

Monksworth

Monksworth drew his overcoat tighter and breathed a thick mist into the cup of his hands. He tried stamping his feet and hugging himself to stave off the cold. Sniffing and coughing more loudly than he should, he hawked up a mouthful of black phlegm and spat it on to the ground. Monksworth, a thin, haunted, shadow of a man in his early thirties, had been told by Lady Woodrow's personal physician that he possessed the lungs of a man twice his age. The war, he thought for the thousandth time, probably something they dropped on us at Ypres. He lit a cigarette, then decided to clean the mud from the car's running boards. The Bentley was custom-built for the sort of money he doubted he'd see in two lifetimes: six-wheels at the front and two at the back, with an elongated engine compartment housing two motors mounted in series. Even with the armour plating, the Bentley could sustain speeds of up to seventy miles per hour for ten minutes before it was at risk of overheating.

He hoped he'd never have to put it to the test.

Monksworth sighed and dropped the muddied rag back into the toolbox, then he shielded his eyes and looked east.

Daybreak, at last.

\* \* \*

—*Can you run, Mr Monksworth?*

—*Begging your pardon, your ladyship?*

—*Can you run?*

—*How do you mean run, ma'am?*

—*I mean, can you run. It's a lot like walking, only faster.*

—*Yes, I can run, ma'am.*

—*I ask because since I began this interview, you've coughed eight times, and I can hear a low rasping sound coming from your lungs.*

—*You can ... hear my lungs?*

- So I ask you again, can you maintain a fast run for at least ten yards?*
- Is that usually a requirement for being a chauffeur, your ladyship?*
- It is a requirement for being **my** chauffeur, Mr Monksworth. And as well as being swift on your feet, I also insist upon absolute discretion.*
- Of course, your ladyship. Goes without saying. And ten yards; yes, no problem ... ma'am.*
- Good. That's very good, and I've had excellent references from Captain Stafford. His father and mine were great friends.*
- The captain is a fine man. Best I ever served under.*
- And he speaks highly of you. He says you're a rock, even in the face of almost certain death.*
- I'm sure that's not true, ma'am.*
- I'm not impressed by false modesty, Mr Monksworth. The captain said you carried him a quarter of a mile back to the trenches, under fire.*
- He was missing his legs, ma'am; there wasn't much of him to carry.*
- Nevertheless, you saved his life. Therefore, I'm inclined to agree with him and declare that you are indeed a man of courage and determination, even if, for whatever reason, you'd prefer I think otherwise.*
- Very good, ma'am.*
- So, after a short test, I think we should discuss your remuneration.*
- A test, ma'am?*
- Nothing academic I assure you. Just a run around the south garden, so I can get a sense of how fast you are.*

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According to the kitchen staff, Hubert Edgar Monksworth was the second war veteran granted the honour of serving Lady Harriet Woodrow, replacing Jonathan Grant, a quick-tempered man who'd survived the Somme.

Monksworth wasn't entirely sure what had happened to Grant, but he suspected that when it mattered, his predecessor hadn't run fast enough.

Her ladyship didn't like the smell of cigarettes in the Bentley, so Monksworth stubbed it out and waved his arms frantically to clear the air. He checked his pocket watch then looked to the horizon where a trident of sunlight pierced the mist. It was almost time. He opened the luggage compartment and took the revolver, a flashlight, and a side of venison wrapped in a

waxed tarpaulin. He unwrapped the venison and carefully checked the revolver. There was single bullet in the chamber in front of the hammer. Monksworth didn't see himself as a superstitious fellow, but at this time he always offered a hastily whispered prayer: *Don't let it come to that; not tonight.*

He wedged the driver's door open with the piece of wood he kept in the footwell. Dartmoor's winds possessed a devilish sense of humour: one night, a sharp gust had slammed the door shut as he ran back towards the car. That had almost been the end of him. He stroked the deep gouges in the inch-thick plating and hoped his luck and his legs would hold if the dawn turned sour. Monksworth shuddered, remembering the terror in his heart and the heat of her breath at his back ...

He measured his footsteps carefully. Ten yards from the car placed him at the head of a natural decline into a shallow valley.

*Keep to the higher ground, she'd said. Keep to the higher ground and blink as little as possible.*

Monksworth checked the revolver and his pocket watch again.

She was late.

\* \* \*

—*Begging your pardon, ma'am.*

—*Yes?*

—*Why are we here?*

—*Here?*

—*Yes, here, ma'am. On the moors in the dead of night.*

—*It's not actually the dead of night, Monksworth. It's late evening.*

—*I can't see where we're going, ma'am; that makes it the dead of night in my book.*

—*I don't think we'll be pitting your 'book' against my five years at Oxford, Monksworth.*

—*If you insist, ma'am ... Ma'am?*

—*Yes, Monksworth?*

—*How can you see where we're going?*

—*As our American cousins would say, I know these moors like the back of my hand. Right, we're here. Have you got the torch ready?*

—*Yes, ma'am.*

—*And how far away is the car?*

—*About ten yards, ma'am.*

—*And we've been working on our ten yard dash, correct?*

—*You've timed me yourself, ma'am.*

—*But on your own?*

—*Yes, ma'am.*

—*Right. Excellent. Good ... Monksworth?*

—*Yes, ma'am?*

—*Do you remember your interview, when we talked about discretion?*

—*Yes, ma'am.*

—*Well, what we're doing here, what's about to happen ... You cannot breathe a word about this to anyone. Do you understand?*

—*Ah.*

—*You seem surprised.*

—*Well ...*

—*Come on man, out with it.*

—*I thought it was ... the other thing.*

—*What other thing?*

—*The ... other thing, ma'am.*

—*What the devil are you talking—Oh, you mean the summer fete!*

—*Yes, ma'am.*

—*When you returned to the house for more champagne ...*

—*Yes, ma'am.*

—*And found me in the scullery ...*

—*Ma'am, there really is no need to elaborate any—*

—*... enjoying Lady Wellesborough's niece.*

—*If your ladyship would refrain from speaking with such ... candor*

—*You really must modernise your thinking, Monksworth. It's all the rage in London, you know.*

—*We are not in London, we are freezing to death on the edge of Dartmoor, which makes little difference because no matter where you are, you are a lady, a much admired, much respected lady, and I would not wish to see your reputation besmirched through such careless*

*imprudence. I apologise if I speak out of turn, but I see it as my sworn duty to protect you, even if it is from your—*

*—All right, Monksworth; you've made your point. I'm sorry if I embarrassed you.*

*—That's very good of you ma'am.*

*—But as you'll see, I am in no need of your protection.*

*—Of course, ma'am ... Ma'am?*

*—Yes, Monksworth?*

*—What are we waiting for exactly?*

*—The moon, Monksworth. We're waiting for the moon. Did you check the armour plating?*

*—Yes, ma'am; twice, as you insisted.*

*—Good. Excellent. As soon as it starts, head back to the car, lock yourself in, and wait for daybreak. The armour plating will protect you if it doesn't head for the moors.*

*—If what doesn't head for moors, ma'am?*

*—You'll know when you see it.*

*—Very good, ma'am.*

*—She moved to France and joined a convent, you know.*

*—Beg your pardon, ma'am?*

*—Lady Wellesborough's niece.*

*—Oh, I see. Well, it was probably for the best.*

*—Yes ... yes, I expect so. I do miss her though.*

*—I have no doubt that you do, ma'am.*

\* \* \*

Monksworth's arms were beginning to tire. He'd been unlucky enough to have been shot during the final days of the Ypres campaign, though one his comrades said he was fortunate: he was going home. He felt his collarbone yaw and creak as he held the venison above his head. He imagined the smell being carried out across the moors. He imagined her snout twitching, saliva pouring from her mouth. He imagined her hind claws churning the earth as she broke into a run towards him.

She was late.

He tried calling out: 'Your Ladyship!' and was about to call out again, when he heard something: a heaving snarl, carried on the wind. He shone the torch into the mist. He should be able to see her by now.

He glanced at his watch. Something didn't sit right. He looked back towards the car, then at the moorlands stretching into the distance in front of him. The sun was rising, kissing the horizon; the fog rolled towards him, carrying a deep chill that set into his bones, and a scent of evil that froze his heart. He strained to hear something, anything.

'Stick to the plan,' he whispered to himself, the safety of the armoured Bentley beckoning. 'Shit.' Monksworth shook his head and pulled back the hammer on the pistol. Without giving himself a moment more to change his mind, he stepped onto the incline and ran down into the fog.

The recent rainfall made the moorlands treacherous under foot. His feet sank into the earth up to his ankles, and every step meant straining to free himself before he could move on. The fog swallowed the light from his torch, and while the hairs on his neck told him he was being stalked, he couldn't hear or see anything. And if he had to run, the Bentley was already more than ten yards away. He'd enough of his wits about him to leave the car's headlights on, a beacon which would lead him back once he'd found Lady Woodrow.

Unless Lady Woodrow found him first.

Then he heard something – like the guttural rumbling of a tiger in a zoo, pacing its cage.

'Lady Woodrow,' Monksworth called softly, and in reply, heard breathing, as deep and as powerful as the Bentley's engines.

A pair of amber eyes lit suddenly, glowing like two suns in the mist. Monksworth swallowed. She was about forty, perhaps fifty yards away. He slowly raised his left foot to draw it out of the earth. If he tried to run, sticking and sliding in the mud, he wouldn't clear the moors before she'd take him.

'You will remain a rock,' he reminded himself. He planted his foot back into the mud and slowly drew the pistol. 'Lady Woodrow; it's me, Monksworth. The sun is almost up and you were late, so I came to find you.'

The glowing eyes narrowed, and the mist below them moved back and forth, as if inhaled and exhaled by gigantic bellows.

'I thought perhaps one of the hunting parties had caught you, or you'd found something more appetising than a slab of venison.' He laughed nervously, and ordered his legs to stand their ground. 'Anyway, you were late, so here I am.'

The eyes moved forward, then again. Then once more. Monksworth wondered how a creature so large, so heavy, could move across the bog without sinking or making a sound. ‘Please, your ladyship, don’t force me to—’

The howl shook the earth and split the skies. And then the soft ground trembled as the mist roared and the inferno-eyes thundered towards him. The sound froze the blood in his veins; the sound of a hundred stampeding bison with a hundred frenzied lions at their backs.

Monksworth couldn’t find his breath, but found the strength to raise the revolver and whisper another near-silent prayer.

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*—I know it won’t seem like any consolation now, Monksworth, but you performed splendidly.*

*—‘I performed splendidly’? I pissed myself!*

*—Well, yes, quite, but you made it back to the car, shut yourself in and stayed here until morning. That’s the kind of instinct I’m looking for, and slow down before you kill us both!*

*—My apologies; I’m still somewhat ... shocked.*

*—Understandable. But you see why practice and preparation is important. Anticipate and react, Monksworth. Anticipate and react. As someone who survived some of the most calamitous strategic errors in the history of warfare, I’m sure you know enough about that, even if you’re not aware of it.*

*—Anticipate and react ...*

*—That’s right. And you knew to use the venison to draw the creature back!*

*—And what if I hadn’t realised what the venison was for?*

*—I knew you would.*

*—Really?*

*—Yes, really, Monksworth. Now, the creature’s nature is always the same, but it can learn. You’ll need to watch for that.*

*—Anticipate and react ...*

*—And be ready to improvise: also very important*

*—The water, soap, towels, medical supplies, clothes, toothpicks ...*

*—Preparation.*

*—Oilskins for the car seats ...*

*—Also preparation, though more for you than me.*

*—I have one question though.*

—*Go on.*

—*Why a pistol? That's not going to stop it. Perhaps we should consider a shotgun?*

—*That wouldn't stop it either, Monksworth.*

\* \* \*

Standing with his eyes closed, ankle-deep in Dartmoor, pointing his pistol under his chin, Monksworth became aware that the only breathing he could hear was his own. He tried again to pull the trigger, but couldn't. He thought himself a coward, and tried again; his finger wouldn't move.

There was another hand over his, pulsing with a life-force that almost scalded him.

'Perhaps you'd better let me have the gun, Monksworth.'

Monksworth opened his eyes.

There she was, beautiful by any man's standards in a strangely feral sort of a way, her naked, alabaster form stinking of carrion, her raven black hair strewn with blood and bone.

'Your Ladyship,' he said, relieved. 'You're back.' He did the gentlemanly thing and averted his gaze, though not before he'd seen the wound, as deep as his thumb was long, that ran from her pubic mound to her navel. 'And you appear to be injured.'

'I'll heal,' she said, taking the gun and marching past him. 'You're supposed to be closer to the car. No more than ten yards, that's what we agreed.'

'You were late. Very late. I was ... concerned.'

'I ran into a stag.' She made her way up the hill with long purposeful strides, pulling her feet free of the bog without any effort. 'I'll need you to pull a bit of antler out of the wound before it closes over.'

'Very good, ma'am.' The most hardened soldiers he'd known would've been unable to walk in such pain; but Monksworth had witnessed the agony of the change; what was a hole in your gut compared to your bones snapping and reforming once a month?

'And of course you didn't think to bring the water and my clothes, did you?'

Monksworth struggled up the hill behind her, his eyes pointing steadfastly downward.

'They're in the car, your ladyship.'

'Well, they're no good to me there, are they Monksworth?'

'No, ma'am.'

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—*You must never leave the car, Monksworth, no matter what. Do you understand?*



—*Yes, ma'am.*

—*Make sure that you can always reach it and lock yourself inside.*

—*I understand, ma'am.*

—*And if the worst comes to the worst, there's always the gun.*

—*Yes, ma'am.*

—*Under your chin, pull the trigger.*

—*Yes, ma'am.*

—*If you don't, and you survive the attack, then we'll have another one of the damn things roaming the moors, and we can't have that, can we?*

—*No ma'am ... Ma'am?*

—*Yes?*

—*What happened to Mr Grant, ma'am?*

—...

—*Your ladyship, what happened to Mr Gr—*

—*He didn't follow my instructions, Monksworth; that's what happened to him.*

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She was still in a foul mood when they reached the road. She cleaned herself with the water they carried, then lay on the ground, watching Monksworth as he went to work with a pair of pliers from the toolkit. The angle was somewhat awkward, so they silently agreed that the ghastly business would be much easier if he lay between her thighs so he could shine a flashlight up into the laceration.

'I think I see the problem, your ladyship.'

During the entire procedure, Lady Woodrow didn't make a sound; at one point he even considered asking her to groan or scream occasionally, just so he'd know how things were going.

'Monksworth.'

'Ma'am?'

'Will this take very much longer?'

'Perhaps, if you look away, ma'am.'

'I beg your pardon.'

'You staring at me while I'm trying to work ... it's not helping.'

'Oh for God's sake ...' She sighed loudly and focussed her eyes on the car.

But there's still the smell, Monksworth thought – like rosewater sprayed on a wet dog. He felt the familiar pangs of revulsion, lust and regret as he thrust the pliers deeper. This time, Lady Woodrow squeezed her eyes shut and made a sound that was part scream, part howl. Monksworth sprang backwards, scrambling away from her on his haunches and heels. 'Gotcha yer bugger!' he declared, holding the pliers aloft, the bloodied fragment of antler held in its grip.

Lady Woodrow sat up and stared at him; he coughed politely, jumped to his feet and went to retrieve the rest of the water and her clothes. She asked him when was the last time he'd polished the Bentley while picking tufts of reindeer fur from between her teeth.

After she'd washed away the blood, they waited another half an hour for the wound to seal and vanish. She put on the Mainbocher two-piece dress suit she always wore for the journey home, then got into the car without waiting for Monksworth to open the door.

Once he'd stowed everything away, Monksworth climbed in behind the wheel and turned the Bentley around, pointing it back towards Ashburton. He drove slowly remembering that she often felt sick after the madness. Every so often he glanced at her through the mirror. Her scowl remained firmly in place for four miles; when he checked again, she was staring out the side window. Six miles on, she was biting at her fingernail, something he'd never seen her do before. And a mile later, when he looked again, Lady Woodrow appeared to be weeping.

Monksworth could see that everything had changed.

'Mr Grant,' he said. 'I expect he left the road and took to the moors to find you, as I did.'

'Yes,' she said, her voice little more than a whisper. 'He thought something might have happened to me, so he did the chivalrous thing.'

'Even though you told him – told us – we must always stay close to the Bentley.'

'Yes.'

'You'd become close.'

'Yes, we had.'

'But he disobeyed you. Put himself in danger.'

'Yes.'

'And so you let him go.'

'I didn't have a choice.'

'And you're going to let me go, for the same reason.'

Lady Woodrow remained silent for a moment, before saying she was sorry.

‘I understand.’ Monksworth replied, hoping she could see his smile through the mirror.

‘I will, of course, write you a reference dripping with superlatives.’

‘Thank you, ma’am.’

‘You and Grant are both good men. And because you are good men, you both sought to protect me, dashing to my rescue, and putting yourselves in terrible danger. Because you are men, in your hearts you could not come to terms with the fact that it’s everyone else who needs protecting from me.’ Lady Woodrow rapped the frame of the Bentley to make her point. ‘I will put in a word with Lord and Lady Beaumont. They’re looking for a new man. It’s the very least I can do.’

‘May I make a suggestion, ma’am?’

‘Please.’

‘Your next chauffeur; a woman, perhaps?’

‘That would present a different problem altogether.’

‘Of course it would, ma’am, begging your pardon.’

‘I have grown very fond of you, Monksworth. I know I haven’t always been easy to work for, but I wouldn’t want you to think—’

‘I understand, ma’am. It’ll be difficult to find a new driver before the next moon.’

‘I found you.’

‘We were both lucky, ma’am.’

‘Yes, I expect we were.’