

The Hairbrush That Saved Christmas

An Agatha Witherington Investigation

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Duncan Johnson

ONE

My first husband used to say there was no such thing as the magic of Christmas, that it was just a myth put out by corporations to sell more of their products.

‘Magic is all around you,’ I would tell him. ‘You just have to know where to look.’ He decided to look for his magic in the direction of the butcher’s daughter so I decided to go in search of husband number two.

My editor tells me that I need to introduce myself at the start of each entry in my memoirs so, for the benefit of those of you who are new to my exploits, my name is Agatha Louise Witherington and I’m a Scorpio. My favourite biscuit is Rich Tea, preferably with a nice hot cup of Darjeeling in which to dunk it. I believe that you can tell a lot about a person by their choice of biscuits. My mother used to tell me that only common people dunked their biscuits in their tea, but I was a rebel from a very young age.

On this particular Christmas Eve, I was ensconced in one of the reading rooms at Claridge’s for my weekly Bridge meeting. The hotel is a bit ostentatious for my tastes, but Brenda’s an agoraphobic and it’s enough of a struggle to get her down from her suite let alone out of the building. Therefore, every Sunday, I dutifully make the trek down from Highgate to Mayfair to join the rest of the girls.

I arrived early, but Brenda was already waiting for me in reception when I arrived. She was lurking near the lifts, as far from the main entrance as possible, and I found myself admiring the restraint of the Claridge’s staff in not pointing out what a truly hideous cardigan she was wearing. Brenda is a fan of chocolate hobnobs.

‘I’ve got something important to tell you,’ she announced without preamble as one of the immaculately attired members of staff helped me out of my coat.

‘And a Merry Christmas to you too,’ I replied. ‘Well go on then, spit it out.’

Brenda shook her head. ‘After the game.’ And she refused to say any more on the subject.

We were ushered into the reading room, our green baize card table already set up near the fire, and provided with drinks while we waited, a sweet sherry for Brenda and a G and T for me, easy on the T. We did not have to wait long; Juliet came barrelling into the room like a hurricane in a department store, plastic bags with designer names on them whirling around her.

‘Sorry we’re late,’ Lavinia apologised. I could just about spy her behind the whirling dervish. ‘Jules left her shopping to the last minute. Again.’

‘Well I do have an awful lot of people to buy for,’ Juliet said. ‘That’s the trouble with coming from a large family.’

I tutted quietly. I too have a multiple children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, second cousins and so on and so forth, but I've also discovered the virtue of gift tokens.

Once we had all settled down and Juliet and Lavinia had been provided with drinks, we paired up for the first rubber. It was my turn to partner Juliet, so Brenda sat down opposite Lavinia. Reaching into the depths of her capacious handbag, Lavinia produced a biscuit tin, opened it and began building a wall in front of her, using custard creams like Mah Jong tiles. Lavinia is a bit of an addict, but, like the good friend I am, I said nothing and continued to shuffle the cards.

Juliet and I won the first game with ease, but things started to fall apart after that. Brenda's enigmatic comment of earlier was preying on my mind and I found it difficult to concentrate. Juliet glared daggers at me as I lost us the fourth trick in a row through forgetting what suit was trumps. I, in turn, shot a black look at Brenda over my half-moon spectacles, but she carried on oblivious. At last, Juliet could take it no more and, claiming a headache in a tone that could have given a penguin hypothermia, she bade us goodnight. Since Lavinia was driving Juliet home, she had no choice but to make embarrassed farewells of her own and hurry after her.

'Finally,' Brenda sighed. 'I thought they'd never leave.'

I have a bit of a competitive streak, truth be told, and losing had done nothing for my mood.

'I suppose I should be going as well.' I struggled to my feet, hips groaning. Brenda practically forced me back into my chair.

'No, no, stay a bit longer,' she insisted. 'Please.'

'Brenda,' I said, 'it's late, it's Christmas Eve and Tom's waiting for me. I really should be going.'

'But you can't go.'

I raised an eyebrow and waited for Brenda to continue.

She chewed her bottom lip nervously and then said, 'I think I need your help.'

This was interesting. Brenda hated asking for help.

'Go on,' I said.

Brenda leaned close to me and whispered, conspiratorially, 'Someone's stolen the hairbrush.'

There was no need to ask which hairbrush. Unless you taste runs to tortoiseshell combs, there is only one hairbrush of any interest in Brenda's collection: The Hairbrush of Aleister Crowley.

Aleister Crowley, magician, heroin addict and 'the most evil man that ever lived', spent the last few days on this earth in a B&B in Hastings. Said B&B was owned and run by Brenda's Aunt Maud. Maud was a practical woman and, when Crowley finally shuffled off this mortal coil, she rifled through his room looking for items she could sell to collectors at a later date. Among the items she 'rescued' was a silver-backed hairbrush. To Maud's

disappointment, her collection didn't make her as much as she had hoped – though you'll be amazed by what some of those items are going for on ebay today – but there was one item she refused to sell. Instead, she gave the hairbrush to her niece as a Christmas present.

'And I was planning to pass it on to my niece,' Brenda explained as she led me to her suite.

'Wouldn't she have preferred an iPod?' I suggested, but Brenda ignored me.

'I was going to wrap it up tonight,' she said, 'but when I opened up the box for one last look, it was gone.'

'Are you sure you haven't simply misplaced it?' I asked, eyeing the clutter in Brenda's rooms.

Brenda glared. 'I was hoping that you could do some of that... thing you do to find it.'

That 'thing I do' is magic. I'm a white witch. Well, more of an off-white witch, I suppose. I can never resist using a little of my gift when placing a bet on Derby day.

My mood, however, was still a little sour. 'Have you tried looking behind the sofa?'

'Agatha, please,' Brenda persisted. 'Surely you can see how important this is?'

'It's just a hairbrush.' I knew that wasn't true, however. It was a hairbrush that had been in the possession of the most powerful magician of the last century. Who knew what that brush was now capable of?

With a sigh, I realised that I had no choice. 'Show me the box,' I said. That was when I had my first shock of the night.

I don't claim to be the most gifted magic-user in the world; I dabble, but it's more in the way of a hobby than a career. That said, when I handle an object that has been closely associated with magic, I do expect to pick up some kind of impression. This box refused to give me anything at all. When Brenda handed it to me it felt as if I was trying to grasp a hole in the air.

'Agatha?' Brenda must have noticed my discomfort.

Unless I was very much mistaken, someone had gone to great lengths to cover their tracks. Someone good. I could no longer dismiss Brenda's concerns out of hand.

'Do you have any candles?' I asked.

Brenda rooted around for a bit before producing a box of tea-lights. 'Will these do?'

I nodded, taking them from her. 'And a measure of gin.'

While Brenda fixed my drink, I cleared the coffee-table and placed a lit tea-light at each corner. Then I retrieved my tarot cards from my bag and started to shuffle.

'What are you doing?' Brenda asked.

'Looking for advice,' I replied. The candles were to help me focus, the gin was to steady my nerves. I knocked it back in one then returned to the cards. Full tarot spreads can involve ten cards or more, but when I'm in a hurry, or just feeling impatient, I limit myself to just three. I turned over the first card. It was the Nine of Coins.

‘What does it mean?’ Brenda asked. I didn’t reply; I don’t like to comment on a reading until it is complete.

The Nine of Coins is also known as Gain and it represents the acquisition of material wealth. However, I’d drawn the card upside-down and what is the opposite of gain? It seemed obvious that this card was referring to the theft. I studied the card closer. Three disks were arranged in a triangle with the remaining six forming a circle around them. A central idea radiating outward. Did this mean that this theft was only the first of many.

I turned over the second card – the Queen of Swords. This card represents a perceptive, individualistic woman and she was pictured with light coming out of the helmet she was wearing, bringing truth to all she surveyed. I had often used this card in readings to represent myself as the querent. Was I reading too much into things to see myself represented here as well?

The third and final card was from the major arcana. It was the Hierophant. I was struck by the image of him riding a bull, representative of the astrological sign Taurus. This card can represent the culmination of a magical working and I wondered if this was the reason the hairbrush had been taken.

I returned the cards to the deck.

‘Well?’ Brenda prompted.

I wanted nothing more to do with it. It was Christmas and I just wanted to go home with Tom and watch the carols on the telly. However, if the cards were to be believed, the theft of the hairbrush was just the first step in something much larger, something the cards wanted me to get involved in. As my second husband said when he proposed to me, who am I to argue with destiny? (I wonder if he said the same just before the combine harvester hit him.)

‘All right, Brenda,’ I said at last, ‘I’ll find your hairbrush for you.’

TWO

My third husband would say that you can find the most amazing things in the most unlikely of places. He was referring to stamps, mind, but I assumed the same held true of hairbrushes. Colin was a philatelist, I'm sorry to say, but he had thighs that could crack walnuts so I was prepared to forgive him a lot.

Tom was waiting outside with my car, a genuine London black cab. Yes, I admit it's a tax fiddle, but if you haven't learned how to make the system work for you by my age then you really haven't been trying. Tom is my live-in gardener/handyman/chauffeur and I keep him around principally because he looks stunning de-heading the roses with his shirt off. But before anyone gets the wrong idea, I should stress that ours is strictly a look, but don't touch relationship. If I were to take it any further, I'd likely go the way of Colin, but at least I can safely say that he died happy.

'Home, Mrs W?' Tom asked as I clambered into the back.

'Alas, no,' I replied. 'You don't mind ferrying me around London for a bit, do you? I know it's Christmas and all, but something rather urgent has come up.'

'Something... supernatural, Mrs W?' Tom's blue eyes sparkled at the thought that we were about to embark on another one of our adventures.

'I think it may well be, Tom,' I replied, knowing that my eyes glowed with the same fire.

'Then I don't mind at all,' Tom said. 'Where to first?'

'Baker Street,' I replied. 'I need to speak to Merry.'

The cab pulled away from the kerb and glided east along Mayfair before turning into Regent Street. Overhead hung the gaudy Christmas lights celebrating that latest movie aimed squarely at our three year-olds. People still thronged in the streets, staggering arm-in-arm from one bar or club to the next, determined to greet Christmas in a way that meant they would not have to remember it. Festive pop songs blared out of open doorways loud enough to be heard even within the cab. I tried to blot out the cheeriness so that I could concentrate on the matter at hand.

A few minutes later, we drew to a halt by the entrance to the Baker Street underground station. From here, one can see the residence on the world's greatest (fictional) detective, but people in the know would not have darkened Holmes' door in their search for missing items. Instead they would make their way to the nondescript building across the street and a few doors down.

Mary Christmas, affectionately known as Merry, had worked at the Lost Property Office for as long as I had known her. Despite, or perhaps because of, her name, Mary has a

deep-rooted hatred of all things Christmas, which was why I knew that I would still find her here, no matter the season.

‘We’re closed,’ I heard her call out when I rang the door bell.

‘Even to me?’ I called back. Bolts were pulled back and the heavy door swung open.

‘Agatha!’ Mary bounded out and wrapped her arms around me. I endured the embrace for a couple of moments and then delicately worked my way free.

‘It’s good to see you too, Merry. Do you mind if we go in, it’s freezing out here.’

It wasn’t much warmer inside. ‘The central heating’s on a timer,’ Mary explained apologetically, ‘but I’ve got a space heater in my office.’

Mary led the way to the back of the building, tottering on her four inch heels. Mary is very sensitive about her height, but, no matter what she does, she still looks like a pixie. There was a black bin bag just outside the office. A stream of gold tinsel was making a daring break for freedom.

‘Someone thought it would be a good idea to decorate my office,’ Mary told me. ‘Since you’re here, you can give me a hand.’ Mary pointed to a sprig of mistletoe hanging from the ceiling. ‘I can’t reach that. I think it’s supposed to be someone’s idea of a joke.’

‘Let me have a go.’ I dragged a swivel-chair over and Mary held it steady while I climbed on to it.

‘So what brings you out tonight?’ Mary asked.

‘I’m looking for something. Whoever pinned this up didn’t want it to be moved. Have you got a knife?’

‘Just a minute.’ Mary crossed to her desk drawer and returned with a bread-knife. ‘What is it you’re looking for?’

‘A hairbrush.’ I slid the knife blade under the head of the drawing-pin and slowly worked it free. ‘There, that’s got it.’ Mary helped me down. I held up the mistletoe. ‘Do you mind if I hang onto this.’

‘Knock yourself out,’ Mary replied. ‘Brushes are in the sub-basement. I’ll find you a scarf.’

In a typical year, approximately two hundred and fifty thousand items pass through the Lost Property Office. That item that you never thought you would see again is probably lurking here in the vaults beneath Baker Street. There’s a room down here containing eighteen thousand odd socks. Discarded and forgotten objects have a way of gravitating here like moths to a flame. It seemed as good a place as any to start looking for Aleister Crowley’s hairbush.

‘B objects are in here,’ Mary told me, stooping to pick up a butterfly net that had fallen across the aisle. ‘I think brushes are towards the back.’

We wove our way between boots and buckets, briefcases and books. A stuffed buzzard peered out from beneath barrister’s vestments.

‘What’s that?’ I asked, pointing.

Mary waved her torch in the direction I indicated. 'It's a boat,' she said. 'Don't ask me how they got it down here.'

'I was actually talking about that,' I said, picking up an object closer to hand. It was a model bull, the kind of cheap souvenir that a family might bring back from Spain. Normally I would not have given it a second glance, but for some reason it was causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end.

'That's not a hairbrush,' Mary pointed out.

'I suppose not,' I said, returning the bull to the pile.

Hairbrushes were in a series of cardboard boxes stacked against the far wall. Mary dragged over a park bench so that we could sit down while we worked and then we each picked a box each and started to root through it.

After an hour's searching, we had discovered multiple combs, brushes and a set of curling irons, but not the object I was looking for.

'It's not here,' I conceded, replacing the last box on the floor.

Mary sighed. 'Sorry I couldn't be more help.'

'It's not your fault, Merry,' I said. 'I just wish I knew where to look now.'

'Something will turn up, Agatha. It always does.'

'Now you sound like Adam.'

'Third husband?'

'Fourth.'

'Mrs W!' I looked up. Tom was stumbling through the vault towards us. He tripped and fell flat on his face.

'I thought I told you to wait in the car,' I said, helping him up. I peered at what he had tripped over. 'Merry, what's a snooker cue doing in with the B's?'

'It's a billiard cue,' Mary said.

'You've got a phone call,' Tom told me as he dusted himself off, 'from Inspector Southgate.'

I've never got the hang of mobile phones. Adam, my fourth husband, was the technology buff, but electronics tend to react badly around me. Adam banned me from his study after the fifth time his personal computer crashed because I looked at it. Therefore, I let Tom look after the phone.

'Raymond,' I said once Tom had handed over the phone, 'are you calling to wish me a happy Christmas?'

'Happy Christmas, Agatha,' Inspector Raymond Southgate replied. His voice was partly obscured by static, but I was used to this by now. Tom had assured me that there was nothing wrong with the phone and that it sounded fine when he used it. 'Unfortunately, I'm calling about something else.'

There was something in his voice that filled me with trepidation. 'Go on.'

'It's the Stone of London. It's been stolen'

My fourth husband never had any time for history. He could bend your ear for hours about the latest technological gizmo to be released, but would fall asleep if you mentioned anything prior to the advent of the computer. He would have been one of the thousands of Londoners everyday who pass one of London's greatest relics without even giving it a second glance.

The London stone was part of the altar of Brutus the Trojan, the founder of London and, according to legend, 'so long as the stone of Brutus is safe, so long shall London flourish.' Shakespeare, Blake and Dickens all believed in the power of the stone and mentioned it in their writings, but today the stone is all but neglected, hidden away in a kerbside cage outside a sports shop on Cannon Street. Everyone knows what will happen if the ravens leave the Tower, but would anyone even notice if the Stone disappeared until London started falling around their ears?

Apparently so, if my telephone call from the Metropolitan Police was anything to go by.

If one ignored the two police cars, Cannon Street was deserted as Tom brought the cab to a halt by the kerb. Inspector Southgate opened the door for me. Chivalry, it would appear, is not dead in the twenty-first century, merely in hiding. He was a tall, dark man who would probably have been quite something in his youth, but the strain of his job told on his face.

'I'm sorry for dragging you out here on Christmas Eve, Mrs Witherington,' the inspector said, his open overcoat billowing in the wind, 'but this seemed like something right up your alley.'

'That's quite all right, Raymond,' I replied. The inspector had consulted me on a number of prior investigations with a supernatural bent and he had not wasted my time yet.

He led me towards the gaggle of uniformed officers in their high-visibility jackets. 'Is it true what they say about the Stone?'

I shrugged. 'If we don't find it then I suspect we shall find out. How was it taken?'

Inspector Southgate ran a finger around the collar of his shirt. 'Um, we were rather hoping you could tell us.'

Curious, I approached the decorative metal cage perched discreetly between the pavement and the plate glass window displaying trainers and football shirts, all discounted for Christmas. The cage might once have been white, but years of exposure to London pollution had turned it a drab grey. I peered closer.

'This cage hasn't been broken,' I said, stating the obvious.

'I spotted that as well,' the inspector replied, 'but if the cage is still intact, how did they get the Stone out?'

‘I wonder...’ I murmured to myself. Two magical artefacts stolen in a matter of hours. I didn’t believe in that much coincidence.

‘You know something, don’t you?’ the inspector said.

‘Perhaps.’ I turned to face him. ‘There are a few avenues of enquiry I’d like to pursue.’

‘And you’re not going to tell me what they are, are you?’ Inspector Southgate rolled his eyes. ‘You know, I could arrest you for withholding information.’

‘You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.’

The inspector sighed. He was inured to my foibles by now. ‘Just try and stay out of trouble.’

I smiled sweetly. ‘What kind of trouble can a nice old lady like me get into?’

I was already walking back to the cab, but I could feel the inspector’s glare boring into my back.

‘Where to now, Mrs W?’ Tom asked as I slid into the back seat.

‘Home first, Tom. I think a job like this is going to require some serious footwear.’

THREE

My second husband, once the initial romance had dulled, would say that he needed to take out a second mortgage just to pay for my shoe habit. It was a difficult position to argue against. In my house opposite Highgate Cemetery, I have set aside a room to serve as a 'boot cupboard.' It is the largest room in my house. I mentioned earlier that I'm not the greatest user of magic. I can't just snap my fingers and cause a rabbit to appear. Instead, I have to work through tools, such as my tarot cards. My favourite tools by far, however, are my enchanted shoes. I've collected dozens of pairs over the years, in a variety of colours and styles, each pair enchanted for a different purpose. I left Tom playing computer games while I took my time deciding which pair was most suited for the task at hand.

Big Ben was striking eleven once Tom and I had driven south again to Trafalgar Square. I took a moment to admire the Christmas Tree standing between the four lions. It was an impressive sight, but still dwarfed beneath Nelson's Column beside it.

'Where are we headed, Mrs W?' Tom asked as he locked up the black cab.

'Just around the corner, Tom,' I said. 'I want to pay a visit to the National Portrait Gallery.'

I started walking away and Tom fell into step beside me.

'Just a thought,' Tom said, 'but isn't the gallery closed by this time of night?'

'Oh, I expect so,' I replied. There were a short flight of steps up to the NPG entrance. 'Did I ever tell you about my fifth husband? He was a locksmith, or so I thought. He was a fan of garibaldi biscuits which should really have made me suspicious from the start. He did, however, teach me everything he knew.'

I knelt by the door and removed my tools from my handbag.

'Breaking and entering is illegal, Mrs W,' Tom said. 'What if we get caught?'

'We shall have to do our very best not to let that happen,' I said. I paused in my work. 'Tom, if you want to wait in the car, I'll understand.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Tom replied. 'If you're going in there then so am I. I just thought one of us should state the obvious, that's all.'

I smiled and returned my attention to the lock. After a few minutes work, the lock popped open. My fifth husband taught me well.

'Could you give me a hand up?' I asked Tom as my joints protested, Nature's way of telling me not to break into art galleries on dark winter nights. I plan to take as much notice of Nature as I do everybody else.

We stepped into the spacious entrance hall.

'Turn on that torch, Tom, there's a good boy,' I said. 'I can't see a blessed thing.'

‘But won’t there be security guards?’ Nevertheless, Tom did as he was told. I like that in a man.

‘The guards won’t bother us,’ I told him.

‘They won’t?’

I pointed at my feet. ‘Slingbacks of Stealth.’

They didn’t really go with my outfit, but there are times when practicality outweighs the importance of being fashionable. Those times are few and far between, but they do exist.

Tom started heading towards the wide staircase, but, conscious of my protesting knees and hips, I took him by the arm and guided him towards the lift.

‘Let’s not make this any more of an effort than we have to,’ I suggested.

I turned left when we emerged onto the first floor and then left again. Tom crept sneakily across the room, keeping to the shadows, but I did not bother, confident that the enchantment I had placed on my footwear would conceal us from prying eyes.

‘Here we are,’ I said as we entered Room 31. ‘Shine the light up there.’

Tom pointed the torch where I indicated, illuminating the portrait of a man in red.

‘Aleister Crowley,’ I said, ‘as painted by Leon Engers Kennedy.’

Tom considered the portrait. ‘This is probably a stupid question, Mrs W, but what did he need a hairbrush for?’

I too studied the magician’s bald pate. ‘I don’t think it was for grooming, Tom.’ I replied. ‘I suspect it was more by way of a tool to be used in a magical working.’

‘Like your shoes?’

‘Like my shoes,’ I agreed. I handed Tom a piece of chalk. ‘Could you draw the magic circle for me? If I bend down again, I doubt if I’ll be able to get back up.’

‘There are worse ways to spend Christmas Eve,’ Tom replied. ‘Which way is north?’

I pointed and Tom knelt down and began scribing symbols on the wooden floor.

‘Wouldn’t you rather be spending Christmas with your family?’ I asked.

‘I thought I was,’ he said, then changed the subject. ‘So tell me a bit more about this Crowley character.’

‘It all rather depends on your point of view. To some he was a visionary, to others, including his own mother, he was a monster. He grew up in a strict Christian household, but something happened in 1896 that drove him towards the occult.’

‘Something?’ Tom said, drawing a fire symbol on the southern side of the circle.

I shrugged. ‘Crowley never talked about it, not in any detail anyway. Conspiracy theorists can have a field day. Crowley went on to join the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and made numerous enemies, whom, so the story goes, he fought by summoning up armies of angels and demons.’

‘Angels *and* demons?’

‘As I said, it all depends on your perspective. There was a schism in the Golden Dawn

and Crowley went on to found his own magical philosophy – Thelema – at an abbey in Sicily. Unfortunately for Crowley, the abbey did not last and he was declared bankrupt after losing a court case when he sued someone for referring to him as a black magician. The judge was less than sympathetic.

‘On the other hand, and we’re back to that dichotomy again, he was in favour with other elements of the establishment. Ian Fleming suggested numerous ways of using Crowley as an agent during World War II.’

‘Ian Fleming?’ Tom asked. ‘*James Bond’s* Ian Fleming.’

‘The same. You’ll find his portrait on the other side of the room if you want to take a look later. My point is that for every one who saw Crowley as the Beast of Revelation, there was another who saw his potential for great works. It’s a pity that he squandered that potential through drugs.’

‘And what’s your opinion of Crowley, Mrs W?’

I considered for a moment. ‘Well, I didn’t know him personally, but, but all accounts, he was a thoroughly unpleasant individual. And yet he was an extremely talented magician who believed he was working to bring about a new Aeon for all humanity. To me, he sounds like a man whose favourite biscuit would have been a Jaffa Cake. The whole cake-biscuit controversy is very him, I feel. Now, let’s have a look at this circle.’

I appraised Tom’s work. ‘Very good. Someone’s been paying attention.’

Tom positively beamed beneath the praise. Cutting a hole in the air with my right hand, I stepped into the circle. Crowley glared down at me from his portrait and I locked my gaze with his. I needed to form a connection with that hairbrush and this seemed to be the quickest way. I slowed my breathing and let my mind travel.

The room blurred and drained away beneath me like bathwater down a plughole. Images rushed towards me. I could see the hairbrush spinning in the void. Its heavy silver back opened up to form a doorway and I stepped into the darkness. The sound of marching feet assailed my ears and I could hear the clang of metal against metal. Light glinted off sword blades as they were thrust into my field of vision. Amongst the swords, I could make out a standard bearing the letters SPQR. Then I was climbing a scaffold, the hangman’s noose rocking gently to and fro in the breeze. The executioner, dressed all in black, turned towards me. He raised a meaty hand and threw back his hood. Horns thrust towards me...

‘Mrs W! Mrs W!’

Someone was shaking me.

‘Mrs W, wake up.’

Gingerly, I opened my eyes, grateful that the only light in the room came from Tom’s

torch.

‘What on earth possessed you to break the circle?’ I snapped at Tom as consciousness returned.

Tom looked sheepish. ‘You looked like you were having some kind of fit. I was only trying to help.’

Gradually, my brain processed what had happened.

‘You did the right thing, Tom,’ I said, patting his hand. He had probably saved my life.

Three bulls. One in the tarot cards, one in the lost property office and now one in my vision. It was a message and I had a nasty suspicion as to what it meant to say. The standard as good as confirmed it.

‘Help me up, Tom,’ I said, ‘there’s work to be done.’

‘Don’t you think you should rest a bit first, Mrs W?’ Tom’s face was a picture of concern.

‘There’s no time. If I’m right, we may already be too late.’

My eyes alighted on a painting near the door and my pulse quickened. I was a regular visitor to the National Portrait Gallery and I was familiar with all the paintings in this room. Winston Churchill, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Virginia Woolf and Ernest Shackleton all shared wall-space with Crowley, but the painting I was looking at didn’t belong up here. It was not even supposed to be on display.

It was another message and this one I understood.

‘Gentleman Jack,’ I muttered darkly. ‘I should have known.’

FOUR

My fourth husband, Adam, was fond of saying that people who looked to the past were frightened of looking ahead. Regardless, as I get older I find myself increasingly looking backwards.

Gentleman Jack, otherwise known as Jack Sheppard, was something of a celebrity in the early eighteenth century and, unlike the so-called celebrities paraded in front of us today, Jack had earned his by being good at something. Jack Sheppard was an escape artist. He needed to be. A notorious housebreaker, he was arrested no less than five times and escaped from prison on all but the last occasion, once extricating himself from the condemned hold of Newgate with only the aid of a small nail. On the fifth occasion, Jack's jailer discovered the knife with which he intended to cut his ropes on the way to the gallows. This time, nothing would halt the execution.

Jack Sheppard, however, had an alternative plan, one that would allow him to escape even death itself. One that required him to make a deal with the supernatural.

I first met Gentleman Jack, as he had taken to calling himself, in '67 in San Francisco. I had decided to tour the world and, while pausing on the west coast of the United States of America, I had joined a coven in Divisadero. We used to conduct our rituals amongst the buffalo in Golden Gate Park and let me tell you that dancing sky-clad while trying to draw down the moon is a lot less nippy in San Francisco than on Hampstead Heath. But it was the sixties and everyone was doing it. The Summer of Love was so close one could practically taste it on the sea breeze.

It was the 14th of January and I had wandered down to Golden Gate Park with my friends Raven and Summer at first light. (Raven and Summer weren't their real names, those were Caroline and Samantha, but they had adopted 'magical names' on entering the coven. I thought the practice was a bit pretentious, to be honest, and insisted on retaining my given name.) The reason for our early start was that today was the day of the Human Be-In.

Other the past few years, San Francisco, the Haight Ashbury district in particular, had become the counterculture capital of the US, possibly the world. The hippie movement and the Beat Generation all made the Haight their home and thousands more left their own homes to be part of it. In 1965, the Haight boasted fifteen thousand residents. By 1967, that figured had swelled to in excess of one hundred thousand, all drawn to the dream.

The sun rose in the sky as revellers congregated on the Polo Grounds – the 'Gathering of the Tribes' the *San Francisco Oracle* had promised – and the morning waned as we

waited. You could feel the magic building even if you weren't sensitive to it. Up on the stage, the roadies were making the final preparations. The Diggers were handing out free sandwiches. The Merry Pranksters were offering LSD. And everywhere there seemed to be Hells Angels, all leather and denim and beards, but doing nothing more sinister than reuniting lost children with their parents. Everyone coming together without the need for conflict.

And then Timothy Leary took to the stage.

'Turn on, tune in and drop out.' The crowd went wild.

We listened to poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, heard speeches by Leary and Ram Dass and enjoyed music by acts such as the Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service and Jefferson Airplane, but despite all the love being spread around, something was causing the hair on the back of my neck to stand on end. It took me some time to locate the source. There, flitting between the kites and streamers, the peace symbols and the hash smoke, a dark figure was moving through the crowd. I could tell at once that he did not belong. Here was a wolf let loose in the sheep paddock. I made my excuses to Raven and Summer, though they were too blissed out to notice, and set off in pursuit.

As I drew closer, I saw him sneak up behind a space cadet and raise a flask up behind her head. He did not touch her, but she collapsed to the ground all the same. The man replaced the lid on his flask and moved on. I hurried over to the girl and checked for a pulse. It was slow, but steady; she would recover.

'Why are you following me?'

I cursed myself for not being more careful and turned to face the man I had been pursuing. Close up, it was clear he did not belong. He was wearing the typical tie-dyed shirt and bellbottoms combination, but he could not have looked more uncomfortable in it had he tried.

'Why did you attack her?' I replied, indicating the girl on the ground.

'Not just her.' The man raised his flask and I could see that it was actually an Egyptian canopic jar. And it was glowing.

I clawed at my chest. It felt as if someone was trying to tear my heart from my body. Black spots peppered my vision, but I could still hear the man laughing at me. There was a blur of black, a thud and then someone was helping me up.

I blinked to try to clear my vision and was treated to a view of a red-bearded Hells Angel. I felt like a porcelain doll in his massive paws.

'You okay, miss?' he growled.

'Yes, I'm fine.' To be honest, the world was still spinning, but I was more concerned with the location of the man who had attacked me and his magic jar. I saw him picking himself up, nursing a cut lip where my rescuer had presumably clocked him, and racing off in the direction of the park's nearest edge.

‘Look after her.’ I pointed the Hells Angel in the direction of the girl and set off in pursuit.

I was too slow. The man with the jar burst onto Fulton Street ahead of me and dived in front of an approaching car. The driver braked hard to avoid hitting him and my quarry took the opportunity to wrench open the driver’s door, haul the driver out onto the road and make off with the vehicle. I was left staring after him as he disappeared in the Richmond District.

He thought he had bested me, but he had counted without my choice of shoe. I was wearing Sandals of Speed.

Magic does strange things to ones perceptions. As I ran, there was no sense of travelling any faster than I might without magical assistance and I certainly did not attract the kind of attention I might have expected if people saw me as travelling at superhuman speed, though I did attract a few odd looks as I crossed the Presidio on account of the outfit I have chose to wear to the Human Be-In. And yet, despite this, somehow I knew that I was gaining on the stolen vehicle.

As I emerged from the trees, I could see my quarry abandoning his car and clambering onto the east suspension cable of the Golden Gate Bridge, canopic jar tucked beneath one arm. With no thought for my own safety, I scrambled after him, hands and feet clawing monkey-like to the thick orange cable beneath me. I was younger and more physical back then. Halfway towards the summit of the southernmost tower, I began to consider my predicament. My limbs burned with the effort of climbing and high winds buffeted me, threatening to throw me into the blue-grey expanse of the Golden Gate far below. I could hear the distant sound of car horns as people on the bridge noticed what was happening high above them, but I forced myself to block it all out. All that mattered was putting one hand in front of another, moving my feet one inch, then two and finally, finally, reaching the top.

‘Don’t you ever give up,’ the man I had been pursuing demanded. ‘Who do you think you are?’

‘Who do you think *you* are?’ I retorted, fighting for breath.

‘Me?’ He put a hand to his chest and then bowed with a flourish. ‘Gentleman Jack at your service, madam. But perhaps you know me better by my former name, Jack Sheppard.’

‘Never heard of you.’

‘Never heard of me?’ Jack was stung. ‘How can you not have heard of English greatest ever escapologist, a man who escaped imprisonment in St Giles Roundhouse using nothing but his wits and the razor in his pocket, a man who escaped from death itself?’

‘Really,’ I said, glad of the chance to talk since it gave me time to gather my resources. ‘And how exactly did you accomplish that? I’m sure that’s a trick everyone would like to know.’

I could swear that a flicker of embarrassment crossed Jack's face. 'I needed a modicum of assistance for that particular exploit. I gained the favour of the dark god Ahriman.'

I shivered and not because of the biting wind. Ahriman *was* a name with which I was familiar. You've all heard the story. In the beginning, the universe was created – by God, Ahura Mazda, an in-rush of hydrogen, whatever fits your personal belief system – and there was light. What you probably did not know, but really should have worked out for yourself, is that that the first light also created the first shadow, the shadow of the Creator. Call it the Un-Creator, if you like, or call it Ahriman.

'You made a deal with the Un-Creator?' I was incredulous. 'Are you insane?'

'Perhaps, but given that the alternative was death by hanging, it didn't seem like such a bad choice at the time.' Jack flashed me a crooked smile. 'There's a price to pay, of course.'

'The jar,' I reasoned.

'Ahriman wants souls,' Jack explained, 'and while those children are expanding their minds their souls are so easy to harvest. Very soon now, Ahriman will arrive to claim his prize and then I'll be rid of him once and for all.'

'Not if I stop you.'

'I don't think that's very likely, do you?' Jack produced a revolver from the pocket of his bellbottoms and pointed it at my chest.

I acted on instinct, lashing out with my foot and kicking the jar out into empty air. It seemed to hover for a moment, then plummeted downwards, shattering when it impacted with the road below. (Were you expecting a sophisticated, magical solution? I'm sorry to disappoint you, but, most of the time, it's the low-tech methods that get the job done.)

I turned to face Gentleman Jack, my heart pounding like a sledgehammer in my chest. Jack's eyes narrowed and I could see his finger tighten on the trigger of the gun. I distinctly recall that the thought that flashed through my mind as I confronted my own mortality was regret that I would now never get married, which is ironic given all that I've learned about that particular institution since. But rather than shoot me, Jack instead spread his arms wide and laughed.

'Ah well, you've bested me this time,' he said, 'but can the defeated man beg one last favour from the victor?'

'That would depend upon the favour,' I replied cautiously. He was still holding the revolver even if it was no longer pointing at me.

'Tell me your name?'

Names have power, but in that moment I forgot myself. 'Agatha,' I replied.

'Agatha.' Jack rolled the name around, committing it to memory. 'Perhaps we'll dance again in the next life, dear Agatha.'

And then he swan-dived off of the bridge.

Forty years later, staring at a portrait of Jack Sheppard by James Thornhill in the National Portrait Gallery, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that Gentleman Jack was back. And he was taunting me.

FIVE

My fifth husband shared his philosophy once. He argued that the human brain was a flawed instrument. Belief systems throughout the ages, he told me, be they Christianity, the religion of the Celts or quantum theory, were simply the mind's way of trying to comprehend a universe it was not equipped to understand. Thus, he concluded, how could one say with certainty that it was immoral to steal the family silver? I did not share his philosophy, which is probably why we are no longer together.

I bundled Tom towards the gallery exit. 'We have to hurry,' I told him. 'There's no time to lose.'

'What's going on?' Tom asked as we waited impatiently for the lift.

'I'll explain on the way,' I said.

Thick fog had descended by the time we emerged from the NPG and the pavement was slick with frost as we hurried towards the cab. I could hear midnight mass starting up within St Martin-in-the-Fields, the congregation blissfully unaware of the danger outside.

'Where to, Mrs W?' Tom asked me as he started the engine.

'Mansion House,' I replied, 'and don't spare the horses.'

Tom drove like his life depended on it, but still found the energy to maintain a conversation.

'So why Mansion House?'

'There are several interesting things about Mansion House,' I explained. 'Did you know that it's one of only two underground stations to use all five vowels in its name?'

'Handy in pub quizzes,' Tom said as we swerved by St Paul's, 'but I don't see how it helps us now.'

'Another interesting thing about Mansion House is that it's just up the road from the Temple of Mithras. You can see the remains of the temple just here on the right,' I said, pointing at the nondescript pile of old stones.

'Do you want me to pull over here?' Tom asked.

'No, keep going. It's Mansion House we want.' I leaned forward, peering out of the windscreen through the fog. 'The worship of Mithras was one of the cults Roman legions brought back with them from their campaigns in Persia and when those same legions were stationed in Britain they brought their cult with them. Their temple, however, was underground. The remains over there were moved to their present location during the rebuilding work following the Second World War.'

'And it's the original temple we're interested in, right?' Tom said.

'Exactly.' I jumped out of the cab as Tom brought us to a halt outside Mansion House

station. ‘The temple originally stood on the left bank of the River Walbrook, somewhere beneath our feet.’

‘But how are we supposed to get to it?’ Tom asked.

I started working on the lock holding the entrance gate closed as I replied. ‘A while back, an extension to the underground was proposed that would link Earl’s Court with Mansion House. The extension was never completed, but some initial excavation was carried out. If I’m right, we can get into the Mansion House end of the tunnel here and follow it to where it crosses the Walbrook.’

‘Which is where the temple was.’

‘Precisely.’ I slid the gate away and we entered the station. Tom held open the ticket barrier for me and we hurried down the stationary escalator.

‘What I don’t understand,’ Tom said, ‘is what this Temple of Mithras has to do with a hairbrush and the Stone of London.’

‘I’m a bit hazy on the details myself,’ I admitted, ‘but here’s what I know. The Cult of Mithras prided truth, honour and courage above all, which was why it was so popular with soldiers. They believed that Mithras was born from a rock and that he endured a series of trials while he was growing up. These prepared him for his encounter with the primordial bull. I’ve been seeing bull images all evening but I didn’t make the connection at first. Anyway, Mithras dragged the bull to a cave and killed it, releasing its lifeblood from which all animals and plants on Earth sprang. The reason the cult built their temples underground, by the way, is to represent the cave where the battle took place.’

We had reached the level of the platforms and I glanced around until I spotted a service tunnel.

‘This way, I think,’ I said.

‘It’s like when we fought the Beast of London,’ Tom said, eyeing the tunnel sceptically.

‘You mean when I fought the Beast of London,’ I corrected. ‘You just came along to carry my umbrella. What’s interesting about Mithras, from our point of view, is that the cult had a festival to celebrate Mithras’ birth and the date of that festival is 25th December. Which, incidentally, is in about ten minutes time.’

For a while there was silence, broken only by the steady drip of water from the ceiling, while Tom digested this information.

‘So you think someone’s trying to disrupt the festival?’ he said at last.

‘Indeed she does, boy,’ another voice interrupted.

There was a light up ahead where the tunnel widened and there, silhouetted by the light, was Jack. He did not appear to have aged a day since our encounter in San Francisco.

‘I don’t think we’ve been introduced,’ he continued. ‘I am Gentleman Jack and in a few short minutes, my patron and I are going to call a halt to that travesty the Romans called *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*. You took your time getting here, Agatha. I was beginning

to wonder if you were going to make it at all, but I should have realised that even a second-rate witch couldn't fail to spot the trail I'd left for you.'

'Whatever you're planning, Jack, I'll stop you,' I said. 'I did it before and I'll do it again.'

'Not this time, dear Agatha,' Jack replied, his smile never wavering. 'This time I came prepared.'

He pointed at me with his index finger and blue energy crackled in my direction. Then it dissipated harmlessly around me.

Unhurriedly, I removed the mistletoe Mary Christmas had given me from my pocket.

'A spell of protection,' I explained. 'I may only be a second-rate witch, but I'll always trump a third-rate hack like you.'

'You're too late anyway,' Jack snapped petulantly. 'I've already conducted the ritual and we're only waiting now for the correct celestial alignment to allow Ahriman to cross over and prevent the return of the sun.'

'I'm sorry?' I said. 'Can you repeat that?'

Jack blinked. 'What?'

'It's just I thought you said something about preventing the return of the sun.'

'Indeed I did. The birth of Mithras marks the triumph of the sun in its battle with the darkness of winter. With the power of the Stone of London, I have prevented that.'

'Have you really?' I said. Then I laughed.

'What's so funny?' Jack snapped. 'Stop laughing!'

'I'm sorry,' I replied, 'I can't help it. I had worked myself up into such a state because I thought I had to stop whatever it was you were planning, but it turns out that I need not have bothered.'

'You don't know what you're talking about, you crazy old woman,' Jack insisted. 'I've won.'

I turned to Tom. 'The reason *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* falls on the 25th the December,' I said, 'is that, in Roman times, that was the day of the winter solstice.'

'The shortest day of the year,' Tom said. 'That's what he means about the light beating back from the dark.'

'Would you mind not talking about me as if I'm not here?' Jack said.

'Exactly,' I told Tom, 'but what Jack has failed to take into account is that in 1582 Pope Gregory XIII introduced a new calendar to replace the Julian one and, as a result, the date of the winter solstice shifted to the 21st of December.' I turned back to Jack. 'You are a very silly little man and your plan to prevent the triumph of the sun will fail because the sun has already fought its battle and emerged victorious.'

'You're trying to trick me,' Jack said, but I could see in his eyes that he knew the truth.

'I don't imagine Ahriman will be too pleased with you. Failure is becoming something

of a habit...’

Jack swirled his cloak around himself. ‘You haven’t heard the last of me, Agatha. Our next meeting will be our last.’

He span on his heel and ran off down the corridor. I tutted. ‘How overly melodramatic.’

‘Do you think this Ahriman will catch him,’ Tom asked, ‘or is he going to get away?’

‘He was England’s greatest escapologist,’ I replied. ‘It’s what he does. Come on, let’s get this stone back to Raymond and call this case closed.’

Tom hesitated, then pointed at the tunnel wall. ‘Um, Mrs W, should it be doing that?’

On the floor, the silver-backed Hairbrush of Aleister Crowley was glowing with a soft blue light and above it a shadow was forming, a human-like figure with long, curved horns.

‘That isn’t good,’ I said softly.

‘I thought you said his ritual wouldn’t work?’

‘And it won’t,’ I said, ‘not the way he intended. This is something else.’

The shadow was getting larger. It opened its eyes, glowing red like coals, and growled at us.

‘Do something!’ Tom implored me.

‘I’m thinking,’ I snapped back. ‘I told you that Crowley summoned angels and demons to fight his battles for him. That hairbrush must be one of the tools he used to do it, a gateway between the realms. That must be why Jack stole it – to give Ahriman access to our dimension.’

‘So that... that thing, that’s Ahriman?’

‘I wonder...’ An idea was forming at the back of my mind, too nebulous to focus on just yet, but building rapidly. ‘Get out of here, Tom, while you still can.’

‘I’m not leaving you, Mrs W,’ Tom insisted.

‘Stupid boy,’ I muttered, but I did not have the time to argue. Instead, I grasped hold of the handle of the hairbrush and focussed all my energies on it.

The shadow was not Ahriman, of that I was certain. Jack’s ritual had failed, but he had unintentionally activated the hairbrush, causing it to perform whatever magic old Aleister had intended for it. Crowley was no fool and there was no benefit to him in summoning the Un-Creator, so what exactly had he been trying to accomplish. I recalled my discussion with Tom in the National Portrait Gallery about the dichotomy inherent in reports of Crowley’s character and felt that idea at the back of my head blossom and burst.

In Judeo-Christian culture, the image of the horned beast has come to be associated with Satan, with evil, but the reason they picked on this particular image was to discredit followers of another faith. To the ancient Celts, the horned god was Cernunnos, the Green Man, a nature god. To one set of beliefs, the shadow in front of me represented destruction, to another it was life. It was all a matter of perspective. With this in mind, I concentrated my efforts on shifting my own perceptions, of channelling the manifestation

down one route rather than the other.

My vision blurred, but I could make out buds forming on the shadow's horns as they twisted to form antlers.

'Who summons me?' a voice echoed in my head.

I was surrounded by colour and sound and smell and taste, my senses overloading with the data that was flooding them. My fifth husband's comment about the human brain being unable to truly comprehend the universe had never seemed more true than then, but, for the briefest of moments, it all made sense to me.

The moment passed.

'The garden,' I found myself mumbling as consciousness returned. 'He showed me the garden.'

'Mrs W, are you all right?' I turned to see Tom crouching beside me, his hand hovering over my shoulder, but a hair's breadth away from actually touching.

'What happened?' I asked, sitting up groggily.

'Beats me,' Tom said, 'but that thing's gone so whatever you did, I reckon it worked. It did work, right?'

I nodded slowly.

'Let's get out of here,' I said.

The bells of St Paul's were welcoming the new day as we left Mansion House station, Tom supporting my weight as we ascended the steps. Snowflakes were falling steadily from the grey sky, dusting the streets and rooftops like icing sugar.

'Is this your doing,' Tom asked, eyes wide with wonder.

I smiled enigmatically.

'Think of it as the magic of Christmas,' I replied.

FIN