

A Labyrinth of Memories



Mind Transfer & Time Travel Versus
an Organic, Telepathic Global
Network in the Midst of the
Victorian Era

TIM E KOCH

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OF
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AN ORGANIC, TELEPATHIC GLOBAL NETWORK
IN THE MIDST OF THE VICTORIAN ERA**

Tim E Koch

A Vintage Science Fantasy

A Labyrinth of Memories

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VOLUME

THE FIRST

Trials Upon the Isle of Ireland

CHAPTER

I

In which a trio of scoundrels are put to the test

The world was as it should not have been. *Witness!*—the terror of Hemodrosis, the Weeping Death: decimating the inhabitants of the great peoples. *Witness!*—two great powers, Britain and France: too invested in a race of technology to spare efforts for a remedy. *Witness!*—Charles-Louis Bonaparte, Emperor Napoleon III, dashing kingdoms and principalities asunder with the power of Ludibrium. *Witness!*—Ludibrium, this preternatural and fantastical maquillage: mesmerizing minds, showing whatsoever is wished seen, save the means of its own production. *Witness!*—the power of Ludibrium: capturing and disseminating the events at Castle Lismore, the trial by sport of three young Scots, for whom the world was most assuredly as it should not have been.

For the two principal commentators on the occurrence at Lismore, Ireland, on an autumnal night in the Year of Our Lord 1850, the world was most certainly as it had not been a mere lustrum prior. Louis Véron in Paris and Junius Booth in Manhattan prepared the world for ‘the sporting event of the century,’ thusly declared by the latter. ‘We are merely in wait of the suns setting upon this little

village in the southeast of Ireland,' he added.

Véron's French accent now accompanied the view of Castle Lismore from the airship *Georgiana* as it circled roundabout the crenellated parapets of the castle's grey stone walls above which, from the courtyard within, rose the anomaly of a seemingly crystalline structure. 'The true contest to watch this night is whether or not the beautiful Mademoiselle Culling may secure the hand of Britain's most handsome and eligible bachelor, Count Fairchild.'

'So they're both there at Lismore?' inquired Booth, a smile lifting his mustachioed mouth and lending a gleam to his basset eyes. He sat at a table on the rooftop of the Cumberland 'neath the great canopy over Longacre Square where Manhattan's Seventh Avenue and Broadway crossed.

'*Oui*,' the potbellied and ruddy-faced Véron declared from his seat in the grand foyer of Theatre Imperial Universelle in Paris. Powder on his pinched nose, and pocked cheeks did little to quell their crimson hue, set betwixt the dangling spirals of his wig.

'We'll see them courting?' pressed Booth.

'We will most assuredly see the Count,' Véron assured. 'He is a most gregarious and comely chap. Mademoiselle Culling is contrarily withdrawn and reserved. I predict we will see her handsome physique, but not her face.'

'Well, mayhap opposites will attract, and we will see some sparks,' Booth teased. 'How about the Emperor? Is he there with you in the theatre, which, if I'm not mistaken, is the Imperial Palace? Will we see him?'

'Theatre Imperial Universelle is in fact the seat of Emperor Napoleon's government. It is where his beloved Rachel Félix worked under my direction and where the miracle of Ludibrium was first used for functions other than military. The Emperor is in residence with

many of the Continent's leading Ludibrium producers. They're all curious to see what this endeavor of the Duke of Devonshire and his illustrious gardener, Joseph Paxton, will come to bear,' Véron explained.

'In Paris, it's quite dark already, is it not?'

'Indeed. And for you it is—what—time for luncheon, yes? Yet you are out of doors, but the sun does not overcome your Ludibrium.'

'Yes,' Booth declared proudly. 'Longacre Square is one of several locales of Manhattan presently sheltered fully to defend shams from the glare of sunlight.'

'Shams, you call them,' Véron laughed. 'Ah, American parlance: so comedic. But you say: of the present, meaning this will soon not be the case?' Thusly he instigated his companion's elucidation.

'Right you are, Monsieur Véron,' Booth agreed. 'If I can find the right casting point, I'll show you, yes there—'

The displays, one upon those seemingly crystalline walls imposing above the parapets of Castle Lismore, one stretching along High Street in the London borough of Whitechapel, one draped within Palace Square in St Petersburg where Ludibrium was yet rarest, whence Tsar Nicholas and his heir, the Tsarevich Alexander, dear friend of the Duke of Devonshire and admirer of the beautiful young British Queen, partook of the event in the middle of the night, and those at a thousand public houses round the world, changed to show the parapets, mansards, and chimney pots of Manhattan's skyline. Great iron trestles, appearing the clutching hands of metal giants, rose menacingly from the bank of the East River.

'Soon all of Manhattan will be covered by a vast dome, our shams thusly protected from dilution of sunlight,' explained Booth.

'Quite ambitious,' judged Véron, 'and proof of America's devotion to Ludibrium and Napoleon's Empire Universel.'

‘We needn’t the sun,’ Booth declared. ‘Ludibrium is our sun.’

The two men laughed together as the display returned from the fearsome construction growing above the New York borough to the rooftops of Castle Lismore.

The light having faded from the rolling Irish hills through which River Blackwater serpentine, Véron acquired a more serious tone: ‘I must admit, when first I heard of Paxton’s plan for a labyrinth, I expected an acre of trimmed hedges.’

‘Not a timber structure covered in canvas?’ quipped Booth.

‘Certainly not,’ decreed Véron, ‘and certainly not two acres of winding passages upon seven levels.’

‘All covered with Ludibrium for wonderful optical affect?’

‘Every inch, inside and out. And,’ Véron entrusted, ‘tis but a shadow of a greater work planned for Hyde Park.’

‘How does it work,’ Booth mused, ‘this miracle of Ludibrium. You pioneered its use in theatre, did you not? Much to the dismay of some in our profession.’

Véron’s cherubic lips twisted into a sneer. ‘I know how to use it, but the man who claims to know how it works is a fool. It has stymied the greatest minds of our age. The notable mathematician Charles Babbage is present in Lismore to study the substance as we’re seeing it put to use tonight. You see the arch above the grand staircase that gives to the roof? That arch—’

‘Ho!’ Booth interrupted. ‘Ho! They bring out the prisoners.’

The aerial view from the circling airship showed Devonshire’s guards marching a young man from the riding house down the avenue toward the gates of the castle court. Silence gripped the two thespians on either side of the Pond, but those who had gathered on either side of the avenue and upon the terraced slopes on the grounds of Devonshire’s Irish residence exploded in uproar at the sight of the

villainous one condemned to the ordeal of the labyrinth.

‘Throckmorton!’ Véron at last erupted, nearly missing the opportunity of introduction as another younger lad appeared in the doorway of the gate house. ‘Eh, of Scotland, obviously. Coinneach, his Christian name. Accused and condemned for the larceny of iron scraps from a yard near Dublin.’

‘Yes,’ laughed Booth, ‘I say, is that rust upon his waistcoat?’

Indeed, ’twas easy to see the stains, and even flecks, of rust insinuating upon the young man’s lapels as the Ludibrium upon the walls of Paxton’s construction concurrently captured from and displayed thereon the villain’s face as large as the biggest hydrogen balloon, while the busts of the two masters of ceremony appeared in gilt oval frames in either upper corner of visages around the world. Each strand of Throckmorton’s youthfully sparse beard distinguished. Green eyes glared back at humanity ’neath the brim of a dirty brown bowler hat.

‘Now this is his cousin,’ Véron informed of the younger lad. ‘He’s near a lustrum junior to Coinneach, who is nineteen,’ Véron recited from a note handed him by his secretary. ‘He goes by Digby but apparently his given name is—’

‘What the bloody hell!’ Booth erupted as a third tiny figure was led from the riding house, his swearing inciting a collective gasp round the globe. ‘I beg the world’s pardon for that outburst. I saw the dwarf and thought ’twas a child.’

‘No, my friend,’ Véron anguished. ‘I fear your initial perception was, alas, correct and your outburst justified, as far as I will judge. That child is Douglas’s—Digby’s—young sister, the poor dear caught up in all this mess as, according to reports from sources in Dublin, the only member of the family to survive the Weeping Death while these two lads were away. Her given name is Bridget.’

For a moment, she alone occupied the broadcast visages, from the top of her rust-colored hair to the tarnished silver chain and locket about her neck. The jeering of the locals lining the way from the riding house to the castle gate ebbed at the first sight of the lass in a dirty muslin dress, only to swell anew as their indictment of her elder caregivers was compounded by this new insight: that they dared involve a child in their lawlessness.

‘Good God,’ surmised Booth, having already corrupted the casting with one profane outburst, ‘they’ve certainly been through it.’

‘Indeed,’ Véron assented. ‘But who hasn’t felt the sting of that dreadful disease. I certainly have, and I know you have.’

His voice breaking at the end, Booth submitted: ‘My entire family.’

‘It is a terrible stain on this event,’ Véron assessed, ‘but she will be joining them inside the labyrinth as, let me see,’ he mulled as he consulted his notes, ‘the team’s scout. Each team has three members. The striker, who will be the eldest of the malefactors, Coinneach; a stave—this will be the task of Digby—whose duty it is to protect his fellow team members and, when possible, thwart, within certain strictures, the members of the opposing team; and then the scout—our young lass—will ferret out the best path for the striker. It is the striker whose journey through the passageways of the labyrinth will claim that portion. The team with the greater portion of all seven levels will achieve victory, and, in the case of our young felons, win absolution for their crimes.’

‘Well,’ Booth admitted, ‘the challenge this day for myself will be that of remaining objective through this competition.’

‘A source near the Duke of Devonshire,’ informed Véron, ‘suggested that the little girl’s incarceration with her brother and cousin determined the selection of this team.’

‘Lord William Cavendish certainly is a man worthy of the title His

Grace,' Booth surmised and then grimaced as someone discharged a great wad of spittle which clung upon the condemned leader's ginger eyebrow.

Phlegm—large as a grown man on the great visages of Longacre Square, Theatre Imperial Universal, Whitechapel High Street, and Castle Lismore—dangled a moment before falling onto Throckmorton's cheek. From the next knoll in Lismore, in the spire of the Cathedral of St Carthage, its great bell suspended above their heads as they peered through a gap wrought by the removal of slats from the tall pointed-arch fenestrations in the belfry, Mr Charles Babbage and Lady Ada Byron Lovelace took advantage of this chronometric event. Their intent: determining asynchronicity in casting over distance, the two mathematicians peered into stereoscopes devised specifically for the critical study: the lens of the left eye seeing a visage applied to the internal workings of the scope, while the lens of the right eye witnessed the magnified visage on the wall of the labyrinth.

'It appeared perfectly synchronic to my observation,' Babbage sat back and noted.

Lady Lovelace agreed. 'There was no distinction between timing of the two displays. And,' she further assessed, 'judging by the reaction of Véron across the Channel and the other across the Pond, I assess the transmission round the world to be, as implausible as it might seem, instantaneous.'

Marched through gates and into the castle's courtyard, the heckling crowd at last left behind, the three condemned stood at the base of the game and faced their opponents.

Having scrubbed his face with his hands, with all the eyes of the world watching, Junius Booth raked his fingers through his pate of graying black hair and gasped, 'They're having us on.'

Each member of Lismore's team towered above his challenging

counterpart. The striker was not only tall but also as sinewy as a racehorse. The stave's brow was broad and flat, his chest broad and round. The scout was a terribly thin fellow with weedy, twitching fingers and the eyes of a zealot.

'Well,' Véron assessed as Booth dropped his brow into his hand and rested it there hangdoggedly, 'it appears we have a colt, a foal, and a lamb facing a racehorse, a bull, and a fox.'

In the courtyard, the Duke's stave bellowed, 'This is what they give us? Who'll change their nappies when they soil themselves? Not I.'

Digby leapt forward, his shoulders, narrower yet of ample muscularity, drawn defiantly square. Sneering, he crowed, 'Criminals're we! Dangerous men—and lass.'

'Is'at right, now, laddie?' countered the Duke's striker, abdicating no attention from his own counterpart.

When his iron glare cut down onto Bridget, she clung to Coin, seeking comfort he could not provide.

'I built it, y'know,' the large stave informed, tipping his head to the looming challenge. 'Know it as my own woman's nethers, do I.'

'The world is watching,' Coin replied softly, 'seeing you say such a thing in front of a little one.'

'She's a idiot,' the stave countered. 'D'not talk. Prob'ly d'not understand neither.'

'She understands fine,' Coin asserted.

'That's right, isn't it, little sis,' bated Digby. 'And if she wasn't so prone to not waste her breath, she'd likely point out the interesting comparison: your woman's nethers to this.' He mimicked the stave's gesture toward the game structure. 'Tis a great deal to know. Bigger than a plow mare she must be. Wouldn't perchance be a plow mare you've been with?'

The bullish man charged Digby, but his striker reined him back,

saying, 'Not now. There'll be plenty of time for that within.'

Digby raised his hands in concession but relented not of his nettling. 'Gentlemen, understand. I have the fullest appreciation of a substantial derriere, and maybe after we've shamed you within, we'll oblige similar shamings in your beds.'

The stave broke free of his striker's hold and, knocking Bridget to the ground, took hold of Digby. Coin uprighted the child and repaired her safely aside before engaging the conflict. This seen as an act of aggression rather than intercession, Lismore's striker entered the fray. The scout, suddenly finding himself the equal of the placid little lass as a mere observer, straightaway wheedled himself amongst the flailing quartet. Shouts, cheers, and applause at the sight of a brawl rose all about the castle grounds and within the many taverns and pubs throughout Great Britain and round the world.

A man's voice wrought the instantaneous cessation of all instigation by the village folk and the strivings of their champions. 'Gentlemen, if you please.'

Digby alone, unacquainted with the voice of the master of Lismore, the Duke of Devonshire, provided a sililoquous punctuation in the form of a battle cry that proved more playful than ardent. His cry languished as he looked up at the figure of a man in a black frock coat, his significant height advanced by the silk topper upon his head, towering eighty feet high upon the face of the game structure. A man of lesser height, with a physiognomy more rounded and sullen, took place beside the Duke, cupped his hand to the Duke's ear, and spoke behind it.

In Paris, Louis Véron announced, 'Here we have our host, Lord William Cavendish, 6th Duke of Devonshire, and his man, Joseph Paxton, who is responsible for designing our imminent pleasure.'

Oh, and there behind him,' added Véron excitedly as the vantage withdrew to the display of the roof terrace extent, furnished as it was with an arrangement of plush sofas and chairs, 'is the Duke's guest, Count Fabian Fairchild, holder of the British franchise of Ludibrium production.' The Count, attired in a crimson frock coat over a waistcoat of emerald twill and black satin cravat, offered a grand wave to the world in response to his introduction while the French master of ceremony prattled on, 'And just stepping out is the lovely Mademoiselle Helen Culling.'

'Withdrawn, indeed,' Junius Booth ascribed to a figure enshrouded 'neath a grey cloak. Even the black bowler hat included a veil to the concealment of the face beneath. 'We're taking your word on her loveliness, and, furthermore, her identity.'

'Oh, I assure 'tis Mademoiselle Culling. The Devonshire-Wellington collaborative is a small and tightly kept circle,' Véron explained. 'It's the most piquing social collective in Britain, and Helen Culling, niece of the Duke of Wellington, is seemingly indispensable. Joseph Paxton has taken her to his tutelage and imparted on her a bit of mechanicals, as Mr Babbage has done for the daughter of Lord Byron. I think, in this case, 'tis less a favor to the family and more an attachment to the Iron Duke.'

So caught up in his proclamations of judgment was Véron as to fail notice of the Duke's whispered reply behind his hand to Joseph Paxton and Paxton's reciprocating nod. The Duke then looked into the Ludibrium on the canvas before him, by which his presence was captured and disseminated to visages round the globe, and announced: 'That will be all.'

When Joseph Paxton set his stern face toward the visage, the gilded oval frames about the French and American commentators vanished, and, to signify his hold on the event's direction, Paxton, a

gardener first and foremost, set roundabout the display a wreath of green ivy. In their respective rooftop gazebo in Manhattan and elegant grand foyer in Paris, Junius Booth and Louis Véron stared at the great sham and visage before them whence their talking heads had vanished, each calling forth members of their support staff to aid in reasserting their presence into the British event.

‘How dare they shut us out,’ Véron bawled, the crimson of his pocked, round cheeks further surpassing their powdering, webbed veins seeming likely to explode. Booth, on the other hand, resolved his attention to the activities of his former countrymen and the opportunity of a slow intake of brandy.

Meanwhile, on the small roof terrace of Lismore Castle, the Duke spoke, his words again as sonorant as thunder from a tempest. ‘Good men—and young lady— please commence!’

The haunting figure of Helen Culling joined that of Joseph Paxton at an establishment of valves and levers before the parapet. Exchanging a number of advisements and directives, the pair set about the making of adjustments. In the sturdy annex betwixt the south face of the castle and the bank of River Blackwater, the steam-powered pneumatic generator set forth pressure to pistons which drove gears within the game structure. Cogs clacked upon each other, feed dogs clicked into place, the lower corners of the canvas lifted, and the iron cross bars of folding gates clasped together to open separate portals at the corners of the southern face.

Coinneach Throckmorton, at the instant the gate gave sufficient breadth to allow, leapt crabwise into a concourse tenebrous yet sweetly fragrant. Dense foliage the hue of old bones shaped the way. As Coin rushed forward, however, checking over his shoulder the progress of his cousins, the appearance of the leaves changed as sapphires through which an autumnal sun glistened. As the many

mechanicals of the gates sealed the three into their new prison cell, Coin ran the length of the concourse, glancing into three offshoots before he reached its end. He turned back to find Digby and Bridget mesmerized by the dazzle of the trompe l'oeil foliage.

Digby bowed very near the outer wall of the structure to ponder a leaf inches from the tip of his nose. The result for the global congress was the lad's crossed eyes peering back at them beyond a nose more bulbous than was its handsome actuality. On the roof terrace, Paxton and Culling turned from the amusement to one another, he peering down 'neath thick black brows, she upward through her veil, both doubting the success they desired.

'Ballocks!' Coin's shout resonated within the music room of the Pavilion in Brighton, whence the Royal Family took the event. He ran back and tugged at Digby's arm. 'It's not your first time in the presence of Ludibrium.'

'Never so near though,' Digby countered. 'It's warm and damp as a cow's gut in here.' Upon Coin's dismissal, Digby hefted Bridget and toted her along, shouting, 'What's this? Now that you've been to university, you're denying ever t've pulled a calf? Remember when ole Elsie was breech and you got in her to one elbow and the other armpit?'

Coin, having explored to its end a branch of the puzzle, replied, upon meeting Digby at the concourse, 'Remember the time we got tossed into a labyrinth and had to find our way through it?'

'Aye, mate,' Digby chided as Coin shouldered past. 'What I'm having trouble recalling is why we filched the scrap iron that got us banged up in the first place.'

'Put her down and go explore,' Coin evaded. 'She can walk on her own.'

'I say we stick together,' Digby retorted into the twisting offshoot

Coin now explored. ‘Why’s it smell sweet as fresh milk in here?’

‘Corn. The catalyst that activates the Ludibrium,’ explained Coin from within the spiral of a vortex alley. Returning and again passing his cousins, he rejoindered: ‘You’d know that if you’d stayed for the lecture Lord Babbage and Mr Paxton gave instead of kicking that ball about.’

Keeping Bridget’s hand and trotting after Coin, Digby confessed, ‘There were more lasses on the lawn than in that stuffy old hall.’

Coin, upon entering the third offshoot, crossed a dark loggia and found himself below an ornate dome supported by smooth Doric columns between which were arched openings giving to three farther portions of the game. At the edge of his vision, he caught the true nature of the place: timber posts and beams infilled of canvass and planking. Grey-leaved vines twining round the columns took the team’s sapphire blue. Digby came alongside. As the two exchanged sideways looks, he inquired:

‘Which way d’you think?’

‘ODIC,’ Coin pronounced.

‘Right,’ Digby drawled. ‘Observe,’ he recited, and, when the remainder of the acronym’s components evaded him, began searching the veins of the smooth marble dome for hints.

‘Observe the current conditions,’ Coin spouted. ‘Determine the desired alterations. Initiate a method of achievement. Conduct toward the goal. The ODIC’s never left me wanting.’

‘You haven’t the vaguest notion how to get through this, have you?’ Digby mocked. ‘A’right. I’ll check this one.’

He turned to the archway on the right but stopped when Coin took hold of his arm. ‘I admit, it’s more than I expected. But I have a suspicion that getting through it is not the only necessity. I agree. We should stay together.’ He nodded toward the way Digby had

chosen. 'Starting that way is as good as any.'

And so together they ran into the dismal grey passage and claimed its depths for themselves whilst in Paris Louis Véron seethed with desire to regain direction of the global casting, and patrons of public houses, taverns, salons, saloons, and even common rooms and bed-chambers of brothels sat fixated with the anticipation of the two teams at length coming together in a great clash forewarned of the prior brawl.

There was, however, at that moment, a public house in the hamlet of Chelton, which lies a halfday's journey into Wales from Gloucester as one goes by fording the River Severn and crossing the moors of Maise, wherein not a single inhabitant gave heed to the happenings within the smear of Ludibrium on the pub's wall. An array of bodies lay about the floor of the pub, its furnishings having been stacked in one corner, legs of tables and chairs clutching desperately upward. The languishing of the victims of hemodrosis, commonly known as the Weeping Death, had subsided, the disease advanced sufficiently to leave them lethargic and turgid. Blood welled about the eyes of a few, showing the final stages of the infirmity.

One cognizant, a member of the group known as the Dark Riders for their work at discovering and quarantining outbreaks of the Weeping Death, entered the pub from the street and heeded across the prone bodies the events in Lismore for a lengthy moment. He next sauntered to the doorway that gave to the back room and hence elicited the attention of two men. 'I do believe this thing's going to be worth watching now that the Frenchie and the Yank have quit their blathering.'

The doctor, a petite man, scalp glistening in the glow of the single lamp on the barkeep's desk, peered up through tiny wire-rimmed

spectacles and opined, 'Are you not supposed to be watching the street?'

'They're all down with it,' allayed the man, waving his hand across the entire populace of the village who lay stricken with the epidemic.

The daily broke with his potato peeling and declared, 'I'll have a squint.'

The two men took seats at the bar, watching for the briefest moment before one submitted t'other, 'We need a better view.'

Upon this incitement, the doctor rounded the desk, peered at the two through the doorway, and bade, 'I beg your pardon.'

'Have a look,' the daily invited, thrusting his hands across the dying toward the wall. 'Tis a great entertainment, but the plaster's showing right through.'

'It'll only take a bit,' his companion pleaded.

'And a catalyst?' the doctor inquired.

'I'll squeeze them taters,' the daily offered to the doctor and then t'other added, 'whilst you go get some.'

Neither dared accomplish either directive until the doctor showed acquiescence at the taking of a chair from a tabletop and positing it at the end of the bar whence to partake. Shortly the one given to retrieve some Ludibrium from the stores returned with a scuttle, a brush, and four comrades.

The doctor glared, regretting his leniency now that it had led to complacency. 'We must maintain the quarantine.'

'There's nobody coming on the road at this hour,' submitted the instigator.

'You'd better be right,' the doctor threatened.

The daily hurried from the back and poured his produce of potato juice into the scuttle, turning the red tint of pure Ludibrium the pink of mastitic milk and the scuttle reactively warm in its bearer's grasp.

While ample of the concoction was slathered over the meager existing visage, the daily procured several carafes from behind the bar and began filling glasses, much to the doctor's dismay. The portal into the game of Lismore clarified, as when a warm breeze vanquishes the smoke and fog from a London street.

As Véron managed a brief rending of direction from Paxton and fixed upon the figures partaking from the castle rooftop, the doctor exclaimed: 'The Count is there!' This being the case, he relaxed, took a glass proffered by the daily, and concluded, 'Very well. Very well, indeed.'

Paxton regained direction of the global portrayal of the game: the efforts of the participants within the puzzle again supplanting the social aspects without. The visage's wreath of ivy returned and divided at Paxton's behest. Tendrils of green curled downward and upward at its upper and lower center, to display simultaneously the opposing teams. On the left, Lismore's weedy scout ferreted one murky hallway while their bullish stave menaced the length of another, halting at each passage for signs of the young delinquents. The striker ran forward, turning the foliage from dead grey to the gleaming red of rubies as he made claim for Lismore. On the right, the youthful challengers scurried down a long corridor.

Paxton looked to Helen who nodded her approval and whispered, 'Very elegant and tasteful. That will show the French bugger to meddle.'

Véron stamped the plush nape of the foyer's red carpet and shouted to his secretary, 'Get me a correspondence portal to Paxton!'

The man bowed and took up a Ludibrium coated slate upon which to attempt the order as above him the three malefactors approached a peculiarly ferine condition at the terminus of a long alley. Branches

of scrub rustled about as a face appeared within.

‘McGaven!’ Digby shouted and surpassed Coin’s reluctant advance down the alley, remanding to him Bridget’s charge.

At the appearance of the man known by all the family as far back as Coin could remember, Bridget straightly scaled his leg and clung to his neck as her little body shook in fear, marking the nearest the girl had come to actual communication since they had found her.

‘Don’t, mate!’ Coin hissed. ‘I think it’s not—’

On the rooftop, Paxton clapped his hands together and declared, ‘Our first bane.’

Helen came as near as she dared to lashing out at her mentor in front of their notorious guest, saying, ‘Why is this team meeting with a bane?’

‘Put that not on me,’ Paxton replied. ‘I am not the only caster present, not to mention that Ludibrium has a mind of its own.’

Inside the game, Digby ran the length of the passage which remained cadaverous grey before Coin’s claim of it. The tenant of the tract adjacent the Throckmorton farm, emerged from the unlikely thicket.

‘Mr McGaven, sir,’ obliged Digby, doffing his flatcap to wring it in his hands whilst scuffing the floor with his bluchers, ‘how good to see you.’

A chill went up the nape of Coin’s neck at the gravelly distinction of the man’s voice. ‘Good, is it?’

Bridget pressed her face into Coin’s bosom.

‘Aye, sir,’ assented Digby. ‘The Weeping Death got all our kin and everyone else roundabout Durham. We thought for sure it took you as well.’

‘So you helped yourself to my goods,’ accused the old man.

‘You were gone,’ explained Digby. ‘Least we thought you was.’

Having slipped back into the vernacular speech patterns of the countryside, Digby glanced over his shoulder and offered Coin an apologetic grin. Coin tried to turn his grimace into a smile as he motioned Digby to back away from the infernal manifestation: its malevolence was greatly magnified by its authenticity.

Back to the man in the scrub, Digby entreated, 'That terrible disease took everybody.'

'Like you took every morsel from my cupboard,' growled the man.

'We're awful sorry about that, sir,' Digby replied.

The man shrugged. 'Well, that's the other thing you're wrong about.' He now made the same gesture as Coin. 'Come close. I have a secret for ye. Come. Come.'

At the sight of a pink tear sliding down the weathered side of the old man's nose, Coin enwrapped Bridget more tightly and entreated, 'Dig, remove yourself.'

Digby pushed ahead while Coin furthered away. Nose to nose with Digby, the manifestation shared, 'Tweren't disease, but poison,' and then exploded into a great gush of innards, ichor, and bits, sending Digby tail over teakettle and crabcrawling from gore-draped scrub.

Coin coddled Bridget to stay her turning as Digby scuttled past them. Coin took the alley, turning its length and its terminus radiant sapphire. At last, he allowed Bridget freedom to see that naught was to fear, but as soon as her feet hit the deck, she ran to Digby and beyond, glancing fearfully over her shoulder. Fear crept up Coin's nape at the thought of some other monster lurking behind him. When he succumbed, looked back, and found nothing there, he began to laugh. He laughed the length of the alley, pointing to Digby and panting: 'The look on your face.'

'Shut it!' Digby grumbled. 'Have you not a game to win?'

‘Indeed, do I,’ Coin replied as he charged an unclaimed corridor. ‘And I do look forward to more amusements such as—’

What appeared a passage as deep as the breadth of the structure, was, in actuality, only of sufficient length to allow Coin, in jubilation at his cousin’s abashment, full tilt before gaining its end, which proved not lithe taut canvas but stolid timber. Having landed as hard on his back as he had hit the bulwark, Coin lay stunned.

‘Ballocks!’ whimpered he, blinking away spots.

‘Amusements galore,’ chortled Digby as his face swam above Coin and Bridget peered as if after something dropped down a well. ‘Oh, look,’ expounded Digby dancing round a corner that had been hidden from Coin by the treachery of Ludibrium, ‘a great, long passage just awaiting a competent striker to claim it. Where is the other team when they’re needed?’

‘Oh, all right,’ yielded Coin, jumping to his feet and running after his cousins. ‘We’re even now.’

As he followed Digby’s howling laughter deeper into the puzzle, on the roof terrace Helen furthered her rebuke of Paxton. ‘I see no need for the child’s subjection to such unseemliness.’

Paxton turned his stony face upon her. ‘She’s with her kin in there, no more put upon than a lass locked with her father in debtors prison.’

‘Oh, well,’ Helen luxuriated, ‘so long as it’s not as bad as that.’

‘I tell you,’ Paxton replied, behind the cover of his hand, ‘she is in good care with that young man.’

‘Are you familiar with the absurd notion,’ Helen inquired, ‘that different people see different things in a visage?’

Paxton withdrew. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Because you’ve actually just supported that absurdity,’ she replied, coming near to wrenching a smile onto his face.

He put on a scowl in its stead and declared, 'He'll pull this off. He's our man. I'm sure of it.'

'He alone can see us through?' Helen entreated. 'Pray tell, how have we managed the mechanicals of all we've done in his absence?'

'He shan't replace you, my dear, if that is what truly motivates your reproach.'

The discourse ceased with Robert Meynell, the Duke's chief servant and valet, coming alongside Paxton. Serving tray in hand, laden with flutes of champagne, he informed: 'A request from Paris for you, Mr Paxton.'

'Monsieur Véron, I presume,' Paxton replied.

Meynell shrugged. 'Perhaps. One haughty, prissy Frenchman or 'nother. I left the slate on the table in the hall. Would you have it out here?'

'No,' rejoined Paxton. 'That's a good man.'

When Paxton had departed, Meynell peered through the veil of Helen's hat to ask, 'A libation for the lady?'

'Oh, please,' Helen replied, making pretense of swoon, 'I dare not.'

'There, there, now,' simpered Count Fairchild, taking her side in Paxton's absence. 'My dear,' the Count continued, beneficence beaming from his face as he looked to Lord Cavendish, 'all will be well. You appear far too caught up.' To Meynell, he sighed, 'Alas, the gentler sex. As with the dear Queen, we shan't let her be overcome.' In a most affronting manner, he deigned reach for her veil, imploring, 'Why conceal such loveliness?'

She flinched and drew back, muttering, 'Allow my eccentricities.'

More irritating even than his words and impositions was Helen's own inability to deny the man's comeliness. Elegant black locks of the sort that set fingers atingle at the thought of their running through them framed a nobly handsome face. Moreover, the most

threatening of his features was that his age being so near her own, so much younger than the men of late sent courting. His arrogance, however, which he exemplified by the shaping of her arm to fit about his, was an affront that far outweighed his beauty.

Paxton found the slate beneath the overhang of a bouquet of deepest red chrysanthemum upon the half-round table immediately inside the door. Louis Véron, Napoleon's minister of some nonsense or other, glared upward at the floral arrangement. Streams of white curls of an absurd wig framed his pinched features. Paxton purposefully turned himself and held the slate so that the portal captured the scene of Count Fairchild and Miss Culling arm in arm.

Smiling into the portal, he teased, 'What can I do for you, Monsieur Véron?'

'You know perfectly well what you can do,' the Frenchman rebutted. 'You shall return to me direction of the event's casting as was agreed.' His eyes grew wide upon at last taking in Paxton's taunting intelligence, 'What is happening there? Are the two together?'

Hearing Lord Douro's voice rising from the ground floor, Paxton waved down the staircase for his attention, and, upon its gain, promptly beckoned. Lord Douro took the staircase in three-step bounds. Upon his alighting, Paxton suspended the connection with Véron and required, 'What's kept you?'

'The staff inquired after the Duke of Wellington,' explained he, 'so, of course, I've been deflecting.'

'I am sorry for your father's condition,' Paxton admitted, 'and I know the need to mask the truth, but Helen is in a state over this new recruit, and now the squid has his tentacles all about her.'

Douro took the terrace as Lord Cavendish waved his hand at the visage of the game and asked, 'Could we have a more comprehensive view?'

‘I’ll see what I may do,’ the Count replied but immediately swooned as Helen set her mind upon the visage and revolved the scene upward until the whole of the first level of play was in view. The men staggered about in response to the affliction of vertigo. Helen used Fairchild’s stupor to extricate her arm from his grasp while Meynell fought to steady his serving tray.

‘Oh,’ Fairchild gasped, ‘you cast?’

After a stiff nod, she advised, ‘Best hold to something more substantial than a mere female.’

‘Indeed,’ Douro declared as he wedged himself unapologetically between Helen and the Count.

Enjoying his young protégé’s successful demonstration of her ability, Paxton quickly repositioned himself and the slate to hide Lord Douro’s imposition betwixt Helen and Fairchild. The portal with Véron resumed in time for Paxton to see the Frenchman’s reaction to Helen’s work.

‘Bon Dieu!’ Véron shouted, and staggered about, his wig askant, its long white curls tangled over his face. He swept them to either side and shouted, ‘Who is directing?’

‘Pardon the interruption. You were asking after the young couple. They’re coming along swimmingly,’ Paxton lied.

‘Cast it!’ Véron shouted, his face jostling about in the portal as he stamped his foot. ‘Cast that, not vermin running about in a maze. People wish to see society,’ Véron insisted, ‘not sport.’

‘I respectfully disagree,’ Paxton countered.

‘Respectfully, pah!’ Véron shouted. ‘Return my direction, Paxton, or I will appeal to Son Altesse Universelle Supreme.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Paxton replied, ‘but this game is occurring within the sovereignty of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria.’

Véron’s eyes narrowed to mere slits as he seethed, ‘But for how

long will your little queen resist submission to l'Empire Universel?'

'As long as her subjects are providing actual and tangibly useful technologies to the world,' Paxton replied.

'How dare you!' Véron shouted. 'Ludibrium is by far the greatest technology ever discovered. And it is French, need I remind you.'

Paxton muttered under his breath, 'For now.'

'What was that?' demanded Véron. 'You think to surpass it with your clockwork and pneumatics? I think not.'

'His Lordship beckons,' Paxton again lied. 'I must return.'

Véron's insistence turned pleading. 'Return me.'

Paxton ceased the portal, replaced the slate upon the table beside the door, and regained the terrace, whereupon, Helen, happily relieved of Count Fairchild's affixture, submitted to Lord Douro, 'Oh, Dee, you have missed it.'

'Pray tell,' Douro invited. With a sidelong glance at Fairchild, he made a perfect display of lacking social grace by saying, 'If you indeed must stand so near, please take my arm, dear.'

When Fairchild had taken an obligatory step away, Helen whispered into Douro's ear, 'I was quite in control.'

'I'd dare not question your performance,' he whispered in reply, 'but it shall be a long event. We only want to assure your endurance, and if I may play the disapproving elder, all the more enticing.'

'Is not my person enticing enough?' sallied she.

In a tone more audible, in offer of truce, invited he: 'So what's this that I've missed?'

'A bane,' Helen chortled, 'a diversion to stall and confound, and quite a hideous display it was.'

'It does appear to have delayed our team's progress,' Douro admitted.

'The bane was the least of their hindrance,' reproved Fairchild as

the visage displayed exceedingly greater red than blue with only a fraction of grey below and right of its center. 'Wouldn't you agree, William, that we allow the others reconsider their wagers?'

'Oh, well,' waffled Lord Cavendish, 'I don't know.'

'His Grace,' Paxton informed, countering Fairchild's familiarity at the use of Lord Cavendish's given name, 'takes his wagers very seriously.'

'And besides,' Douro put in, 'the youngsters are just getting their legs under them. Am I right?' When he met no reassurance, least of all from Cavendish, who wagged his head in wonder, he delved into a new subject. 'How are they to get to the next level?'

'Just there,' revealed Paxton, gesturing toward the canvas, indicating the terminus of a long corridor of ruby red in the southwest corner.

'That place has been claimed by our team,' whinged Fairchild. 'Why did they not ascend?'

'Ah,' wheedled Paxton, 'tis therein the trick of the game. The way up will not be manifest until the whole of the level is claimed.' Joining his master on a sofa at the edge of the terrace, he sat and whispered, 'Véron is obviously not the Emperor's chief caster.'

'But he has been with Charles-Louis since the beginning,' replied Cavendish. 'Or very near the beginning.'

Paxton wagged his head. 'I dare say the little one in the game could overcome his control.'

Lord Cavendish sighed. 'Then we keep looking.'

As the remaining portion of unclaimed grey paths quickly diminished, Douro declared, 'Are our two teams on a path of collision?'

'Confrontation is inevitable,' assessed Helen.

'In which our young challengers will likely be further reduced,' Douro concluded, 'if they survive at all.'

Paxton glanced at Helen with a suggestive knitting of his brow. She studied the course of passageways and found the secret the game designer suggested.

‘Perhaps not inevitable,’ she whispered to Douro.

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