

SALAMANDER

Thomas Wharton



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McClelland & Stewart

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Salamander (2001)

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I restore life from death

– early printers' motto

A burning scrap of paper drifts down out of the rain. A magic carpet on fire. It falls with a hiss the wet stones of the street.

The colonel dismounts from his horse and stands holding the reins, his eyes raised to the sky. The light rain that began as he entered the town has drawn off. The grey clouds are shredding away to reveal patches of deep blue twilight. Wind moans from within the black hole that was once the building's entrance, like the sound from a shell held to the ear.

There is a flicker of candlelight deep within the shadows of the bombed-out ruins. There shouldn't be. Sheltering in such places has been forbidden by decree of the governor.

The colonel ties his horse to a nearby rail and climbs a ridge of fallen brick to enter the building. The smoke, the drifting ash tell him that the bomb struck quite recently. Only a few hours ago, if his judgement of these things is correct.

A wigwam of smouldering timbers fills the middle of the narrow main floor, and he has to wade along the wall to proceed any deeper into the shop, for a shop of some kind it seems to have been. He is stepping carefully over wet and treacherous wooden wreckage. He feels a drop of rain on his face and glances up to see luminous patches of cloud through a cross-hatching of scorched and amputated beams.

A bookshop. Three of four huge glass-fronted bookcases that once lined the long walls have been smashed open, the books they contained scattered about the room. The one case that remains standing now leans backward as if half-sunk into the wall, its glass panels gone but a few of the books still intact on its shelves. Along the side walls ancient stonework appears in the places where the plaster has fallen loose.

Two men are browsing through the books that remain on the shelves. They glance at the colonel, take in his uniform, put down the books they were examining and hurry out with furtive backward glances. Looting has become a hanging offense in the abandoned town.

In the waning light the colonel gazes in wonder at the bizarre volumes issued by destruction. Books without covers. Covers without books. Books still smouldering, books reduced to mounds of cold, wet ash. Shredded, riddled, and bisected books. Books with spines bent and snapped, or transfixed by a jagged black arrow of shrapnel. In one dark corner lies the multi-volume set of an outdated atlas, fused into a single charred mass. The gold lettering on the spines has somehow survived the fire and glows eerily from the shadows.

Why is the world so made, the colonel wonders, that whatever is damaged shines?

As he steps forward the colonel's foot strikes another volume, one without a cover. It lies splayed open, its uppermost pages lifting and falling with the gusts of evening wind. A huge grey moth is sealed in its unknowable moth self.

Further back, where the roof is still intact, he finds the source of the light he saw from the street. Candles everywhere, in brackets, in crevices and holes blasted through the masonry.

At the back of the shop, in the midst of the light, a young woman crouches amid a great heap

splintered wood, picking up and setting down one piece after another, as if searching for something. Above her on wires strung across the room large sheets of blank paper stir in the wind like ragged sails.

The colonel watches her from the shadows. She is dressed in a tradesman's clothes: worn shirt breeches, a coarse green apron. Her pale russet hair is tied back: he can see the slender white column of her neck. A girl, really, who should not be alone in an exposed ruin like this, at night. He clears his throat.

Mademoiselle? Do not be alarmed. I am an officer.

She speaks without surprise, making it obvious she knew he was there watching her.

I saw you come in, she says, turning. Well, I saw your wig, anyway.

The colonel laughs, relieved. This may be someone, one of the few in this benighted land, that I can talk to. He steps forward, pleased with the smart sound his new boots make on what is left of the floorboards.

Everyone wonders, he says, how I manage to keep powdered and polished in the midst of a siege. The truth is, I have a truly dedicated barber. Neither cannon, nor musket, nor dreadful scalping knife cows his spirit.

The young woman tosses a jagged stick back on the pile, rises and turns to him, studies him with steady blue-green eyes that belie her youth. Her face and hair are streaked with dust. Her right wrist is bound in a strip of white cloth. Was she here when the bomb fell? For the first time in a long while the colonel finds himself awkwardly searching for words.

I was riding through the town on my way to meet with the Marquis. I saw lights and thought I should investigate. Did you know there were a couple of looters in the shop just now?

They weren't looters, she says. They're old customers. They stare in the window every night after we lock up.

He is vaguely disturbed at her casual response to everything. The bomb, the intruders, him. The encounter is not going quite as he anticipated.

My name is Colonel de Bougainville, he says, doffing his tricorne.

The name seems to have impressed her, he thinks. Or the rank. She looks at him more closely.

You wrote a book, she says.

I did indeed, but –

About the integral calculus.

This is a first, he thinks. He's known in this country for his military exploits, his friendship with the Iroquois, his conquests of the heart. He himself sometimes wonders who it was that wrote the forgotten book with his name on it.

It's true, he confesses. Don't tell me you've read it.

I had a copy here. It may still be in one piece, somewhere out in the shop. But I have read about the calculus. In volume seven of the *Libraria Technicum*, page two hundred and three.

You've memorized an entire encyclopedia of science?

No, just volume seven.

Remarkable. It must be terrible for you, what has happened to your father's shop.

This is my shop, she says.

Bougainville smiles warily. This would not be the first lunatic he has encountered since arriving the colony. War can collapse wits as quickly as buildings.

Be that as it may, he says, you really should not be here alone.

I'm not, any more. You're here.

She speaks French very well, he notes. He cannot place the accent. There is something strange in her look, the pale, translucent gleam of her skin, but the girl is not mad. His instinct for people is certain on that point. And she is pretty enough. Riding through the wet streets his thoughts had been as bleak and cheerless as the charred, deserted houses on either hand. He weighs the matter and decides he will linger here, for a while, a diverting interlude before the heavy task of bringing the Marquis more bad news about the doings of the English.

The young woman wipes her charcoal-blackened hands on her apron, pulls a chair towards her and stands beside it as if waiting for the colonel's permission to sit.

There couldn't have been a lot of business left here for you, Bougainville says. Most of the merchants have closed up and gone.

This is my home. I have nowhere else to go.

Bougainville unbuckles his swordbelt and hangs it from the back of a chair opposite the young woman's.

May I?

Please.

He lifts the wings of his blue velvet coat, seats himself, and she does likewise. Her next words are another salvo from an unexpected quarter.

Do you like to read, Colonel?

Certainly.

What?

He shrugs.

A little of everything, I suppose. I particularly enjoy narratives of travel. I confess I have a certain ambition, once this war is over, to visit faraway places. Perhaps even discover an unknown island or two. And you, mademoiselle? Do booksellers read their books?

I used to, she says. Now most of them will become fuel, I suppose.

Yes, it looks like it will be a cold winter, Bougainville says. I'm sure, being of the nobility, you're not accustomed to this kind of hardship.

That surprised her, he registers with satisfaction. Once again, his intuition proves itself.

One can tell these things, mademoiselle, he says. You are very self-possessed, it seems to me, for such a young woman. And alone, as you are here, amid all this destruction:

Do you think the siege will end soon, Colonel?

Alas, not even my barber, sagacious as he is, can answer that question.

The people I've talked to lately are very disheartened. They think it's only a matter of time before the English make a successful assault.

This is not a subject he wished to have brought up. Especially by a girl who doubtless knows nothing of the art of war.

Time, he says with a soft huff of derision. Yes, well, time is one thing the gallant Major-General Wolfe has very little of any more. His chances of turning this siege into a conquest are withering with the autumn leaves. Soon it will be winter, and if he doesn't withdraw his ships they'll be frozen and crushed in the river ice. The cliffs are his last hope, but as the Marquis said to me the other day we need not suppose the enemy have wings. In the few places where we have not posted sentries, the heights are unassailable — even the farmers who live along them say so. They cannot be scaled, especially by troops hauling artillery.

Her eyes hold his for a long moment.

Not everyone believes that, she says. Some say that the English will take Quebec, and when they do the world will surely end.

And what do you reply to such superstitious nonsense?

I tell them that whatever happens a world will end. And another one will begin.

You're wise beyond your years, I see.

I've had good teachers.

From the darkening street outside drifts the far-off frantic barking of a dog. Bougainville remains still, not wishing to betray himself, but when the sound dies away at last he sees that his hand has reached for his sword hilt.

It's so quiet this evening, the young woman says. Isn't this just the kind of night they would make an assault?

Is she taunting me? he wonders, and decides that a jest would be the best response.

What irony that would be. I see, mademoiselle, that you have read a few novels. Or you did, until today.

There's one book the bombs didn't touch, she says.

Volume seven?

No, another book. One I haven't read yet. A book I'd like to read.

I'm intrigued, he says, feeling the chill night air on the back of his neck. He shivers, leans closer to the warm glow of the candles. Why don't you tell me about it, then, this ideal book. I'm curious to know what sort of a book you would like to read.

It could take all night, Colonel. I'm sure you have duties....

Well, let us call this an interrogation, then, since I have found you here, a young woman, alone in what looks like an abandoned shop. With no proof that you are who you say you are.

She smiles.

Who did I say I was?

Bougainville takes a deep breath, eases back in his chair. This is getting better by the moment. The little ballet of swordpoints before the duel begins in earnest.

Come now. I doubt any book could take an entire night to describe.

The girl looks down, examines the palms of her hands.

It's not that simple. I would also have to tell you about the books that this book might be. And the books that it is not. It could go on forever, really.

The colonel draws his chair closer.

Begin, please, and let's see where we end up.

She closes her eyes.

Well, I think every reader imagines this book a different way. Mine is slightly larger than pocket size. Narrower.

Her pale hands trace a shape in the gloom.

The cover is sealskin, dyed dark green, and the pages ...

She brings her hands together until her palms and the tips of her fingers touch. Her eyes open.

The pages are very thin. Almost sheer, weightless. When I close the book it's like a beetle's wing folding back under its wingcase.

You do know some science. Pardon me. Go on. Tell me what happens when you open the book.

I can't read the words at first. The text is like a slender black door. This could be any book.

A treatise, Bougainville suggests. A history.

Or a novel, the girl says. I can open it anywhere, even to the last page, and find myself at the beginning of a story.

And where will you start this time?

The girl gazes slowly around the ruin of the shop.

This time ... this time the book opens out into a marvellous castle, with paper walls and ceilings and floors that fold and collapse and slide at the touch of a finger. There are cardpaper wheels that revolve and change what you see. And panels that slide open to reveal hidden passageways to other pages. You can get lost there....

And does this wondrous castle have a name?

It does. But you see? Already it is happening.

What is?

In order to tell you about the book, I have to tell you about the castle. But to tell you about the castle, I have to begin somewhere else.

And where would that be?

With a siege, like this one. And a battle.

THE CAGE OF MIRRORS

By nine-thirty the guns have been firing for over three hours, churning black smoke into a sky of pristine blue. The sun shines with a glassy, distant brilliance that heralds the turn towards autumn.

The year is 1717. The Christian armies, united under the leadership of Prince Eugene of Savoy, have met the Ottoman Turks outside the walls of Belgrade. An early-morning fog gave the besieging force the opportunity for a surprise attack.

Now the world is a crystal of perfect clarity, and on a hillock above the battlefield Prince Eugene paces, scribbles orders to be sent to his marshals in the field, peers through his spyglass, nods approvingly and writes another missive. He is a small, clerkish man whose first great struggle was to win over his own officers. At first they were scandalized by his unorthodox ideas about making war.

Precision is the key, he often reminds them. The most important weapon you take into the field is your pocketwatch.

He is the only commander to spurn the privileges of his exalted rank and pitch his tent with the common soldiers, sharing with them the noise and stench and bad food of an army encampment. The men love him and call him Papa.

At nine-thirty the faintest trace of a smile appears at the corners of the prince's mouth. He permits his valet to pour him a thumbnail measure of brandy in celebration of what has become a certainty. The Turks, routed at almost every point along the battle line, are going to lose. It may take a few more days to convince the inhabitants, still cowering behind the walls, of that fact. But the cross will once again rise above the minarets of Belgrade. Scarcely a single green-and-silver banner still flutters over what is fast becoming a field of slaughter.

Prince Eugene crosses himself and dispatches the waiting messengers with his final orders to the marshals now scattered far and wide across the battle line. A few more moves on the chessboard, and this engagement, as well as the crusade he has led for the past three years into Ottoman territory, should be over, praise be to God. With the taking back of Belgrade from the Turk the centuries of warring back and forth over the same rivers, forests, and mountains will at long last cease. Today the clock stops.

This was a war of time, Prince Eugene announces to his aides-de-camp. Our clocks against their musty lunar almanacs. You can't run an efficient military engine by the phases of the moon.

The aides-de-camp nod and murmur agreement. They have heard these phrases many times. Among them is a young man named Ludwig, the only son of Count Konstantin Ostrogon, one of the Prince's veteran commanders.

Ludwig is seventeen. He has stayed all morning by the Prince's side, held in reserve while the senior adjutants are chosen for the honour of relaying Papa's orders. Ludwig has been fidgeting, barely reining in his desire to do something, anything, other than wait here with the Prince and his retinue on this distant knoll, which only a scattering of enemy cannonfire has reached all morning. When his turn at last arrives and the orders are signed, sealed, and

tucked into the leather pouch at his side, he is off, galloping his sleek black mount down the hillside, over the trampled yellow grass, past the blood-spattered tents where doctors are sawing limbs off the shrieking wounded, between the slow columns of sullen reserve troops brought forward to fill the gaps in the dishevelled lines. He rides as if this is the whole world, the roar of the wind, the lunging flanks of the horse beneath him, the intoxication of his body's youth and animal vigour. He surprises himself with the thought that this feeling surging up in him is an absolute joy.

I am happy, he thinks, and laughs out loud.

He remembers the letter that arrived in camp a month ago, informing him and his father of the death of the Countess, his mother, in childbirth. For the first time since that day the coals of ashes in his heart have stirred to life.

I have a sister, Ludwig reminds himself. *Someday, when she is old enough to understand, I will tell her about this moment.*

He was sent to find his father, but it is his father who finds him. Led here by the captain who saw the boy fall, the Count at first does not recognize his son. Ludwig is stretched out on the grass, hat missing, his head propped against the wheel of a smouldering gun carriage. His hands are resting loosely, palms upward, in his lap. This is how beggars slump against walls. Ludwig's head lolls to one side and his jaw hangs like an old man's, as if in a single morning he has aged thirty years.

The Count dismounts and kneels beside his son. Ludwig's eyes are closed, his face chalk-white. He sighs like a gently roused sleeper about to awaken.

The Count turns to the captain.

What happened?

The man sputters. He does not know. He saw the boy fall from his horse, he rushed over and carried him to the gun carriage. The Count searches his son's uniform for traces of blood, gently opens the wings of his gold-embroidered coat. The white shirt beneath is spotless. At the Count's touch, Ludwig opens his eyes.

Let's go home, Father, he says in the tone of a bored guest at a card party.

He draws in a long, drowsy breath, as though about to yawn. His head falls softly sideways against the axle of the carriage. The Count moves closer and looks into Ludwig's eyes.

Peace to his soul, the captain says, doffing his hat.

After a moment the Count draws his blood-crusted sabre and cuts the braided topknot, the Ostrov badge of warrior ancestry, from the head of his son. He rises shakily to his feet.

What killed him? he asks the captain, who lifts his blackened hands helplessly and lets them drop. *He just fell from his horse?*

Yes, Excellency. I saw him coming down the hill, then he slowed up and began searching this way and that, shading his eyes with his hand. Looking for you, I suppose. He was riding towards me when just like that he slid off the saddle and fell to the ground.

When?

I had scarcely rushed to his side and carried him here when I saw you riding by, Excellency.

The Count tucks the topknot into his belt. He gazes over the trampled ground, as if he might find the past few moments lying among the other litter of war.

Others are pausing now on their way back from the last expiring groans of the battle, they gawk, crane their necks, find out who has fallen here. There being a nobleman on hand, must be somebody of importance. The Count glares around, his naked sabre held before him like an accusation, as if someone here knows the answer to this riddle and refuses to tell him. Young men do not just die.

Two officers on horseback canter past, pausing in their conversation to take in the scene with impassive faces. A grenadier follows soon after, leading another whose eyes are hidden by a dirty bandage, his outstretched hands shakily patting the air before him. In the distance three infantrymen have upended a gunpowder cask and are already playing cards.

The world will not stop.

The Count tosses his sabre to the earth. Tomorrow perhaps, or the next day, the Prince's army will breach the walls and take its vengeance for the deaths of comrades, families, ancestors. He will not be among them. He will honour his son's dying request and return home. He will mourn his wife. See his infant daughter. And devote himself at last to his long abandoned dream.

The next morning he resigns his commission. Prince Eugene tearfully embraces his old comrade-in-arms.

My dear Konstantin, what will you do?

Puzzles, the Count says, placing his sword in the Prince's hands. *I will do puzzles.*

φ

After his son's death Count Ostrov retired to his ancestral castle, on a precipitous island on a rock in the River Vah. This ancient stronghold had been built by his ancestors on the crumbling remains of a Roman fort in the same year that Constantinople fell to Mehmed the Conqueror and Gutenberg printed his first Bible.

As a boy growing up in this castle, the Count had loved puzzles.

Cryptograms, mathematical oddities, those new criss-cross word games known in his native land of Slovakia as *krizovka*, riddles and philosophical conundrums, optical illusions, and sleight-of-hand tricks: all beguiled him and, so the Count came to believe, each of these puzzles was related to the others by some hidden affinity, some universal pattern that he had not yet uncovered. Their solutions hinted at a vague shape, like the scattered place names on a mariner's chart that trace the edge of an unmapped continent. The philosophers of the age were asking why or how God, perfect Being, had created an imperfect world, a world which at the same time the new science was comparing to an intricate machine of uncertain purpose. Perhaps the answer to such questions could be found in these seemingly innocent diversions of the intellect. Was not the mind itself, the Count conjectured, a composite engine of messy animal imperfection and clockwork order?

Yet if there were a single solution to the infinite puzzlement of the world, the young Count

Ostrov had been forced to abandon the search for it. In the tradition of his forefathers he had taken up the sabre and spent his life on horseback battling the encroaching Turks. At the time the thought did not occur to him that he might make some other choice. One of his ancestors after all, was legendary for having decreed that when he died, his skin should be fashioned into a drum to call his descendants to arms. Another still led his men into battle after an exploding shell had blinded him.

Now the Count indulged himself in puzzles as he had never been able to in his youth.

He had *trompe l'oeil* doors and windows painted on walls. Filled rooms with unusual clocks and other marvellous trinkets and curiosities: refracting crystals and magic lanterns, miniature cranes and water wheels, ingenious traps for mice and other vermin. The few dinner guests who stopped at the castle over the years were required to solve riddles before they were allowed to eat.

*We are little airy Creatures
All of different Voice and Features;
One of us in Glass is set,
One of us you'll find in Jet.
Another you may see in Tin,
And the fourth a Box within.
If the fifth you should pursue
It can never fly from you.*

He hired servants who were what he called human riddles. Massive-jawed giants, dwarves, beings of indeterminate age or sex, boneless contortionists, and people with misshapen or extra limbs. Many of the menial tasks in and around the castle were, however, performed by ingenious mechanisms installed in the castle by inventors from all over Europe. Count Ostrov dreamed of a castle in which there would be no living servants at all, but despite many attempts he had not yet succeeded in having a machine fashioned that could prepare roasted larks just the way he liked them.

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Not long after the Peace of Passarowitz, the Count found his cherished seclusion threatened by another kind of invasion: that of the document men. The castle was besieged by government functionaries toting satchels bulging with documents, rolled-up maps under their arms, maps which they spread out on his huge oak desk to show him what the Imperial Survey Office and the Superintendency of Frontiers had jointly decided: the River Vah now formed the revised boundary between the Duchy of Transmoravian Bohemia and the Principality of Upper Hungary.

Like a vast bloodstain the empire had changed shape once again. And once again, as so many times before, the land of Slovakia, like a slaughtered ox, had been sliced up the middle.

In consequence, the document men told the Count, although your forests, fields, and vineyards are all situated in Bohemia, this castle stands precisely on the border with Hungary, and thus falls into two administrative districts.

Which means? the Count growled, stroking his moustache.

Which means that Your Excellency is now subject to the duties, excises, levies, and fiduciary responsibilities pertaining to both states.

Which means, the Count said, stabbing a finger at the dotted line that bisected his homeland, every time a pheasant is killed and plucked at my back door, roasted in the kitchen, and carried out to me on the front terrace, another coin will be plucked from my purse.

He argued that by their own logic, his castle did not in fact exist, *as an entire castle*, either Bohemia or Hungary, and thus should be exempt from taxation altogether, and from any other meddling in his affairs, for that matter. The document men plunged into their law tomes and surfaced with an obscure ninety-year-old *lex terrae* stipulating that a fugitive could not be shot at by soldiers from either of two neighbouring nations as long as he stood precisely on the border. *For if he be wounded in a leg that stands in one realm*, the statute read, *some of the blood he sheds will of necessity flow from that part of him residing in the other, to which transfer of vital humour clearly falls under the Unlawful Conveyance of Spirituous Liquors Act*. Such a man, in other words, remained suspended in legal and political limbo for as long as he took not a single step in either direction. And so it appeared that by analogy the Count's argument for autonomy was viable. Yet the document men insisted that an exemption of this kind could only take effect in the improbable circumstance that there were no separate, self-contained rooms in the Castle Ostrov.

Just as the several parts of a man's body blend together seamlessly, they reasoned, *so your castle would have to be a space in which, for example, no one could say exactly where the gaming room ended and the chapel began.*

At that moment Count Ostrov had the great revelation of his life. Not only would he fill his rooms with oddities and brain-teasers, he would transform the castle itself into a deviant labyrinth, a riddle in three dimensions, a giant puzzle.

Nineteen years were devoted to this grand design. In the world beyond the castle, peace gave way once again to war. The Turks retook Belgrade and were rumoured to be preparing for a march on Vienna, where the newly crowned empress Maria Theresa, young and inexperienced, was already under siege by Frederick of Prussia and his opportunistic allies. Armies tramped once again across Europe, cannonballs flew and villages burned, and during a brief lull in the conflagration the document men returned to inform the Count that the borders had been renegotiated and moved, freeing him (at least until the next war) from the threat of dual taxation. He treated the document men to a sumptuous dinner for their troubles (complete with the obligatory riddles), dismissed them from his thoughts and went on with his project.

Dry goods, cookware, clothing, furniture were gathered from their respective niches and redistributed throughout the castle. Ancient walls were knocked down and centuries-old doors taken off their hinges. Fixtures were unfixed, immovables became movables. There were windows set into floors and ceilings, inaccessible doors halfway up walls, winding passageways that circled back upon themselves or led to seemingly impassable barriers of stone that would slide away with the touch of an ingeniously concealed catch. Then came the tables, chairs, and beds mounted on rails in the floor, the mezzanines that lowered themselves into subterranean crypts, the revolving salons on platforms filled with halves of chairs, divans and settees whose other halves would be found along farflung galleries amid

clutter of incompatible household objects.

The workings of the castle were made even more complex by the Count's insistence that although the rooms merged, there would be no such intermingling when it came to social classes. Once every hour through the night, the Count's bed, and that of his daughter, Irena, left their temporary chambers and roamed the castle on their iron rails, in the morning ending up where they began. Despite this nocturnal meandering, the Count saw to it that neither of them came near the areas reserved for the servants. For their part, the servants learned to remain as unobtrusive as possible when they went about their tasks. The Count's presence was a constant reminder to the Count that he had not yet succeeded in creating a castle capable of functioning on its own without constant human intervention. As they made their daily peregrinations, the servants would conceal themselves behind moving pieces of furniture, or take circuitous routes that kept them well away from where the Count and his infrequent guests were to be found. Eventually he hired a Venetian metallurgist who fashioned automatons to take over some of the castle's more repetitive chores, and to these creations he gave the Slovak name for peasant labourers. There was a *robotnik* that polished silverware, a *robotnik* that folded bedsheets, a *robotnik* that woke the Count every morning by playing his favourite folk melodies on the violin.

The intended result was that the castle seemed scarcely inhabited by human souls.

But the crowning achievement of the Count's great labour was undoubtedly the library. A Scottish inventor, at enormous expense, designed a system of hidden tracks, chains, and pulleys, driven by water and steam, to create a ceaseless migration of bookcases that without warning would sink into the walls or disappear behind sliding wooden panels. Others dropped through trapdoors in the ceiling or rose from concealed wells in the floors. The entire castle in effect became the library, and no private space was inviolable. A guest at the castle might be luxuriating in a perfumed bath, or lecherously pursuing a servant when, with a warble of unseen gears, a seemingly solid partition would slide back and a bookcase or a reading desk would trundle past, the Count himself often hobbling in its wake, consulting his watch, oblivious to anything but the timing and accuracy of the furniture's progress.

As volumes began to arrive in parcels, boxes, and crates, they were unpacked, inventoried, and given a first cursory examination by the Count's daughter, Irena.

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When Count Ostrov first returned from Prince Eugene's campaign, Irena was in the care of her nurses, and so she remained until the day the women came to him in terror to tell him that the child had fallen ill and was near death. He descended like a thundercloud on the nursery, scattered the women, and finally got to know his daughter.

Never one to place trust in doctors, the Count installed Irena in his own bed, consulted the few medical treatises in his possession, and set to work to cure the disease himself. He spent a sleepless week preparing herbal concoctions and force-feeding them to the child, who immediately threw most of them up all over the blankets. He had her shivering body swathed in reeking medicinal gauzes. She was steamed, plastered, and bled.

Irena recovered, but the legacy of the illness, or the cure, was a weakened spine that left her unable to hold herself upright. Without the support of a pillow or someone's arm she

would collapse like a cloth doll. Eventually the Count had the girl fitted with a corset of steel bands, hammered into a poised, properly feminine shape by the castle blacksmith.

It was also at this time that the Count realized Irena was old enough to read and write, and so might be of some use to him in his never-ending work. One morning he had her brought to his study.

He handed her a small Bible.

Read some of that.

Yes, Father.

She opened the book and then looked up.

What shall I read?

What you find there.

He listened while she read from Deuteronomy, with quiet confidence, never once faltering. *The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law....* He stopped her after a few minutes and gestured to the quill, inkhorn, and paper that sat on his desk.

Now write it out.

She set the Bible down, picked up the quill, dipped it in ink and began to write. After a moment he noticed that she was not looking at the book.

You know the entire passage by heart.

Yes, Father.

You must have read it before.

No.

He tested her and found that she was telling the truth. And so Irena became the permanent replacement for the string of secretaries who had attempted to live up to the Count's expectations and had either been dismissed in a downpour of abuse or had seen such a moment coming and fled in the night.

A quiet, serious child, Irena had, not surprisingly, grown into a quiet, serious young woman. She did not greatly resemble her mother, the Count was relieved to see. The memory of the beautiful young woman to whom he had scarcely spoken during the long years of his campaigning tormented him. Irena had the same thick russet hair tinged with gold, but her eyes were sea-green rather than topaz, and her face, no matter how closely he scrutinized while she wrote the letters he dictated, remained out of focus, difficult to see.

When she was seventeen, Irena accompanied her father on one of his infrequent visits to the Imperial Court. No matrimonial offers materialized, but at a grand ball an elderly Hungarian noblewoman took Irena aside and told her to be thankful for her unusual looks.

Ours is the sort of beauty that attracts unusual men, who are of course the only men worth knowing.

In his lucid moments the Count was aware that Irena's unmarried state had more to do with the quality of the young men who were dragged by their avaricious fathers to the castle in the hope of a hefty dowry. Not one of these potential husbands read anything other than

the numbers on playing cards, and that, in Irena's eyes, was a fatal defect. They talked of hunting, horses, and war, and when these thin rivulets of conversation dried up, they talked not at all.

In the end, when it came to his only surviving child, the Count found himself powerless to enforce his will, and so Irena remained unmarried at the worrisome age of twenty-four.

She was rarely seen without a book in hand, and in the evenings the Count would often find her motionless near a lamp or a candle, stealing a quiet moment of reading before resuming her unending duties. *My little moth*, he whispered to her affectionately when he found her like this. *Always hovering near the light.*

As the library grew, Irena submitted her report on the shipments of books to her father, who approved or rejected each item and then allowed Irena to arrange the chosen few on the shelves, according to his deliberately arcane bibliographic system.

Almost every day shipments of books arrived from near and far. While unpacking a crate sent from Boston, Irena discovered that one of the books had been hollowed out inside, and within, another smaller book lay nested. The outermost cover was engraved with a title.

A Conjectural Treatise on Political Economy.

Irena opened the cover of the inner book, and found within its cavity yet another book even smaller, and within it, another, and yet another within that, reminding her of the doll within-dolls crafted by the local village toymaker. The innermost volume, its soft leather cover slightly curled, rested snugly in her palm like a tiny seashell. Only with the aid of a magnifying glass was she able to decipher the single sentence which made up the entire content of the smallest book.

The great do devour the little.

Dutifully Irena took this object of ingenious trickery to her father.

It's a joke, a pun, a riddle, he cried. *But not even the hairsplitters from the Imperial Court would disqualify it as an actual, functioning book.*

Irena handed her father the printer's catalogue, where his other books, both finished and projected, were described.

A Book Impervious to Fire

Knives from Persia

Memoirs of the Sibyl at Cumae

A book of mirrors is in the works at this time ...

The Count turned the pages with an impatient flick of his finger, his eyes darting up and down the neat columns of print.

My magnifying glass, quickly, the Count said.

On the last page of the *Conjectural Treatise* he discovered the microscopic publisher's imprint, under the device of a phoenix amid flames.

"Vitam Mortuo Reddo"

N. Flood, Printer and Bookseller London

Write to this fellow, the Count ordered his daughter. We must bring him here.

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The river was as still as glass on the wintry night that Nicholas Flood approached the island. The castle, perched on its slick wet rock, seemed to ripple like a watery reflection in the heated air from the barge's brazier, so that it looked to Flood as though reflection and cast had changed places.

He felt his breast pocket, where he kept the letter Countess Irena had written to him, folded in a cream-coloured envelope with a seal of red wax bearing the impression of the Count's odd coat of arms, a ribbon twisted into a loose knot above two crossed swords.

Dusting the snow off his hat, Flood jumped from the deck of the barge and climbed the wide stairs to the portico, his ascent watched from both sides by a row of winged stone lions with the faces of women.

He looked back once at the Slovak boatmen already busy unloading the crates of his equipment onto the pier. He had travelled with them for days up the placid Danube and then the foaming, sinuous Vah. Not knowing a word of their language, he had shared their leather bread and thin, over-peppered cabbage soup, hummed along to the sad and lovely melodies they sang in the evenings. They had not been curious about his unmarked crates, and no hard at work ridding the barge of them, the men did not spare him a glance. By climbing these stairs he had vanished to another plane of existence.

The Countess Irena met him in front of the doors with what she told him was the traditional offering to favoured guests, a glass of *slivovice* and a kiss of welcome. The colourless plum liquor burned pleasantly as it slid into his belly, warming his chilled and weary body. But the brief touch of this young noblewoman's lips left his wind-scoured cheeks throbbing with another sort of heat. Irena herself seemed undisturbed by this sudden intimacy, and calmly ordered the clustered servants to see to Flood's baggage. *That is how she kisses every guest*, he decided.

– How was your journey? she asked him in faltering English as they passed into the torchlit entrance hall. Their shadows rose above them into a loft of darkness.

– Uneventful, Flood answered. The way I like them.

He did not speak of the dreary voyage in the Count's strange ship, an antiquated argosy that had taken him circuitously by sea to the mouth of the Danube. It was less dangerous and less costly, the ship's captain had explained, to pass through the eye of the Ottoman Empire than to attempt an overland journey across the plague-stricken, robber-haunted roads of the continent. The Count, he also learned, was something of an inventor and had installed a system of steam-driven winches that controlled the braces and the halyards. This meant that only a skeleton crew was needed to man the ship, and so Flood spent most of the journey in solitude, feeling as though he were sailing alone to the end of the world.

– My father has shut down the castle's machinery for the night, Irena said.

She led Flood through a dark and tortuous passageway where votive candles glimmered from niches in the walls. Irena's blue silk gown rippled in the changeable light like water. They climbed a curving staircase which caused Flood to stumble. When he glanced down

his feet he saw the reason: the height and width of each stair was decreasing as the ascended.

They went along another tunnel of fitfully illuminated blackness. When Irena spoke next she turned to look at him, her pale aquamarine eyes reflecting the candlelight. She seemed to him like one of the flames taken human form.

– My father wishes you to be comfortable, she said. Be prepared, however, for a few surprises in the morning.

They had apparently arrived at his chamber, although he had not noticed a doorway and saw only a bed and the indistinct shapes of panelled walls.

– May you have a restful night, Irena said. She lit the torch in the sconce attached to one of the bedposts and left him.

Even after Flood had undressed and sunk with relief into the depths of his vast, chilly bed he kept putting a hand to his cheek in amazement. Finally he sat up, dug her letter out of his pocket, unfolded it, and smoothed out its soft creases.

To Nicholas Flood, printer and bookseller, from the Countess Ostrova,

Dear sir, It is with pleasure that I discharge the office appointed to me by my father, in offering you the following terms of employment...

He had answered her letter on an impulse. He hadn't needed to. His painstakingly crafted expensive novelties sold well, leaving him with no desire to crank out the heaps of pamphlets, travelogues, and fat novels that a growing reading public clamoured for. Every year he sent a catalogue to the Frankfurt book fair, boasting of new wonders to come. Impossible books that he could not imagine creating. And yet somehow he always found a way to turn his mad ideas into actual books that could be held in the hand.

No, he hadn't needed to come. But here he was. Transported a thousand miles from home by a letter.

Who was she? he had wondered the day he first read her elegant greeting. To conjure up a Bohemian countess, he resorted to the little he knew of the nobility, a patchwork of fact and conjecture that had been sewn together more out of reading than experience. From the remembrance of some of his more salacious commissions he constructed a haughty duchess, soft white body armoured in boned taffeta. A stabbing glance of disdain giving way to purr of delight once blood had been drawn.

He folded the letter, tucked it back in its envelope, and blew out the candle.

Lying awake in the dark, Flood thought back to what she had said about the castle machinery. He remembered the bizarre ship, with its wheezing steam pipes and squealing pulleys, and he guessed that something similar awaited him in the morning. Closing his eyes and squirming deeper into the bedclothes, he remembered with drowsy amusement how soundly he had slept on that voyage, lulled by the ever-present vibration of the machine. Before he left London he had consulted Bostridge's *New Orthographical Atlas* for the location of the River Vah and found it at last, after his finger had made a meandering peregrination over mountain ranges and through forests, *there*, an inky rivulet issuing from the remotest Carpathians. The nearest large place name on the map, he had been delighted to see, was the

city of Pressburg. This seemed a good omen, although the Count's ship, at his first glimpse of it on the Thames dockside, dampened his enthusiasm for the adventure and gave him his first doubts.

He closed his eyes, exhaustion plunging him swiftly towards sleep. Through the halls of his dreams stalked a red-haired young woman in a white shift. He followed her down a tunnel lined with sphinxes, while all around them some vast hidden engine rumbled and throbbed.



He awoke to find his mattress shuddering beneath him. Fearing some calamity – an earthquake, a flood, a peasant revolt – he parted the heavy crimson curtains. His chamber, where there had indeed been one, had vanished and his bed was moving along a curving passageway into a spacious hall, gilded and corniced, lined on one side with deep window alcoves pouring in ice-light. From a vaulted firmament of cloudscape and cherubs hung a chandelier, a bloated glass spider. A tall pier glass stood between each alcove, and in the sudden bedazzlement of reflected brilliance Flood did not at first see the elderly man in an old-fashioned campaign wig and hussar's uniform, sitting at a table giving orders to a small group of liveried servants. The old man glanced at Flood's bed arriving and clapped his hands twice sharply.

The assembly broke up. Servants and their wavering mirror-twins hurried towards one another and then all these moving bodies, both real and reflected, vanished with a ripple as concealed doors silently opened and closed like the valves of some giant undersea creature. The old man, alone now in the centre of the great hall, beckoned to the printer, who still had not emerged from his refuge behind the bedcurtains.

– Good morning, Mr. Flood. Welcome to Hrad Ostrovy. I trust you slept well. No need to be alarmed. All is functioning as it should. Come, join us for breakfast.

Flood ducked back behind the curtains, searched frantically, and then stuck his head out again.

– Your Excellency, I haven't got my clothes.

The Count raised a finger.

– Yes. Just a moment.

A panel in the ceiling above Flood's head slid open. A wicker basket was winched down to him by unseen hands. He took the basket off the hook from which it hung and found inside his clothing, discarded in a heap at the foot of the bed last night and now cleaned, pressed and perfumed. By the time he had hurriedly pulled on his shirt, waistcoat, breeches and stockings and had climbed cautiously down from the bed, the Count was hunched over the table, busily attacking his breakfast.

Irena had joined him, Flood was alarmed to see. And a man somewhat older than himself, strikingly handsome, wearing the skullcap and black cassock of a cleric, his long raven hair tied back in a queue.

The Count greeted Flood this time with a hearty grunt and offered him a less opulent and noticeably shorter chair than his own.

– I gather you were still asleep when the shaving machine stopped by your bed. That would

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