



The Laurel Broach Affair

M C Neuffer

I swung my walking cane in cheerful arcs, appreciating the rhythmic tap at its landing on the pavement ahead. My ambulation came with the tipping of my hat on the occasion of passing escorted ladies on this wonderful spring morning. The day promised light air, sunshine throughout, and the bustle of cheerful

young families packing off for picnics in the park while lovers stroll the boulevards under budding lilac arches. A few of those I encountered gave a pleasant "Good morning, Mr. Mill." I replied in kind, adding a nod and a smile to the day.

Merriweather Tombs attempted to exit as I entered the foyer of his brownstone on Appold Street. My astonishment came because he loathes pleasant weather and the accompanying bustle of the common man emerging from what he describes as the squalid tidiness of their dreary existence, plodding day to day to their graves without purposeful effect. Grey skies were more to his liking as they brushed aside sharp shadows.

“Grovers,” he said in his dry manner, the same he would apply on encountering an elephant or an orphan in his dressing room, not questioning my identity or the coincidence of our meeting, simply making the announcement of his observation.

“Merriweather,” I replied, in similar stoic fashion, using this moment to inspect his countenance. “You appear a bit off today.” His squire’s grey and tweed attire appeared satisfactory as that went.

“Off, yes, taking the 11:15 to Gladensburry, then on to Witherton, that ghastly place peppered with new-money estates. They’ve no appreciation or respect for empire, too enthralled by every modern contraption that comes along.”

Yesterday, the *London Times* had a column about an ongoing elevator construction at Windsor Castle. I made no mention of the modernizing as it would only serve to further inflame his discountenance. He moved to step around my blocking, a clock tick-tocking in his mind. But a friend must intervene in instances needing correction to prevent even minor catastrophe.

I parried his attempt toward the door. “Yes, yes, good fellow. I see you have your chapeau perched and pointing north. But I meant *off* in the sense you’re wearing slippers.” I pointed to his feet. “And you’ve not shaved this morning.” Perhaps not for the past three, but it would not do to emphasize his forgetfulness and dislike for mirrors. Reflective scoundrels

in his mind, liars unnecessarily reversing reality. His complaint to me more than a dozen times in our eight years of acquaintanceship.

His eyes took a distant look over my shoulder, his way of inward-looking, mulling evidentiary thoughts. I suspected he was flexing his toes, verifying my statement regarding his footwear, untroubled by chin stubble, not caring about the impression his fuzziness might have on others. He considered his brilliant mind would at once shine through, garnering forgiveness for his lack of attention to appearance and abrupt manners.

I patted the side pocket of my longcoat, checking for the bottle of laudanum kept for dispensing when he became overly agitated at being derailed or upon hearing squeals and screeches of the young. Once, on the hunt for a mad bomber, a pleasant dowager asked Merriweather if he liked children. *Yes*, he replied curtly, *roasted is my preference*. Taken aback, the lady withdrew from further conversation.

Finding his feet felt in too much comfort, he wheeled around and headed for the stairs. "Come along, Grovers. I'm in need of my second pipe."

No purpose to my waiting below. Unless I remained at his elbow to prod, he became prone to spend hours held in distraction. For my part, I was quite ready to enjoy a profitable

rail holiday in the countryside and intrigued by what may be involved, what lured him to leave his cloister.

As I made to ascend, the landlady's apartment door opened a crack. A single eye and quadrant of the crone's face appeared, then scuttled into shadow before the gap shut and the porcelain knob rotated back to its resting place. Her interest prompted me to gather two small bags my friend left by the door.

When I entered his main room, I found him silhouetted against a window with a view down Walpole Street. "We'll miss the 11:15," he said.

A stack of unread newspapers, still bound in paper bands, required removal before I took my favorite chair by the brazier. Expecting this to take more than a few moments, my legs sought brief rest from the morning's exertion.

"The 1:40 will do, I should think," I told him.

Knowing Merriweather, I considered the trip might be an overnight affair, requiring a small valise.

"But no later," he said. He opened his hand, exposing a shiny artifact. "What do you make of this? Delivered by messenger before breakfast."

I took the offered trifle, holding it for examination, knowing it carried significant interest to Merriweather. The broach's weight, color, and patina told its metal species of silver design. Five ruby chips led around the circumference, an empty divot for a sixth. A quarter moon's curve occupied the exact middle

with a wreath of laurel leaves encompassing the whole, the sort for topping heads of Caesars and other ancient notables.

I handed it back. "More than a few pounds on Hawthorne Street, I should imagine. Gaudy and pretentious, but showing the mark of a fine jeweler," I said.

"The manufacture is Belgian, not English. Look at the back." Merriweather tapped his foot, waiting for me to fathom the significance.

Turning it to the obverse side, I detected embossed letters but could not distinguish the meaning in the dim light.

"Come to the window. Examine it with my glass," said Merriweather.

I rose from my seat, joining him. On closer inspection, the curve of the inscription read: *First anniversary 1873 JTR.*

"Surely there is more to this. You mentioned travel to Witherton."

He didn't answer. Instead, handed me a notecard, well-scripted in a female hand, the stationary's expense notable by its texture and weight.

Found in the garden next to my beloved.

Fearful for my safety.

Please come at your earliest convenience.

Eveline Ranthom,

Heatherton House, Witherton.

“And the envelope?” I asked.

He passed it to me. A pale-yellow packet sufficiently sized to have encased the broach, blue wax seal at the flap broken. *Merriweather Tomes* scripted on the outside in the same handwriting as the card. Nothing more.

“The messenger?” I inquired.

“A houseman. Well dressed and of acceptable deportment, but sweating like a Welshman making a coal delivery. I gave my reply before his leaving. No more than six words passed between us.”

“Early this morning, you say? How did he arrive?”

“By Hansom cab. I noticed from the window, hearing hoof clatter and voices below.”

“Surely not the entire way.”

“Night mail train,” said Merriweather. “The red stamp on the return stub tucked into the wrist band of his glove gave evidence of it.”

I never occasioned to see a color-stamped ticket and so assumed the midnight rail tickets are marked in such a distinctive manner. One learned not to question Merriweather’s observations and conclusions unless having time for extended explanation and lengthy dissertations, which might begin with the seven days of creation.

I made a frantic scramble to follow Merriweather's long-legged stretch out the door and down the stairs.

The common coach from Gladensburry Station deposited us next to a public house in Witherton, the sort one might describe as rustically charming as long as you put any intention to enter aside. Rather than ask directions and engage local conveyance to Heatherton House, Merriweather stepped to the boar's head sign of the inn.

Pint drinkers, wearing black armbands, filled the front room, all carrying the waterlogged demeanor of gamblers drowning their sorrows. I supposed a smaller congregation at this afternoon hour, as trade and craftsmen would inhabit their employment for a few hours more.

We settled into chairs at a back table. Every eye in the place struck on us. My friend cautioned, "Not a word, Grovers."

When our refreshments arrived, Merriweather raised his glass in salute to those around us, after which the inhabitants returned to their muted and somber conversations.

Words of "poor fellow, what's to become, and now we're in it" floated in the stagnant air. Obvious to even the least keen observer, Lord Ranthom's death shook the shutters of this township.

Interrupting my first bite of cheese and buttered bread, a ruddy-faced rotund fellow fairly burst through the door. His eyes skipped over the faces of local mourners and landed squarely on us. Striding purposefully, his substantial shade fell across our table.

“Be one of you gentleman Merriweather Tombs?”

Merriweather tapped his chin. “Who might inquire?”

The interloper puffed up and announced, “Constable Smythe. Answer my question and be quick about it.”

Knowing Merriweather would not tolerate this impolite intrusion, I requested of the man, “Is there an official charge?”

“Charge?” said he. “No charge, sirs. Though this is within my assigned capacity.”

“What is?” demanded Merriweather, having no patience for vague pronouncements.

Taken aback at the challenge, the constable said, “My query, gentlemen, my query. I’ve been informed of your recent arrival and suspect you are the one to be expected.” He pointed at our meager baggage.

“Expected by whom?” asked Merriweather.

“Lady Ranthom. I hold orders to escort you to the estate.”

Merriweather insisted time be provided to finish our repast, pleasing me.

Black cloth festooned the Heatherton House entryway and exterior facings around every window. Solitary candles shone from interior sills.

"I fear we are too late to make headway," Merriweather said as the trotter came to a halt.

"How so?"

"The decorations. I suspect it has taken the better part of a week to gather and post those mourning drapes. The further from a crime time has traveled, the less likely a satisfactory outcome will be forthcoming." He continued to sweep his practiced gaze over the tableau before remarking, "But then solving the case is secondary to our needs."

"Crime? The Lady's note made no mention of a crime."

"Highly inferred. One of passion, coin, or both, I speculate. Though cold revenge is not out of the question."

I made no further inquiry as we set foot to ground, met by two gentlemen in tailcoats, top hats, and red silk lined capes, anticipating the rising chill of approaching evening. One, recently into his adult years, the other presented as a man of dignity and grey-headed experience.

"Mr. Tombs?" asked the younger.

In answer to the question of identities, Merriweather signaled with gloved hand they should address him. "This is my associate, Grovers Mill."

Once past the oak portal, the gentlemen surrendered their coats, capes, and hats to servants, ours similarly collected and managed away with baggage from the carriage. A houseman drew open the doors into a drawing room suitable for smoking and drinks. No sooner than three steps in, Merriweather somberly intoned, "Facts." He prided himself on the economy of spoken words.

The youngest of the pair glanced at the elder, received a nod, and began. "I am Harold Ranthom, nephew of the late Lord." Thumbs tucked in waistcoat, he gave a slight head tilt to the older man. "This is Sir Robert Carruthers, the estate's solicitor. He's agreed to attend this... this rather... complicated family matter."

Three of us sat while Merriweather meandered the room, browsing the mantle, looking at mementos, artifacts, and small framed photographs. Walking past the bookcase, his fingers ran under each waist-high shelf, looking for a release catch to a hidden alleyway between the walls. A habit of his, I have noted. Not finding one, he withdrew his pipe and pouch to prepare his smoker. We waited without comment, watching the mechanics of the ritual until the abrasive friction of his match broke the spell. He puffed up a blue cloud of Kentucky Orlik. "Facts," he repeated.

Harold's right knee bounced as if prepared for a sprint, and so it must be, a run of words in need of loosening if only to move beyond preliminaries. "My uncle, Lord Ranthom, perished this past Monday while attending his roses in the garden. An avid horticulturist, he held great excitement in the annual blooming now starting. I have a similar enjoyment in flower study, but not as rabid as his.

"The hound master found him in the greenery behind the stables. The doctor reported the cause to be from a heart condition of several years, one that prevented exertion beyond that of moderate flower tending."

Merriweather raised his hand to request a pause. "Time of day the body discovered?"

"A few minutes after eight... in the morning," Harold replied.

Merriweather arched a single eyebrow. "I should like to speak with the dog keeper."

Sir Robert rose. "See here. An inquisition has been held and concluded. There is no need to investigate further. Your presence is at the behest of Lady Ranthom on another matter altogether. One I have objected to as being a spurious fantasy sprung from a young female mind that has been further weakened by distress at the passing of her husband."

I noticed, and I'm sure Merriweather did, when the nephew turned his head toward the window, taking the expression of catching a whiff of the wharf at low tide.

"How young?" asked my friend.

Sir Robert took the lead, seemingly to spare Harold.
"Pardon?"

Merriweather tapped his pipe against the wainscoting.
"What age is Lady Ranthom?"

"She recently passed her twenty-fourth birthday," said Sir Robert.

"And Lord Ranthom?"

"A man in his fifties." The solicitor growled at the impertinence of this questioning.

I watched Merriweather tap his fingers on the mantle as I'd seen him do many times. Counting. Remembering the date on the back of the broach, I determined Lady Ranthom had not yet been born. Lord Ranthom would have been in his twenties, an age ripe for adventure and romance in a man's life.

Merriweather's pipe tapping transferred to his foot. "And what of his first wife?"

The opportunity for an answer was interrupted. "I believe these gentlemen are here to see me." The bright, lyrical voice from the doorway matched the form and figure of its speaker, undoubtedly Eveline Ranthom. Except for Merriweather,

everyone stood to greet the lady. He already vertical, finger stroking one of the African ivory tusks that framed a suit of armor between two windows looking out at the back garden.

Sir Robert cleared his throat. "Dear Eveline, we thought it best to provide the inspector...

"Scientific investigator," said Merriweather.

"... investigator with a perspective concerning...."

"Jameson's murder?" interrupted Eveline, her brow and chin rising in challenge.

In the pause, I considered her demeanor and attire quite curious. Her nephew and solicitor wore mourning suits, and the servants we encountered turned out in similar black. Her pale-yellow gown with periwinkle accents pulled securely to her lithe figure, though not in any sense vulgar. It would seem no less startling if she appeared in jodhpur, boots, and velvet riding jacket. Neither her face nor fashion conveyed the least element of bereavement.

She flowed into the room, a refreshing feminine breeze, ignoring all, stopping next to Merriweather, who wore a sanguine expression a statue of Aristotle would be pleased to adopt. Tucking his arm under hers, she implored, "Make these bores leave so we may have a candid discussion. I've sufficiently enjoyed Robert's and Harold's dreariness these past few days."

I hadn't a clue how she knew which of us was Merriweather unless she had listened at the door for a period. Sir Robert made to protest, but Harold touched his sleeve and nodded toward the foyer. Both men yielded a slight bow to Lady Ranthom before making their exit.

When the doors closed, she said, "Come sit with me, dear sir. I'm fatigued by the solemn ceremony haunting the manor. I would enjoy a few honest moments not to hear family skeletons marching past."

"Why do you suspect murder?" Merriweather asked.

Why, indeed. She held the confidence of a colonel, ready to rout a rabble of upstarts. Her slight accent sounded like those professionally trained in cultured English language, not having learned it in childhood. Perhaps a Midlands convert?

Lady Ranthom executed a twirl away from Merriweather. "They hated him. All of them. Would it be so far a stretch that I am next to be dispatched?"

A Houseman entered our conversation. "My Lady, your guests have arrived."

Lady Ranthom put finger to chin. "I must attend."

"Do you believe her?" We took a respite from the journey and interrogations in rooms provided for our stay, the evening

supper announced as two hours yet further. Lady Ranthom's words held little to latch onto other than wisps of suspicions.

"I would like an opportunity to inspect the will and converse with her lover. Surely, she has one, being so full of fire and considering her deceased husband's lack of prowess for conjugal activities."

His first pronouncement seemed logical. However, the second appeared a long leap in my mind. However, I've come to trust Merriweather's vaults more than a coin toss. "Whom do you imagine?"

He waved his pipe at me. "The list is necessarily short. He wouldn't be an overly coarse man or too distant an acquaintance of this house, either residing on the grounds or one to not raise questions at coming and going. Perhaps a frequent dinner guest, perhaps even the vicar or son of an invading family, settled here in the last generation."

I found it unpalatable to suggest such a breach of the cloth possible.

"Relax your brows. They give away your thoughts. There are several photographs on the mantle. One, a young fellow of the dog-collared clergy, another a youth in hunting attire holding a shotgun. The Lord and Lady posed in each of those congregations, telling of their recentness."

"It is noticeable you have omitted the nephew from the list."

“Easily relieved of that accusation. Did you notice the purple of his cufflinks and watch fob?”

“I fail to see the relevance.”

Merriweather sat up from his reclined position on the bed, taking the pose of a visiting Oxford professor. “Just so, Grovers. A color affectation effeminates take to identify each other in the city. That tags him as one who would not frequent rural areas such as this, where his preferences would not be well received by the peasantry, let alone into the bed of such a vivacious young woman.”

“And what of her fears?”

“More information is needed. I am sure to be watched by the house staff and my movements reported to Sir Robert. While I inspect the rose garden, slip down the back stairs to the library for a copy of *Burke’s Peerage*. We’ll give it a thorough study this evening after cocktails. Do you have a spare ascot?”

Dinner was laid out for eight with sideboards of sufficient bounty for twice that number. It presented a magnificent cornucopia since I’d not eaten anything of note since breakfast. The head of the table stood conspicuously vacant, its chair swathed in black ribbons and tipped inward against the table’s edge. A single wine glass dressed in a dark lap cloth rested on the vacant place setting.

The previous interrupting guests, Mr. and Mrs. Grendine, a middle-aged couple from a neighboring estate, presented at table. He of erect but casual bearing, and she an attractive yet frail presence, possessing an accent from across the Atlantic. By their countenance and reception, they were more than familiars of the Lady, though Harold exchanged only light politeness toward them as we seated.

An excellent broth served with slivers of shallots, and goat cheese peels whetted my pallet. As those dishes cleared, the evening was speared by a woman's high and continuous scream from the garden. Merriweather gave a start, whispered quick instructions to me, then dashed out in the sound's direction, followed by Sir Robert and Harold at a hasty pace. The neighbor dinner guests rose but did not follow.

After completing my assignment, I made my way to the source of the night's excitement, finding Merriweather studying a body that lay beyond the hedges. Lanterns provided illumination. Sir Richard attended, though I noted young Harold's absence. The Lady's fear may have some grounding.

Off to the side, some paces away, a kitchen maid trembled in the arms of an underbutler.

"Have you touched anything?" Merriweather asked the young woman.

"No, sir. Thomas is as I found him."

Merriweather knelt to examine the hound master's corpse, as I've seen him do with others of the recently deceased. No natural heart problem on this occasion. A knife proudly protruded from his back.

He motioned me to stand clear. "We've not much time before authorities arrive and damage the evidence. Move to the other side and check the ground for anything unusual. Even a button or a footprint may prove sufficient to identify the perpetrator."

"Bring more lanterns and post a guard," I directed the yardman, a person I considered a least likely suspect, he being on the enfeebled side of life, not one with the energy of a knife plunger.

"A regimental blade," said Merriweather. "And the actor trained in such things. Notice the angle. An amateur would hold the article thusly." He made a motion with his fist tight, descending downward from above his head. "A most ungainly path, with the least power and the most obstructions. Our man, assuredly a man, held the thing at waist level, struck upward to miss the boney structures, and sliced into the soft organs to initiate a fatal bleed. He clasped the handle as a straight extension of his arm."

"My dear chap, I don't see how you can brush away half the human population as the culprit."

“The weaker sex hasn’t the strength to penetrate a knife to the hilt through three layers of rough loomed woolens. And the final push would necessitate a grasp around the neck for leverage. Observe the man’s neckcloth. It has twisted from his front by such action?”

I searched the side opposite, finding nothing save scuff marks on the ground.

One can feel the double grief now laid on this house. The houndsman was well liked and, by all reports, faithfully served. Before joining Merriweather at the scene, I escorted and instructed Lady Ranthom to remain locked in her chambers, opening only to her most trusted women staff. Locked in with her, Mrs. Grendine attended. I stationed her husband as guard in the hallway after considering his fitness for the assignment. On being informed of the events, her previous gaiety and flirtatious manner fled, leaving her shaken with future uncertain.

Merriweather did not wait for the High Sheriff before instituting our investigation, interrogating the doctor summoned for examination and opinion.

“Less than a minute, I suspect,” offered the physician in response to Merriweather’s question of how long before the internal bleed brought unconsciousness, then death. The

physician withdrew and cleansed the knife of foul blood and probed the wound, measuring the depth. Since the dagger pierced a full six-inch length of the blade, I failed to see the need for the probing, except as adherence to some required medical procedure.

“Time of death?” Merriweather asked.

“By the lividity and extremity evidence postmortem, time of death can only be ascribed as between four and eight this evening.”

Merriweather produced his pipe. “I place the time at precisely six and no later.”

The doctor stood aback and shook his head at this pronouncement. “Too exact.”

Merriweather took on the expression of schoolmaster. “By your own estimation, this unfortunate fellow had time and reason to cry out at the assault. None heard or reported, yet that does not preclude one was issued.”

The doctor remained dubious while I waited for my friend to expose his deduction. “At six, the township’s evening bells ring out from every spire. I heard them myself this very night. Though not clamorous enough at this place so far removed as to mask a cry, the response of the estate’s hounds to that awful racket would, in their cacophony, shield a banshee’s wail. I’ve queried the butler, and he assures me it is a nightly occurrence members of this house well ignore. Another point in favor is

the ground under the body lay dry while surrounding grass accumulated evening dew formed an hour after sunset.”

While he canvassed the notables, I was dispatched to gather the whereabouts of the service staff during the time of the assassination. The kitchen servants vouched for each other and the underbutlers, having been engaged in the evening meal preparation. “If any person came or went by the kitchen door, I’d have noted it,” said the chief cook. “There’s no slippin’ around in this house.”

The main doors or those of the library and solarium could have been used, but the kitchen was the only door servants used unless delivering drinks, food, or messages to an assemblage on the patios.

The accounting of maids proved difficult. Several claimed sequestration in quarters, passing their personal hour before returning for night service assignments.

Merriweather confided we would involve the groundsmen in the light of morning. “No sense to make ourselves easy prey in the darkness. If any are absent after dawn, we’ll have the culprit.”

We spent the remaining hours before sleep prowling the house. He found interest in common items and collectibles alike. I trailed, not wanting to miss any discovered clues. None were forthcoming, or at least none mentioned. Satisfied, he made his way to the front stairs leading to the second floor.

Arriving on the upper landing, he turned right. I corrected him. "I believe our rooms are in the south wing, not the north."

"I have no interest in that direction. Lord Ranthom's apartment needs examination. Now that the house is settled, we may conduct without being questioned."

After we slipped inside, I searched his Lordship's desk and bookcase.

Merriweather marched to the dressing room. "Don't tarry. Look for anything unusual or out of place."

My search turned over nothing of note. Merriweather returned, clutching three medicinal bottles. "These are the brutes his physician prescribed. Back to our sanctuary."

Once so sheltered, Merriweather consulted his apothecary reference for a few moments. Satisfied, he bustled about with vials, microscope, and others of his scientific instruments, taking serious intrigue with rose buds and plucked petals. While he worked, he bade me read aloud the Ranthom family entries from *Burke's Peerage*. When I occasionally paused, I saw him holding glass tubes over a candle flame, scrunching his face, then moving on to prepare another tincture or such, adding a pinch of this and a drop of that until the mixture turned.

"Stop. Read that section again."

I did so.

Jameson Thomas Ranthom, eldest son of Lord Charles Ranthom, held rank and position at King Leopold II's court. 1871-1874. Sir Byron assumed the Lordship on the death of his father in 1875.

I looked up at my friend. His face beamed.

"As I thought."

"How so?" I asked.

"The date on the Belgian broach, 1873. Indication of a romantic dalliance, I should think. Someone thought to return it, perhaps with a vengeance, though unlikely. You recall the quarter moon on the face? It's part of the Holfenfassen crest, a family of Bavarian nobility."

"My dear sir, such a person would need foreknowledge of his passing, I hardly think—."

"You miss the mark, Grovers. Probably sent to him as a warning, or perhaps even a simple remembrance. It makes no matter when he came to possess the thing, it could have been years ago. I suspect he mused over it in private before falling dead from poisoning."

"And the method of poisoning?"

"You recall his nephew said Lord Ranthom liked to take in the fragrance of his roses. At his age, senses being dulled by time and tobacco, he would breathe in heavily to catch the

odor." Merriweather held up a vial, amber liquid filling it halfway. "I took samples earlier this evening. The roses were dusted with ground berries from the *Actaea alba* plant, commonly called Dolls Eye. Quite deadly when inhaled."

I slept contented, settled to the occasion that ways and means existed to meet our ambition beyond solving the issues.

In our private parlor on the train, I began my deferred interrogation of Merriweather. "How did you discover Lady Ranthom was with child and the houndsman being the father?"

"A simple observation. A house has an organic life of its own. The drawing rooms are the eyes and ears, but the kitchens are the orators, speaking volumes of past and present.

"From the cook, I learned of the ginger and mint tea delivered to the Lady's chambers every breakfast for the previous weeks. That bitter concoction is used as a calmate for morning sickness."

"And the root of your suspicions?"

Merriweather assumed a lectern posture informing he was quite pleased with himself. "Lord Ranthom may have been ill but not ignorant. In fact, he was complicit in the amorous congress. He'd married young Eveline, hoping to produce a male heir. Not an uncommon circumstance for a childless

widowed man in his position to take a young wife in later years. But medications the good doctor prescribed for his heart yielded sterility and impotence. That condition required another avenue to prevent the nephew from inheriting his title and taking a seat in the house of Lords, tainting the family name.”

“From his sexual preference?”

“Hardly. Harold holds membership in Travailleurs Unis, a French Bolshevik club, under serious suspicion of fomenting rebellion in the working classes.”

“And the houndsman,” I prompted.

“Precisely. One who could be counted to provide the required heir breeding service and remain quiet unto death. His build and coloration matched those of his Lordship in his youth. A distinction I noted in a photograph on the mantle. Sir Robert divulged all when I pointed out the comparison. The trail is obvious. Thomas was the illegitimate son of Lord Ranthom, born in Belgium with arrangements for the boy to be raised away until the age of ten. That lady, I suspect, was the youngest sister of Marie Henriette Anne, King Leopold’s wife. The broach undoubtedly accompanied the child as proof of lineage.”

“Since Lord Ranthom is now deceased, what if the child is not male? What then?” I asked.

Merriweather waved his hand, dismissing the question. "A simple matter of having a newborn of that gender waiting in the wings to be adopted without official ceremony. Quite simple, a thing Sir Robert can easily arrange. They would then be raised together, one as heir and the female child as an orphaned niece from elsewhere in the empire."

My travel companion stared out the window as the train rattled to start our journey southward. Tricky negotiations with Sir Robert concerning the termination of our involvement yielded to Merriweather's superior skills in such delicate matters as to divine sensitive agreements. Scandals of this nature are abhorrent to the upper classes, known to bring down fortunes, crush dynasties, and taint the commerce of townships.

After a few moments of mental repose, he reached into his valise and withdrew a thick envelope. "Here is your half. Three hundred pounds in banknotes."

"Only three?"

"Drawn from the estate's account. Devil of a time getting that much. Sir Robert took quite the convincing we would not return to drink from his well again. I intimated we discovered his action, or that of a vague someone under his order, paid for the murder of the dog keeper to keep him silent. That tipped the scales."

“So, you never divulged the Lord was also murdered? That the nephew dusted the roses with powdered poison? Won’t that put lady Eveline in continued danger?”

He gave a piercing look, a sign he might not wish to tell all. Claspng his hands behind his back, he decided I could be trusted. “I provided those facts and the identity of a troupe of gypsies who can ensure no further mischief comes from young Harold. Bolsheviks are often anonymously dispatched.”

When the train attained speed, he withdrew the silver broach from his trouser pocket, tossed it up, and caught it, chuckling. “A red herring that never smelt.” He laughed hysterically at his pun. I reached for the laudanum bottle.