

FATE

Prologue

An Artist of the Aether

'What are you?' Alice asked.

My great-great-great-great-granddaughter is full of questions.

'What I am,' I told her, 'is the story of my life. And it is too long a story for today.'

And yet the question remains. I return to my study, summon a pipe and my blue silk chaise longue, a fire and a brandy, paper and pen.

What am I? Not a ghost, though that is what most people believe. Not a Secret Chief, a Mahatma, an Illuminatus: also common assumptions. I'm not even enlightened, no matter how you define that. I am, and it looks like I shall forever be, Lord Francis Peter George St. John Damory. I was born more than two hundred years ago and although I am not strictly speaking alive, I am obviously not dead. My appearance is as I choose, though usually I resemble my old self. I was a handsome man; I enjoyed it then and I enjoy it now. I am not beyond vanity, nor any other trick or trap of earthly existence. My body is a simulacrum, as is my study, my fire, brandy, pen, paper. I am an artist of the æther.

A Book That Cannot Be Written

1717. 17 November, my seventeenth birthday.

I'm lying in a gutter in the stinking city of London. It's night, the fog is thick. Someone must have hit me, or I fell. I didn't even have time to draw my sword; the men in masks grabbed the girl and ran off. Sebastian vanished in pursuit; the link boy fled.

My brother Sebastian had arranged a party in a private room at Lovejoy's Bagnio. The girl was meant for me. Her name was Rosie; she was from Shropshire; she was fourteen, a virgin, or so he had been assured. But I couldn't do it - the look of fear on her face was, I discovered, a compelling anti-aphrodisiac - so he'd decided to take her home for himself.

My head hurts; I close my eyes and slip away. It's my eleventh birthday; I'm sleepwalking through the rooms of Farundell. I've unpicked the knots in the cords that bound me, wrist and ankle, to the posts of my bed; I've opened the heavy door. Sure-footed with glassy unfocussed eyes I descend the great stair and cross the stone-floored hall to the library, to stand before the portrait of my ancestor Tobias.

His pale, serious face breaks into a smile and he leans forward, elbows on his gilded frame. 'May God be with you, Francis, on this anniversary of your birth. I have a gift for you, if you can find it.' He shows me a book bound in white vellum, yellowed with age. There is no title, but on the cover a rose twines over a cross. As I watch, a new shoot unfurls, grows, buds. A flower appears, deep red and sweetly fragrant.

The cobbles are cold under my cheek; I smell piss, dead animal, rotten cabbage, dog shit. I taste blood where my lip has split. A rat runs over my hand.

I open my eyes and sit up. I'm still drunk, apparently; the world is swaying gently. The fog has congealed near the ground and as moonlight breaks through the clouds, I pull myself to my feet. I feel dizzy; I lean against the bowed front of a shop and press my forehead against the window.

There, right in front of me, within reach of my hand but for the glass, lies the book, red rose on pale vellum, one among a dozen dusty volumes on display. In the dark interior of the shop I think I see a light moving; I tap on the window, but no one comes.

Then Sebastian is shaking me, pulling me to my feet, dusting me off. 'Link!' he shouts, and the boy emerges from an alley. Sebastian aims a kick at his head but he dodges and grins.

'St. James's Square, wasn't it, sir? This way, if you please.'

'That was Hetheringham and his gang, I'm sure of it.' Sebastian drags me along by my collar. 'If he wasn't a fucking earl I'd cut off his balls. I paid fifty guineas for that girl.'

I try to look back. 'Where are we? What street is this?'

'A foul, verminous, poxy one that we wish to leave as soon as possible.'

'Wait, stop...there was a shop, a bookshop...'

I awoke the next morning with an abominable pain in my head, sick and queasy in my bowels. I begged the servants to summon a doctor, who came promptly and was about to bleed me when Sebastian strolled in, took one look at me, fell over laughing and booted the doctor out.

'It is only,' he said, 'a temporary effect of excessive drink, in particular the combining of wine with spirits. Their natures are incompatible, and make war in your body.' He sent for what he called his Morning Medicine and made me drink a large cupful.

It was unspeakable. 'What in God's name is in this?' I asked.

'You don't want to know,' Sebastian said as he left. 'Just give it a few minutes to work.'

Someone came to lay out a fresh shirt, and another to dress my hair. A maid brought coffee; I felt almost myself again. I had not realised that something so pleasant, when taken in excess, could have such dire effects. I had paid no attention; I drank what was in my glass – which, I now recalled, was always being refilled by someone's generous hand.

I obtained directions from Sebastian's manservant Joseph, who gave me a complicit wink, and found my way back to the Bagnio. I tried to retrace our steps. Things looked completely different by day, not that I had been in a fit state last night to make accurate observations. As soon as I left the main thoroughfares, with which I was somewhat familiar from my few previous visits to London, I was lost in a maze of tiny alleys, blind courtyards, narrow passages deep in filth. I told myself it was really just the same as farmyard manure, but a fastidiousness I had not known I possessed caused me to try to walk without setting down my feet, an awkward, mincing gait that I noticed immediately in others.

I wandered down Long Acre, turned left at the Dog and Bone, whose sign I vaguely remembered, then stopped, confused. Now which way? Down to the Strand? No - the link

boy had cut through a court with a fountain - this was it. Yes, here was the spot where the masked men had waylaid us and here, rather to my surprise, for I half-thought I'd dreamt it, was the shop front I remembered. Above it hung a faded sign: B. Lytton & Son, Antiquarian Booksellers. I peered through the grimy window. The book was no longer there; the place it had occupied in the display was now taken by a treatise on gardening. I pushed open the door and stepped into a small room crowded with books from floor to low, sagging ceiling.

The smell was that blend of old leather and mould, tallow, crumbling paper and stale smoke peculiar to such establishments throughout the world. It never fails to trigger in me an acquisitive anticipation, a cunning hope that here, in some forgotten corner, in an utterly innocuous binding or perhaps mis-bound, will be the book, *the book*...

As my eyes adjusted to the dim light I made out an elderly man in an ancient periwig, evidently the proprietor, in conversation with a woman whose face I couldn't see. He glanced up, murmured 'If you will allow, Contessa,' and turned to me. 'Good day, sir,' he said. 'In what way may I serve you?'

'Last night, as I was...passing, I noticed a book in your window, but it's no longer there. It had a rose on the cover, and a cross ...'

'Oh, but that was not a *book*.' The woman turned to face me. It was impossible to guess her age; her features were striking rather than beautiful, though I could not, at that time, have said whether she was dark or fair. She was tall, sumptuously if soberly dressed, with a cool and direct gaze. 'Why do you ask for a book that cannot be written?'

'That cannot be written? But I saw it...I thought I saw it. Tobias had it...my great-great-grandfather...'

'Tobias Damory?'

'Yes, my lady.'

'That is why you seem familiar. So he has led you here. Well, if we should chance to meet again, young Damory, it may be that I will be able to tell you something about the book you seek.'

That night I walked in my sleep, for the first time in years. The London house felt strange to me, thin and lonely. It was a new house, only thirty years old, and we had scarcely

made any imprint - unlike Farundell, so deeply imbued with the varied, subtle flavours of generations of my family that it simmers with life, even at night when its current denizens sleep.

I wandered from room to room, vaguely aware that I was looking for something, drawn down the chilly marble stairs and the steeper wooden ones at the back towards the warmth emanating from the subterranean kitchen. A single candle burned by the banked fire where a girl sat sewing, and silently weeping.

I must have made some noise that startled her; she looked up, saw me and shrieked. I awoke and realised I was barefoot, in my nightshirt, with a prominent erection. I tried to speak, but my teeth began chattering so hard I couldn't form any words, and my limbs shivered with such violence I feared I would fall down. She took pity on me, guided me to a chair by the hearth, found a blanket to put over my shoulders, poked at the fire until it blazed up, fetched a cup and poured me some wine.

I watched her and sipped; warmth slowly soaked into me. 'What's your name?' I asked.

'Matilda, sir.'

'You're Tildy Butterfield, aren't you?'

'Yes, sir. I came here four years ago.'

She was about my age, daughter of one of our farmers; we'd played together as children. 'I remember your mother,' I said. 'She used to give me milk, straight from the cow. And your father let me ride his plowhorse.'

'They're both dead now.'

'Is that why you're sad?'

'Oh no, that was years ago.'

'So what troubles you? If I can help, I trust you will ask.' I was trying to act the kind master, and put her at ease, but in truth I only wished for the shawl to slip a little further from her white shoulders.

'It's nothing you can do anything about,' she said. 'Just a silly little thing. The sort of thing that can happen to any girl.'

'My brother.' Behind Sebastian trailed a long line of pregnant serving girls. 'What will you do?' He was always generous; the girl could choose: money for an abortion, or a return to the country to become a farmer's wife.

'I don't know.' She glanced up; our eyes met. 'Do you remember when we were children, sir, you and your brothers - we used to sneak up to the hayloft and take off our clothes ...'

'I remember.'

'I always liked you best.'

The next day I took a horse from the stables and set out to explore, determined to see something of London besides bagnios and coffeehouses. I rode along the Strand, lined with fabulous emporia and glossy equipages, and up Fleet Street to gawp at Wren's huge new cathedral of St. Paul, which I supposed I ought to admire but which I found brutal. At its base the building is just large, with a ponderous and self-important air. If one did not know, one would think it the headquarters of some particularly recondite government department in a nation, such as France, that specialises in infuriating bureaucracy. I craned my neck to comprehend that dome. The stone and metal protuberance seemed to assault the softly varied greys of the sky rather than aspiring with hope and love towards Heaven, which it is natural that Man should do. I found its immensity rather futile, and it made me sad. I thought of Tildy, and wondered what she would choose.

The streets were crowded; I was jostled from all sides and nearly run off the road by a scarlet coach with a liveried driver who looked neither right nor left but lashed out with a whip at everything in his path. A wide avenue leading north gave a glimpse of the open land beyond the city; I turned that way. Carts and carriages and drovers with cattle for the slaughter passed in great numbers, but the close-packed buildings gradually thinned. There were open fields to either side, and on my right glimpses of a slender river, which cheered me. Was I pining for Farundell already? Sebastian would be disgusted with me.

A shaft of sun broke through the clouds and shone on a wooded hill in the distance; I let the horse out for a canter. The way was steeper than it looked, and muddy from recent rains; by the time we'd reached the foot of the hill the poor beast was heaving. I pulled him up at a trough outside a little church, dismounted and let him drink, then tied him to a tree next to a pretty grey mare.

I looked back. Miles away, across the pattern of fields, woods and villages, London lay beneath a grey-brown pall of smoke. It crossed my mind that I didn't have to return; I had a horse and a full purse. I could go home to Farundell or just ride on, wherever my fate might

take me, like a knight errant in the romances of Mallory and Chrétien de Troyes that I had always loved.

Yes! I would do it! My heart suddenly fired with daring, I was turning towards the door of the church, intending to beg a scrap of paper to send a message to Sebastian so he wouldn't worry or tell Father, when it opened and an old priest came out, accompanied by a woman. I recognised her at once.

'Contessa.' I bowed. And so this must be, I thought, La Belle Dame sans Merci.

She greeted me without surprise. 'Which way are you riding?'

'Wherever my fate might take me.'

'Then you may ride with me.' She mounted the grey mare and set off up the hill.

The road – if one could dignify the raw sluice of mud with that name – was so steep it had to be negotiated in a series of tacks. I forced my way past a line of overloaded ox carts and caught up with her.

'Have you been to Farundell, Contessa?' I had reasoned that she must have visited our house; she could only have known what my great-great-grandfather looked like from his portrait, and as far as I knew, there were no portraits of him anywhere else.

'Why yes, I have,' she said. 'Many years ago.'

'I did not know that I resembled Tobias.'

'I am not certain that you do.'

'I know very little about him,' I said. 'My father will not have him spoken of.'

'Why is that?'

'He does not explain.' My one inquiry had led to such a rough and sudden cuff to my head that I did not broach the subject again.

Fields bordered the road, and a few new houses, bleak and neat. We entered a patch of woodland and turned off on a track to the right.

'Do you play music?' the Contessa asked.

'I am a most humble student of the harpsichord, my lady.'

'What music do you most love?'

I knew at once. 'The *Stabat Mater* created by Signor Vivaldi.'

'Why?'

'It makes my heart weep.'

'For sorrow?'

'No, lady. For beauty.' I looked up. Branches, nearly bare, met above our heads; a golden leaf drifted down. I gestured. 'Like that.'

She said nothing, but I felt as though I had passed some test. After a time we came to a gate; she told me to dismount and open it, and made no objection when I followed her in and closed it behind me.

1924. 18 November. Midnight.

There is no more night in London; street lamps insinuate their unpleasant gloom into every lovely darkness, even here atop Highgate Hill. I'm standing on a grotesque iron bridge where the forest track once lay. A hundred years or so ago they failed to make a tunnel and made instead this chasm where traffic now flows unceasingly from morning till night. London spreads as far as the eye can see.

An old woman leans over the railing, gazing into the abyss. She sees me. 'What are you?' she asks.

'Just a passing stranger.'

'Stranger,' she says. 'So you are.' She climbs up and stretches out her arms. 'I can fly.' She blows me a kiss, leaps into the air, rises and soars towards the moon as her body falls like a rag to the road far below.

I walk on.

The fields have been dug up for clay, the woods felled for timber: it is all still here, merely rearranged. I stand in the Contessa's drawing room, now a house, one of a hundred identical, with a narrow tiled hall lit by a stained glass window of mediocre quality. A little girl pauses on the stairs, wide-eyed. She sees me.

'Are you sleepwalking, child?'

She nods.

'Shall I show you something wonderful?'

She nods again.

'Then look.' The walls of her house dissolve; the Contessa's garden spreads over the hillside. The avenue of yews, the pyramid pale in the moonlight. The divine Celestino is singing the *Stabat Mater*; of course he was not there that night, but whenever he sang it for me, this was the image that always came to my mind, and now I cannot separate them.

The child listens avidly; she's drinking in his voice as it swoops and slides, pure and passionate. 'This is beauty,' I tell her. 'Try to remember.'