

The Adventure of the
Naked Guide

Conversation Pieces



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About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, *Conversation Pieces*, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The *Conversation Pieces* series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what *Conversation Pieces* is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Praise for the Blood-Thirsty Agent series

The Adventure of the Incognita Countess

2017 Recommended Reading Lists of *Locus* and *Tangent Online*; *Seattle Times* list of noteworthy books of 2017.

“[A] brisk novella...it draws deeply from the well of 19th and early 20th century speculative literature. In that much, it reminds me no small part of *Penny Dreadful*. It has the same gleeful delight in its own references, the same playfully gothic geekery.”

—Liz Bourke, *Tor.com*

“[G]rand and smashing recursive steampunk...a splendid romp indeed.”

—Paul Di Filippo, *Asimov's*

The Adventure of the Dux Bellorum

“[A] gleeful mashup of historical and fictional characters... all good fun, not without more serious rumination on issues like colonialism and women's suffrage.”

—Rich Horton, *Locus*, April 2019

“This tale of two monsters, at once romantic and action-packed, is fun and thought-provoking, giving readers everything they want.”

—*Publisher's Weekly* (starred review)

“[T]he book takes all the elements of the first installment and builds on it. The action is more visceral, the cast larger, the stakes much higher. There are sapient dinosaurs, vampire vs. wolfman fights, and a particularly evil German scientist who just won't seem to die. Plus there are moments where the characters must confront their missions and the legacies of their nations. It's a fast-paced, daring adventure that is all kinds of Extra....”

—Charles Payseur, *Quick Sip Reviews*

Conversation Pieces
Volume 74

The Adventure of the Naked Guide

by
Cynthia Ward





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*For C.C. Finlay, without whom there would be
no series of adventures*

“Are there not other alternatives than sending our armies to chew barbed wire in Flanders?”

—Winston Churchill, in a letter to
Prime Minister H. H. Asquith

“I believe that this War, on which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest.”

—Siegfried Sassoon, *Soldier’s Declaration
Against the War*

“There are times, young fellah, when every one of us must make a stand for human right and justice, or you never feel clean again.”

—Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Lost World*

“If your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours.”

—J. Sheridan Le Fanu, “Carmilla”

Royal Dungeon, Lustadt, Kingdom of Lutha,
Balkan Peninsula, 24 December 1916

“You’ve picked a posh meeting spot,” I tell M as I walk into the cell. “I can only hope my assignment proves as cushy.”

The head of the Empire’s Secret Intelligence Service isn’t the only man in the reeking cell. The other is a stranger, but I recognise him. He’s about thirty. His gaunt face and form and his grey-threaded hair and beard suggest he’s much older. He’s chained to the floor.

I turn to M. He’s a portly, towering mortal, with pale grey eyes and receding grey hair. He wears a British Army officer’s trench coat and a Sam Browne belt, with a Webley Mk VI service revolver in the holster.

I address him. “The Luthanians are in the streets, celebrating their liberation from Austria and praying for the return of their missing king. Why the hell haven’t you freed him? For that matter, why the hell are you here, instead of Petrograd?”

“I’ve just arrived,” M replies. “Miss Harker, your language is deplorable.”

I indicate the mortal in chains. “This isn’t?”

The prone man speaks, his voice cracked by long privation. “Mr Holmes wants me to agree to a treaty which makes the kingdom of Lutha a protectorate of Britain.”

M says, “Bernard Custer is an American adventurer of unknown loyalties, who seized the throne of this flyspeck of a nation under questionable circumstances.”

“Mr Custer is a war hero who fought for his ancestral homeland against the Austrian invaders,” I say. “He’s king of Lutha because he’s cousin and sole heir of the late king.”

“I’m sure the Luthanians filled your ears with many interesting stories while you worked under cover in Lustadt,” M says. “Mr Custer’s provenance remains to be confirmed.”

I return my attention to the emaciated man. “You’d not have treated Rudolf Rassendyll in this fashion.”

“The late hero of Ruritania was a British intelligence operative,” M replies.

King Bernhard tries to rise and sinks back, confined by weakness and short chains. Taking my skirt in hand, I sink to my knees beside him. His clothes are filthy rags, and he shivers with cold and weakness. I wrap him in my wool overcoat and keep an arm about him. His shoulder-blades feel like knives.

M says, “What do you think you’re doing?”

Pushing back the right sleeve of my jacket, I extend my fangs and slash open my wrist.

The king’s eyes widen, but he raises a hand to guide my bleeding wound to his lips.

He realises what I am.

M’s eyes have narrowed so they appear as colourless as acid in the electric light. “Get away from Custer.”

I let M read my lips. “Give me the sack.”

He makes no response.

I’m one of only two blood-drinkers in the service of the British Empire.

The other is my lover.

I tell the King of Lutha, “Your wife is safe.”

He doesn't take his mouth from my wrist, but his eyes are eloquent.

M says, "Miss Harker."

I don't bother looking at my stepfather as I reply. "If we didn't know whether my mother was alive or dead, we'd want to."

The king ceases to shiver. Colour suffuses his complexion and muscle thickens on his bones. When he firms the set of his shoulders and raises his head from my wrist, his eyes are keen.

I look at his iron cuffs, wondering if I've lost too much blood to break them, and M says, "You've done enough."

Hiding my weakened state, I stand. "You haven't."

"We've provided the man with food and water, as you can see, and I've sent for clothing."

From the corridor come the sounds of a surprisingly familiar pair of footsteps.

I tell M, "King Bernhard doesn't merit the dungeon."

"The old king of Lutha collaborated with the Austrians," M says. "Perhaps the new king did, as well."

King Bernhard speaks levelly, his voice strong. "That's absurd, and you know it."

I meet M's gaze. "Investigating someone's past doesn't justify his mistreatment."

"Defending the Empire justifies everything."

Noticing the footsteps, he turns his head, then gives me a look.

"Step out of the cell, Miss Harker."

Stiff with arthritis, he follows me into the corridor, which is lined with otherwise empty cells. Their smells are muted from disuse, and the ghosts of the dungeon

have antique fashions. The Austrian invaders were keeping their royal captive isolated.

M and I face the living man who strides vigorously up the corridor. Tall and lean and young, he's dashing in the uniform of the Royal Tripod Corps. When his nostrils flare, I know he's scented the prisoner.

Though M is a civilian, my half-brother salutes him.

Then he looks at me with a sardonic lift of the eyebrows. "A curious place to observe your birthday, Lucy."

I smile grimly. "Woman proposes, M disposes."

Lieutenant Quincey Morris Holmes served originally as an aëroplane pilot on the Western Front. He re-trained for the Martian-style fighting-machines when Prime Minister Winston Churchill sent the first completed tripods with the British battalions deployed to the Eastern Front. Our forces stabilise Czar Nicholas II on the Russian throne and reinforce our allies against the Central Powers, forcing the Germans to shift battalions from the Western Front to the Eastern.

"Sir," Quincey says. "Why am I here?"

M keeps his reply too soft for the prisoner's ears. "Your commanding officer has granted my request for your indefinite leave."

"Indefinite leave, when most of the Balkans are still in enemy hands?" Quincey's voice is lowered, but it's possible King Bernhard hears him, given he's pitching his words for the failing ears of a seventy-year-old mortal. "Why are you in Lutha, anyhow? What the devil's going on, Father?"

For the first time in my twenty-six years, Mycroft Holmes looks his age.

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“Your mother has disappeared on an intelligence operation,” he whispers. “Your joint mission is to recover her.”

I open my mouth to speak.

“Don’t ask,” M says. “Your mother must never meet Miss Stein.”

Altstadt District, Lustadt, Lutha,

24 December 1916

Church bells ring across the city. Neighbours sing “Stille Nacht” as they light candles on the tallest fir in St. Bojan’s Square and twine pine garlands around the lowest leg-segments of the nearby British tripod. Christmastide has never been so lean in Lustadt, I expect, or joy so great. It’s two days since British forces ended the Austrian occupation of the capital of Lutha.

Under the noise, I hear a lively interpretation of Joplin’s “Pine Apple Rag” from the town house I’m approaching. When my key clicks in the lock of the front door, the music stops. The silence gives way to footsteps before I can step into the hall.

The light of sunset rises like water on the slight form of the woman who descends the stairs from the first floor. The slanting beams reveal an evening dress in an elegant pre-war style and the youthful aspect of her delicate features. The light finds soft gold glints in the darkness of her pompadour.

It also reveals my missing coat and filthy skirt.

I frown at the woman. “Return to your spinet, Clarimal, and mask your ears from the carols and bells.”

“Sacred sounds hardly trouble me now.” She draws near, speaking English with an antique Austrian accent. “The war grinds on, and mortals increasingly fall away from God.”

Bare months ago, she'd not have spoken the holy name, because doing so would have caused her so much pain.

Sacred sounds and objects have never affected me. As a dhampir, I possess a soul. Like my mortal mother, I have the chance of Heaven or Hell.

Mindful not to smear Clarimal's gown, I keep my body from brushing hers as we kiss.

She touches the side of my face. "I've sent my renfield to join the celebration, but there's nothing celebratory about your expression, darling. M must have cancelled your leave."

"You and I rescued the queen of Lutha," I say. "M keeps the king of Lutha hidden in the dungeon."

"And you've given him your coat." Clarimal slips her arm through mine as we proceed up the staircase. "King Bernhard is foreign-born," she observes. "M must want to verify the man wasn't serving the Central Powers."

"You're correct on every count," I say. "But M should secure the man who led the Luthanian Army personally in a comfortable location."

"The Austria of my childhood died long ago," Clarimal says. "My childhood died only when I understood the behaviour of empires."

"You speak of the Austrians and Germans," I say. "This is not *English* behaviour."

Clarimal studies my face. "It's not the reason M summoned you on your birthday," she says. "Do you need to eat before your mission?"

"I need only my Webley and the mountain-man's clothes I wore when I slipped into Lutha," I reply. "After leaving M, I ate at the palace mess."

My lover is unable to eat, gaining nourishment only from blood. A dhampir may eat like a mortal, though it's blood that heals me quickest from grave injury. Only a mortal's blood aids an *upiór* or dhampir who's risen from the dead.

"M doesn't want you to know any of this," I tell Clarimal. "But for the last month, my mother's been operating under-cover in the principality of Tann."

"A wild place," Clarimal says, "and the only part of Lutha still in enemy hands. And, if we may believe the old stories, Tann is home to an entrance to the Hollow Earth."

"If it is, Queen Emma failed to mention this detail of her birthplace."

"That would be rather a large piece of information to give to foreign agents." Clarimal's expression grows pensive. "We may be fortunate she could provide any information."

Before the fall of Lustadt, Clarimal and I searched for the missing royal couple, and found the queen in the control of the Austrians' puppet, Prince Peter of Blentz. When we spirited Queen Emma to safety, she didn't say what befell her in Blentz's power. Perhaps it was only captivity. But even the suggestion of defilement may ruin a woman's honour, so not even British intelligence knows we found King Barnhard's wife chained to Blentz's bed.

It's not for *my* sake that I conceal my bastardy.

As we enter my bedroom, Clarimal presses the back of my hand to her breast-bone.

"Has something happened to your mother, Lucy?"

"A week ago, she infiltrated the Castle Von der Tann," I say. "It's been three days since British intelligence last heard from her."

Clarimal exhales. “M’s sending you to rescue Mrs Holmes.”

“Or recover her body.”

I slam open my wardrobe.

Clarimal begins lighting the candles on my dressing table, though our eyes are no more affected by evening gloom than a cat’s. “I’ll go with you.”

I place my men’s wool socks and mountaineer’s boots near the bench of my dressing table, then meet her gaze. “M has explicitly barred you from this mission.”

Her black eyes are sharp as volcanic glass. “M’s never mentioned his wife in my presence. He’s the reason I’ve never met your mother and brothers, isn’t he?”

Your mother must never meet Miss Stein. M has told me this many times, since I rejoined British intelligence at the start of the war, and Clarimal Stein joined with me. *Your mother must never meet Miss Stein.*

“My mother has been a vampire hunter almost since my birth,” I remind Clarimal. “With her heightened senses, she would recognise your true nature as an *upiór*.”

Wilhelmina Murray Harker Holmes believes the old folk-tale that vampires are naught but emotionless killing machines. Once, I told her this is false. She became so extraordinarily upset, I could only be grateful M didn’t overhear.

Clarimal gives me a grim smile. “Given how long she’s served British intelligence, your mother would recognise my true identity as Mircalla, Countess Karnstein. If M wants me never to meet her, it means he’s not told her I also serve the Secret Intelligence Service.”

I toss my grey felt Tyrolean hat on the dressing table, then pull the men's loden coat from my wardrobe and drape it over the back of the nearby chair.

I face my lover. "If my mother had only a mortal's normal senses, she would still realise what we are to one another."

"You don't wish to distress her with knowledge of our sin."

"Ah, Clarimal." I fling my men's shirt and trousers over the coat. "My mother blames herself for Dracula's assaults, though she never sought them. She doesn't desire women, either, but she'd blame herself for bequeathing me degeneracy."

As I remove my jacket and the shoulder holster with my Browning Short, Clarimal realises I've closed the subject and turns her attention to my skirt.

It's our habit to help one another to dress and undress. Such assistance has effects which cannot elude detection by our inhuman senses. By the time she's slipping off my silk stockings, I'm grinding my teeth.

"Even fear for my mother's life cannot prevent desire, it seems."

Clarimal smiles at our frustration and slides my men's shirt over my shoulders. "I cannot believe these garments persuade anyone you're a man, even when you bind your breasts."

"Perhaps men's clothes fool someone a mile away." I know she's trying to distract me from a ferocity of concern barely mastered by Holmes discipline, and I'm grateful. "It's not efficient to tramp through wildwood and mountain in a dirndl," I add, as I reach for the dark

wool trousers. “And I expect my family wouldn’t want me rescuing my mother in not a scrap of clothes.”

Clarimal’s lips twitch. “You’ve always been a naturalist at heart, darling.”

She knows of my childhood adventures as a sort of wild animal stalking other wild animals, discarding clothes to hone my hunting skills on remote moors and mountains in Yorkshire.

“Why should I like hampering myself with layers of clothing?” I’m adjusting the braces of my trousers. “Blood-drinkers don’t share mortals’ sensitivity to extremes of weather or temperature.”

Clarimal laughs. “I never fought my attraction to women, but in hundreds of years of soullessness, I’ve not shaken off the strictures of a Catholic girlhood.”

I reach for the gun-belt which hangs on my chair, weighted with an occupied holster and full ammunition pouch. “One irreligious savage in the household is sufficient, surely.”

My smile fades as I examine my Webley Mk VI revolver. Finding all in order, I holster the loaded handgun. After buckling the belt round my waist, I seat myself before the mirror and reach for the agate drops clipped to my earlobes.

“Would you braid my hair?”

“Of course, darling.” Clarimal unpins my hat, then removes the agate-topped stick from my chignon, spilling black waves down my back. “You’ve said your brothers’ senses are nearly as heightened as your mother’s,” she remarks, reaching for my boar bristle hair-brush. “Why, then, hasn’t M mentioned keeping me away from your brothers?”

“Because they’re not vampire hunters?” I smile at her in the mirror. “Or, perhaps, because Quincey is a ladies’ man?”

“A ladies’ man?” Clarimal says. “You’ve told me Quincey’s twenty years old and looks like Sherlock Holmes.”

“With ginger hair.” I reach for my socks. “I thought I must have been precocious, seducing another student at fifteen. But Quincey was thirteen when I realised I must supply him with sheaths, and an explanation of their proper use and function.”

“Tod und Teufel.” Clarimal’s voice is amused. “Should we chance to meet, I’ll endeavour to resist his masculine charms.”

“Countess Karnstein, succumb to a man’s charms?” I say. “That would be a first.” My smile fades. “I asked for you, but M is sending Quincey with me on the mission.”

At Clarimal’s silence, I look up from the laces of my ankle-boot to find a line between her brows.

“Is Quincey an intelligence operative?”

“I haven’t been informed,” I say. “But almost every military pilot is.”

“He heard M’s refusal?” Clarimal asks. As I nod, she takes a hair ribbon from a drawer of the table. “Have you mentioned me to your brothers?”

“I have not, and of course Quincey asked who you were, once we’d left M’s presence. I said you were a fellow operative working with me in Lutha and that I didn’t know why M forbade your inclusion.”

“Whatever M says, I should go with you.”

“And ensure my mother realises we’re lovers? Anyway,” I say, “it’s not practical. You sleep in a coffin.”

Clarimal gently tugs my braid, signaling she's finished. "Rescuing your mother is more important than my comfort."

"Comfort?"

I rise so abruptly, she steps back.

"I remember when you were deprived of your coffin for three days." That was when we rescued Winston Churchill from Dr Krüger, the German science hero. "You experienced the torments of Hell!"

"The separation causes no permanent harm—"

"I won't have you suffer like that again." I realise I'm nearly shouting and force my voice low. "Even without your coffin, Clarimal, you fall asleep at dawn and remain insensible till midday. Quincey and I may not even reach the Castle Von der Tann by sunrise—"

The long-case clock on the landing chimes the quarter hour.

I pull on my men's coat so it covers my braid and give Clarimal a reassuring smile. "I'm supposed to meet my brother at the western gate of the Altstadt in fifteen minutes."

As she shakes her head doubtfully, I remember the night I sought her on the *Titanic* with an ash-wood stake, and abruptly crush her to me.

"A farewell, darling?" she whispers. "Or a premonition?"

"Dhampirs are as immune to premonitions as *upióry*." I suppress a shiver. "Sometimes, I remember I almost destroyed you, because I falsely believed vampires had no emotions and did only evil."

"Why wouldn't you believe that," she says, "when both priests and philosophers teach it?"

“Why have scientists not learned the truths of vampire behaviour, when they’ve plumbed the truths of human behaviour?”

“Have they?” Clarimal says. “Lucy, you and your brother will be greatly outnumbered in Tann. And if Tann *is* home to a passage from the Hollow Earth, then Dr Krüger may be there.”

“If Tann had such a passage, wouldn’t Krüger have made his way back to Germany months ago?” I say. “I think he died when I trapped him in the German passage to the centre of the earth.”

Clarimal frowns. “Dr Krüger escaped the *Titanic*. His inventions dwarf those of Edison and Tesla. We cannot assume he died. I should go with you to Tann—”

“You know that’s impossible.” I brush a loose lock of gilt-bronze hair from her face. “Don’t worry. Quincey Holmes isn’t a normal mortal, and I haven’t forgotten the information Queen Emma gave us about secret passages in the Castle Von der Tann. My brother and I shall have our mother safe in Lustadt before you’ve slept twice.”

My lover’s frown deepens.