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The Devil in Amber

Mark Gatiss

Fallen Idle

He was an American, so it seemed only fair to shoot him.

I'd already winged the beggar once – somewhere in the region of his flabby calves – and was now in hot pursuit with the tenacity for which I'm mildly famous. For reasons too dreary to dwell on, I found myself clinging to the running board of a motor car, wind whipping at my face, positively pelting through the choked streets of Manhattan. Ahead of me loomed the gorgeous elegance of the new Chrysler Building, thrusting like a sword into the cold, brilliant blue sky. Ice and sun glinted off its exterior; sharp as a pin in the eye.

For those of you not in the know (dear me, where have you been?), my name is Lucifer Box: painter, occasional memoir-scribbler and agent (most secret) for His Majesty's Government. Sad it is to relate that my artistic career was somewhat in the doldrums. Fashion, that gay but inconstant dog, had moved on and I was regarded with some suspicion by the bright lads of the new school. *Passé*, old-hat, pre-War (the Great one, you understand: although there'd been nothing particularly great about it from my point of view). Between the Surrealists and the Cubists and the Whatsists, there seemed precious little demand for a spectacularly good portrait painter such as yours truly. Oh, don't protest! Modesty is for amateurs.

Even the landed gentry who had once positively drenched me in commissions seemed in thrall to the damned new religion of photography, and were busy cramming the green-damask walls of their country piles with horrid daguerreotypes of their scarcely smiling selves. And so here was I, the gorgeous butterfly of King Bertie's reign: middle-aged and rather neglected, my hair shorter and greying – though my figure still as trim as a boy's, thank you very much.

Crouched low against the cold metal of the motor, I peered at my distorted reflection in the window. Still a head-turner, no doubt about it, and those eyes no less blue, no less cold and clear.

So much for Art! Happily I had other interests and when not exhibiting my daubs to an increasingly bored public, I was engaged, as I've said, doling out death and

violence as gleefully as I did Crimson Alizarin or Mars Yellow. Every man should have a hobby.

Trouble was, of late the glee had rather gone out of this too. But I mustn't get ahead of myself.

The chap I'd been assigned to bump off on this charming December day was called Hubbard. Hubbard the Cupboard, don't you know (the Colonials like their schoolyard nick-names), his curious moniker coming not only from his ungainly shape but from his being a dealer in stolen goods. It was said Hubbard's cupboard was never bare.

The fat fool, however, had strayed somewhat from his usual territory of filched diamanté and crudely forged Demuths, being the brains, it was said, behind an influx of cheap cocaine that was currently drowning New York's nightspots. So, before the hooters of all the hoofers were irretrievably rotted, Hubbard was to be removed from the scene forthwith.

I was in town, tying up the loose ends of another job (the startling history of the Sumatran Automata will have to wait for another day), and, at its conclusion, had been hastily shunted off in pursuit of this nefarious drug baron.

I kept my head low as the car slowed down. The fat man's blood was visible in the snow, trailing in neat crimson curlicues as if fallen from a leaking paint tin. If I could finish him off by lunchtime, I knew a place down in the Bowery that did a smashing shad-roe-caviar club sarnie.

Dropping from the running board, I flattened myself against the grimy wall of the nearest brownstone and watched as the flivver chugged off with a backfire like a Lewis gun.

Inclining my trilby at a rakish angle, I paused a moment, knowing I cut quite a dash. I'm afraid I rather fancied myself – but then everyone else did, so why should I be left out of the fun?

The trail led off the pavement – or 'sidewalk' as I suppose I must call it – and I moved off, my breath billowing like exhaust before me. The air was heavy with the stink of Polish cooking and uncollected rubbish.

Hurrying through the churned-up, brown drifts and following the trail as it swung right, I found myself in a light-starved courtyard. At its centre, smothered in snow, stood a quaint little clapboard church, fragile and unremarkable – save for the polka-dot pattern of bright blood on the steps. The door to the church was slightly ajar. I had him.

As quietly as possible, I slipped inside, taking a moment to adjust to the musty darkness with its familiar odour of incense and damp. Rapidly I made out shadowy pews, a pulpit like a ship's fo'c's'le, a narrow spiral stair leading to the bell tower.

My gloved hand closed around my Webley. As I reached the well of the stair, there was movement above and a little rivulet of dust cascaded onto the brim of my hat. Stealing upwards, I emerged into a beam-ceilinged chamber where two great copper-green bells hung in their housings. The hunched figure of a man was silhouetted against the flat light pouring through an arched window. I raised my pistol and he swung towards me, his face a picture of fear. But unless Hubbard had hastily taken holy orders, this was not my quarry.

The priest's face fell as he glanced over my shoulder.

I span on my heel, hearing the scrape of shoe leather on wood and realizing at once that Hubbard was right behind me. Suddenly there was something startlingly cold at my flesh and every instinct thrilled as I felt a coil of piano wire loop about my throat. Without a moment's hesitation, my hand flew to my collar just as the wire tightened, allowing vital room for manoeuvre. I gasped as the deadly lasso bit into the leather of my glove.

Hubbard's sickly breath hissed into my face as he crushed me in a bear-like embrace. I own I was in a pretty blue funk. Trying frantically to turn about and aim the Webley, I felt instead my wrist savagely twisted and the pistol went crashing down the stairwell.

Still the noose tightened. Jerking my elbow repeatedly backwards, I met only empty air as Hubbard the Cupboard swung clear. There was a cold, bright zing as the razor wire sliced cleanly through my glove and ripped at the flesh of my hand.

Yelling in agony, I dropped to my knees and reached desperately behind me, clawing at the rotten woodwork of the floor, striving to find purchase on my assailant's ankle. The cold wire sawed into my palm.

'Help me!' I cried to the priest. 'Help me, for Christ's sake!'

But divine intervention came there none, the holy fool merely whimpering and wringing his hands.

Again I cried out in pain but then my fingers closed on the turn-up of Hubbard's trouser leg. It was wet with blood and I realized at once that this was where I'd already wounded the fiend. Frenziedly, I scabbled at the floorboards till my fingers found the rusty end of a bent nail. Croaking with effort, I prised the nail from the planking and managed to ram it with main force into the wound on my enemy's leg.

Hubbard screamed, stumbled forwards and suddenly the wire noose slackened. I rolled away, nursing my damaged hand, then, leaping to my feet, finally came face to face with him.

He was broad as a meat locker and swaddled in a cheap fur-collared overcoat such as an actor-manager might have left out for the moths. His eyes – buttons in the burst upholstery of his ugly face – glinted black and tiny. I'd never met Hubbard, only shot

him, so by way of an introduction I kicked him in his lardy throat, sending the brute flying backwards into the bells. At once, the great shapes rolled in their housing.

He tried desperately to right himself, but the bells moved like quicksand beneath him, clappers ringing off the ancient bronze. He clawed at their surfaces, nails scoring grooves in the thick verdigris; sliding, gasping, out of control.

'This ain't right!' he squawked in a grisly Brooklyn accent, already slipping through the gap between the bells. 'It's a set-up!'

I scowled at him, cradling my wounded hand, totally unmoved by his imminent demise. 'Tell it to the marines.'

Hubbard gasped as he fought to keep from falling, his little feet scrabbling comically at the wooden housing. 'I'm a patsy!' he screeched.

'Cornish?'

'A patsy!' he cried. 'Oh, God!'

The corpulent cur knew he was a goner and something nasty flashed in those black eyes. One hand flew to his overcoat, and in an instant a small snub-nosed revolver was in his chubby hand. He wasn't intending to go down alone.

I stood powerless, my heart racing in time with the blood thudding onto the boards from my wet glove. Still the wretched priest did nothing, standing by in saintly inaction.

When the shot rang out I was surprised to feel no pain whatsoever. It took me a while to realize that this was intimately bound up with the fact that Hubbard now boasted a capacious and gory hole in his temple from which startlingly papal white smoke was pouring.

Hubbard gurgled most unpleasantly and then made his final foray between the bells, tumbling to the church floor below and setting the wretched things peeling gaily as though for Christmas Mass.

A cold sweat prickled all over me as I turned to greet my rescuer. He stood at the top of the stairs, still holding the weapon he had used on the ill-famed dealer in stolen goods.

'You're getting slow, old boy,' said the lean, brown newcomer, stepping into the light.

'Hullo, Percy,' I said lightly. 'Thanks.'

Percy Flarge grinned his infuriating grin, pocketed his pistol and tipped his hat onto the back of his head, setting his blond fringe bouncing. 'Least I can do to help out a chum in his hour of need.' He peered at my hand. 'I say! You have been in the wars.'

I stepped away from him. 'I'll take things from here.'

Flarge shook his head. 'Wouldn't dream of letting you, old love. You should really put your feet up! Least I can do, as I say, for the great Lucifer Box.'

The great Lucifer Box suddenly felt a clammy sickness grip him and chose that moment to collapse onto the planking in a dead faint.

I awoke to a biting pain in my hand. I was stretched out on a pew, back in the main body of the church and sat up, blinking for a moment. The light had that strange, vivid quality as before a thunderstorm. The place was abuzz with what I knew to be Domestic - those terribly useful folk who clean up after chaps like me have been splattering haemoglobin all over the furniture - but there was no sign of Flarge.

I shook my head, groggily. My wound had been neatly and expertly stitched and was now being bandaged by a little ferret-faced chap in a short coat and yellow gloves. This was 'Twice' Daley - one of Flarge's favourites. Unlike my own dear Delilah (presently cook, valet, general factotum, bodyguard and thug) back in Blighty, he was a local man of no particular distinction.

'Hi there, Mr Box!' he cried.

I nodded weakly. 'You'll forgive me if I don't shake hands.'

He gave a short, barking laugh and tied off the bandage with his nimble fingers.

I flexed my own digits to assess the damage. 'Thanks for the repair job, Daley. Everything cleared up here?'

He nodded, his rheumy eyes scanning the church. 'Shoo-wer. We paid off the pastor with enough rubes to make a new roof, and the Cupboard'll soon be doing the breaststroke in the Hudson - face down, if you takes my meaning.'

I did. 'I have orders to bring back everything he had on him. I trust you took care to -'

'Mr Flarge done all that,' he interrupted.

'Did he now?'

'Oh, yeah. Nice and regular. He's very per-spik-ay-shee-us, is Mr Flarge. He saved your ass too and no mistake.'

I ignored Daley's taunting and looked towards the back of the church. 'Is the body still here?'

‘Shoo-wer. You wanna pay your last respects?’ He grinned nastily, exposing tiny neat teeth like those of a deep-sea fish.

‘Why not?’

Outside, freezing night was creeping on. Daley handed me a pocket torch and led me into the yard, where a tumbledown outhouse had been pressed into service as a temporary morgue. Snowflakes as big as chrysanthemums were floating down from the drear sky and I bent down and scooped up a handful to assuage the awful throbbing in my hand.

Daley shuddered open the outhouse door and the body of Hubbard was revealed in the beam of the torch. We went inside.

‘What exactly did Mr Flarge take away?’ I asked, peering down at the powder-blackened hole in Hubbard’s head.

‘Whole bunch of stuff,’ said Daley, taking the stub of a fat black cigar from his waistcoat pocket. ‘Mr Flarge had a big carpet bag on him. Filled it with papers, mostly, and, you know, some merchandise.’

‘Cocaine?’

‘Uh-huh.’

Well, that seemed to confirm the theories. I nodded absently, and began to search Hubbard’s body. Flarge had certainly been thorough. There was nothing in the big man’s ghastly suit. No wallet, no identification, no driver’s licence.

More than anything, I wanted to spot something that young pup had missed, and Daley knew it. He smoked his spit-wetted cigar and watched my fruitless activity with obvious glee. I’d almost given up when something caught my eye.

It was Hubbard’s handkerchief. In sharp contrast to the dead man’s vile tailoring, the wipe was made of an exquisite ivory-coloured silk of obvious antiquity. It was folded into three neat triangles, like a miniature mountain range, and there seemed to be some sort of exotic pattern on it. It might be a mere trifle, but trifles ain’t to be sniffed at when you’ve not even been invited to the party ...

Daley was watching me closely. I cleared my throat and straightened up as though satisfied.

‘Very well. There’s nothing more to be done here,’ I said. ‘Thanks for your help.’

Daley gave a little bow. I gasped suddenly, as though in pain, and dropped the torch, which rolled under the table.

‘Sorry!’ I managed through gritted teeth. ‘Damned wound!’

Daley bent down to retrieve the torch and I swiftly whipped the handkerchief from Hubbard's breast pocket, stuffing it into my trousers just as the Domestic bobbed back up.

'You get yourself to bed now, Mr Box, you hear?' he said with a horrible grin. 'Then maybe get on the boat back home to Eng-ur-land, huh? What with Christmas coming and all.'

I smiled tightly and stalked off into the gathering snowstorm, the silken rag tucked firmly into my pocket.