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The Blood Card

Written by Elly Griffiths

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ELLY
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The Blood
Card

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For Mandy and Heather

The room was dominated by a huge double bed. Edgar's eyes were drawn immediately to the blood stain on the white eiderdown. If Cartwright had fought with his assailant in the sitting room, how come the blood was here?

'That was how he was found,' said Petre. 'His body was here on the bed but, as you say, there had obviously been some sort of fight in the other room. Cartwright wasn't the sort of man to go down without a fight. He had stab wounds on his hands as if he'd tried to defend himself.'

Max crossed over to the bed and bent to examine something. Edgar, following him, saw that what he had taken to be a large spot of blood was actually a playing card. Red on white. The ace of hearts.

'The card was found on the body,' said Petre. 'Body laid out on the bed, knife still in chest. This card was next to the knife.'

'The blood card,' said Max.

Petre turned to stare at him. 'What did you say?'

'The ace of hearts,' said Max. 'Magicians call it the blood card.'

*

'The blood card.' The General's face was in shadow but his voice sounded odd, strained and fearful, nothing like his normal parade-ground rasp.

Max shrugged. 'It's just a superstition, that's all.'

‘Did anyone take a photograph of the room as it was when the crime was discovered?’ asked Edgar.

‘Of course not.’ The General seemed to have recovered his scornful tones. ‘They had better things to do than take *photographs*.’

But it had occurred to Edgar that, if the playing card had been left as a message, then perhaps there were other messages hidden around the room, clues that the police and ambulance men could have destroyed as they rampaged through the flat.

‘What else was here?’ he asked. ‘You said there were several things that pointed to a magic connection.’

‘I found this in his bedside cabinet,’ said Petre. He produced a piece of paper from an inside pocket and handed it to Edgar. It was a scrap of paper which looked as if it had been ripped from a newspaper. Edgar went over to the bedside table and turned on the Tiffany lamp. The blue and green glass reflected eerily on the page.

Woman faints at Mind-Reading Exhibition

Mrs Velma Edwards, 58, was taken to hospital after fainting at a mind-reading exhibition given by the celebrated mesmerist William ‘Wild Bill’ Hitchcock at the Albany state fair. ‘It was his eyes,’ Mrs Edwards told...

The rest of the article was missing but in the margin someone using a blue fountain pen had written ‘Butterfield 5-1212’. Edgar turned the scrap of paper over but the back only contained some sentences about a

game Edgar guessed to be baseball.

Max looked over Edgar's shoulder. 'What's this? A phone number?'

'An American phone number,' said Petre, with a certain amount of distaste. 'Apparently it refers to a district in New York State, as opposed to the city.'

'And do you know anything about this William Hitchcock?'

'Apparently he's a small-time magician. He does a mesmerist act at state fairs and the like. Nothing very exceptional.'

Except that he made Mrs Velma Edwards faint dead away, thought Edgar. Aloud he said, 'Was that all? Just this scrap from the paper?'

'This was in the drawer with it,' said Petre. He reached into his pocket and Edgar wondered what else was going to emerge. A white rabbit? A pair of doves? Instead the General held out a piece of paper with red and blue lettering. Edgar looked at it curiously. It was a playbill, the sort he had seen hundreds of times before, usually with Max's name emblazoned across the top.

This time the name he recognised was halfway down the cast list.

'Tony 'the mind' Mulholland. He knows what you're thinking before you do.'

The bill was from the Liverpool Empire, dated May 1939.

Max was still reading over Edgar's shoulder. 'Tony! Why would Col-

onel Cartwright have one of his playbills? From before the war too.'

'That's what I was hoping you might tell me,' said the General. 'Is this Mulholland still around?'

Edgar and Max exchanged glances. 'Tony died three years ago,' said Edgar. 'He was murdered. Did you ever hear about the Zig Zag Girl case? The Conjuror Killer?'

'Was he involved in that affair? I remember reading about it.'

'Tony was one of the victims, yes.'

'Was he one of your lot in the war? The Magic Men?'

'Yes,' said Edgar. 'He was.' As he said this, he could see Tony sitting at the bar in the Caledonian, wearing his pin-striped spiv's suit. Heard his voice too, as loud and clear as if it was transmitted by radio waves. 'I was only the top of the bill at the Liverpool Empire.' Well, he hadn't been top of the bill, not by a long chalk. Judging by the size of the names on the piece of paper in his hand, the top of the bill had been a double act called Roman and Renéé. Where were they now, he wondered?

'Have the police seen this?' he asked.

Petre hesitated for a moment before replying. 'I did a quick search of the room before they arrived. I knew the police wouldn't be interested in the cutting or the handbill but I was. That's why I contacted you.'

That seemed to leave a hell of a lot of questions unanswered,

thought Edgar. Specifically, why was General Petre consulting an obscure Detective Inspector from Brighton rather than Scotland Yard? More to the point, why involve Max, who was now examining the playbill with a rather sardonic expression on his face.

‘I suppose I’d better explain,’ said the General. ‘Let’s go into the sitting room. This room gives me the heebie jeebies.’

Max headed to the door as if he too were spooked by the room with the blood-stained bed. But Edgar stayed to look around one more time. As he bent to turn off the bedside light, he caught sight of something white under the bed, half-hidden by the eiderdown. He pulled it out. It was the Evening Standard from two days ago, folded over at the cryptic crossword. Half the clues had been filled in, using the blue fountain pen that had scribbled down the phone number. Edgar took the page with the crossword and put it in his pocket.

In the sitting room General Petre turned on the centre light, as if determined to chase away the shadow of death. Then he sat heavily on the sofa without bothering to right the coffee table which lay on its side in front of him. Max and Edgar took armchairs on either side of the General. Edgar put the table on its feet, it was a flimsy wooden affair with a carved top, rather oriental in appearance. Edgar had noticed a few other Chinese objects around the room. Had Cartwright served in the east? Well, maybe they were about to find out.

But the General’s opening line surprised them both. ‘As you know,

it's the Coronation in two week's time.'

Edgar stared at him. Was there anyone in the country who didn't know? The papers had been full of nothing else for weeks. Sweets were going to be taken off rations to celebrate. Bob was counting down the days.

'For some time MI6 has been aware that there are certain anarchist groups who would like to...well, *disrupt* the occasion. Peter Cartwright was on the trail on one such group. The day before he died he telephoned to me to tell me that he thought he'd made a breakthrough. We made an arrangement to meet at number twelve the next day. When he didn't arrive, I came round here, found the sitting room disturbed and Cartwright on the bed, dead. As soon as I saw the card I thought of the Magic Men. Then, when I saw the playbill, I knew there must be a connection. I did some digging, found out that Stephens had joined the force, so I contacted you. I asked Mephisto because Cartwright always spoke so highly of him. I thought you might be able to help me make sense of it all.'

Cartwright had been a fan, Edgar remembered, and it sounded as though General Petre was one too. Still, that didn't altogether explain why they had been summoned to London in the middle of the night.

'But why me?' said Edgar. 'Surely Scotland Yard are the ones to handle it?'

Petre took out a large white handkerchief and unfolded it so slowly and deliberately that Edgar thought, for one wild moment, that he was

about to perform a magic trick. Instead the General wiped his brow and then carefully refolded the handkerchief. But Edgar knew that the white linen square was performing the same role as the magician's cape; the General was buying time.

'In situations like this,' he said at last, 'you have to be very careful who knows what. For security reasons, you understand. The fewer people knew about this American connection the better.'

'So do you think that the cutting about the American mesmerist had something to do with why Colonel Cartwright was murdered?' Edgar had to fight to stop the incredulity creeping into his voice.

'It's a line of enquiry,' said Petre, 'and one that I want you and Mephisto to follow, discretely mind you. After all, presumably Mephisto can use his show business contacts.' He said this as though he was referring to the mafia. Which, after all, maybe he was.

'I don't have many contacts in Albany, New York State,' said Max.

'It may be nothing,' Petre continued, although the late-night trip, the ransacked room and the blood-stained bed hadn't exactly felt like nothing, 'but the playing card, the cutting and the play bill do point to a theatrical connection. That's what I want you two to investigate. You'll report directly to me. The password is Lorgnette.'

Edgar thought long and hard afterwards about the meaning of the password but, to his disappointment, he was to find out that all MI6

codewords were picked at random from the shorter Collins dictionary.

The General dropped them back at Whitehall. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning but somehow the thought of trundling tamely back to Brighton didn't appeal to Edgar. It was Saturday tomorrow (today!) so there was no reason for him to go into work. So, when Max mentioned that he knew an all-night café in Covent Garden, Edgar offered to drive them both there and, after another glide through the dark streets, they found themselves eating bacon and eggs as the market traders set up their stalls outside.

'I thought you never ate breakfast,' said Edgar, taking a swig of dark brown tea.

'This isn't breakfast,' said Max. 'It doesn't count if I haven't been to sleep.'

'Of course, you're always awake at two am,' said Edgar. 'It's an unusual experience for me.'

'That was when I was young,' said Max. 'These days I'm asleep by midnight. Alone.'

Edgar said nothing. He knew that Max had what he called an 'understanding' with a Brighton landlady called Joyce Markham (Mrs M) but he didn't know how this relationship operated when the two were apart. And, one way and another, he didn't really want to talk about love affairs with Max.

Luckily, Max's thoughts were still on Colonel Cartwright.

'So who's going to make the trunk call, you or me?'

'It had better be you. If I telephone it'll become official police business. You can find some show business excuse.'

'Help! I need a mind-reader urgently.'

'That sort of thing.'

Edgar took a last delicious mouthful of fried bread. 'What do you make of it, Max? The ace of hearts and all that. What did you call it? The blood card?'

Max sighed and pushed his plate away. There was still some bacon left on his plate, Edgar had to stop himself eating it.

'The ace is the highest card,' said Max, 'so some people say it's lucky but it's also unlucky. An ace scores eleven. K is the eleventh letter, so ace means kill.'

'Is the ace of hearts particularly unlucky?'

'No. It's the ace of spades that's known as the death card, supposedly because an ace of spades was found in Wild Bill Hickok's hand when he was shot during a card game.'

'Wild Bill Hickok?'

'I thought of that immediately. Wild Bill Hitchcock of Albany must

be a fan.'

'Then why not an ace of spades?'

'The ace of hearts is the magician's favourite card. When you do a trick, you usually end up with the ace of hearts because it's showy. When you ask people to think of a card, any card, it's usually the ace of hearts. That's why it's the blood card because it's the most important.'

'Is that the only reason?'

Max sighed again. 'There's a card trick that involves blood coming out of the ace of hearts. It's a variation on The Whispering Queen.'

'The Whispering Queen?'

'It's very simple. Look.' Max took a deck of cards from his pocket. Edgar had long ago stopped being surprised at the way Max could summon playing cards from anywhere. He remembered the first time he saw Max, on Inverness station, the way the magician had shuffled the cards in his hand without looking at them once.

'Pick a card.' Max was grinning at him.

Edgar took a card, hardly thinking about it. He had given up trying to second guess Max in this kind of trick. Three of diamonds. He put the card back, face down. Max shuffled and reshuffled. Then, from the centre of the pack, he took the Queen of hearts.

'The Queen is going to whisper to me,' he said, 'tell me what to do.'

Of course you'd make a lot more of this on stage. What are you saying your majesty? Cut the cards again, your majesty? Of course.' He cut the cards once and again, separating them until just one card lay on the table between their egg-smeared plates.

'Now I'm going to slide the Queen under the card so she can see it.' He did so, then held the card to his ear again. 'The Queen tells me your card is the three of diamonds. Is that right?'

'No,' said Edgar.

'Crap. You know it is.'

'OK. It is.'

'Now, if I was playing the blood card, I'd say that the Queen represented the girl who broke my heart. I'd take the ace of hearts and put a pin through the card. Then, I'd make you pick out the ace of hearts and, when it was in your hand, I'd make it bleed.'

'How the hell would you do that?'

'It's the easiest thing in the world. Blood capsule in your hand. But if you want to take it further, you can make the punter himself bleed. All you have to do is get him to hold the card to his chest. Then, when he takes it away, it looks as though he's been stabbed in the heart.'

Edgar stared at him.

‘It’s a nasty little trick,’ said Max, ‘totally lacking in finesse. I never do it.’

‘Did Tony perform that trick?’

Max looked up as he passed the cards from hand to hand. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It was one of his favourites.’