

Conversation Pieces
Volume 53

The Adventure of the
Incognita Countess

by
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Published by Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, WA 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ISBN: 978-1-61976-119-3

Cover illustration: Titanic © Can Stock Photo Inc. / Catmando

Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin Kempton:
www.writersmugs.com

Editor Note: Spelling in this work follows British English style of the period for authenticity.

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging

Acknowledgements

For their assistance and support, I'd like to thank my parents, my sister, Steven J. Bigwood, Elizabeth Bourne, K. Tempest Bradford, Jessica "Jessie Lou" Butterfield, Brenda W. Clough, Georges T. Dodds, L. Timmel Duchamp, Win Scott Eckert, C.C. Finlay, Kim Fletcher, Dr. Donald M. Frazee, Lucas Garrett, Arrate Hidalgo, Carol Hightshoe, Dr. Kyung H. Lee, Thomas Marcinko, Nancy Jane Moore, Saabrina Mosher, Jessee Robbins, Nisi Shawl, Rene Sears, Susanna J. Sturgis, Joe Vincent, Kathryn Wilham, Amy Wolf, members of the Titanic Historical Society Inc. (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/THSOofficial/>), and especially S., Dr. James Ray Comer, Rebecca McFarland Kyle, and Joe Murphy.

All mistakes are mine.

For S.

“You will think me cruel, very selfish, but love is always selfish; the more ardent the more selfish. How jealous I am you cannot know. You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me, and still come with me, and hating me through death and after. There is no such word as indifference in my apathetic nature.”

— Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, “Carmilla”

“But to die as lovers may to die together, so that they may live together.”

— Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, “Carmilla”

“It must be that I am dreaming, and that I shall awaken in a moment to see that awful knife descending toward my heart—kiss me, dear, just once before I lose my dream forever.”

— Edgar Rice Burroughs, *The Return of Tarzan*

“I cannot imagine any condition which would cause a ship to founder. I cannot conceive of any vital disaster happening to this vessel. Modern shipbuilding has gone beyond that.”

— Captain Edward John Smith

referring to the *Adriatic*,

from *A Night to Remember* by Lord, Walter.

London
9 April 1912

M summons me to his office at Whitehall Court and assigns my first solo mission.

“Your covert assignment,” M elaborates, “is unbeknownst to everyone save myself and a few other individuals at the very highest levels of government.” He slides a dossier across the glacial expanse of his desk. “Make sure this gentleman returns safely to Washington, DC.”

I open the dossier. It concerns Major Archibald Butt, a prominent American official. The photographs show a rather stout, fit-looking gentleman with grey-threaded dark hair and a trim moustache. With his smooth face and prominent jaw, he looks younger than his mid-forties, and he’s handsome in his U.S. Army dress uniform. A quick scan of the intelligence typescript reveals a distinguished record, which has culminated in admirable professional and personal situations: Butt is military aide and close friend to the American president, William Howard Taft.

“You’re to protect Major Butt,” M says. “The cover story is that he bears documents from the Pope to the United States, which in fact he does. But he also bears secret documents of critical importance to British relations with the U.S.”

I look at M. “Critical importance?” I raise my brows. “Have we begun sharing our breakthroughs in Martian science?”

Since the failed Martian invasion of England in 1902, our government has devoted enormous resources to unlocking the secrets of the alien technology. It’s only in the last few years that we’ve mastered the heat-ray; the rest continue to elude us.

“We’ll never share Martian technology,” M frostily responds, missing my humour. “The documents in question involve a breakthrough in submarine technology.”

I smile. “I wouldn’t have thought the Bruce-Partington plans all that valuable at this late date.”

This time, M perceives my jest. He reacts as he commonly does, with a frown. “This is fresh information from Germany. Our foe has recovered the *Nautilus*.”

My humour fades. “There’s dashed bad luck.”

M’s eyes narrow at my language; but he says only, “You have a gift for understatement.” He shifts slightly. “We believe our agents have gained all the technological information the Germans have extracted to date by ‘reverse engineering’ Prince Dakkar’s long-lost submarine. We’re sharing only a portion of this information with the Americans, of course, but that makes your mission no less critical.”

“Understood,” I say. “I deduce Major Butt isn’t to know he’s under my protection.”

M scowls. “No one is to know.”

“Does the major have bodyguards he knows about?”

“We haven’t been informed, but expect he does. Of course, whether they’re men or monsters, their existence doesn’t make your mission any less critical.” M leans back, examining my face. Finally, he says, “You’re young for an operation of this importance. But you’re

fully trained, and you've unique abilities. We have every confidence in you, Miss Harker."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now." M rises, and I follow suit. "You've time to study the dossier, visit the Quartermaster Division, and pack your personal effects," he tells me. "Be at Waterloo Station tomorrow morning. The First Class boat train departs at 9.45 a.m." He unthaws enough to smile, though the ice doesn't leave his pale grey eyes. "Your mother and I will see you off, Lucy."

M isn't just the head of the Empire's Secret Service Bureau. He's my stepfather.

"It's crucial," he adds, "that you look like just another passenger."

I restrain my impatience at his condescension.

"You won't find it in the dossier," M says, "but you've a second responsibility."

I wonder if he will now remind me of my one paramount and perpetual duty to the Empire, which I've ably executed since I was thirteen years old. "What is it, sir?"

"Keep your eyes open for *any* suspicious behaviour, and act as you deem necessary."

This isn't what I expected, but it's still so bloody obvious, my impatience slips free. "Don't I always?"

"Of course. But—here." M produces a second Manila folder. "This will clarify."

Opening the folder, I find tickets for a First Class boat train and passage on a White Star liner, which departs Southampton on its maiden passenger voyage tomorrow. I recognise the name of the steamer. It's the first civilian craft to use Martian technology. With its heat-ray fired boilers, analytical navigation engine, and improved design, the steamship is unsinkable. But

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that doesn't mean the technology of the *RMS Titanic* is unstealable.

Cherbourg Harbour

10 April 1912

Once I became old enough to mind my manners and control my blood-thirst, M made sure I received frequent exposure to the upper classes. So, though my mother and her former husband were middle-class, my childhood was not deficient in extravagance. Had it been, however, I'd still have realised the *Titanic* offers the most luxurious First Class afloat.

I'm not paid to admire the shipboard scenery, however. I assume the guise of just another frivolous young Englishwoman with access to money. And, when the *Titanic* finishes the Channel crossing and pulls into Cherbourg Harbour, I make my way to the First Class Reception Room. Here, I join a table of young idlers watching for celebrities among the new passengers. Viewing the Cherbourg passengers as they board is the easiest way for me to get an impression of the newcomers to First Class, and it makes me look like just another sight-seer.

This pastime is less dangerous than a midday stroll through Mayfair, but you wouldn't know it by the man who has asked to be my protector on the voyage. He's Lord Greyborough, a young viscount. His wife on his arm, he drifts towards me.

“Good evening, Miss Harker,” he says, and his wife echoes his greeting.

They’re not being forward. M introduced me to the couple at Waterloo Station, where they waited for the boat train in the company of their small daughter, her Irish nurse, and a coloured lady’s maid.

I return Lord and Lady Greyborough’s greetings cordially, but don’t invite them to sit down. This is reasonable. I’m sitting with three other young ladies, sipping aperitifs, and we quite crowd the small table. The tables closest to ours are occupied, as well. The viscount and his wife will need to find seats elsewhere.

Before I departed Waterloo Station, M handed me a small travel bag with the lie, “I’m afraid you forgot this, Lucy.”

Opening the bag in my private cabin on the *Titanic*, I found cash adequate to support my appearance as a girl wasting her stepfather’s family money. I also found a fat dossier devoted to passengers who’ve booked First Class passage. They’re rather a glittering bunch. Several barely merit inclusion in the dossier, as they appear so routinely in newspaper stories, society columns, or both.

I need no dossier photograph to recognise one of the three men seated with Major Butt at the adjoining table. He’s the distinguished American painter Francis Davis Millet. The other two sharing the bottle of vintage Pinot Grand Fenwick weren’t in the dossiers. Eavesdropping reveals that the funny-looking little man is a German addressed as Dr Krüger. The handsome, vigorous-looking younger man is apparently the doctor’s nephew, Lieutenant Franz Schlosser of the Imperial German Navy.

To the frown of the major and the laughter of the Germans, Millet is holding forth on the passengers. “Queer lot of people on the ship. There are a number of

obnoxious, ostentatious American women, the scourge of any place they infest and worse on shipboard than anywhere.” He shakes his head. “Many of them carry tiny dogs, and lead husbands around like pet lambs.”

As I smile at his trenchant observations, he and his companions arise from their seats. Dash my luck! They’re meeting a trio of new arrivals: the millionaire American colonel John Jacob Astor IV, his distinctly younger bride, and the Denver millionairess Mrs James Joseph Brown. Lord and Lady Greyborough are not slow to assume the vacated table.

Once her husband seats her, Lady Greyborough addresses me in her educated Baltimore accent. “Are you waiting for a friend, Miss Harker?”

“I don’t expect to see anyone I know in Cherbourg,” I tell her. “In truth, I can’t say I know many Frenchmen.”

Lady Greyborough glances at her husband. “James’s closest friend is French.” A trim blonde woman in Parisian fashions, she looks about my age—twenty-one—and a couple of years younger than her husband. A corset hides the evidence, but her scent indicates she’s pregnant. “I’m sorry Paul won’t be joining us on the *Titanic*.”

Amusement curves her husband’s thin lips. “I expect he already gets enough of shipboard life, Joanne.” The viscount is a tall and athletic-looking gentleman, elegantly tailored, with thick black hair and sharp grey eyes and a faint scar across his brow. He’s as good-looking as his wife. “Paul’s a naval officer,” he tells me.

His pleasant baritone has an accent so slight, I expect most miss it. To my ears, it’s clear as a bell; and it’s troubling. Why does a peer of the realm, born and raised in England, have a foreign accent—or, more precisely, a compound of foreign accents? One is upper-middle-class

Parisian French. The other I don't recognise, though I've been extensively drilled in accents of the world.

I ask the couple, "Are you expecting to meet someone here?"

Lady Greyborough smiles. "We're just sight-seeing."

Lord Greyborough isn't sight-seeing. He's scrutinising every new arrival, subtly, yet closely. I don't know the reason. I don't like it.

Neither do I like his developing tendency to show up wherever I go, although this behaviour is no mystery. Gentlemen in First Class traditionally offer their protection to women passengers travelling alone or with others of the fair sex. Human females require such protection. I do not. But no one aboard is to suspect I'm not human, so I accepted Lord Greyborough's offer at Waterloo Station. In return, he unknowingly wastes his time and tries my patience.

I suspect my stepfather asked Lord Greyborough to watch over me. Were I a male—even a human male—M wouldn't think to make such a request, of course. But my stepfather, who is as conversant with my inhuman abilities as my professional training, must of necessity act as if I were a helpless human female.

Major Butt departs with his friends. I stay in my seat. An unaccompanied young woman following the men would pique not only the viscount's curiosity, but also everyone else's.

I forget every concern as a new arrival rivets my attention.

"Gracious, James," Lady Greyborough remarks to her husband. "There's an extraordinarily beautiful woman."

M saw to it that I attended an exclusive girl's school. By this time, he had long since married my mother, and they'd had two sons. But not even my mother was in ear-

shot when, strolling with me across the school's flower-starred sward on a lovely spring day, M remarked: "I perceive you and your close friend, Giuffrida, have become intimate."

My stepfather's extraordinary analytical abilities were no boon to a fifteen-year-old girl keen to hide nearly every thought and deed from adults.

"I shan't be making a fuss, Lucy," M continued, deducing the terror his words roused in me. "Such experiments happen at your age. I won't say anything to your mother, or to anyone else. You'll outgrow it before you're done with school, anyway."

I believed him. And, before I finished school, I'd attracted the interest of a young gentleman, and I felt no less passion for him than he did for me. I gave up my intimacy with my friend, sure I'd found proper adult love; she thought so as well. I was convinced M was right, even when I gave up the gentleman to carry out my first covert intelligence mission.

Now I wonder how I ever could have believed my stepfather.

In response to Lady Greyborough's remark, the viscount studies the stunning new passenger for a moment, then returns his attention to his wife. "The girl's not one-tenth so beautiful as you, dear," he says, with the blindness of love.

The new arrival appears two or three years younger than I am. She's a little above average height, with an unfashionable slenderness that magnifies her stature, and every movement shows a grace I've rarely seen. Her delicate features betray a mingling of Teutonic and Slavic bloodlines. As she glances curiously about, her black eyes reveal a lively intelligence. Her dark, upswept locks give off glints of gold in the brilliant electric light. Her

fair countenance is rosy to a striking degree, perhaps because she's just crossed from the ship's tender and the evening is cold and windy.

While her complexion suggests a robust physical condition, she leans on the arm of her matronly governess or chaperone. She moves with a lassitude so marked, I cannot help but suspect some serious reversal of health. The thought gives me a pang as sharp and unexpected as the desire she's already sparked.

Watch it, I warn myself. Anyone might pose a danger to the major, the *Titanic*, or the British Empire. However unhealthy the girl seems, she must still be considered a possible threat.

Within moments, I know I'm right.

As the lovely girl draws close, still leaning on her grey-haired companion's arm, her subtle scent comes to me.

The young woman is an *upiór*.

From the sudden flaring of the viscount's nostrils and tensing of his body, it's clear Lord Greyborough has also caught her scent. Has he recognised she's a type of vampire? Perhaps more importantly, how did he detect her scent at all? He's human; his scent makes that clear. And humans, compared to monsters and animals, essentially have no sense of smell.

Spirits above and below, I think in astonishment. Is Lord Greyborough the rumoured peer raised by *apes*? But how could he be? The viscount grew up on his family's ancestral estate in Northumberland, as attested by both the intelligence dossier and two decades of routine public appearances.

The *upiór*'s nostrils widen. Her eyes open wide, and she looks my way. Her attention fixes on my face.

She has realised I'm a dhampir.

Her companion, a mortal of about fifty, is oblivious to my true nature. Pausing, the woman faces the Greyboroughs and me. Her expression turns to one of entreaty and, I might almost say, anxiety. When she speaks, her voice is very nearly desperate.

“Kind sir, you look a gentleman.”

Her words are English, her accent Luthanian.

Before Lord Greyborough can react to the governess’s words, she turns to his wife and me. “You are gentlewomen, I know it,” she says. “Please, ladies, sir, won’t you aid us? I dined on the boat train from Paris and am suddenly come over with an illness of the digestion,” she says, though her Teutonic coloration is not much less bright than her charge’s. “I know the White Star Line is most proper, and we are staying in the First Class. But if I am unable to accompany my charge, Miss Clarimal Stein, in public, I pray you will keep an eye on her. She is so delicate—frail from a childhood injury....”

“Ladies, sir, please do agree to my governess’s request,” the *upiór* says, looking into my eyes. Her accent is Styrian; and Styria is part of Austria-Hungary, a nation no friendlier to Britain than Germany. “Frau Rudolph’s health,” claims the *upiór*, “is most distressingly disordered.”

With her entreaty, the *upiór* lays her soft hand on my forearm. Through the fine kidskin of our gloves, the blood-drinker’s palm burns, as if she’s struck my skin with a Martian ray. The heat flashes through my body so thoroughly that, when I open my mouth to reply, I cannot make a sound.

Lord and Lady Greyborough assure the older woman they’ll protect her charge.

With effort, I regain my voice. “I’ll be happy to accompany you whenever I might, Miss Stein.”