Shadow of the Raven (Act 1)

by Lorenzo Baehne

1. Sign of the Raven

On the All Hallow's Eve that I rapped at his library door Dr. Percival H. Wyndham was seated before the blazing hearth in his favorite leather armchair. The cluttered shelves lining the room's maple-paneled walls brimmed with rare and obscure titles, their love-worn spines poking willy-nilly from their cubbies in well-thumbed profusion. “My dear, Anton,” he greeted, fingering the yellowed bowl of his meerschaum, “good of you to see me on short notice. Come in, come in.” As usual, the doctor was obscured by an impenetrable haze of blue smoke and his unkempt thatch of salty hair, backlit by the roaring blaze, looked as though his hoary fringe lay on the verge of conflagration.

I stepped hesitantly into the inviting room and self-consciously cleared my throat. “Mathilda made it sound as though lives were at stake, Doctor, so I hurried right over,” said I. I gazed inquisitively at the teetering volumes threatening to topple from his book table. Clearly he had been engaged in another marathon reading session.

Wyndham pulled the stem from between his strong, white teeth and jabbed the glowing pipe in my direction: “And so they are, young man. So they are. Sit there!” he said, nodding toward a book-laden armchair. I heaved up its literary occupants and lay them on the floor's plush array of Persian rugs. When I was comfortably seated before the rosy fire the doctor leaned earnestly forward and said: “Antonio Vasari, how long have you known me?”

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I wasn't certain how to respond to his improbable query, so I gave him as straight forward an answer as I could: “Seeing that it is now 1930,” said I, “we've known each other for precisely five years. We met during my second year at Issaquah University. It was during your esteemed anthropology course “Cannibalism Through the Ages” that you gave my paper on the ritual practices of the tribes of Papua, New Guinea a high mark, if memory serves.”

“Ah, so I did,” he said fondly. “A stellar paper indeed. Original thinking, penetrating insights, all around excellence.” His bushy brow knitted then over a long, thin nose as though matters more pressing than antiquated student papers were troubling his mind. He then clamped the pipe firmly in his rippling jaw. But when next he spoke I was no less baffled by this utterance than his last. “And in that time, Anton, have you known me to succumb to the sirens' song of conspiracy theories and unsubstantiated rumor?”

“Why of course not, sir,” I huffed. “Since leaving academia your research into occult mysteries is second to none. You're methodical to a fault and your deductions rather ingenious. But please excuse me, Doctor,” said I, raising a pleading hand, “why the interrogation? Has something happened?”

“And then some,” he snorted. Upon his rumpled lap lay a copy of The Destiny News Tribune and Ledger. Wyndham unfolded the paper and slapped it onto the book table before me. “The evening edition hot off the press,” he announced. “What make you of that, my friend?”

In bold forty point type the headline screamed: GRISLY DISCOVERY AT UNION STATION!

I feverishly skimmed the lead article. But as I lay on the verge of the gory details doctor Wyndham said, “You needn't bother, Anton. The methods and outcome are the same.”

I looked up: “Decapitation?”

“Just like the others,” he confirmed, drawing deeply on the smoldering pipe. He exhaled a voluminous cloud. “And the victim's head,” he said, pausing for his trademark sense of drama, “was nowhere to be found.”

“The tattoo, was it there?”

Wyndham narrowed his cornflower blue eyes: “Inked upon the victim's left breast was a perfectly executed raven.”

“Damn!” I tossed the paper onto the table and stroked thoughtfully at my razor-smooth chin. “Where has the fiend been these last two months?”

“Otherwise engaged I should think.”

He fell silent then and I studied him for a long moment. His haggard countenance spoke of an acute lack of sleep, and the doctor's distinctive Van Dyke, normally pristine as a courtesan's boudoir, was as rumpled as he. I leaned back into the foamy chair to gather my thoughts, but when the doctor failed to impart his own, finally I asked: “What is this business about conspiracies and rumors? Why suggest something so plainly absurd?”

Wyndham unfolded his gangling frame from the armchair and rose to his full six feet, two inches. His ever-wrinkled suit hung lifeless about his cadaverous physique, not unlike the cast-offs adorning the average scarecrow. He strode across the room, plucked from a shelf a rather aged and hefty tome, and resumed his former position.

I squinted at the title on the volume's ridged spine: “Military Orders of the Crusades?” said I, doubtfully.

“How well do you know your Crusader history?” he inquired, whilst riffling through its gilded leaves. He found his page, bookmarked the spot with a long thumb, and waited patiently for my response.

“That's a lot of territory to cover. Care to narrow it down?”

“Specifically,” he amended, “what know you of the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon?”

“The Templars?” The doctor certainly knew how to catch a fellow off guard. I gazed up at the luminous chandelier hoping to rekindle my reading on the subject. “Well,” said I, “they were founded in the early twelfth century by Hugues de Payens. Their charter, I believe, was to protect Christian pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem. They were well-trained military men, fervent Catholics, and bankers who grew extremely wealthy--thanks in part to the land holdings donated by their many aristocratic members. Curiously the order answered only to the Pope, which is something I always found odd given their martial structure. Disciplined soldiers are ever fond of chains of command.”

“All of that is true, of course. And what of their trial?”

“Blown up charges for the most part,” I replied. “Sodomy, heresy, desecrating the cross. All standard fare during Inquisitional proceedings, I understand.”

“But were all the charges truly run-of-the-mill?” Doctor Wyndham opened the book resting on his lap and ran a pale finger down a short paragraph. “What Jules Michelet says on the subject is this: ‘that in all the provinces they had idols, that is to say, heads,

some of which had three faces, others but one; sometimes it was a human skull . . . that in their assemblies, and especially in their grand chapters, they worshiped the idol as a god, as their savior, saying that this head could save them, that it bestowed on the order all its wealth, made the trees flower, and the plants of the earth to sprout forth.'" Wyndham snapped the book shut with a sharp clap. "You shall recall this charge of head worshiping, yes? The idol in question bore the unlikely moniker of Baphomet, which historians commonly claim is a corruption of the Islamic prophet Muhammad."

"But you don't believe that?" I pressed.

"What I believe, Anton," the doctor said, his eyes taking on a troubled cast, "is far more sinister, more wholly diabolical than previous researchers have dared speculate."

For several long moments I turned his words over in my tumultuous mind trying desperately to grasp the provocative thread the doctor was pursuing. But little of it was adding up. Mysterious heads, crusading knights, and antiquated trials? It made little sense. Finally I spoke the question on my mind: "Forgive my lack of apprehension, sir, but what has a medieval order to do with the recent spate of decapitations? This is the twentieth century, after all. I don't quite follow your logic."

Pulling a glinting silver chain from his waistcoat, the doctor consulted his ornate pocket watch as though late for some pressing appointment. "If we leave now," he announced, "we shall make it just in time."

"Wait—what? Where are we going?"

"To evening Mass," he said, whilst taking his feet and smoothing out his furrowed coat.

“Mass?” I scratched my head in confusion. “But, Doctor,” I complained, “I'm not even a Catholic.”

“In that case, Mr. Vasari, you are in good company, for neither am I.” He grinned broadly revealing his perfectly straight teeth. "Well then, shall we?" The good doctor lifted his walking stick from its resting place and strode resolutely toward the library door. Over his narrow shoulder the departing scarecrow figure intoned, “There is something I wish you to see, Anton. I think you will find it most compelling.”

I am certain the involuntary sigh that escaped me was audible across the smoke-filled library. I had been anticipating a hot meal, an hour of reading, and an early retirement this evening. But it looked as though I was to be disappointed. Again. With that, I shook my head and rose from my accommodating chair; and with a last longing glance at the beckoning hearth, I reluctantly followed Doctor Percival Heracles Wyndham out of the door and into the cold, inhospitable night.

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