**Vengeance and the Doctor**

Doctor Jameson was thrown from sleep by the insistent bell sounding its flat, rusted note.

‘Doctor Jameson! You better come quick. It’s Squire Trellswith,’ the spent lad choked out the words. ‘He’s taken bad.’

‘Calm yourself,’ the young doctor’s voice was still mellow with sleep as he pulled the thick coat about him.

‘Who is it?’ his wife spoke with weary impatience.

‘I must go.’

‘Again?’

He sighed but did not call back as he trailed into the bitter night. There had been so many nightly errands of late and not all in pursuit of his profession. His wife did grow more irritated, perhaps a little suspicious but he’d not been discovered yet. There was no need to worry tonight as this was a legitimate call, or at least it began that way.

‘What ails him, lad?’ The doctor mounted his horse with a swift, strong ease.

‘Struck by a carriage on the Plymouth Road, they do say. Dragged for miles ‘til his head near come off his shoulders!’

A smile whispered at the corners of the doctor’s mouth and he casually tossed the boy a coin. ‘Well, let’s see if I can’t sew it back on, shall we?’

The doctor turned his keen, confident eye into the night.

The road was in that deep realm of darkness where light is all but forgotten and unimaginable. A cold, charcoal sky was stitched through with old, dead stars that cast no light on his well-hooved path. It held no fear. His secret love had taken him down this route many a shadowed night but tonight was not for dalliances.

He gripped the reins with thick, assured hands and drove his heels hard into the mare.

‘Come on, my girl!’ His coat flared up, a rook’s wing against the pewter sky.

High in the moors, a storm was being born as the doctor arrived at Squire Trellswith’s door. Servants’ faces were slung low in sorrow and the Squire’s wife already wore the frosted face of widowhood. A few stray tears had risen in her eyes but they were no more than salt now.

‘He has gone,’ she said crisply. ‘I cannot say where. Do you know, Doctor, where adulterers and philanderers go when this world has had enough of them?’ She held his gaze and he felt a fast flush race up through his face.

‘I’m sure I cannot—’

‘He was out on the Plymouth Road near Fitzford Gatehouse. Perhaps you know it, Sir.’ There was a surly, accusatory tone to her voice that went undisguised.

‘I do, Madam. Might I see Squire… the body?’ He wove his fingers together firmly behind his back.

‘Struck by a coach that never meant to stop. His head was near sheered off.’ She spoke the words with solemn disgust. ‘I’m not sure which woman he’d laid with before but she’d not recognise him now.’

Doctor Jameson lowered his eyes. ‘I am sorry, Madam.’

‘Men such as *you* should be, *Doctor* Jameson.’

The examination was brutally routine and the widow dismissed the doctor with swift, sour disapproval.

The night drew out new shapes across the path as his horse slowly walked along the Plymouth Road back towards Tavistock, back towards home. His mind wandered out with the shadows to his own bleak bed and the bitter face that waited there. He cast a warm eye towards the moors and a different, welcome bed. A smile stripped back his lips and bared his teeth. His hands twitched at the reins.

It was in that moment of decision that he heard it. It was a faint, solitary cry to begin with – distant and no more than a call in the dark. He paused to listen. Animals, out on the moor, no doubt. He moved on.

It came again, a shrill echo of a scream, lingering on the thin, damp air. The leaden sky let no light through and he stopped again to peer into the dead, velvet night.

Now the sound rattled the night. He felt the unmistakeable roll of wheels and beat of hooves rise up from the road, through his body.

The coarse clouds sat low across the starlight and he looked with blind man’s eyes into the night. The growing beat of a carriage pounded through the black air. He felt his hands instinctively grip the reins and a small seam of sweat bead down his back. He would surely be thrown from his horse or crushed. It would never stop in time.

He called in warning at the night. ‘Hey! Ho there!’ But his words were swallowed by the shadows.

He saw the great silhouette of animals and a vast coach blazing behind. He held his arms over his face. His horse threw back its head and reared. He was thrown hard to the floor and the fretted animal bolted into the dark.

The raging chaos of noise surrounded him. Then, in an instant, all was still. A disturbing calm descended.

A silken voice, siren like, spoke. ‘Handsome Sir, I apologise for unnerving your steed.’

He looked into the endless well of night and above him was a face of haunting perfection. Her lips moved around the words as if they were languid prayers at dusk. Her skin shone as a pearl nestled in the black shell of night and she watched him with eyes that saw all of his desires.

‘Your horse has fled, Sir, and it is a night for the dead alone. No man should wander this eerie road alone.’ She smiled as if each word tasted divine.

He possessed no will to move, his mouth bewitched into silence. A veil of hair fell across her ashen skin.

She leaned through the window and spoke silvery words. ‘Perhaps I should take you into my carriage where you can forget such a lonely, desolate road.’ Her hand gripped the carriage door. The darkness cast a strange, grey pallor across the frame as if it was not fine timber or oak but merely driftwood. ‘Perhaps you would sit with me, lose yourself and leave your *wife.’* Her words fell with a new bitter tone. ‘Perhaps you would meet my hound.’

A ribbon of savage teeth drew from the darkness beside her, its bloodied eyes rounded on him. A furious animal, part dog, part beast sat by her. The doctor’s face flooded with terror.

‘Madam, I…’ The wings of his pulse fluttered violently against his ribcage.

In that moment, the winter clouds slit open and a milk white moon cast its gaze on all her splendour. His eyes strained at the sudden splash of blanched light that flared from the woman and her carriage. He held his arm across his face but remained mesmerised by the horrifying sight.

She was indeed a magnificent spectre with her bone white skin and porcelain eyes but as he began to focus, he was drawn to the carriage around her.

Every section and slat was made entirely of bone. Gnarled knuckles and small sticks that were once fingers were intricately inlaid amongst great grey shafts of bone that had been shins or arms.

He recoiled into the dirt road, his mouth slack and eyes wide.

‘You admire my fine carriage, Sir,’ she smiled and stroked a slender finger along the branch of bone he recognised as a tall, sturdy femur. ‘Crafted from the bones of each of my four *philandering* husbands.’ She leaned through the dark window. ‘Now their dead eyes see nought but my vengeance.’ She held her arms high and he looked up.

At each corner of the carriage sat a skull.

‘You are fortunate, *Doctor,* for tonight I go to claim the bones of another that I did dispatch earlier for his wayward ways. Squire Trellswith will bed no more and I collect my bag o’bones. I do not think his wife will care to stop me. And I *will* come for you if you cannot mend your vulgar ways.’

The white glass of her eyes fixed on him. The horses worried at their reins and the carriage jolted.

‘I *will* come,’ she lashed out the words.

The bones clattered and bickered against one another, as if some remnant of life in them struggled to escape. The wheels turned, each spoke a perfect clay white bone. The dry noise of every shaft and spindle raked against one another, grinding and groaning. The ribs of bone scraped and knocked as it juddered into movement.

Doctor Jameson watched the four polished stones of the skulls with their black mouths and empty eyes, forever locked forward on their blind journey. As the clouds closed over the night’s light, the great carriage of bones rolled fast and dissolved into the darkness.

He sat alone, his eyes staring out into the dead sky.

As he lay in his bed that dawn, his sad eyes watched the sleeping face of his wife and he thought of all the aging years that lay ahead.