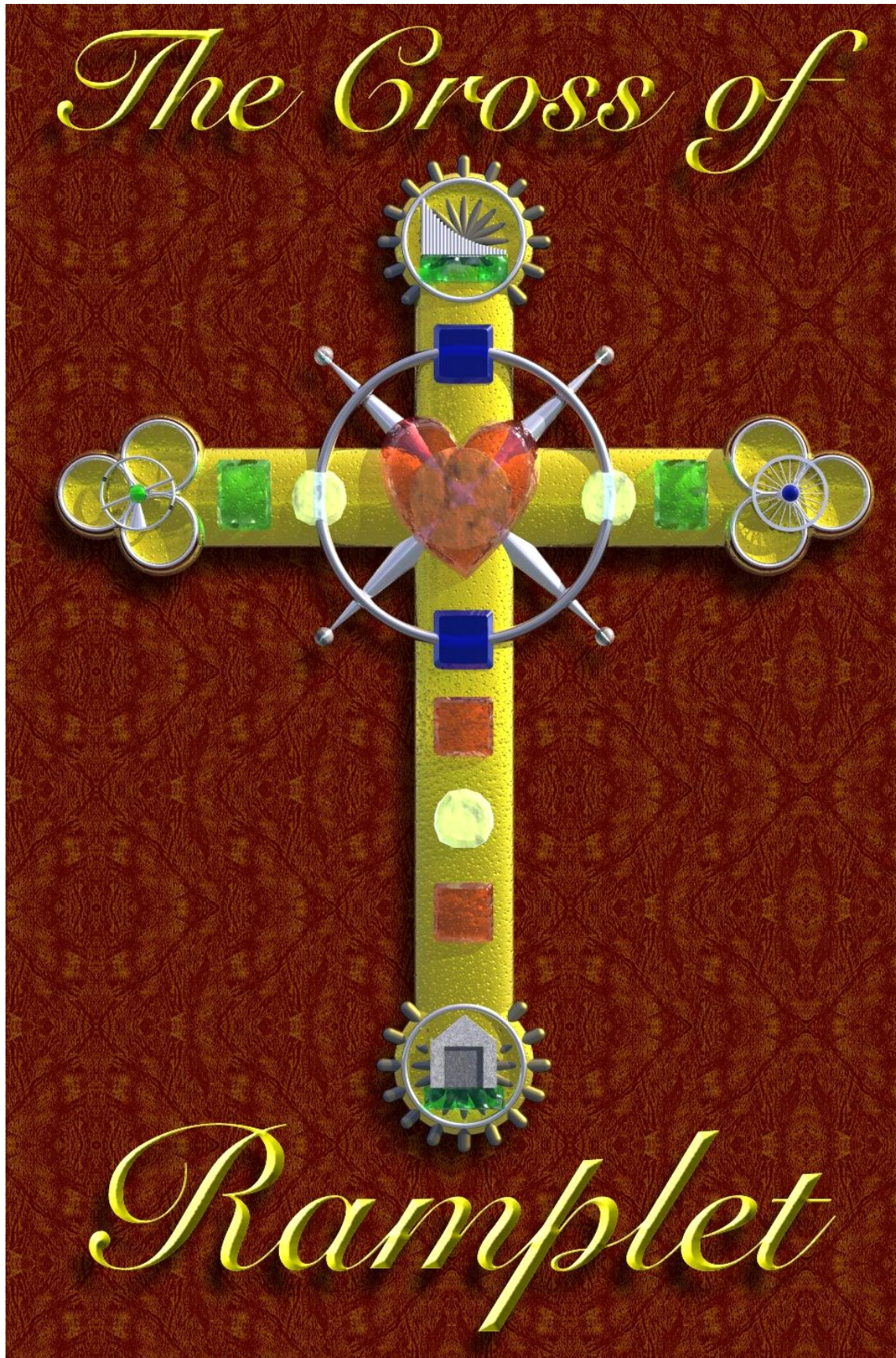


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Chapter One - The Blasted Church

Billowing voluminous clouds rolled menacingly across the clear sky. Deep shades of purple and grey mist swirled in a downward spiral totally blotting out the calm summer's day. Growling thunder roared in the distance ebbing closer with each moment, as blinding lightening bolts pierced through the ever-darkening canopy, striking the ground with burning accuracy incinerating everything they touched.

A large black raven swooped down and perched on the remains of a charred smoldering tree. It watched with amused curiosity as the storm gathered momentum. The thunder boomed and the ground shook. The lightening crackled and sizzled, as it homed in on its designated target.

The bird blinked a beady little eye and cawed with satisfaction as a flash of white light hit the church spire and it crumbled into a pile of rubble, trapping and wounding the occupants. With a nonchalant flap, the raven was airborne and circling just beyond the boundary of the churchyard, like a vulture waiting for its prey to die.

The tempest's velocity had increased ten-fold and was centered directly over the church. The screaming and wailing from the trapped occupants was barely audible above the brutal battering of the tempestuous storm.

Darla awoke with a start, beads of sweat forming on her forehead. It had happened again, the awful dream of that terrible night. She lay there in bed, terrified to close her eyes, scanning the darkened room. Her ears were attuned to the sound of the silence, no thunder, no pelting rain, just an eerie stillness in her half wakened state.

Her mouth was dry, and she blinked several times to try and force the dream vision away, the memory from so very long ago. Her mind raced through the recollection. It was never supposed to happen, it was impossible, it could not have been and yet, it was and she had lived it.

As she lay there, knowing she should get up but too terrified by her memory of the dream and the trauma, felt trapped and frozen. Then she noticed it. Something was terribly wrong. She was not alone!

She breathed as quietly as she could, and focused her hearing. She held her breath to test, and yes, the room still had the sound of breathing, deep, slightly raspy breathing. Darla suspected the sound came from the far corner of the little bedroom. What could she do? She did not dare

move. She lay as still as possible, hoping not to reveal that she was awake and aware. Whoever was in the room with her, she was sure, was watching her intently, ready for... what?

The breathing was slow and calm; she matched the rhythm with her own as she tried desperately to think of a plan. Then, in a sudden fit of boldness, dictated by something within her, an instinct perhaps, she very quietly spoke.

“I know you are there.”

The other breathing seemed to take a start, then returned to its previous rhythm, but no answer came to her ears. She waited in silence and terror.

“It’s no good, I know you are there! Who are you, what do you want of me?” she asked quietly.

There was a sigh, almost a moan, and she received her response.

“I knew you would know,” the voice was deep and raspy, a masculine sound, with a tinge of sadness in it.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Darla asked again, this time giving away her fear in the sound of her voice.

“I shan’t hurt you,” the other responded from the shadows, “I don’t want to... hurt you.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Darla corrected the specter.

“Who I am is unimportant. What I want is... I want to warn you.”

“Warn me of what?” Darla asked, beginning to sit up.

“Do not move!” the shadow sharply commanded. Darla eased back down into the feather bed. “Tomorrow you will be approached by someone with an enticing offer. It will excite and

thrill you, but you must resist. Look deeply into the eyes of the person making the offer. Trust your instincts based on what you see. You must refuse!” the shadow instructed.

Darla lay there thinking, what could possibly be happening in her dull and pointless life? The idea of change, any change, was already exciting. Yet not to trust?

“Please explain,” she asked quietly.

“All will be revealed to you in time,” the shadow replied. She heard a movement, the slight snap of bones out of alignment and she knew her specter was about to leave.

“Wait!” she called out, sitting up, blinking in the dark. She could just make out the silhouette of a tall human figure, without distinct features, almost without form, just a large shadow, now near the darkened window. “Who are you?”

“I am unimportant. You know me, if you remember. It does not matter now, soon, all will be over and...” the voice trailed off.

“Do you need... help?” Darla asked, having a sudden feeling of compassion for no apparent reason.

“Help...” the voice was barely a whisper, “...help? There is no... there is... none...” the shadow voice trailed off, “Heed my warning!” It commanded sharply and the shape suddenly moved to the window and was gone as a cold breeze announced its departure.

In an instant, Darla was on her feet, fumbling to light the candle by her bed. Her hands shook as she struck the match and it roared in flame. The little candle illuminated the small darkly paneled room, with its low beamed ceiling and sparse upholstered furnishings, the large wing chair in the corner with its tapestry cover, the small footstool. Darla hurried to the window on creaking floorboards, past the billowing curtains and shut it. As she did so, in the pale

moonlight, she saw the figure of a tall, cloaked man slinking across the cobble driveway and rolling lawn of the manor house.

There was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” Darla asked.

“It’s your cousin, dear. I heard your footsteps. Are you well?”

Relieved to hear the sound of a trusted and familiar voice, Darla sighed and unlocked the door. There, in the long dark corridor, holding a single sputtering candle was her beautiful younger cousin, clad in her elegant flowing night robe.

“Oh cousin Sarina, how very kind of you to come and check on my safety. I received a chill from the night air, that is all,” Darla whispered in the flickering candlelight.

Her cousin was about to answer when Darla, eyes wide in surprise and shock, shouted, “LOOK OUT!”

Darla pulled Sarina over the threshold just as a tall cupboard opposite the door suddenly slid across the hallway stopping in the exact spot Sarina had stood a moment before, blocking the entry to the room. Moments later thundering footsteps came dashing along the corridor as the young women huddled together in shock.

“Darla, are you alright?” boomed a voice from the corridor.

“Yes, Sebastian, we are fine,” Darla replied, trying to control her shaky voice.

“We... who’s we?”

“Sarina is here with me too!”

“Oh...” he replied as he began to push the heavy piece of furniture to the side, “What on earth happened?”

Darla looked at Sarina, they knew better than to tell the truth.

“Oh, I was awakened by the window rattling, it wasn’t closed properly, and I must have disturbed poor cousin Sarina when I got up to close it,” Darla smiled sweetly, her sapphire blue eyes giving away nothing, “Isn’t that right, dearest Sarina?”

Sarina smiled nodded in agreement. If her brother suspected anything, they were both in serious trouble. Sebastian looked from one to the other and back towards the door.

“But that doesn’t explain why the cupboard was blocking the doorway and how did it get there?” he pressed.

“Oh we have no idea, you see we were both in here at the time with the door shut, we didn’t even know it was there until we heard you come running, then we opened the door and found we were trapped,” Darla smiled her sweetest smile, “and there you were again, to save us.”

Sebastian looked at his exquisite cousin standing in the moonlight; he knew there was something different about her, something he just couldn’t place.

“Well as long as you are both fine, I shall retire,” Sebastian said, retreating from the room.

“Why did you lie to him?” Sarina asked as Darla jumped into the feather bed and hugged her knees under the counterpane.

“Well, we don’t want him getting suspicious, do we?” she smiled with a wink.

Sarina joined Darla in the bed, giggling. The two had been companions since childhood, almost inseparable. They shared all their secrets. Almost all of them anyway.

“Darla, the cupboard... do you think HE was, you know...”

“I’m not sure. After all, the cupboard is on wheels and what with the force of gravity...”

“Gravity? What is that?”

“I’m not entirely certain. Something scientific I am sure. I overheard father and his friends discussing it in the library after dinner a few nights ago. I’m sure I have no idea what it is, but they did mention Mr. Newton.”

“And so it **MUST** be true!” giggled Sarina, “How does it work?”

“It has something to do with attraction, one body attracts another...” Darla began.

“Oh, I know all about **THAT!** We both know an attractive body, don’t we?”

The two young women looked at each other with a sparkle in their eyes, squealed “Sebastian!”, and then got into a small giggly pillow fight.

The innocent companions were well known in the local area. Often they were seen on Market Day in the sleepy village of Portsur, sashaying about, hand in hand or arm in arm, putting on airs of importance they hardly deserved. Their innocent charms were so genuine that no one believed them, and this sent gossiping tongues wagging.

“Sarina, if it is... you know, **HIM**... what are we going to do?” Darla asked seriously.

“Oh, I don’t know, I am sure. But, we haven’t seen him or heard from him in ages... even months. No, I think you are right about this gravity thing. The house **IS** settling, and the floors do slant somewhat. Young William, Cedric’s son, loves to play ball in the corridor because the ball seems to roll by itself. You know,” Sarina became suddenly excited, “I saw him playing the other day and the ball rolled down the corridor and onto the stair, and then it bounced down, thump, thump, thump and hit Mother on foot! It was all I could do to keep from laughing. She was so confused because William was nowhere to be seen! Hee, hee.”

“Oh, how very naughty! Still, I do worry that **HE**’s back.”

“Let’s not even think about that. If you like, I’ll stay with you through the night,” Sarina offered. “Do you think HE is after — you know — it?” She said after a moment of thought.

“It?” Darla asked.

“Oh, you know! Can I see it, please? Please Darla, let me see it once more,” Sarina pleaded.

“Sarina, dearest, it isn’t for the curious. It’s very special and important!”

“I won’t touch it, I promise. Just let me see it! If HE is here trying to get it... well, you’ll need a witness that you still have it — in tact,” Sarina argued.

“Oh, very well,” Darla sighed. Sarina’s interest was a bit tiresome. She pushed down the covers of the bed so her cousin could see the pendant hanging around her neck. Sarina gasped at the sight.

“Oh, Darla, it is so beautiful!”

“Yes, I know,” Darla smiled.

Sarina stared at the fascinating object. It was silver, pointed, about 3 inches long, and 2 inches wide, suspended from a fine mesh silver chain, an uncomfortable piece of jewelry to wear, especially to bed.

“Darla, this Amulet, although it is shaped like a Christian Cross...” Sarina almost touched the silver object, but Darla held up a warning hand, “...it has those strange markings, almost like hieroglyphics. I can see — there is a shape that looks like a snake embossed on it, here, and a fish here, and at the center of the arms, it looks like a sun. What does it mean, Darla?”



“It’s magical,” Darla whispered. “I am not entirely sure what these markings mean, they are very secret, very ancient. But I believe they hold the secret of great power. I think there is an incantation that they somehow reveal. I did look in the historical books Sebastian placed in father’s library when he returned from University, but I could not fully understand them nor find anything. Of course, we must never let Sebastian know about the Amulet!”

“Well, I for one will always keep it a secret and never tell a soul. But if HE comes back, HE may try to take it away from you,” Sarina offered.

“There is no danger. I only wear the Amulet at night. During the day, I keep it locked away safe and sound in my special secret place. And at night, I recite the special incantation inscribed on the back of the Amulet. See, here?” Darla turned the Cross over revealing the inscription etched into its shiny silver surface:

Mai Dieu protègent le porteur de cette croix et tous sa famille contre tout mal, maintenant et pour toujours.

“Oh! I know what that means. It’s French!” Sarina piped.

“Well, of course it’s French!” Darla giggled as she turned the object back over. “It means: *May God protect the wearer of this Cross and all his family from any evil, now and forever.* So you see, by protecting me, I protect us all. But I have to wear the Amulet for it to work. Of course, during the day, it isn’t necessary; we can all take care of ourselves. But at night, I wear the Amulet and recite the incantation,” she said, somewhat haughtily.

“Darla, why is it in French? I mean, a Cross, shouldn’t it be inscribed in Latin?” Sarina wondered.

“I’m not sure. Perhaps it was made in France and that’s why it is in French, or perhaps it was made by some French artisan who wanted to honor his native tongue. Regardless, I am sure it is blessed. For when I wear it, I feel a type of warmth coming from it, radiating, if you will,” Darla explained.

“Well, just in case, If ever you are in danger, call my name and I shall come running to save you... as I did tonight,” Sarina offered.

“Oh, cousin, you are such a dear,” Darla thanked and lay down on the pillow, smiling and seemingly content.

“Darla...Dar LA!” called Mrs. Throckmorton from the base of the grand staircase, “Hurry down, breakfast is waiting!”

The portly woman looked anxiously up the staircase for a sign of her daughter. She was a kindly faced woman, with rosy cheeks and a ruddy complexion. At one time, she was a fair lass, but that was years ago before her youth, and her figure, were altered by years of comfortable and lazy country living, fed on rich cream and too much beef, mutton and gravy. Her stout figure was hardly hidden by her copious garments, her petticoats and dress and aprons. Having married well, she had no need to worry about her appearance, as her role changed from that of a maid to a matron, concerned with the running of a household and the raising of the children of the house.

Some of the children were not actually hers, but had been rumored to have been abandoned by her careless sister who ran off with a dark pirate captain, a scandal that would never die. So the story went, and Mrs. Throckmorton did nothing to change it to align it with the truth. Like so many people, she was of the opinion that there was no reason to allow something as mundane as the truth to interfere with a much more entertaining rumor. She called all the children her own, and they called her — and her husband — Mother and Father. The ruse fooled no one and the family reputation was still tarnished by the unfounded and inaccurate rumor.

Sebastian, the handsome young University graduate, marched proudly in to the large dining hall and began helping himself to breakfast from the many trays set out on the sideboard.

“Young man!” rebuked Squire Throckmorton, the lord of the house and master, a pudgy small blob of a man that no amount of fashionable clothing could ever make handsome. “We wait for the family before helping ourselves!” he admonished.

The handsome youth turned and said, “Oh father, these ideas are so old fashioned. We are all equal now, don’t you know?”

Squire Throckmorton eyed the youth from the rim of his spectacles as he paced before the large dining table. It was ironic that a being as uncomely as himself could be expected to sire such a handsome offspring.

Sebastian was the pinnacle of athletic youth. At 6 feet, he stood a head taller than most of his contemporaries, and his chiseled, clear complexioned face, with high prominent cheekbones and strong jaw line were striking to see beneath his jet-black locks of perfectly silky and smooth hair. His sparkling blue gray eyes bespoke of a high order of intelligence, yet his strong, muscular athletic body spoke of a man of action.

Sebastian was considered the ultimate catch of the day — on any day — by the local ladies. He was of marriageable age, and with the small family fortune, his value was more than in his looks. The gossips had many reports of him being a bit of a rogue, that no daughter was safe with him unchaperoned, especially in the stables. An excellent horseman, riding was Sebastian’s great passion, and the exercise of the horse may have accounted for much of his musculature.

“Where do you get such fanciful ideas?” gruffed the Squire, “Reading again, I suppose. I never should have allowed you to go to University. All that study of history and archeology and the ways of the ancients. Stuff and nonsense if you ask me! I’ve never studied history and I’m none the worse for it,” he muttered as he slapped his hands behind his back in impatience.

“Father, ‘those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it’. Reading is important. It is how we get new ideas! And yes, the new philosophy started by the... colonies... suggests that we are indeed equal in the eyes of...”

“Well, I never,” Mrs. Throckmorton interrupted him as she came bustling into the large dining hall, her dress and petticoats rustling as her wooden heels clunked on the old planks of the polished oak floor. “I do not know what has gotten into that girl this morning!”

“Wife,” replied Squire Throckmorton as Sebastian, in spite of his earlier warning, began loading up his plate with eggs and sausages and sat down to eat. “I have, at your request, allowed you to manage the education of the children and avoided the use of a governess. However, if they are not able to show proper courtesy and manners, I will be forced to reconsider my decision!” He paced back and forth while Sebastian shoveled food into his mouth as if he had not eaten for days.

“Good morning, Sebastian,” Mrs. Throckmorton addressed him, rather than deal with her husband’s latest argument. “You’re looking well this morning. Don’t push food into your mouth like an animal, and sit up straight! Did you sleep well? I do hope you are rested. I heard a noise last night, was that you? You really should be more considerate.”

Sebastian looked up blinking. It always amazed him how his ‘mother’ was able to speak kindly and admonish him in the same sentence and then change the subject completely. It was a rare talent.

“Yes, mother. The old cupboard was parked in front of Darla’s bedroom door again.”

“Again?! Father, that is IT! I demand that you remove the wheels from the contraption as soon as you can. We cannot have furniture wandering about the house at all hours of the night. It isn’t proper. What would the neighbors say!”

“My dear,” the Squire replied as courteously as he could, “the cupboard is one of my finest creations. The wheels make it fully transportable and convenient. I am sure that eventually, people will come to recognize my genius!”

“Well, my dear,” she continued, completely forgetting the topic, “if Darla cannot be bothered making an appearance at breakfast, we shall start without her.”

She waltzed round the large dining table to the sideboard, prepared a plate for her husband and placed it on the table before him, “Now sit down and eat your breakfast before it gets too cold.”

Squire Throckmorton sat sheepishly as ordered. Although he often criticized his wife, he always obeyed her. It was a secret of their successful marriage. Put up a brave front and then acquiesce.

Mrs. Throckmorton was preparing her own plate when a rather rude and unpleasant noise came from Sebastian’s chair. She spun around in shock.

“Sebastian! We do NOT break wind as if the sounding of a trumpet! How many times must I tell you this?”

“Sorry, mother,” Sebastian apologized through a mouthful of food.

Suddenly, Squire Throckmorton slammed his hand on the table. “It is not RIGHT!” he demanded.

“What’s that, my dear? I’m afraid I wasn’t paying attention,” his wife replied, sitting at her place and daintily beginning to eat her breakfast.

“Doesn’t that girl know, ‘To everything there is a season, and a time and a purpose...’?”

“Father, I hardly think breakfast constitutes a season. Although I suppose you have a point, if we are going to follow the standard conventions. Your justification is, however, a bit over reaching,” Sebastian suggested. “By the way, I am riding into town this morning. Do you wish me to pick anything up for you?”

“Yes, I have some correspondence you can deliver. One is a letter for Mr. Swindle, the banker, and another is for Constable Jonas. The poachers have been at it again,” Squire Throckmorton replied.

“Poachers!” cried Mrs. Throckmorton, suddenly convinced that her life was being threatened. “Why don’t you just shoot them like everybody else?”

“My dear,” replied her husband, somewhat testily, “if I were to shoot a man simply because he was searching for food to feed his family, why, I’d be a monster. No, my dear, much better to let the constable do it. One of the great conveniences of a legal system is that we can create laws to suit our own conveniences and then hire officials to enforce them, making us look entirely innocent. I believe this also applies to taxes.”

“Father, you sound like the Emperor Caligula!” Sebastian argued.

“Popular fellow was he?”

“Not exactly.”

“Well, he must have been or else we wouldn’t know about him centuries later.”

“Sir, I believe there is a difference between being popular and being infamous,” Sebastian replied.

Mrs. Throckmorton was about to comment when she looked up, shrieked and dropped her fork clattering onto her china plate.

There, standing in the doorway was Darla. She was still in her nightgown, but it was tattered, dirty, and torn. Her face was bruised and bloody, her wet, auburn hair disheveled and covered with old leaves, in fact, she was soaking wet! “Sarina...” she stammered in her state of disheveled shock, “Sarina... she’s...”

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Chapter Nine — The Musical Party

It was about 6 months earlier, on a warm summer's evening. Jonas had been invited to join the Throckmortons for dinner after an afternoon spent with Manfred Throckmorton, warning him of the rumors that Reverend Dunstable had re-appeared and was making accusations of foul play against the Squire's wife.

That evening, for some reason almost no one in the family could fathom, Cook served a rather large mutton stew filled with white beans, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, diced potatoes, and turnips.

"Good Lord!" Exclaimed Squire Throckmorton at the sight and smell of it. "What was she thinking?"

“Now, now dear, I’m sure it will be delicious and very good for the digestion. So much — fiber,” his wife admonished and then continued without the slightest hesitation, “Sebastian, how many times have I told you to mind your posture? Sit up straight! And that goes for you too, Darla!”

The two young adults looked at each other with a wink in their eyes.

“You two are up to something,” Squire Throckmorton observed while he tried to pick out safe bits of meat from the odious stew. “What wickedness are you plotting tonight? Remember, constable is here and it would take very little to pack you both off to gaol.” He winked at Jonas, whose dark and penetrating eyes were transfixed on Darla.

“Why, nothing, father,” Darla innocently replied, batting her pretty lashes at him and the constable. “Seeing as how we have a guest,” she nodded politely to Jonas, “Sebastian and I have planned an entertainment. Well, it was really Sebastian’s idea, I’m not nearly clever enough to invent things like you father or Sebastian. We’ve been,” she could hardly repress a giggle, “practicing all day. I am sure you and mother will enjoy it, as will our... dear, sweet and noble guest.” She let the words linger on her tongue as she batted her eyelashes at the constable who was trying desperately to stroke her foot under the table. She abruptly turned to Mrs. Throckmorton, “Sebastian says he was inspired by you, mother.”

“Oh, an entertainment!” exclaimed Mrs. Throckmorton, clasping her hands. “How delightful. Perhaps I should send round for a few of the neighbors?”

Darla and Sebastian looked a bit shocked at the suggestion; they hadn’t considered that there would be an extended audience. The look in Darla’s face said “No,” but Sebastian, sporting

a positively wicked grin, replied, “What a capital idea mother! Do send for the neighbors... I am sure they will find this evening unforgettable.”

The family and guest ate very little of the dinner in relative silence, satisfying their hunger on dinner rolls and butter instead. Yet Sebastian seemed to relish the stew and had second and third helpings. The entire proceeding was interrupted only by Mrs. Throckmorton’s constant consideration and admonition of her children’s posture and other violations of etiquette. She took such things very seriously, with very good reason. Her social standing was critical.

After dinner, Squire Throckmorton retired to his library with Jonas to discuss ‘important matters’ while Mrs. Throckmorton invaded the kitchen, intent on correcting the cook for the rather surprising meal. “We had a guest, for heaven’s sake! She should have roasted a chicken, not served THAT slop,” she muttered to herself.

Darla grasped Sebastian’s hand and hurried him into the music room. “Are you insane?” she spun round and hissed at him as she shut the big sliding doors. “Inviting the neighbors! A joke on mother is one thing, even with Constable Jonas present, but embarrassing the family in the community is quite another. Sebastian, I won’t allow it!”

“Oh Darla, what does it matter? Besides, it will be very funny. Mother carries on too much about etiquette. It’s time she had her come-uppance. Perhaps if the neighbors are witness to it...”

“Sebastian, it is downright cruel. I won’t allow you to do it!” Darla commanded. Her stern blue eyes flashed fire at her cousin/brother and he knew she meant business.

“Very well,” sighed Sebastian. “We shan’t get an opportunity like this again, you know. Pity, when you think about it. But what shall we do? Mother has sent for the neighbors, they’ll be here in an hour.”

“We will play the music straight, that’s what we’ll do! And no funny business Sebastian. Mother takes social grace extremely seriously and I won’t have you embarrassing her.”

The time seemed to pass interminably, but the mechanisms of the entertainment had already been set in motion, even prior to dinner. At this point, nothing could stop it, something Darla fully realized and it concerned her greatly.

She deeply cared about her mother, in spite of her constant admonitions, and intuitively knew that she’d be mortified if anything happened to jeopardize her standing in the community. But she was also aware that Sebastian, for all his good nature, was not above a perfectly wicked act if he thought it would be amusing.

The neighbors arrived punctually and evening port was served all around. The men chose to stand behind the sofas and settees in the music room while the ladies lounged and chatted.

“Damme, Throckmorton,” said Mr. Snevell, a merchant with whom the Squire had business dealings, “quite nice of you and yours to provide an evening’s entertainment. Rather short notice though, don’t you think?”

“It was Leticia’s idea,” Squire Throckmorton replied, wanting his wife to receive full credit, “Subject came up, oddly enough, at dinner. I had no idea the children were planning this.” Although Darla and Sebastian were young adults, the Squire and Mrs. Throckmorton continually referred to them as children, as if the appellation would halt the aging process.

The women were chatting and fanning themselves, even though it was a mild evening. The fanning was all the fashion, and each lady had a more elaborate fan than the next, as if the style and complexity of the accessory was a sign of social status. They showed off their fans as elaborately as they could, like strutting peacocks trying to out do each other.

Darla entered and stood in the grand archway looking positively radiant in a long graceful white evening dress augmented with the finest lace and embroidered blue irises. Her hair was done up in the latest French twist fashion, with a very pretty tiara, and she had on a bit of makeup, something of which her mother did not approve as could be seen in her sudden frown.

Jonas had to turn away, for the sight had so excited him.

Darla swept into the room and stood by the large grand double Harpsichord.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” she smiled with incredible elegance, “although we had not imagined performing a concert for such a distinguished company, my cousin Sebastian and I have arranged a little musical number for your entertainment which we call: ‘The Ode to Etiquette.’ We hope you will enjoy it.”

She performed a little curtsy while her mother, beginning to catch on that something was afoot, and most probably at her expense, frowned even more gravely, not at all entertained. She fluttered her fan in great agitation.

Seeing this concern, and his chance to win approval points, Jonas moved near her and patted her on the shoulder, smiling approvingly. This seemed to help although he could clearly see in Mrs. Throckmorton’s eyes that not only was she concerned, she was afraid. He was about to speak to her, but was interrupted.

“Indeed,” said Sebastian as he came sauntering into the room in his finest black waistcoat and white trousers carrying a shiny brass bugle, “our little piece was inspired by our dear mother, to whom we dedicate this performance.” He bowed gracefully and nobly.

Jonas fancied himself a great judge of character and Sebastian puzzled and worried him. The extremely handsome man was many years his younger, and a little too free with his ways. Jonas speculated that one day, he’d come to a rough end. Yet his physical stature and amazing attractiveness won him over to both men and women. Beauty, even when skin-deep, can do that, Jonas had observed many times in his career. Some of the most notorious criminals were strikingly beautiful people.

There were nods and smiles of approval and a gentle applause, with all eyes on Mrs. Throckmorton who was becoming extremely uncomfortable. Darla shot a darting glance at Sebastian and mouthed the words: “Don’t you dare...”

There was an awkward silence while the audience awaited the performance to begin. Darla thought for a moment that she should stop the proceedings at once, but she knew how social grace demanded that they make good on their promise of an entertainment for the neighbors. She silently prayed that Sebastian had come to his senses, and she began to play and sing.

She thundered (if it could be said of her instrument) some bass chords on the grand harpsichord ‘plein jeu’ in an ominous tone followed by a silly little arpeggio in the treble and sang: “The book of, the book of, the Book of Etiquette!” She followed this musical announcement with a skipping ritornello on the keys, then repeated her song: “The book of, the book of, the Book of Etiquette. It’s something, ‘tis something, we must not ‘ere forget! It must

not be ignored, for if it be ignored, all people will be bored, all people will be bored, people will be, people will be, people... will BE BORED!” Her part came to a grand musical climax on a crashing great cadence in the key of F major, hardly called for by the idiotic words.

Sebastian entered in his fine baritone voice with the response chorus: “We cannot, we cannot, we cannot so ignore, we cannot be such bores that the Book we would ignore!” He then raised the bugle to his lips and gently played, rather unexpectedly well, the pretty little tune on the brass instrument. Darla breathed a sigh of relief. This was not as rehearsed, thank goodness.

It was her turn again, and she sang some more of the insane words the two had concocted, about the importance of following correct procedure and citing many of the more erudite rules. At times they sang in duet, sometimes in antiphon and response, building towards the climactic extended coda in a relative major key, a solo provided by Sebastian.

“And of these rules, of all these rules, none is more important. None is more important... Than this!” The music slowed down, modulating to a grave and minor key. Sebastian seriously delivered the suspenseful climax.

“When, in the company of others, one does not...” Darla trilled the harpsichord keys, “one does not...” Sebastian gravely sang as Darla again performed a little trill followed by a descending mordent, “ONE DOES NOT...” Sebastian sang in grand tone as Darla strummed chords on the keyboard, “break wind as the sounding of a trumpet, the sounding of a trumpet, the sounding of a truh-uh-uh-um PET!”

Sebastian instantly raised the bugle to his lips and blew what can at best be described as a BLAT, shocking everyone with the sudden loud and unmusical noise. It was immediately

followed by another noise, coming, not from the bugle this time, but Sebastian himself, and almost as loud. The look of surprise on Sebastian's face was hysterical.

Everyone was in complete shock, their mouths agape, as the look on Sebastian's face turned to one of horror and he turned a crimson red. A rather sulphurous pungent and unpleasant smell permeated the room.

"Oops!" He said, wide eyed, and rushed from the room in complete embarrassment. Everyone could see the stain he bore behind him as he ran from the place.

Darla screamed with laughter at the sight and fell over her keyboards in hysterics. Some of the men laughed as well, even Jonas, while the ladies fanned themselves furiously in shock and indignation, muttering, "Oh dear, oh dear!" Mrs. Throckmorton wanted to die, then and there. She had no response, no excuse, and was positively perplexed.

Darla came to the rescue and stood up, still laughing and faced the audience.

"The moral of our little ode is that..." she raised her voice hoping Sebastian would hear her from wherever he had fled to, "turnabout is FAIR PLAY!"

She curtsied in the most graceful manner and swept out of the room, screaming once more with laughter as she ran after Sebastian.

The men found the entire experience very amusing and applauded, which infuriated the ladies who were, as convention required, shocked and horrified by the spectacle.

"I must apologize," said Mrs. Throckmorton. "We had mutton and beans for dinner..." the men roared with laughter at the explanation, "and apparently, Sebastian, well, apparently, he strained himself."

“Indeed he did!” Shouted Mr. Tweedle, the magistrate, laughing until tears filled his eyes. “Indeed he did!”

“Well, playing the bugle is a strenuous activity, even if it is musical,” she tried to continue. This made the men double over with laughter yet seemed to calm the ladies, and Squire Throckmorton took advantage of the breather to pass around full glasses of rich port, hoping, for his wife’s sake, it would have a memory dulling effect.

He had no idea what Darla and Sebastian were up to, and busied himself as host, trying to turn the conversation to other matters, while his wife did the same. For the next half hour, no one saw hide nor hair of Darla and Sebastian, and the guests began to take their leave.

“Dammed entertaining, Throckmorton,” approved Mr. Snevell, “dammed entertaining! Who knew watching a man soil himself to music would be so amusing?”

“Yes, I am sure Herr Mozart would have approved. He might have called it: ‘Concerto for Harpsichord and Bodily Functions’, eh what?” the Squire Throckmorton replied with a grin, trying to cover for the event. “As I understand it, in spite of his glorious music he was a somewhat gross individual with rather filthy habits and ideas. I am sure tonight’s musical adventure would have amused him greatly.”

“Ah, leave it to the Austrians to find such entertainment. They make damn fine pastries though, don’t they, strudel and all that?” Replied Mr. Snevell as he took his leave, still chuckling over the memory of the evening’s event.

Jonas too was taking his leave, but Mrs. Throckmorton bid him remain. He could see fear and anger in her eyes. He thought perhaps, given the recent innuendos, that for Darla’s sake, he should remain behind.

As soon as the guests had all departed, Mrs. Throckmorton, casting a stern eye at her husband rushed to the base of the grand staircase.

“Darla? Dar LA! Come down this instant I have a word... no, I have an entire PARAGRAPH for you tonight!”

Squire Throckmorton silently snuck off to the library, nodding to the constable who winked in reply, knowing full well that his wife would be busy for at least an hour admonishing Darla, and Sebastian, if he could be found. Jonas remained in his place on the hallway settee, ready for action if need be.

Upstairs, hiding in the corridor, Darla whispered with Sebastian.

“You are a complete idiot!” she hissed. “Mother is furious and so embarrassed. I wanted to die!”

“How do you think I felt?” argued Sebastian, who obviously had cleaned himself up. “THAT wasn’t in the rehearsal! Whom do you think they’ll remember tonight, mother or me?”

“It serves you right!” Darla almost shouted. “I mean, when you appeared with the bugle, I thought you had come to your senses. I know the idea of musical farting seemed a grand idea... the Mozart letters and all that, how I ever let you talk me into it is beyond me... I shall plead insanity. I thought when you had the bugle, you had changed your mind!”

“I did, Darla, believe me, I did. It was that last note... and the beans...” Sebastian countered.

His words brought back the vision of the look on his face at the event and she had to laugh. “Oh, it was funny, though!” she admitted.

“Darla? Dar LA! Come down this instant! Don’t make me come up there and fetch you!”

Mrs. Throckmorton was enraged and getting worse.

“You’d better go down,” Sebastian suggested.

“ME! This was all your idea! Oh no, Mister, I have no intention of taking the blame for this escapade!” She grabbed his ear and pulled him towards the stairs.

“Coming Mother,” she shouted, “I have collected Sebastian, I believe he has something he wants to say to you.”

“How nice dear, I have SEVERAL paragraphs to speak to him!” the matron snapped.

Sebastian wriggled out of Darla’s grasp and looked down the stairs at his mother. She appeared to be almost smoking with fury. In spite of seeing her anger, he now felt a new emotion, not fear, but remorse.

“By all that is holy, what were you two thinking?” she snapped as they arrived at the base of the stairs. “You KNOW how important it is to maintain a good social standing in this community. Our very existence depends on it. Now, I want to know immediately which one of you thought up this little scheme!”

“Oh, mother, we are very sorry to have placed you at risk. Really, it wasn’t our intention. But you were so excited to invite the neighbors,” Darla tried to smooth her over.

“Indeed,” Leticia Throckmorton fumed with crossed arms, tapping her foot on the old oaken floor. “Darla, I believe you were merely an accomplice in this. But YOU, Sebastian, I remember how you encouraged, ENCOURAGED me to summon the neighbors! Well, sir, you are not going to get away with it this time...” She shook her finger furiously at him, “I am NOT to be played the fool young man. I’ll teach you that, indeed I will!”

“Mother, I don’t see what you’re so upset about. The neighbors won’t think ill of you. I was the one who soiled myself, and it WAS an accident.”

“Oh, I am quite certain you hadn’t PLANNED on soiling yourself in a public performance, Sebastian. Even you aren’t THAT foolish. What concerns me is what you were REALLY planning to do to me!” she almost screamed.

“Musical farting,” Darla quickly confessed.

“What?” Leticia turned her burning eyes on her.

“Musical farting! You know how much you upbraid Sebastian when he farts at table. We thought it would be funny to set it, well, to set it to music. We had read how Herr Mozart thought it was a very artistic way of expressing one’s self,” Darla explained and Sebastian nodded, trying to make the joke as innocent as possible while giving it cultural and artistic credibility.

“And,” he added as quickly as possible, “you know how beans generate gas. In this type of music, one has to, well, tune his instrument, so to speak.”

“I know perfectly well what beans do, Sebastian, don’t be an idiot! And what has Herr Mozart got to do with farting? Oh, never mind him! So, you set cook up to this as well! Was SHE in on it too? Am I surrounded by traitors?”

“No, no mother,” Sebastian confessed. “As I explained, I needed the beans and broccoli as fuel. It wasn’t going to be just me who was doing the farting. If things had gone right, we’d — the family, including you, would have made an entire, er, farting chorus. I only meant it to tease, mother, really I did. You always berate me at table.”

“Well, you always FART at table. Good heavens, can’t you learn to control yourself?”

“Apparently not,” Offered Darla quietly.

Sebastian shot an angry glance at her and continued, “I didn’t think cook would use so much and add the other ingredients to the stew. I... I told cook that you wanted her to make the meal, that’s why she did it. I guess she wanted to impress you, so she added the other vegetables.”

“ME! So now it’s all MY FAULT? I do NOT think so Sebastian!” Leticia Throckmorton’s eyes almost popped out of her head in her rage. “And I just upbraided the poor woman for that awful meal! I threatened to give her the sack. Sebastian, you are in so much trouble... with both of us! Come with me at once. You have a great deal of apologizing to do!” Mrs. Throckmorton stormed off toward the kitchens with Sebastian in tow. He turned and winked at Darla.

She wondered how he could take delight in such a state of affairs. Maybe he truly was wicked.

Jonas, who had been witness to the scolding rose from his seat with a smile.

“What are you grinning at?” Darla demanded, now angry at herself and Sebastian for the evening’s fiasco and cruelty.

“You are such a wicked little vixen, aren’t you my sweet?” he said softly coming close to her, lifting her chin with his index finger. “Sebastian could never have pulled this off without your help. Sooo innocent, aren’t you?”

“Why Constable Jonas, whatever do you mean?” Darla softened, flirting a little and sashaying her dress.

“Oh my darling, my love!” Jonas gushed. “When you appeared in the music room doorway in this stunning dress, I was overwhelmed by your beauty!” He took her in his arms, his eyes gazing into hers as she batted her pretty lashes. She echoed his embrace, rubbing her cheek against his.

“Then kiss me, my dear and prove your love,” Darla whispered.

Jonas brushed his lips ever so gently across hers when the sound of the creaking library door made them quickly break off and turn away from each other as Manfred Throckmorton entered the hallway.

“Storm passed?” he asked absently as he headed towards the stairs.

“Uh, no father. Just moved on to the kitchen,” Darla replied.

“Oh dear, and there are knives in there! Constable, perhaps you should just go keep an eye on things?” he answered still ascending the stairs. “Goodnight, constable, Darla.”

“Goodnight sir,” Jonas replied, looking at Darla. They both watched as he disappeared into the upper corridor.

Jonas rushed towards Darla, but she backed off.

“Father’s right, it is getting late. And you really should check in on the kitchen. I believe mother could be in a murderous rage, and cook, well, I don’t trust her one bit!”

Jonas looked deeply disappointed, “Of course, my love. But, oh my darling, my dear, sweet precious young lady of society. When can we be married? You do want to marry me, don’t you? I realize that I am much older than you, but such marriages are not uncommon, and I do love you so very much. Do you love me as well? I need to be sure. Please, tell me you love me!”

“I want to marry you more than anything in the world,” Darla smiled sweetly. “You are dear and precious to me, there is just one little thing I must get sorted...” she caught herself and looked up into his love struck eyes, “soon, my love, soon. Oh, my darling, we won't have to wait long to be married. I have power, and I have a plan!”

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Chapter Eleven — The Arabian Connection

He was back in the castle. Sarina was pointing a gun at the group.

“I’m NOT your sister!”

“Sarina,” Sebastian said, inching forward, “what are you talking about! Of course you’re my baby sister!”

“Hold it right there, Sebastian!” she warned, waving the pistol dangerously at him. “Our father told me the truth. And I’m NOT your baby sister, I’m three years older than you!”

“Older? Father? He’s gone off with the constable on our wild goose chase, remember?”

“Not THAT father, our OTHER father, or rather, YOUR other father!”

“Other father, my father... Sarina, dearest, I think maybe the fumes from the acid test have addled your brain.”

“Oh Sebastian, you’re such a twit! Don’t you remember? Think... think back to when we were very young children!”

“As far as I can remember, we’ve always lived at Throck... morton... wait. How very odd. I never remembered it before. I seem to recall, a woman in tears, she was always in tears, I thought it was a dream.”

“Oh, Sebastian, you’re so clever at some things and so dense at others! That woman was no dream, she was our mother, our REAL mother. And our OTHER mother killed her in a fit of rage!”

“Other moth...”

“Leticia
ago, didn’t you,
was hardly the j

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Richard nodded slowly, now regretting his revelation. Mortimer hissed at his brother, “Can’t you ever keep your mouth shut!”

Richard was about to defend himself when Sarina continued, “Never mind you two. I’ll make it easy for you s
priest, archbishop, wha
was Prince Azbar-ab-Achmed.

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! The
mine

Mother, our real mother was named Jane Grey. She was a streetwalker. She’d been kidnapped by sailors and carried aboard a ship bound for the Middle East. White women carry a good price and no one would miss a prostitute here. Most would say, the fewer, the better!

That ship was the *Mare Librium*,

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harbor three years ago. She was loaded with goods for Prince Azbar-ab-Achmed, woolen goods, ales, common staples, broadloom carpets, and an odd assortment of English peas.

The sailors smuggled her on board ship and kept Jane in the hold, hoping to sell her in the slave market. They figured they could smuggle her off the ship with the goods. They drugged, bound and gagged her and rolled her in a large carpet. The plan would have worked but the Prince's porters were already at the dock to accept shipment. So Jane wound up in the palace. Imagine the Prince's surprise when he came to inspect the goods in the palace hallway and heard struggling in the carpet! Of course, they unrolled it and there was Jane, writhing furiously and struggling to get free.

Then, a funny thing happened. Instead of being angry and demanding retribution and sending out his guards to the docks, the Prince laughed and clapped his hands for joy. He thought Jane was a gift

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disheveled state. He ordered her taken to the Harem and made presentable. She knew well where she was and having been a streetwalker, she knew that her only chance was to please him.

Jane had been lucky, in spite of her profession. She had a pleasing appearance, and the Prince took her as one of his wives. How she ever convinced him she was a virgin is beyond anyone's guess, but eventually, she became pregnant with me.

Jane didn't want me raised in that country, and she knew that now that she'd born a daughter, the Prince would be displeased and possibly kill us both. But she had made many friends in the palace, especially among the guards, and had a plan. A few days after I was born, they snuck her out and on board a ship, the *Rising Sun*, where she eventually ended up in Japan.

While in Japan, she contacted the missionaries, and they arranged for her passage on a Portuguese freighter bound for the new world, South America... Chile, I think.

When she got there, she again approached the missionaries. There she met a minor priest, Arthur Dunstable, who was Michael

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Michael and arranged to send Jane home. Michael, like the Prince, fell in love with Jane upon seeing her and married her. He was kind to her at first, and soon, they had a second child — you.

I was three years old at the time. But father,

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grew quickly tired of Jane. He had a serious drinking problem, and since in his mind, she was nothing more than a worthless whore, he abused her savagely. That's when she escaped him.

It was on a terrible night, when we were but babes, me four and you only one year old, that she encountered Leticia Throckmorton. Leticia had a grudge against her. For years before she met Manfred Throckmorton, she'd been having an affair — who was as hypocritical as he was pious. She'd hoped

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mother, all her hopes were dashed. She wound up with our OTHER father, Manfred Throckmorton, as a second catch. She never loved Manfred, but he had money and power.

That night, when she came across our mother, Jane, in the forest, she flew into a rage. She beat our mother to death there in the darkness and stole us away. She told our witless other father, Manfred, that we were orphaned children of her half sister who had run off with a pirate.

So, you see, my dim brother, I am NOT your sister. And you very much!" She waved the gun at the group menacingly.

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"What are you going to do with it?" Mortimer asked cautiously.

"Return the artifact to its rightful owner and my true father, the Prince!"

“But, you can’t. He won’t honor you — you must know that!” Richard complained.

“Ah, but there you are mistaken.”

“Sarina, my darling, I don’t understand,” said Roquefort.

“Oh, Gaston, I am very fond of you. But there’s no way I could possibly allow you to take this great treasure to France, not after what the French knights did to MY Arabian ancestors.

I have been in touch with my father, my true father, c

This section is blocked to prevent giving away an important clue.

What fitting revenge on Arthur Dunstable, Leticia and all you other fools to play you for your true greedy natures and get what rightfully belongs to my family returned. So I will have that

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Sebastian’s mind returned to the present in the inn as he completed his story.

“I impulsively rushed Sarina, I really didn’t think she would shoot. But she did. Her aim was off and the ball lodged in my shoulder. The pain was unbelievable. I must have passed out.

When I came to, she, and

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seen, but Richard and Mortimer did not fare so well.

Richard had been clubbed with something, his skull was crushed, and Mortimer, I don’t quite know what happened to him, but I found him lying dead, face down in a pool of that acid Mortimer had used to test the Amulet. His face was completely eaten away. He must have died horribly. I think the only reason I’m alive is because I was presumed to be dead from Sarina’s shot.”

Blackmort rubbed his chin in thought as he considered Sebastian’s tale. It could be true, or, it could be yet another ruse. All this confusion over that Cross that everyone wanted. The

only way to be certain of Sebastian's tale was to check it out. Surely, the bodies of Mortimer and Richard would still be at the castle.

"That's quite a story, Sebastian," Blackmort said in his most appealing voice, "but you need to rest. Your wound is very dangerous. Rest is the best thing for you. Here, take this draught, it will help you sleep."

He handed Sebastian a small glass of a greenish liquid and turned to his medicine bag. While he was turned away, Sebastian emptied the contents of the little glass under the covers of the bed. He returned the empty glass to Blackmort, hoping he was convinced that he'd drunk the liquor. His shoulder was burring in pain, but he did not dare let the doctor administer to him. He feigned wooziness and said, "Quite a nice potion, my dear doctor." He closed his eyes, and eased back into the bed pillows.

Blackmort pried open one of Sebastian's eyes to assure himself the man was unconscious. Sebastian rolled it up to feign the condition. Satisfied, Blackmort left the room.

He went across the hall and knocked on the door to Darla's room. There was a muffled answer and some rustling, and he quickly lifted the latch and let himself in.

"What the hell!" he shouted.

There, in the room he caught Darla and Steven, the stable boy rifling through Sebastian's saddlebag.

"Darla," Blackmort complained, "good lord, what are you doing, stealing from your own brother!?"

"Oh, is this Sebastian's bag? I thought it was mine. How very silly of me!" she giggled.

"You're drunk!"

“You’re mad!”

“You’re damn right I’m mad!”

By now, Steven had scampered out the window and was long gone. Blackmort wanted to go after him, but also needed to follow up on Sebastian’s story. “I’ll deal with you later, missy!” he demanded, grabbing the bag from her and slamming the door. If Sebastian had actually stolen the Cross, as he suspected was the real case, and she found it, that would ruin everything. The bag only contained a rather large amount of money. But the doctor worried. Who really had the Cross now? Could Sebastian actually be telling the truth? Why would he do a thing like that?

He rushed downstairs and left instructions with the innkeeper to keep Darla there at all costs, and if that little urchin, Steven appeared, to beat him within an inch of his life and tie him to a post. The landlord looked a bit shocked. Blackmort shouted, “I’m a doctor dammit! Do as I say, or do you WANT plague in your inn?”

The mere mention of plague was enough to convince the innkeeper.

Blackmort got on his horse and raced for the castle. It was well after sunset when he arrived. He didn’t mind though because he didn’t have to be at Throckmorton Manor until 8:00 the next morning. Plenty of time to check out Sebastian’s story, get back to the inn and beat Darla severely, teach that rotten stable boy a lesson and get on to deal with the constable.

He held up his lantern as he poked through the musty ruins. The place was eerie, with long shadows. The wind whistled through the hallways when he heard a SNAP of breaking twigs. He spun round and came face to face with Mortimer and Richard.

“By Jove, you two are supposed to be dead!” he cried, his hand suddenly clutched to his pounding heart.

Mortimer grinned and Richard patted his body, as if checking he was all there.

“No, we definitely aren’t dead, are we Richard?”

“No I feel pretty solid and am still breathing so I would conclude that I am still living!”

Richard joked.

Blackmort stared at the grinning duo, unable to make sense of anything.

“Oh,” Mortimer said suddenly. “That little charade we pulled on Sebastian, he must have told you we were dead!”

Blackmort said nothing.

“So I would guess that good old Sebastian found you in his dazed and confused state,” Mortimer jabbed a finger in Blackmort’s direction, “and told you of this terrible tragedy, that Sarina had caved my head in and thrown acid over poor Mortimer here. Am I right Doctor Blackmort?”

Blackmort nodded, his head was swimming with so many stories he thought his brain would burst out through his eye sockets.

Mortimer looked at Richard, “Shall we tell him what really happened?”

Richard looked thoughtful for a moment and then whispered in his brother’s ear, “Be very careful what you say, and don’t tell him that we have transport.”

“Well my dearest doctor, the real story is this,” Mortimer said calmly. “Sarina did pull a pistol on us, Sebastian tried to grab the weapon from her and it accidentally went off. Sebastian was not injured at that point; however Roquefort whacked Sebastian from behind rendering him unconscious before he lunged at Sarina.”

Richard picked up the story. “Little Miss Sarina still had hold of the gun and promptly pointed it at Roquefort’s head and pulled the trigger,” Richard paused for effect. “Sarina was so angry that the gun didn’t go off, she threw it to the ground in temper, just as Sebastian was trying to get up.”

Blackmort stood agog, mouth wide open and eyes shining as the new facts raced through his devious mind.

“Shall I continue?” Mortimer prompted.

The doctor nodded eagerly.

“Well as the gun hit the floor, it fired — and that is how Sebastian got shot. As we rushed to aid him, Sarina would think we were in a dim light when he was murdered by Sarina chasing her for the

This section is blocked to prevent giving away an important clue.

Blackmort stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“Oh gentlemen you don’t know how happy you have made me, not being dead that is!” He laughed wildly, “That stupid sap Sebastian is convinced she shot him during their struggle, he really does have the brain of a half-wit.”

Richard and Mortimer said nothing as the doctor rambled on.

“And talking of dimwitted, my sweet Darla is also acting rather rashly too, I caught her rifling through Sebastian’s saddlebag with the stable boy, Steven. I really thought Sebastian had

taken the Cross, what with his insane story. Gosh I thought all was lost until you two appeared alive and well. This does make things so much easier. Do you know which way Sarina went?"

The two men shook their heads.

"No, we were crouched over Sebastian, all we heard were horses galloping away," Mortimer replied quickly, "Sorry Doc, can't help you."

"That's why we're still here. We've got no transportation and we aren't walking anywhere in the dark, especially not in these parts at the moment and unarmed too," Richard stated. "That's why we were so surprised to see you here, with all the highway men and bandits that prey on the night time travellers."

"Well I had no choice, I had to check out Sebastian's story, as things seem to be getting more and more complicated as each hour passes," Blackmort retorted. "I would have never anticipated that everything could have gone so terribly awry, the plan was so simple but every time a part of it is executed it brings with it a mountain of complications and now we are all nearly caught in our own webs of deceit!"

Mortimer shrugged and added.

"Well, we've played our part and there is nothing more we can do here now."

"So we have decided to go back to what's left of the old Preceptory just outside the small village of Templecombe," Richard said quietly.

"But I thought that one had been destroyed in the fifteenth century and the land given by King Henry to the Sherringham family," Blackmort queried rather too hastily. His vast research was blurted out in a moment.

“Oh yes that is true. The original Preceptory was destroyed but the secret catacombs are still perfectly in tact,” Mortimer replied mischievously. “A few years later a new manor house was built and the hilarious thing is, the family which resides there now, have absolutely no idea we are hiding out directly beneath them!”

Blackmort stared at the men, but his eyes gave him away. “So where exactly do you get into these catacombs?” he asked. All his years searching were now going to be given to him on a plate.

Richard had already anticipated the doctor’s question and was ready with his answer.

“Well, my good doctor, there is a tunnel which runs all the way from the cliffs. Look for a pointed rock, much like a giant obelisk protruding in a small bay, and the entrance is level with the rock. If you need us that is where we’ll be,” he smiled genteelly. “You can’t miss it, if you know what you’re looking for.”

Blackmort thought for a moment before speaking.

“Thank you my good men and if I need you, I know where to find you,” he said nodding respectfully. “Now I must depart, so I bid you farewell and a safe journey by the light of day.”

The men exchanged nods and small bows before Blackmort vanished into the gloom.

They stood silently until the sound of trotting hooves disappeared into the night.

Richard tugged on Mortimer’s sleeve, “Come brother, quickly, we must take everything we can!”

“You get the horse and cart while I get our apparatus,” Mortimer said heading for the laboratory. “We cannot afford to leave a trace of anything!”

“That fool Blackmort will get everyone killed with his stupid plan but at least we fooled him for long enough,” Richard murmured with a wry smile. “He must think we are stupid. Fancy thinking we’d tell him where the real catacombs are. That man is an idiot as well as a scheming cheating manipulative liar!”

Sarina slowed her horse to a steady trot and looked behind her. There was no sign of Roquefort, which pleased her immensely. She turned her horse off the dirt road and down a sloping bank. Once amongst the shelter of the trees, she dismounted and tethered her horse securely.

“Bloody fools, the lot of them,”
the leather bag, which she then disca
artifact. “My father will make me hi

This section is blocked to prevent giving away an important clue.

throughout the kingdom as Princess Sarina, oh how nice does that sound? P’rrrincess Sarina, her royal highness, her majesticness and the one that must be obeyed at all times! I shall be Princess, Princess Sarina! I shall live in a palace and everyone will bow down to ME!”

She giggled like a little girl. “Gosh, I am so looking forward to living in a palace, oh what fun that will be and I’ll have my own servants and everything I wish for will be granted, how perfect.” She giggled again. “All the dresses, jewels and definitely not forgetting all the pretty things that a girl needs...”

She stopped suddenly and listened intently. A branch snapped and fell next to her.

“Oh it’s just your imagination!” she whispered to herself. “Now where was I? Oh yes, pretty things and...”

Another noise made her turn and a voice said.

“Do continue my sweet — pretty things and... I think you were saying,” Gaston Roquefort said, emerging from the trees.

Sarina shrieked and made a run for it, but Gaston had the reflexes of a cat and pounced from the bank, knocking her to the ground and winding her quite badly. He rolled Sarina over and pinned her firmly to the ground.

“Now then my little vixen or are you a minx?” he said angrily. “Did you really think you could lose me, are you stupid?”

Sarina glared at him and tried to spit in his face.

“You really are a nasty little minx aren’t you?” he said nastily as she struggled wildly beneath him. “Look, we can do this the nice way or we can do it the hard way. It’s really your choice.”

Sarina said nothing but her contorted facial expression spoke volumes.

“Very well then, I see you’ve made your choice,” Gaston replied almost sadly, “and you know the tragic part in all of this?”

Sarina glared at him again and curled her lip distastefully.

“I truly felt we had something special and actually thought we’d get married,” he said quite endearingly.

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“Well you are the stupid one then aren’t you?” Sarina said with venom.

“In that respect yes, but I never imagined that you were such a harlot!”

Sarina squealed in frustration.

“Pretending to be a lady ‘n’ all and really you’re nothing but a common whore, and the daughter of one too! In reality this is a blessing, as I found out before I married you,” Gaston said with a twisted smile. “Now what is it that they call ‘your sort’ today... oh yes there are several terms that are used, would you like to hear them?”

Sarina said nothing.

“Let’s see, there is streetwalker, strumpet, trollop and one of my favourites is cocotte but that’s only because it is French!” he sneered spitefully. “And then we have slut, tart, scarlet-woman... would you like me to continue?”

Tears began to slip down her cheeks and she bit her lip to stop it from quivering.

“Oh did I touch a nerve, please let me apologise your sluttiness,” he spat indignantly. “Let me rephrase that, I am so sorry your *royal* sluttiness.”

Gaston stood up and dragged the weeping Sarina to her feet. “Now take off your dress and throw it over there,” he ordered.

She removed her dress and stood in her undergarments.

“Now remove your corset, stockings and boots,” he said watching her intently as she did so. “There’s a good little minx. In fact take it all off and stand next to that tree.”

Sarina stood forlornly and wept, before she crumpled to the ground in a pitiful heap.

“Oh, get up will you?” Gaston said tiresomely. “I’ll let you keep what you’ve got on. Now go and stand next to the tree.”

Gaston removed a length of rope from his belt loop and tied Sarina tightly to the tree, and

This section is blocked to prevent giving away an important clue.

He flung her dress and boots further down the slippery bank, before turning on the trussed up trollop.

“Well my little pigeon, it seems you didn’t fly so well on your own and we could have had such a beautiful life together,” he sighed heavily. “I am sorry for leaving you like this, but you really give me no option. You are untrustworthy, a liar and a thief. So all in all you got your comeuppance.”

She tried to speak.

“I don’t understand what you are trying to tell me, but I will give you this piece of advice before I leave you and take your horse. These woods are crawling in bandits and they’d love to find a pretty little thing like you in your predicament, so if you want to survive, remain still and be quiet and I’ll bid you adieu.”

Gaston winked at her in a rather disconcerting manner, then blew her a kiss and dashed up the bank. As he rode into the night, he chuckled to himself. Everything had worked out after all. He absently reached down and
reassure himself he actually, after
through the heavy leather, but it was there. He hunched up his cape around him to protect against the chill night air. There was a breeze coming in from the sea, carrying clinging droplets of moisture that made things feel a bit more chill than normal. He kicked his horse to make her run along the road that led to the village. Suddenly, his horse whinnied and stopped, throwing him from the saddle. It was so sudden that even an expert equestrian as himself was caught by surprise.

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