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CARVER'S QUEST



NICK RENNISON



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To my sister Cindy

PART ONE



LONDON



CHAPTER ONE

Crouched over the shallow bath of chemicals in his dark room, Adam Carver watched an image begin to appear on the photographic plate resting in it. Slowly, out of the darkness, the ghostly outlines of buildings in a London street emerged. Walls and tiled roofs, silvery grey on the plate, swam into view through the liquid in the tray. Adam gave a brief sigh of pleasure as the picture took shape. It was interrupted by a sudden irruption of light into the small room as the door was thrown open.

‘What is it, Quint? I’m busy. And shut that blasted door. The light will spoil the photograph.’

‘Some’un to see you.’

‘Who is it?’

‘A lady.’

‘A lady would scarcely call on me here in Doughty Street, Quint. Not alone.’

‘Well, maybe she’s a lady, maybe she ain’t. But she’s here. She’s in the sitting room.’

Still bent over the photographic equipment, Adam looked over his shoulder. He watched impatiently as Quint closed the door of the dark room, returning it to its usual crepuscular gloom. He heard Quint’s footsteps retreating along the passageway. Adam wondered who could possibly be waiting for him in the sitting room. No lady he knew would risk her reputation by visiting a single gentleman in his rooms. And those few women of his acquaintance who were not ladies knew better than to come calling upon him at home. There

was but one way to find out, of course. Whoever she was, it was the height of impoliteness to leave her waiting alone.

However, Adam was annoyed to be disturbed. His work had been going so well. In the course of the morning, he had brought three views of London streets from the darkness into the light. If ever he had cause to question what he was doing, a successful session in the dark room was enough to quell his doubts. He was recording the city for posterity, for a future that Londoners in this thirty-third year of Victoria's reign could not imagine. If Macaulay's New Zealander, sitting on the broken arches of Westminster Bridge, were ever truly to gaze out over the ruins of London, then he would have a guide to what had once been. Adam's photographs and those of other pioneers he knew would survive to show the visitor what had been lost. Some friends – Professor Fields for one – had chastised him for deserting archaeology and the classical world for this new pastime of photographing the city's architecture but Adam knew he was, in his own way, still serving the same end. He was assisting the archaeologists of the future. Had the technology existed in the past, what would Fields not give for photographs of Periclean Athens or the Rome of the Caesars?

There was, though, no help for it. He would have to leave his labours and look to learn what this woman wanted. He took the plate from the bath and placed it carefully on the workbench, which ran along one side of the room. He removed the long white frock coat he had taken to wearing to protect his everyday clothing from the chemicals he used, donned the jacket he had been wearing earlier and exited the dark room.

Quint was loitering at the far end of the passageway where the door to the sitting room opened. He pointed a stubby forefinger through the door and mouthed, 'In there,' as if he thought that Adam might have temporarily forgotten where his own sitting room was.

Adam walked through the door with Quint close on his heels. He was both delighted and disconcerted to find that the lady waiting there unchaperoned was a beautiful young woman. A very beautiful young woman. Seated on the only chair in the room that was

not covered with old newspapers and magazines, everything about her invited admiring attention. Her auburn hair, which looked unfashionably natural, was long and lustrous and nearly hid the small pillbox hat that was perched in it. Her milky pale complexion clearly owed nothing to powder or cosmetics. Her greenish-blue eyes danced and sparkled with life. Cosmo Jardine, the Pre-Raphaelite painter Adam had known since his schooldays in Shrewsbury, would have had no hesitation in describing her as ‘a stunner’.

Faced by her charms, Adam was suddenly conscious of the bachelor disarray in which he lived, of the piles of books strewn around the room and the papers scattered everywhere. He drew his finger through dust that was lying thickly on the table in the centre of the room. To his slight embarrassment, he noticed that his finger was stained with the chemicals he had just been using.

‘The place is filthy, Quint. I’m embarrassed that our visitor should see us amidst such squalor.’

Adam bowed slightly towards the woman as he spoke. She acknowledged him with an almost coquettish tilt of her head.

‘Well, I ain’t got neither the time nor the inclination to be prancing around with a feather duster,’ Quint said. ‘If you’re planning on getting finicky about a bit of dirt, we’d best get a maid.’ With that, he turned and walked out of the room.

Adam looked again at the young woman, smiled and shrugged his shoulders. ‘Quint,’ he said, ‘is a temperamental soul. We were both members of an expedition to Macedonia in sixty-seven. We sailed home from Salonika together and he has been with me ever since. I would call him my valet except that, as you see, he has few of the attributes usually associated with a manservant.’ Adam smiled again. ‘Of course, I have few of the attributes usually associated with a master. So we are well matched.’

‘Mr Quint was politesse itself when he showed me to the room, Mr Carver. I can have no complaints on that score.’ The woman was perfectly self-possessed and seemed amused rather than upset by the disorder surrounding her. ‘And I am not such a dainty house-keeper myself that I am likely to worry over a bit of dust. I have

something to discuss with you important enough to make a little domestic disorder seem a trifle in comparison.’

Her English was perfect but Adam noticed that she spoke with just the smallest hint of a foreign accent.

‘I am at a loss to know what this business might be, madam.’ Adam remained politely puzzled. ‘I might wish it were otherwise but I am obliged to confess that I have not had the pleasure of meeting you until now.’

‘No, we have not met. But, nonetheless, I know something of you, Mr Carver.’

‘Indeed – and what is it that you know? Something that shows me to advantage, I trust?’

‘I know that your name is Adam Brunel Carver. That your father was Charles Carver, the railway baron.’

Adam started slightly at the mention of the name. Even now, more than four years after he had watched his father’s coffin being lowered into the ground at Kensal Green Cemetery, he disliked reminders of the death. Did the woman, he wondered, know the circumstances in which Charles Carver had departed this world? He doubted it. So few people did. Two of his father’s colleagues had made it their business to keep the details from gaining any wider circulation, and burial at Kensal Green would have been impossible had they not succeeded. But it was unlikely this auburn-haired beauty knew anything of that. Indeed, Adam found it difficult to hazard a guess how she knew anything of the Carvers at all. Or why she had arrived at his rooms here in Doughty Street.

‘I know that you were obliged to leave Cambridge when your father died,’ his visitor continued, ‘and that you travelled with Professor Burton Fields in European Turkey. And with Mr Quint, it seems. That you published a book when you returned called *Travels in Ancient Macedon* which made you quite the literary lion.’

Adam had recovered his poise. He laughed. ‘The small celebrity I won when my book appeared has lasted little longer than the

money the publisher paid me. If I were ever a lion, I have lost my roar these last few months.'

'There are still many people who admire your book very much.'

'Yourself amongst them, I hope, Miss...?' Adam left the question mark over his visitor's name hanging in the air, but the attempt to discover her identity was unsuccessful. She simply ignored it.

'Indeed, I admire your book so much, Mr Carver, that I have put my reputation at risk of compromise by coming here to tell you so myself.'

'I can assure you that no one will know of your visit save myself and Quint. Now, I am the soul of discretion and Quint can keep a secret even in his cups. So your reputation is as safe as the gold in the Bank of England.'

'I am grateful for your assurance, sir.' The woman, sitting demurely amidst the chaos, spoke quietly and apparently seriously, but Adam could not help but notice a hint of half-hidden irony in her voice. 'I thought long and hard before I decided to visit you. I know that perhaps I should have left my card first or come with a chaperone. Or acted in almost any way other than that in which I *have* acted. But I was *so* determined to see you.'

Adam was sensible of the suggestion of play-acting, even insincerity, in his visitor's manner but it was not every day that a beautiful woman expressed determination to see him. He decided that he was happy enough to ignore any doubts he might have about the reasons for her arrival on his doorstep.

'I am sure that your reasons for acting as you have done are important enough to outweigh any minor transgressions of etiquette, madam.'

'You are right. I *do* have important reasons for coming. But, before I vouchsafe them to you, I must tell you something of myself.'

Not a moment before time, Adam thought to himself but he said nothing.

'My name is Emily Maitland. I am not a native of London. Indeed, I have not spent time here since I was a small girl. My mother and I have been abroad for many years. We have made our home in a

number of places. Constantinople. Athens. Rhodes. For the last three years we have lived in Salonika. A city which, of course, you know?’

‘An unusual city in which to make your home, Miss Maitland.’

Adam was surprised. He recalled the harbour at Salonika and the houses rising gradually from the water up the steep slopes to the castle on the summit. He remembered the white walls of the city and the long stone fingers of the minarets pointing heavenwards. From a distance it was a beautiful sight, but it was also an unhealthy spot with a reputation for malaria. Why would a young woman and her mother choose to live there? Salonika, he remembered, had its small English community, mainly merchants and traders, but he could not believe that it included many women living on their own.

‘There are reasons for our choice of Salonika,’ Emily said, sensing his surprise, although she made no attempt to reveal what they were. ‘We travelled to London in the spring of this year. A distant relative of my father had died and we were beneficiaries in his will. We needed to visit the lawyers to make the proper arrangements to receive our legacy.’

The young woman paused and looked up at Adam. He smiled and made a gesture that he hoped would be interpreted as an encouragement to go on.

‘However, I need not trouble you with the details of our family affairs,’ she continued. Adam found himself very nearly agreeing with his visitor but he bit his tongue. ‘I must hurry on to the point in my story when it will become clear why I have called upon you in so unconventional a fashion.’

Miss Maitland moved her hand across the front of her dress, as if brushing from it a fragment of lint she had just noticed.

‘When your expedition arrived in Salonika in the summer of sixty-seven, my mother and I had only just become residents of the city ourselves. We were staying in a hotel by the waterfront. We saw you land from the Constantinople steamer. As you disembarked we could see you were English. We decided that—’

Adam was never to know what Miss Maitland and her mother

had decided. Her words were interrupted by the most terrific uproar from the direction of the dark room. The sound was as if a shell had exploded in a glass factory. As the noise ceased, Adam and his visitor looked at one another in shocked surprise. He was the first to recover composure.

‘If you will excuse me for just a moment, I will endeavour to discover what Quint is doing.’ He bowed himself out of the room, leaving the woman sitting amidst the disordered books and papers. ‘And why he is making that infernal racket as he is doing it,’ he added to himself as he left.

He was gone just long enough to learn that Quint, his *amour propre* injured by the remarks about dirt and dust, had been cleaning the equipment in the dark room when several of the glass plates had – of their own volition, according to Quint – crashed to the floor. Lingered only briefly to curse his servant for his clumsiness, Adam made haste to return to the sitting room and his guest.

‘I must apologise for Quint. A bull in a china...’

His words dried up as he realised he was addressing an empty room. There was no one sitting in the chair. Emily Maitland was gone.



CHAPTER TWO

The following day found Adam sitting in the Marco Polo Club, listening to Mr Moorhouse talk about whatever subjects flitted briefly through his butterfly mind. The Marco Polo, established in the early 1800s by a group of army officers who had served in India and travelled in the rest of Asia, was not the best-known of London's gentlemen's clubs but it was, its members felt, the most agreeable and, in its own particular way, the most prestigious. Only those who had, at some time in their lives, travelled extensively beyond the comforts of civilisation were allowed membership in the Marco Polo: a little *dilettante* journeying through France or Italy was insufficient qualification for admission. Adam himself had been hard pressed to convince the membership committee that his travels in the mountains of Macedonia had been dangerous and discomfoting enough to allow the doors of the Marco Polo to be opened to him. Only the support of the club's secretary, Baxendale, a man who had spent two winters in the 1850s sharing an igloo with a family of Eskimos in northern Canada and was thus able to speak authoritatively on the subjects of danger and discomfort, provided Adam with an entrée. Baxendale had enjoyed *Travels in Ancient Macedon* and let it be known that he believed its author would be a worthy addition to the club's membership roll. Within days of the secretary expressing his opinion, Adam was admitted to the Marco Polo. In the thirteen months since his admission, he had grown to love the club and had spent many happy days in its Pall Mall premises.

Mr Moorhouse, Adam's conversational partner on this particular day, was the oldest member of the club. Many decades before, when Lord Byron had set a fashion for discontented young men of fortune to journey abroad in search of experiences unavailable in England, the 25-year-old Mr Moorhouse had set sail for the Middle East. Landing at the ancient port of Sidon, he had travelled on to Damascus and then set off through the wilds of the Syrian desert, accompanied only by a supposedly faithful Arab servant named Ibrahim. Eighty miles into their journey, Ibrahim had handed Mr Moorhouse over to a Bedouin chieftain in return for two camels and a dozen goatskins filled with water. The Bedouin, delighted to gain a young and handsome Frankish servant for so low a price, had immediately set Mr Moorhouse to work on a series of humiliating, indeed disgusting, tasks about his encampment. It had cost the British consul in Damascus three weeks of negotiation and ten more camels to arrange his countryman's release.

By the time he was free and able to sail home, Mr Moorhouse had been cured permanently of any further desire to leave his native land. Now, more than fifty years after his Levantine adventure, he rarely set foot outside London. He sat for hours in the smoking room of the Marco Polo, puffing contentedly on a succession of foul-smelling cigars and indulging in amiably inconsequential conversation with anyone prepared to join him at his table. Adam found him a curiously relaxing companion.

'Clever fellow, that Boucicault,' Mr Moorhouse remarked out of the blue, after several minutes of silence. 'Saw that play of his, *After Dark*, at the Princess's a couple of seasons ago. Did you see it?'

Adam said he had not had the pleasure.

'Damned great train comes thundering across the stage halfway through it.' Mr Moorhouse made vague, waving motions with his hands to indicate the size of the train. 'Man lying bound to the tracks. Engine getting closer and closer. Train whistle going like billy-o. Terribly exciting. Thought I was going to have conniptions.'

Adam said he was sorry he had missed it.

'Train didn't hit him, though. God knows how. Think I must

have looked away for a second and next thing you know, the man's up and free. Never did work out how the blazes they did it.'

Mr Moorhouse fell silent again, as if he was still struggling to understand the logistical details of the sensational scenes he had seen two years earlier. Adam returned to his own thoughts, many of which circled around the attractive figure of the young woman who had called at Doughty Street the previous day. Who had she really been? Was her name really Emily Maitland? And what had been her purpose in flouting convention so flagrantly by visiting him in his rooms? Although his vanity had been tickled by her claim to be an admirer of his book, he was not sure he believed her. Nor was he sure he believed her interrupted tale of watching the Fields expedition arrive at Salonika's waterfront. The professor, he remembered, had gone out of his way to ensure that they had arrived without fanfare. It was unlikely that she and her mother could have learned their names or that they were English. And why would she knock on his door three years later in order to inform him of the fact that she had seen him in Salonika? It made no sense. He was at a loss to imagine *any* reason for her visit. And, once she was there, why had she left so suddenly and without a word of explanation? Quint's noisy destruction of the plates in the dark room had been a shock, but surely not sufficient to scare a young woman into flight. Certainly not one who seemed so self-possessed as Miss Maitland. Adam was faced with plenty of questions but few answers. After a minute, his companion broke in upon his thoughts.

'By the way, Carver. Almost forgot to tell you. Fellow was in here asking after you last night. Asking if you'd be at the memorial dinner for Speke on Thursday. Told him I thought you would be. Hope you don't mind.'

'Fellow, Mr Moorhouse? What sort of fellow?'

Mr Moorhouse seemed taken aback by the question. 'Tallish chap. Balding.' The old man quickly exhausted his powers of description. 'Don't recall much more about him, to be honest... except, now I come to think of it, he did have a scar you couldn't help noticing. Above his eye. Like a crescent moon. Here.'

Moorhouse pointed to his own brow. ‘Sorry, old chap. Hope I haven’t committed a faux pas of any kind.’

* * * * *

With Adam at the Marco Polo, Quint Devlin was alone in the rooms in Doughty Street. He had seated himself in the best chair in the sitting room and was busily engaged in packing his favourite pipe with the villainously smelling tobacco he favoured. His intention was to spend the next hour doing nothing more strenuous than inhaling and exhaling it.

Quint had gained his present name one day in 1828, when he was but a month old. Perhaps he had had some other name bestowed upon him before he was discovered, wrapped in a blanket and lying on the steps of the St Nicholas Hospital for Young Foundlings in Ely Place, but if he had, it had been lost. The Reverend Malachi Merridew, spiritual director of St Nicholas, who had been presented with four other orphaned infants that week decided that, as the fifth, this one should be named ‘Quintus’. The ‘Devlin’, more prosaically, had come from the blanket in which the baby had been found. On the blanket was a label which read: ‘The property of Devlin’s Boarding House, Ardee Street, Dublin’. So it was as Quintus Devlin that the Reverend Merridew presented this particular foundling to the world. The foundling no sooner reached an age when he could speak than he decided that a two-syllable Christian name was simply too cumbersome. Quintus became Quint and had remained so for forty years.

During those forty years, Quint’s life had had both its ups and its downs. Downs had included a short spell working the treadmill at the Coldbath Fields House of Correction, after a misunderstanding with another man involving the ownership of a horse; and an even shorter spell spent soldiering in one of the least illustrious regiments of the British Army. Quint had found being a soldier a tiresome business and had deserted after only a month. Luckily, he had taken the precaution of enlisting under a false name. Even more luckily, the name he had chosen had been ‘John Smith’ and

he had decided, quite rightly, that the chances of the army catching up with a deserting John Smith were so negligible that they could be dismissed from his mind. Two days after leaving his barracks in Aldershot without the necessary permission, Quint had been back in familiar haunts in the Borough, renewing his acquaintance with London street life.

If anyone had questioned him, as he sat blowing plumes of smoke in the direction of the bookshelves, he would have acknowledged that his association with Adam Carver represented a very definite up. He might also have acknowledged that the association was an unlikely one. However, Quint was a firm believer in fate. Fate, he thought, had to be behind the events which had brought master and man together. It had surely been fate that had led Quint to join the Fields expedition to European Turkey in the first place. What else would have led him to pick up the discarded copy of a morning newspaper in a Southwark pub? He was not usually a great reader. What else but fate would have drawn his eyes to the advertisement that invited men of stout heart and strong body, interested in shaking the dust of England from their feet, to present themselves at an office in the Marylebone Road at nine on the following morning, where they would learn of certain plans that might prove to their advantage? Money, it was clearly suggested, might be offered to those who possessed the qualities the advertisers sought. Quint had been intrigued. He was unsure whether or not he had a stout heart but he did have a strong body. He was also enduring one of his periodic spells of pennilessness. His creditors, of whom there were several, had begun to insist on payment. One of them, familiarly known as Black Ben, had let it be known that broken bones might well follow failure to cough up. Cash, or the opportunity to leave London – or both – seemed an appealing prospect to Quint. On the principle of ‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained’, he had decided to turn up at the Marylebone office at the appointed time and see what game the advertisers were playing.

A queue of men who had read the advertisement had already formed outside the office of Mr William Perry, the agent Professor

Fields had appointed to recruit half a dozen dogsbodies for his expedition. Quint was there to join it. While every other man waiting in the line looked like a disgruntled clerk or unemployed shop assistant, he was the only one who could be vaguely described as belonging to the labouring classes. The distinction was a decisive one.

‘The gentleman I represent is looking for men of stout heart,’ Mr Perry had said, ‘men who are unafraid of hard physical labour in the blazing summer sun of distant lands. Not pasty-faced hobbledehoyes who spend their days behind a draper’s counter in Holborn.’

In Quint, Mr Perry thought he had found the ideal candidate. He was taken on. The rest of the supplicants were sent packing. The agent was not the first to make the mistaken assumption that Quint’s air of surly obstreperousness was only a mask hiding sterling qualities beneath it. And so fate decreed that, within a few weeks, together with Professor Fields and Adam Carver, Quint was one of those who shook the dust of England from their feet. Black Ben and the other irritations of London life were left behind as they sailed for Salonika.

Equally surely, Quint had thought, it was fate that dictated that he was on hand to rescue Adam in an alleyway in Salonika when the young man was confronted by four unfriendly Turks demanding any piastres he had about his person. Adam, who had boxed for his college only a few months earlier, succeeded in knocking two of his assailants to the ground, but weight of numbers began to tell. He was facing a beating from the other two when Quint providentially turned the corner into the muddy backstreet. The Turks were significantly heavier than the Englishmen, but Quint had earlier decided, soon after the party had reached Salonika, never to walk anywhere in the city without a billy stick to hand. The billy stick, especially when wielded with enthusiasm, changed the odds in the fight in favour of the visitors. The Turks were swiftly rendered unconscious. Adam’s piastres remained in his pocket. He and Quint, who had hitherto taken little notice of one another, now formed an alliance. Months later, in the mountains south of the city,

Adam had been able to return the compliment. Quint had tumbled from his mule and into a fast-flowing river. He would have been swept halfway to the Thermaic Gulf had Adam not hauled him from the waters. The unlikely partnership between the two men was strengthened. Quint came to be seen by others in the party as Adam's man.

When the expedition returned to London, Adam had suggested that he had a vacancy for a manservant and that Quint might be just the person to fill it. Quint, behaving as if he would be bestowing a favour on Adam if he accepted the post, had agreed. Adam duly availed himself of the money that John Murray had advanced for the privilege of publishing *Travels in Ancient Macedon*, and man and master had moved into the rooms in Doughty Street. They had been there for nearly two years and the arrangement seemed to suit them both.

None of this past history crossed Quint's mind as he smoked his pipefuls of noxious tobacco. At such times as this, he had a capacity for tranquil existence in the present moment that would have been the envy of an oriental sage. For nearly an hour, he was troubled by nothing more than the need to tamp down or refill his pipe at regular intervals. As midday arrived, however, and he listened to the sound of the mantle clock striking the hours, he became aware that something was wanting to complete his happiness. A smoke, he thought, was nothing without a drink. It was time to make his way towards the Lion and Lamb. Quint walked from the sitting room to the small side room which was exclusively his domain. He picked up the blue serge jacket that was lying on the bed and put it on. Thrusting his dowsed pipe into one of the pockets, he left the room and headed for the stairs that led from the first-floor flat to the ground floor.

As he began to descend those stairs to the hallway, he saw that someone was standing in the ill-lit passage. To his dismay, he realised that it was Mrs Gaffery. Mrs Gaffery, courtesy of her late husband's will, was the owner of 65 Doughty Street. Unfortunately, ownership of the property was all that Mr Gaffery, a solicitor with

a small practice in Chancery Lane, had been able to leave his wife. Unwise investment in an Australian gold mine which, on closer inspection, had proved to contain very little gold, had eaten up all his other worldly goods. After his death, his relict had no means of support at all. She had been obliged to let the upstairs rooms of her property to paying tenants while she continued to live on the ground floor. She had been forced to become a landlady. It was not a situation that either Mrs Gaffery or many of her tenants enjoyed.

Mrs Gaffery's loss had occurred many years earlier yet her already formidable appearance continued to be made even more tremendous by the mourning clothes of black crape and bombazine which she still wore. Unkind rumours suggested that, during his lifetime, Mr Gaffery had been a severe disappointment to his wife. His last will and testament had certainly been so. However, now that he had long been a member of the great majority, his faults had been forgotten. It seemed that Mrs Gaffery, like the queen, was determined to advertise her status as a widow until she followed him to the grave herself. Now, black and unmistakably threatening, she stood in Quint's path.

'Women,' she said. 'I won't have them.'

Quint's method of dealing with Mrs Gaffery was the same one he employed to deal with any social superior likely to trouble him. He feigned idiocy. If he had been able to feign cheery idiocy, he would have done so on the grounds that it was more likely to produce the results he wanted. However, Quint being Quint, he was obliged to feign surly idiocy. Over the years he had found that even surly idiocy was remarkably effective in persuading people in any kind of authority that he wasn't worth questioning or bothering any further. Faced with an apparently furious landlady, wagging her forefinger in his direction, he simply grunted and stared fixedly at the wainscoting. The storm, he knew, would eventually pass over his head.

'Not in my house. Not under my roof. Flibbertigibbets flaunting their shamelessness. They have fewer morals than a pack of Pawnee Indians, the lot of them.'

Quint continued to gaze floorwards. He had been puzzled by

Mrs Gaffery's opening remark but he had now worked out that it was the visit of the mysterious young lady that had disturbed her sense of propriety. He could think of nothing useful to say so he remained silent. Mrs Gaffery's outrage continued to erupt around his ears. Quint waited for it to pass and eventually sensed that it was reaching its conclusion.

'... and you can tell your master that from me. Tell him there shall be no more women coming calling upon him at all hours of the day. Or he shall hear more from me. Much more. You tell him that, Quint. Do you understand me, man?'

Quint grunted again. Taking the grunt as an indication that her words had hit home, Mrs Gaffery turned and retired to her lair. Quint, grateful that his ordeal had been a short one, continued on his interrupted journey towards a pint of India Pale Ale.

* * * * *

Standing under the portico of the British Museum, Adam looked towards Great Russell Street and the traffic passing down it. It was a few minutes after ten on a Wednesday morning and, behind him, the doors of the museum, which welcomed members of the public only on alternate weekdays, had just opened. He was waiting for Professor Fields, who had despatched a letter to say that he was coming up to town from Cambridge that morning. 'There is an Attic vase from the bequest of Sir Charles Tankerville that has been newly put on display,' the professor had written, 'and I am particularly eager to see it. You would also find it of interest and I propose that you should meet me at the entrance to the museum prompt at ten.'

The letter was, Adam thought, typical of Fields's somewhat peremptory style of correspondence. There was no suggestion that the young man might have other plans which might conflict with the professor's. He had been summoned to appear and appear he must. The fact that Fields himself was not in evidence prompt at ten was not unexpected. The professor was also given to issuing strict instructions for behaviour and comportsment which he then failed to follow himself.

Adam pulled out his watch on its silver Albert chain from his waistcoat pocket. It was nearly ten past ten. He glanced idly at the small stream of visitors climbing the steps to the entrance of the museum and then looked towards Great Russell Street once more. He felt a small surge of affection as he picked out the sturdy figure of the professor turning into the grounds of the museum and heading in his direction. Fields could be difficult and argumentative and irritating, it was true, but he had become an important person in Adam's life. Thomas Burton Fields had been a senior master at Shrewsbury School, and was already a legendary figure when Adam had arrived as a timid thirteen-year-old boy from his prep school. Fields had seen something in him, had encouraged his burgeoning love for Greek and Latin and for the long-vanished civilisations of the Mediterranean. When Fields had left Shrewsbury to accept a professorship at Cambridge, Adam had been lost but he had followed his mentor to the university only a year later. The death of his father and the consequent change in his financial fortunes had ruined his hopes of a life in academe, but Fields had been on hand to rescue him. Although Adam had found it necessary to go down from Cambridge without taking his degree, the professor had arranged for him to join him on his expedition to European Turkey. In many ways, Thomas Burton Fields had been a second father to him.

'We must make our way to the Tankerville Vase immediately,' the professor said, as he strode up the steps. He made no attempt at a formal greeting and spoke as if it was Adam's fault that they had not been able to enter the museum the moment it opened. 'Doubtless there will be hordes of gawking visitors in front of it already.'

Adam thought it unlikely that an Attic vase would draw the crowds Fields was anticipating.

'Should we not first take a side turning into the Elgin Gallery?' he asked teasingly, knowing what the answer would be.

'Those marble statues are much overrated,' the professor said dismissively. 'I would exchange all of them for the finest examples of Athenian red-figure wares.'

‘Or the Phigalian Saloon? The bas-reliefs from the Temple of Apollo are much admired.’

‘They are even worse than the works Elgin prised off the Parthenon. No – we are here to see the Tankerville Vase.’

As Adam had anticipated, there was nobody in front of the case that held the vase. Both men bent double to peer more closely at the decoration.

‘It is unmistakably a depiction of the Centauromachy,’ the professor said. ‘The same subject that appears on some of the sculptures you mentioned earlier but a purer, more authentic rendition of it. I had read that this was so but I wished to see for myself.’

They continued to examine the tiny figures on the pottery.

‘This must be Peirithoos, the king of the Lapiths. Yes, the lettering makes it clear.’

‘And these are the drunken centaurs,’ Adam remarked, pointing to the half-men and half-horses reeling across the vase’s bulging middle.

‘An illustration of the dangers of inebriation.’

‘Never allow a centaur more drink than it can hold,’ the young man said.

‘A lesson that Peirithoos learned to his cost.’ Fields straightened and stood up. ‘I am pleased to have seen this but I cannot linger over it as long as I would like. I have another appointment.’

Adam, directed so autocratically to meet his mentor, could not help feeling exasperated that the professor was hastening away so swiftly.

‘I had hoped to have longer to speak with you, sir?’

‘Of course you did, my boy. But it was not to be. You have seen the Tankerville Vase and that must suffice.’

‘You will not be able to dine with me tonight?’

Fields waved a hand, as if to suggest that the very idea of dinner was ludicrous. ‘I must return to college.’

The two men made their way back through the museum towards the entrance.

‘I believe that I *shall* make a diversion here and see the Phigalian

Marbles,' Adam said, as they reached a door to another gallery. 'So we must go our separate ways.'

He held out his hand and Fields took it. 'We will see one another again soon, Adam. Of that I am certain.'

Several inches shorter than his one-time pupil, the professor looked up at Adam's face as if scanning it for signs of continued irritation. He let go of his hand and smoothed the thinning hair on the top of his head. Then he turned abruptly and marched briskly in the direction of the door to the outside world. Adam watched him go, his annoyance slowly fading, and then turned to enter the gallery on his right. He would see how the battle between the Centaurs and the Lapiths appeared in marble.