



MERCEDES DANNENBERG

**A new and terrifying
Sherlock Holmes Mystery**

**The
Case of the
Bashful
Balrog**

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A NEW AND TERRIFYING SHERLOCK HOLMES MYSTERY

The Case of the Bashful Balrog



A tall tale of Devilry and Horror
from the unpublished adventures
of Mr Sherlock Holmes, the
distinguished consulting
detective, after his retirement to
the Shire, as recorded by his
assistant, Mr Bingo Bracegirdle,
the well-known antiquarian.

MERCEDES DANNENBERG

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THE CASE OF THE BASHFUL BALROG

The story you are about to read is a tall tale of Devilry and mystery from the unpublished annals of Sherlock Holmes, the internationally renowned, fictional detective created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle during the late 19th Century. What sets it apart from other pastiches of this type is that, so far as I am aware, this story is not based upon any known Sherlock Holmes adventure and has the added novelty of being set in the fictional world of 'Middle-Earth' created by the philologist and author J R R Tolkien.

Although other, new Sherlockian adventures have been written since Conan Doyle's death, this story is the first to introduce his fictional sleuth into the complex, multi-layered mythology of Middle-Earth. Those readers who are familiar with J R R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and his invented worlds will hopefully find much to amuse, terrify and interest them in the following pages.

Those who profess a repugnance for what some unkind souls have called 'the Boys Own fantasy world of furry-footed midgets', need not despair, however. Midgets are seldom mentioned beyond the first, few pages and furry feet, hardly at all. The story can be read as a straightforward detective horror mystery without missing anything of vital importance, yet I would urge those unfamiliar with the works of either J R R Tolkien or Conan Doyle, who are brave enough to overcome their dislike of Hobbits, to read the prologue, which they may find both educational and amusing.

This tale grew in the telling, branching out in many strange directions I had never anticipated, to take on such a dark and horrific character in the later chapters that I seriously began to doubt whether anyone would actually read it! Fortunately, both friends and enthusiastic fans seem to be made of sterner stuff and were at pains to reassure me that nothing I had invented was not foreshadowed in J R R Tolkien's own writings. I remain unconvinced that the good professor would altogether approve of what I have done, but am flattered that my readers have taken a more charitable view.

In taking liberties with the letter of the writings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Professor Tolkien, I have tried to remain faithful to the spirit of their stories. For this reason, *The Case of the Bashful Balrog* can be read as one possible sequel to the events described in *The Lord of the Rings*—albeit a very strange and disturbing one in parts!

I have written several Sherlock Holmes/Tolkien parodies of which this story is by far the longest, and most imaginatively conceived and carefully constructed. The interested reader can find these tales on the Internet at:

<http://www.utterpants.co.uk/hobbits/sherlock.html>.

Mercedes Dannenberg, Hamburg, March 2005.

THE CASE OF THE BASHFUL BALROG

*PROLOGUE**By Mr Bingo Bracegirdle*

As my account of the singular adventure that follows is largely concerned with my friend, the distinguished consulting detective, Mr Sherlock Holmes, and his involvement in the affairs of Hobbits, he has prevailed upon me to give some explanation of how we became acquainted for the benefit of those readers who are unfamiliar with either hobbits or his distinguished career. In order to do so, I am compelled to touch upon the history of the Shire and the character of my race. Interested readers will find further information in the Red Book of Westmarch, extracts of which have been published under the title of *The Doom of Sauron*, as well as in the popular zoetrope entertainment *The Lord of the Rings*, produced by the famous hobbit historian, Hob Jackson. Many, however, may wish to know more of hobbits, while others may not possess the books or have seen the zoetrope entertainment. For such readers a few notes about the more important points which may assist them to a fuller comprehension of what follows, are here briefly set down.

Concerning Hobbits

Hobbits are a gay and gregarious people, more numerous today than we were formerly, for we love boisterous entertainments, good food, strong ale, and amorous contests: a verdant valley, an upthrust bottom and a well ploughed furrow are our favourite haunts. We do not and never did understand or share the prudishness of Men in matters of love, though we admire the tools they employ in their pursuit of it. It is said that we were once shy of the 'Big Folk' as we call them, and avoided them with dismay, but those days are long past and it is becoming increasingly hard to find any hobbits who have not had some intercourse with Men.

We are a nimble and inquisitive people with a sharp eye for a pretty face or a comely body, the female of the species no less so than the male, for it has long been a custom among us to place our young lads in the capable hands of an experienced hobbit-maid to acquire that skill and refinement without which no gentlehobbit's education is complete. Hobbits possessed from the first the *Art of Venus* and this art has been developed until to Men it may seem magical. But Hobbits have never, in fact, studied magic of any kind, and our amorousness is due solely to our descent from the common Coney, which long practice and professional skill, and a naturally affectionate nature, have rendered inimitable by bigger and clumsier races.

For we are a little people, smaller than Men, though slimmer in form, and larger in our private parts than our stature would suggest. Our height is variable, ranging between three and five feet, though few among us do not now attain four feet; for historians tell us we have increased in stature and in ancient times were much shorter. According to the Blue Book written by my ancestor, Bilbo Baggins, Bob Smallcock was only two feet nine and unable to ride anything larger than a squirrel.

We like to dress in bright colours, being notably fond of yellow and blue; but seldom go barefoot any longer, since our feet have grown smaller and are no longer clad in the thick, curling hair that once set us apart from other races. Our faces are as a rule beautiful, rather than rustic, long, sensitive, bright-eyed, with lips made for kissing, and wide mouths apt to laughter, eating and drinking. And kiss we do, often and heartily, being fond of amative contests at all times, and of multiple partners (when we can get them). We are a hospitable folk and delight in parties and in intimate caresses, which we give away freely and eagerly accept. It is plain that Elves are relatives of ours, far nearer than Men, or the hated Orcs.

Hobbits have never been warlike, though we have often been obliged to fight to maintain ourselves in a hard world; but in my time the Shire was a well-ordered land, rich and kindly, with many farms, woods, vineyards and villages. Nonetheless, we are a doughty folk, difficult to daunt or kill, and our women-folk can survive great hardship, rough handling, and even torture, in ways that astonish Men, as my record of our adventure will show.

We are longer-lived than Men, often reaching the age of ninety-nine or more, and our young enjoy a long and care-free childhood until they enter their 'tweens' — as we call the irresponsible years between sixteen and coming of age, at eight and twenty.

Of old we spoke the language of Elves, which is the language of Love, and disliked the arrogance, cruelty and coldness of Men. But what exactly our relationship to the other races of Middle-Earth is, can no longer be discovered. The beginning of Hobbits lies far back in the Elder Days that are now lost or forgotten. Only the few, reclusive Elves who still dwell in Middle-Earth preserve any records of that vanished time, and they no longer have any dealings with either Hobbits or Men. Those days, the Fourth Age of Middle-Earth, are now long past, and the shape of all lands has been changed many times, and hobbits have spread far and wide across the earth.

In my time the Shire — which is our own name for that region of Middle-Earth in which we hobbits dwell — was divided into four quarters: *Northshire*, *Southshire*, *Westshire* and *Eastshire*; and these again into twelve *Farthings*, many of which still bear their old Elvish names; such as *Lawrelión* and *Rivendale*. The High King who once sat in his great castle in Tirith Minor, away down south in Old Gondor, is but a memory to us. There has been no King in the Shire for over three hundred years since Eldäkár was killed in the Twenty-Years-War. For the most part we manage our own affairs through the *Shiremoot* which is presided over by the *Margrave*, who is elected every seven years during *Forelithé*. Under him are the *Thanes* of the forty-eight *Farthings* and they, in turn, appoint individual *Sherriffs* to govern the towns and settlements under their jurisdiction. Men, for the most part, mingle freely and peaceably with hobbits, though there are fewer now than there have ever been in the Shire. Most have sailed away to the new lands that arose off the coasts of old Gondor in my great grandfather's time, and it is from one of the great cities of Men in the largest of these islands, that Holmes came to us, many years ago.

Concerning Mr Sherlock Holmes

Our meeting arose out of one of those commonplaces that are so often the cause of momentous events. I had gone to Bywater, a small market-town a short pony ride from my home in Hobbiton to collect a rare folio in connection with my researches into ancient Elvish only to be told that the book had been purchased a half hour before by another collector. I was mortified not so much by the loss of the book but by the confounded vulgarity of the scoundrel who had had the impudence to pay five times the asking price the bookseller had demanded from me! I need hardly add that the author of my loss was none other than Mr Sherlock Holmes.

“By Jove!” I cried; “if he has that much money to throw around it will give me the greatest pleasure to relieve him of it!”

I was by no means a wealthy hobbit, and my collection of valuable antiquities was a drain on my modest competence, so I eagerly sought out the mysterious collector in the hope that he might be persuaded to purchase some of the less important items at a greatly inflated price. I quickly discovered that Mr Sherlock Holmes was not the gullible spendthrift I had taken him for when he explained that it was the demands of his singular profession that had prompted him to purchase the book I coveted, rather than any great love for ancient Elvish. Unknown to me at the time he was then engaged in unravelling the mystery of the missing crown of Old Gondor and required the book to translate some manuscripts which had come into his possession in connection with the case.

Of greater moment was his complaint that he was unable to prosecute his researches owing to the grave misgivings of his Landlady over the chemical experiments that had wrecked one of her rooms on the previous day. As I was then a bachelor with a large burrow above the hill in Hobbiton, I prevailed upon him to share my accommodation, and so our long and remarkable friendship was born. Holmes gave it out that he had retired to the Shire to escape the smoke and chills of his native city, but I soon learned that it was the scope to exercise his remarkable talents in new, and unexpected ways, that had drawn him to the Shire.

I had never lived with a man before and had some difficulty in adjusting to the habits and conceits of my remarkable companion, not least his most perplexing aversion to the fairer sex which forms such a significant part of the adventure which I have recounted on the following pages. It was not so much that he disliked women, on the contrary, he was the embodiment of charm and refinement in their presence and ever eager to do them a courtesy. It was rather the overt display of any affection, and in particular, amorous affection, that aroused his irritation and embarrassment, and gave one the distinct impression that his emotions were almost entirely repressed. It was only when Miss Beaverburrow came to do for us that he thawed a little, but even then he would take himself off for a walk, or retire to his rooms, whenever either of us attempted to induce him to share in our amorous contests.

As the months and years went by and he involved me more deeply in his cases, my curiosity as to his aims and aspirations deepened and increased. His very person and appearance aroused no little attention and comment in

the district. In height he was some eighteen inches taller than me, perhaps a little over six feet, and so excessively lean that Miss Beaverburrow took extraordinary pains to tempt his wayward appetite with the most exotic delicacies the Shire could produce. His eyes were sharp and piercing, save when he was deep in one of his bouts of self-indulgence resulting from his regrettable weakness for the *miruvor* bottle — a powerful stimulant first derived from the narcotic berries of the Mallorn tree by the Elves; a drug to which he was at that time hopelessly addicted. His nose was thin and aquiline, and his chin had the prominence and squareness which mark characters of determination and self-will.

His hands were perhaps his most distinctive feature, and his long, artistic fingers possessed an extraordinary delicacy of touch that I had many occasions to observe when I watched him play the violin, or manipulate his scientific instruments. In contradiction to his race, Holmes was invariably an early riser which endeared him to me, for we hobbits like to be up with the sun and early to bed. Nothing could exceed Holmes' energy when the working fit was upon him; but now and again a reaction would seize him, and for days on end he would lie upon the sofa in our parlour, hardly uttering a word or taking a bite to eat. It was on the first of these occasions, some six months after he moved in with me, that Miss Beaverburrow suspected he was addicted to *miruvor*, but I had not the courage to confront him about it until many years later, as my readers will discover in the following narrative. His knowledge was prodigious, but singularly variable, inasmuch as he had no interest in anything which was not immediately useful to him in his work. It was our housekeeper who first alerted me to this remarkable fact when I found her compiling a list of Holmes' intellectual accomplishments. I could not help smiling at the document when she had completed it. It ran this way:

1. Knowledge of practical gardening - nil
2. Knowledge of the art of love - practically nil
3. Knowledge of brewing - limited
4. Knowledge of women - practically nil
5. Knowledge of botany - variable
6. Knowledge of poisons - profound
7. Knowledge of geology - considerable
8. Knowledge of music - variable. Plays the violin with great feeling but indifferent technique.
9. Knowledge of anatomy - accurate
10. Knowledge of sensational literature - immense.
11. Knowledge of archaeology - considerable
12. Knowledge of ancient races - variable. Well up on Elves; knows nothing about dwarves.

Such then, is the character and person of the man whom I have the honour to call my friend; the distinguished detective, the implacable foe of criminals, and the finest mind in Middle-Earth.

Being a singular mystery from the unpublished adventures of Mr Sherlock Holmes, the distinguished consulting detective, after his retirement to the Shire, as recorded by his assistant, Mr Bingo Bracegirdle, the well-known antiquarian.

Chapter I

A SINISTER REPUTATION

In recording the more bizarre and shocking experiences that I associate with my long and intimate friendship with Mr Sherlock Holmes, I have continually been hampered in my efforts to publish his cases by his singular aversion to the fairer sex, or indeed, any sex. To Holmes' refined and cynical spirit all women were abhorrent, and not to be entirely trusted. An atrocious sentiment with which no decent hobbit could agree, possessing as we do, the procreative passion of the wild Coney, and a precocious enthusiasm for the more uncommon forms of intimacy, which were first set down in his Blue Book by my ancestor, Bilbo Baggins, a votary at the shrine of Venus renowned throughout the Shire for the tricks he could perform with his magic ring. It was this attitude upon the part of my mentor, rather than any need for discretion, which caused me to publish so few of the adventures that befell us after his retirement to the Shire. So it was with considerable surprise, that I received the following pigeon-gram early one spring morning, couched in the terse language I knew so well:

"Why not tell them about the Isengard Horror? The most singular holiday we have ever taken!"

I have no idea what had brought that devilish business to his mind, or what change in his inscrutable character had caused him to desire I should recount the most shocking adventure that ever befell us, but I hastened, before he should change his mind, to dig out the notes I made at the time, and now lay the whole unsavoury narrative before my readers. It was then, a spring morning, much like today, in the Shire Year 1889 that Holmes' iron constitution showed some signs of giving way in the face of his heavy case load, aggravated, no doubt, by his regrettable weakness for the *miruvor* bottle, a powerful stimulant first derived from the narcotic berries of the Mallorn tree by the Elves, an effete and melancholic race with ridiculously pointy ears, who have all but disappeared from Middle-Earth.

In April of that year, Dr Rory Rogerghast, of Harley Street, Tuckborough, whose astonishing sexual prowess I may some day recount, entreated the famous sleuth to lay aside all his cases, and place himself unreservedly in the hands of Miss Belinda Beaverburrow, our housekeeper. Belinda expressed some reluctance in relieving Holmes of the tensions which were at the root of his indisposition, until I explained to her that her ministrations need in no way curtail my own enjoyment of her lithe-limbed, and buxom person. The state of his health was not a matter in which Holmes himself took the slightest interest, for his mental detachment was absolute, yet he was persuaded at last, on the threat of being permanently disqualified from work, to set aside his perverse aversion to women, and

agree to a little sun and air. Even then, he would insist on his ridiculous little joke:

“I do hope, my dear Bingo, that the sun and air you are proposing will not result in my fathering a young hobbit upon the charming Miss Beaverburrow?”

To which the saucy wench replied: “Oh, Mr Holmes, you naughty man!”

These are the circumstances that led us to be cosily ensconced together in a snug hobbit-burrow above Isengard, in the late spring of 1889. It was an isolated spot, once the seat of a wealthy Pipeweed Baron and infamous conjurer, and particularly well suited to the grim humour of our reluctant patient.

From the round windows of our little love-nest, which was built into the surrounding hills, we looked down upon the picturesque, ruined tower and surrounding lake, beneath whose placid waves still lay the deep pits and foetid gullies in which many a sexually precocious goblin of an earlier age had met his slippery end. On the landward side, our surroundings were as bleak as my Aunt Lobelia’s face on the day she discovered that all she had inherited from my Uncle Stingo were two gold spoons, and a jar of haemorrhoid cream. It was a country of rolling moors, isolated hamlets, and retired scopophilists, where women were few, men were lonely, and the frolicsome sheep were glad of it. In every direction there were traces of the vanished race of Elves who, along with their effeminate clothes and inedible food supplements, had all but disappeared from the landscape, leaving as their sole record, some scratchy phonographs of their appallingly bad poetry, and curious, irregularly shaped artefacts which hinted at the erotic practices to which they are said to have been addicted. The glamour and mythology of the place, with its sinister reputation for unnatural vices, piqued my curiosity, and I spent much of my time in long, solitary walks upon the moors, and in interesting encounters with the sheep.

We had been in Isengard but a week and Miss Beaverburrow had my mentor’s problem well in hand, when, to my disappointment, and his unfeigned relief, we found ourselves plunged into a mystery which was even stranger than Holmes’ refusal to allow our lissome housekeeper to join him in his daily bath. Our singular adventure caused not a little notoriety, which the newspaper headlines of the time echoed in their customary, sensationalist manner: *Isengard Horror kills again*, *Shocking outbreak of Balrogism in Longbottom*, and, perhaps, most telling of all; *Young women ravaged by libidinous Balrog in Shire sex-scandal*. I need hardly add that owing to the commendable modesty and discretion for which Mr Sherlock Holmes was justly renowned, our part in clearing up this mystery has hitherto remained a closed book.

The true facts of this shocking mystery, as my more discerning readers will readily comprehend, were far stranger and darker than anything the gutter press could fabricate. Indeed, the facts I am now about to relate are so unsavoury, that I feel it incumbent upon me to issue the sternest warning that that which follows is wholly unsuitable for those who are of a nervous, or prudish disposition. It is the truth, and nothing but the truth, that I now lay before you.

I have said that isolated hamlets shared this wild country with the sheep. The most populous of these was Longbottom, a straggling, warren of half-timbered hobbit burrows and run-down villas clustered along the north shore of Lake Isengard. For centuries its picturesque appearance and idyllic, isolated location had attracted a number of well-to-do residents, none more so than an irascible old antiquarian, Lotho Bolger. Lotho was a powerfully-built hobbit with a big, rugged face, crooked teeth, untidy red hair, and peculiarly lecherous grey eyes, who was recognised as the leading authority on the history of the area, particularly by himself. He lived at 'Sharkey's End', a shabby, ancient pile at the extreme edge of the town, together with his unmarried sister, Belladonna, and his two eccentric brothers, Odo and Drogo.

Our nearest neighbour was the Sherriff of the area, a Mr Folco Proudfoot, who, in addition to his office, was something of an historian, and as such I had cultivated his acquaintance in connection with my researches into the fascinating Elvish artefacts which I mentioned earlier. He was a tall and gangling, half-starved hare of a hobbit, with nervous gestures and a lazy left eye, which gave the unsettling impression that his attention was always elsewhere. Much the same could be said of Lotho Bolger, but for different reasons. I quickly developed an aversion to this red-haired, pot-bellied old hobbit when I discovered that the interest in horticulture that he professed to share with me, was nothing but a crude ploy to entice the impressionable young Miss Beaverburrow to inspect his 'prize marrow'.

Such were the two men who abruptly entered our parlour one Sunday morning in late May, as Holmes was finishing a capital breakfast of bacon and mushrooms, and Belinda and I were taking our customary bath together.

"Mr Holmes!" said the Sherriff in an agitated voice, "The most extraordinary and terrible event has occurred during the night!"

"You put your foot in the chamber pot?" said I, not a little nettled at having my ablutions interrupted at the very moment Belinda had discovered a novel use for the Elvish artefact I had unearthed the previous day.

Holmes gave me a withering look, and asked the Sherriff to continue.

"It is the most tragic affair, sir. A B-Balrog is at large. A B-Balrog, Sir! It is a merciful providence that the only man in Middle-Earth who can help us, is staying here, in Longbottom."

I glared at the intrusive Sherriff with unfriendly eyes; but Holmes took his pipe from his lips and sat bolt upright in his chair like a Shire-hound scenting mushrooms. He waved our two guests toward the sofa. The palpitating Sherriff sat down with a sharp exhalation of breath. Lotho Bolger sat down beside him. He was more composed than his companion, but the twitching of his left leg and wildness about his lecherous, watery eyes showed that he was in the grip of the same emotion as Mr Proudfoot.

"Let us leave aside the question of Balrogs for the moment," said Holmes soothingly. "Who made the discovery?"

"I did," said Lotho Bolger.

"Then you had better speak."

"With your permission," said the Sherriff, turning to his companion,

“Perhaps I should say a few words first, and then you can judge if you will hear the details from Mr Bolger, or hasten at once to the scene of this terrible event.”

Holmes smoked in silence as the nervous hobbit continued.

“I should explain that my friend, Mr Lotho, dined with his sister, Belladonna and his two brothers, Odo and Drogo at Sharkey’s End last evening, and left them shortly after ten o’ clock to spend the night in town with friends. At nine o’clock this morning he was on his way home when he was overtaken on the road by Dr Lightfoot, who explained that he had been summoned to Sharkey’s End by an urgent message from the housekeeper, Mrs Tipplebottle. When they arrived at the house they found the most dreadful scene. The library was in some disarray and the furnishings much burned, as if by some fierce conflagration. Lotho’s two brothers and his sister were seated exactly as he had left them the previous evening. Odo and Drogo lay back in their chairs, laughing maniacally, their senses stricken clean out of them, and his sister lay stone dead on the chaise longue; her bodice undone, her dress and petticoats around her ankles, and her —”

“— Yes?” I interjected impatiently, “Her what?”

Holmes glanced at me peevishly and signed for Proudfoot to continue.

“I — I am reluctant to say any more with, with a lady in the room, Mr Holmes.” said the Sherriff.

Belinda Beaverburrow stifled a giggle, and leaning forward, laid her hand on my mentor’s knee. Holmes suffered her affectionate caress with no more than a raised eyebrow.

“Perhaps our guests would care for some tea?” he asked her, kindly.

She rose from her chair, curtsied to him, and slipped noiselessly from the room.

“Now, you were saying, Mr Proudfoot?”

“Her, her undergarments were unaccountably missing.”

“Missing?” I asked.

“What does that matter?” muttered Lotho irritably.

“It may not be without significance,” said Holmes.

“By Jove, I should say so!” I agreed.

“Pray curtail your licentious imagination, my dear Bingo. Was there any evidence of impropriety, Mr Proudfoot?”

“I - I fear so,” stammered the Sherriff, glancing helplessly at his companion. “The poor woman’s thighs and stomach were covered in a thick, greenish slime that — that suggested she had been — been — intimate with the Balrog.”

Holmes sat up and looked keenly at the Sherriff.

“Intimate?” he asked. “Is that what the Doctor concluded?”

Proudfoot’s left eye roved randomly across the ceiling before focusing on Holmes with a nervous twitch. Then it was off again. “No, sir,” he said. “Doctor Lightfoot fainted dead away the moment he entered the library.”

“But Mr Bolger did not?”

The old scopophilist growled under his breath and shuffled uncomfortably.

“The atmosphere was thick with the Balrog’s foul exhalations,” he added sharply. “Naturally I opened the window as soon as I had carried the Doctor

into the kitchen and revived him. It was then that I noticed that my sister had been foully abused by the monster.”

Holmes snorted at the mention of the mythological creature’s name, and sank back in his chair.

“Pray continue, Mr Proudfoot,” said he.

“All three retained upon their faces an expression of the utmost horror - a convulsion of terror too dreadful to look upon. Their glasses were still full. There was no sign of anyone else in the burrow, except for Mrs Tipplebottle, the housekeeper, who declared that she had slept like a log all night, and had heard and seen nothing until she found the family in the state I have already described the following morning. The atmosphere was so thick, and the shock so great, she too, fainted clean away.”

Holmes sat up again and put the tips of his long fingers together.

“This is most interesting. Let me hear the details.”

“Lotho’s brothers Odo and Drogo were slumped in their chairs around the dining table. Bella - Miss Belladonna, lay on the chaise longue near the fire place.”

“Was the fire lit?”

“Yes”

“Who lit it?”

“I did,” said Lotho. “It was a damp night.”

“How curious,” said Holmes. “The air was positively balmy here.”

“The southern shore is apt to be chilly at this season on account of the fogs from the lake,” explained Lotho.

“Nothing had been stolen?” asked Holmes.

“Except for Belladonna’s undergarments,” said the Sherriff.

“Camiknickers.”

“You don’t believe us, Mr Holmes?” asked the Sherriff.

“On the contrary,” replied Holmes. “I am tolerably certain Mr Bolger’s sister was wearing hand-made, black silk camiknickers embroidered with a monogram at the time of her demise, rather than the sensible, woollen undergarments usually favoured by respectable middle-aged women.”

“Astounding!” I gasped.

“Good gracious!” said the Sherriff.

“Explain yourself, Sir!” exclaimed Lotho Bolger, starting up from the couch. “How the devil do you know what my sister wore under her petticoats?”

“Because that is precisely what a dissolute woman of low morals would wear.”

Lotho’s face was ghastly. “Damn your eyes, Sir! How dare you sully the good name of my dead sister with such a monstrous calumny!” he cried.

“Because your sister is better known under her theatrical non-de-plume of ‘Goldilocks’, who I am given to understand is an actress of some notoriety even amongst hobbits.”

“Not Miss Whiplash in *Spanking for Pleasure*”? I asked.

“The very same.”

Never shall I forget the expression on Lotho’s face as he sprang up and waved his fist at Holmes. Then, with an extraordinary effort of self-command, he sat down again and glowered at us.

“Do you deny that ‘Goldilocks’ was your sister’s stage name?” asked Holmes.

“No..” groaned Lotho.

I gazed at Holmes in astonishment. He returned my enquiring look with an enigmatic smile.

“Miss Beaverburrow’s accomplishments are not limited to the tunes her nimble fingers can draw from an unresponsive instrument, my dear, Bingo,” he began. “Like you, she is no stranger to the titillating trash which passes for romantic entertainment among Hobbits, and has long been an admirer of *Goldilocks and the three bare bottoms*, an unsavoury tale which you may recall we viewed at your insistence last Saturday evening at the Isengard Zoetrope Palace. Had your attention not been distracted by Miss Beaverburrow’s expert exploration of your trousers, you would have noticed that the heroine of that tawdry entertainment bore a striking resemblance to Belladonna Bolger, and was divested of a pair of camiknickers not unlike those which are now unaccountably missing from her person.”

“Good gracious, Holmes!” I ejaculated, “You don’t mean to say that we are looking for a libidinous Balrog with a fetish for women’s undergarments?”

“That remains to be seen. We do not know who dishonoured Miss Bolger and assaulted her brothers, but whoever it was, I am tolerably certain that we are not looking for a fire-breathing transvestite with wings.”

Lotho fell back in his chair and wrung his hands.

“Though it grieves me to admit it,” said the Sherriff in a strangled voice. “Mr Holmes is right. It was largely due to my influence that Lotho finally persuaded Miss Bolger to give up her sordid career and retire quietly to the country, though she did not thank me for it, and has never ceased to blame me for the loss of her earnings. I fear that it is all too likely that she fell back into her old, dissolute ways, and was only too eager to welcome the Balrog’s caresses, and in doing so, died at the very instant her unnatural appetites were satisfied. There is the situation in a nutshell, Mr Holmes, and no explanation of the whereabouts of the horror that ravaged a deranged woman to death, and drove two strong men out of their minds. If you can clear up the mystery and identify the perpetrators it would a blessing to us all.”

I had hoped that I could coax my companion back into the pleasant recreations with Miss Beaverburrow that had been the object of our holiday, but one glance at his intense face and feverish eyes told me my expectation was vain. He sat for some time in silence, absorbed in some inner turmoil which I could scarcely guess at.

“The missing undergarments certainly require looking into,” he said at last. “On the face of it, it would appear to be a case of a very exceptional nature, though I think we can safely discount the Balrog you mentioned when you entered, Mr Proudfoot.”

“But what else could have burned up all the library, Mr Holmes?” asked the Sherriff.

“An act of arson does not require the presence of an imaginary fire-breathing creature out of the ridiculous mythology of the Shire,” retorted Holmes, testily.

“But Balrogs have been seen in modern times,” I objected. “My uncle Stingo saw one burn Bywater Post Office to the ground simply because they lost an important letter. Then there was that terrible business over in the North Farthing when poor Miss Primula Shortfoot vanished along with her entire class while they were out mushrooming.”

“Tommyrot,” snorted Holmes derisively. “Your uncle Stingo is several raisins short of a fruitcake, and that flibbertigibbet of a schoolteacher sold her charges to a party of travelling Elves in exchange for three bottles of cheap scent and a sack load of designer lingerie. Let us hear no more talk of Balrogs, gentlemen. How far is it to your house, Mr Bolger?”

“About a league.”

“Then we will walk over together. But before we start I must ask you a few questions — ah tea, thank you Miss Beaverburrow, please set the cups down on the dresser.”

Our housekeeper did as he asked and left the room.

Mr Bolger took the cup Holmes handed to him in a shaky hand, and avoided my mentor’s piercing glance as he raised it to his trembling lips.

“Ask what you will, Mr Holmes,” he said hoarsely. “It is a torment to me, but I will tell you the truth.”

“What were your family doing when you left them?”

“Playing ‘hunt the ring.’”

“Hunt the ring?”

“A — a traditional after dinner game we Hobbits are fond of, sir.”

I pictured the scene and blushed to the roots of my hair.

“What is the purpose of this game?” asked Holmes.

“To hide the ring upon one’s person and invite others to find it.”

“Who had the ring on this occasion?”

“My sister.”

“Was she intoxicated?”

“No.”

“Was she fully clothed?”

“Of course!”

“Were her hands tied?”

“No!”

“Did she ask you to flagellate her?”

“Certainly not!”

“Did you or your brothers interfere with her person in any way?”

“You are an impudent fellow!” cried Lotho. “How dare you make such vile suggestions?”

Holmes gave an ejaculation of impatience and sprang to his feet.

“Come now, Mr Bolger! This delicacy hardly becomes one who has made a business of preying upon young women to pander to the prurient desires of dissolute young hobbits and sybaritic old lechers. You are a scopophilist, sir, do not attempt to deny it!”

Lotho’s flush of anger subsided and Holmes sat down again.

“I assure you no impropriety took place, Mr Holmes. My sister was in normal high spirits and my brothers as merry as can be after emptying the port decanter and an excellent dinner.”

“What happened then?”

"I bid them good night and fetched my sou'wester —"

"— Sou'wester?" interrupted Holmes.

"It was raining."

"Why not take an umbrella?"

"We have no umbrellas, sir."

"No umbrellas in a district famous for its sudden and precipitate showers?"

"There is a shortage, Mr Holmes. No one knows why. Umbrellas are not to be had for love nor money within a hundred leagues of Isengard."

"Remarkable... make a note of that Bingo — it may prove significant."

"Shall I also record the missing camiknickers?"

"By all means."

I opened my pocket book and made a few swift notes.

"Who let you out?" continued Holmes.

"I did."

"Where was the housekeeper, Mrs Tipplebottle?"

"Asleep in bed. She had served the port, and I fear, partaken too generously herself."

"Where did you spend the night?"

"At the inn in Longbottom."

"Alone?"

"No, I was with a companion."

"And who might that be?" I asked.

Lotho glared at me and fidgeted nervously.

"Come now," said Holmes. "You promised to tell the truth."

"The landlady, Mrs Chubb."

"Can she corroborate your story?"

"Yes — as will her daughters, Daisy and Peony."

"Daughters?" I asked, astonished.

"If you must know I was engaged in taking a few candid daguerreotypes for a new zoetrope entertainment I am producing. I can see there is no point in my making a secret of my profession."

"None," said Holmes. His lip curled distastefully. "The facts as you state them are certainly remarkable. I take it that you have no theory of your own that could account for them, Mr Bolger?"

"No," said Lotho.

"It's devilish, Mr Holmes, devilish!" cried Folco Proudfoot. "Something came into that room and drove Lotho's brothers to madness, performed who knows what unspeakable acts upon his poor sister, and then murdered her before incinerating her undergarments. What in Middle-Earth could do such a thing? Only a Balrog, sir, only a monstrous, winged ghoul of fire, slime and horror!"

"I fear," said Holmes, "that if it was a Balrog, it will be the first I have ever encountered. Yet we must exhaust all natural explanations before I embrace a supernatural creature of fire and slime with webbed wings and an appetite for expensive lingerie. As to yourself, Mr Bolger, I take it that you were not always on the best of terms with your sister?"

"That is so, Mr Holmes. Mr Proudfoot touched upon the causes when he confirmed your suspicions about my late sister's former career. She fell into

harlotry at an early age and became so notorious my late parents were compelled to evict her. I am ashamed to say Belladonna was a fallen woman, sir; sadly fallen, who soon became addicted to unnatural practices so foul, I cannot bring myself to recount them. It was with the greatest difficulty that Mr Proudfoot and my elder brother Odo persuaded her to give up her dissolute life and return to the family home. I will not deny that there was some ill feeling between us on account of the money she had made from her career, and my insistence that she should use some of it to pay for repairs to the house, but we were reconciled long ago, and have been the best of friends ever since."

"How well did your sister get on with your brothers?"

"They were inseparable, sir."

The almost imperceptible twitching of Holmes' left eyebrow told me he entertained the gravest doubts as to the veracity of the old hobbit's answers.

"Looking back," continued Holmes, "Is there nothing that stands out in your memory which could throw any further light upon this tragedy?"

"Nothing."

"Think carefully."

Lotho considered earnestly for a long moment and then said: "There is one thing.."

"Yes?"

"As I smoked my cigar my back was to the window, and my brother Drogo was facing it. Twice he looked anxiously over my shoulder, so I turned around to look but saw nothing. Drogo was convinced he had seen an umbrella moving among the bushes at the end of the lawn. Odo laughed and told him he had taken too much port."

"Umbrella?" asked Holmes sharply. "I thought you said that umbrellas were not to be had for love nor money within a hundred leagues of Isengard?"

"So I did," said Lotho, colouring deeply. "Drogo was mistaken. I immediately dismissed it as a trick of the rain and the wind and his inebriation."

"Neither you nor Odo thought to investigate?" asked Holmes.

"No."

"You left them, then, with no premonition of evil?"

"None."

"Remarkable - most remarkable!" exclaimed Holmes, rising from his chair and reaching for his hat. "I think we had better go up Sharkey's End without further delay. I have seldom known a case that presented such singular problems. Will you accompany us, Mr Proudfoot?"

"No, I must return to my office to write the matter up while the events are still fresh in my mind," said the Sherriff. Just then Miss Beaverburrow re-entered the parlour to clear away the tea things and I gave her an affectionate kiss on the cheek, and followed Holmes and Lotho to the door.

*Chapter II**AN INEXPLICABLE MYSTERY*

I confess that my thoughts were not on Belinda as we took the winding lane to Sharkey's End. The prospect of feasting my eyes upon the famous beauty, 'Goldilocks', albeit bereft of life, filled me with a singular excitement I was at some pains to conceal from Holmes. Our investigation began inauspiciously when we were overtaken on the road by a four-in-hand from which issued the most dreadful shrieks and groans I have ever heard. As it drove past, heading in the opposite direction, I caught a glimpse of a horribly contorted face glaring out at us.

"My brothers!" cried Lotho Bolger, turning white as a sheet, "I took the liberty of instructing Doctor Lightfoot to commit them into the care of the local asylum without delay."

Holmes slackened his pace as the black carriage flashed past us, and allowing Bolger to get a little ahead of us, turned to me with a concerned air.

"That is not without significance, Bingo," said he softly, "One witness is dead and the other two are spirited away before our very eyes. Moreover, we have picked up three further clues this morning and none of them point to a Balrog. One is the foul atmosphere in the room where the tragedy took place. The second is the lady's undergarments which I have little doubt were stolen because they could help to identify her murderer. Finally, there is the inexplicable umbrella shortage, made more mysterious by Bolger's obvious embarrassment at what his brother Drogo thought he saw in the garden."

"What about the fire and the green slime?" I asked. "What natural explanation can there be for them?"

"That I hope to discover at the tragic scene. Mark my words Bingo, the 'Balrog' we are seeking is no more supernatural than my hat."

Holmes said no more until we reached Sharkey's End. It was a large and rambling dwelling, tunnelled deeply into the sandy cliff that overlooked the southern shore of Lake Isengard. Unusually for a hobbit-burrow, the bedrooms were on the first floor and looked out over an unkempt lawn that swept down to the lake. We were met at the door by the housekeeper, Mrs Tipplebottle, a thin stick of a woman in her eighties with iron-grey hair and a florid complexion. She answered Holmes' questions in a quavering falsetto, somewhat slurred by the influence of the port which I distinctly smelt on her breath. Nothing she told us added to our meagre store of facts, except the surprising information that Belladonna was not in the habit of dining with her brothers, and that the Doctor had removed her body to her bedroom.

"I will not stay in this poisonous hole a moment longer!" she croaked at last, and gathering up her bits of things in a shawl, darted past us with surprising agility, and made off down the garden path as fast as her leathery feet would carry her.

Holmes insisted on making a careful inspection of the garden, and was so absorbed in his examination of the flowerbed below the library window, that he tripped over a watering can, upset its contents, and soaked Mr Bolger's large feet.

We left the old hobbit to clean himself up in the scullery and crossed into a spacious, half-timbered hall with a high, domed ceiling, and ascended a broad flight of stairs to his sister's bedroom. Doctor Lightfoot opened the door and ushered us into a large and comfortably furnished room lit by two round windows in the opposite wall. To our right stood an ornate four-poster bed upon which the dead woman reposed.

"I took the liberty of refusing Mr Lotho's request to wash the body, sir," he said.

"I am indebted to you for your foresight, Doctor," replied Holmes.

Lightfoot was a singular-looking man, whose appearance, as well as his voice, testified to the unaccustomed strain under which he was labouring. He was thin, but had apparently been much fatter, so that the sallow skin hung about his face in loose pouches, and his sparse, sandy hair, flecked with grey, stuck out in all directions. A pair of keen, but not unfriendly blue eyes regarded us questioningly.

"I will not deny that I am at a complete loss; it is quite outside my experience."

"May we examine the room and the body?" asked Holmes.

The Doctor nodded his assent.

It was with considerable curiosity, and mounting excitement that I gazed upon the body of the woman who had exercised such a grip on my adolescent imagination. I had met Belladonna Bolger only once before, at a small soiree given in our honour by the Sherriff when we had first arrived at Isengard. Even in middle age her beauty and grace had outshone every other woman in the room and made Belinda appear plain and awkward beside her. At the time I had been singularly impressed by the sharp contrast between her cold, aloof manner and the wildness of her large, dark eyes, and had remarked to Holmes that she appeared to be in the grip of some overmastering emotion. Her intensity and keen intelligence had quickly aroused his curiosity, and she seemed grateful for his attentions. As my readers will know, Holmes was an enthusiastic musician, being himself a most capable performer and composer of some merit. That evening he had accompanied Miss Belladonna on the violin while she sang the opening Aria from my ancestor's famous *Encouchment of Arwen* in a clear and poignant soprano that moved me to tears.

I found it hard to reconcile the shameless indecency of the harlot Lotho and Proudfoot had described to us with the angelic being who now lay before me. Belladonna was still a very beautiful woman, though now past her best. Her tanned, clear-cut face was framed by long, dark hair that curled about her slender neck, and lay upon the coverlet in disorderly array. The inviting outline of her voluptuous person could clearly be discerned beneath the thin sheet that clung to her limbs. I had never looked upon a face that was at once so refined and sensitive yet bore all the hallmarks of a sweet nature corrupted by sensuality and hardened by vice. It appeared to me like the face of an angel that had lain with the Devil.

"By Jove!" I said, "She was a handsome lass; but I thought she was blond?"

"Only on stage," said Holmes, indicating the wig perched on a small stand on the dressing table. He continued his examination of the room and

I saw him slip something into his pocket from a drawer in the wardrobe. Then he joined me at the bedside and lifted the sheet from the body.

I stifled an exclamation as I saw the claw marks of some wild animal upon the thighs and belly of the dead woman, still coated with the mysterious, green liquid the Sherriff had reported. Something of the rictus of horror that had been Belladonna's last emotion lingered still in her beautiful, sad face. Holmes drew a small glass vial from his pocket, and stooping low over the corpse, scraped a sample of the substance into it.

"What is that filthy stuff, Doctor?" I asked.

Lightfoot wrung his hands and shuddered. "The — the seed of the Balrog, sir."

"Nonsense!" said Holmes, sniffing the viscous liquor. "It is of vegetable, not supernatural origin."

"It smells like pond weed to me," said I.

"Algae, Bingo. I shall know more when I have analysed it."

As he spoke, his nimble fingers were flying here, there, and everywhere, feeling, pressing, examining, while his eyes were alight with a feverish excitement.

"Hullo!" he cried, as he bent down to examine the woman's wrists. "Look at this, Bingo! The woman was bound!"

"And savagely whipped, sir," added Lightfoot in a trembling voice, turning the body to reveal a tightly-spaced lattice of crimson wheals that extended from the middle of her back to the base of her buttocks.

"As I suspected," said Holmes grimly. "And yet Bolger denied it when I questioned him."

"The foul blackguard!" I cried. "He had a perverse relationship with his own sister and when she would no longer accede to his criminal abuses, foully murdered her!"

"I confess appearances point that way, Mr Bracegirdle," said the Doctor, "but these wounds are not the worst of her injuries. From the scorching it seems she was repeatedly violated, though I cannot bring myself to believe it was the work of her own brothers."

"My word," said Holmes with a sharp intake of breath. "This is a bad business!" He stooped down and examined the woman's thighs with his magnifying glass. I was shocked to see that the skin was discoloured with several circular burns, about the size of a halfpenny piece that showed that her murderer had not flinched from abusing her.

"What brute could inflict such unspeakable injuries?" I asked.

"Not Bolger," said Holmes. "Unless he possesses the singular ability to be in two places at once, he cannot have been the murderer. Remember, he has three witnesses who will confirm he spent the night at the inn."

"Then how are we to read this mystery?" I asked.

"That remains to be seen. If I am not mistaken rigor should have set in some hours ago."

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Lightfoot, "you're right, the flesh is still pliable!"

"Holmes rubbed his hands and chuckled with delight. Drawing a small mirror from his pocket, he handed it to the Doctor.

Lightfoot held it over the dead woman's lips. The faintest haze gathered

on its surface. "Try the carotid artery, Doctor."

"She lives!" cried Lightfoot. He handed the mirror back to Holmes and I was astonished to observe the intense emotion which now animated my friend's face.

With a shock of dismay I saw him produce a neat morocco case from his coat pocket and take out the vile instrument which I associated with the singular weakness of his character.

"No, Holmes!" I pleaded. "Not the *miruvor*!"

He ignored me, and deftly uncorking a small, green bottle, plunged the hypodermic syringe into it. With his long, nervous fingers he slowly raised the piston and tapped the instrument several times. Finally he stooped over the body, thrust the sharp point into the woman's right forearm, and pressed down the tiny piston. The Doctor stared at Holmes in consternation.

"What did you give her, sir?"

"A twenty-percent solution of *miruvor*," said Holmes.

"I have never heard of it," said Lightfoot.

"That is not surprising. Its manufacture was a closely guarded secret of the ancient Elves until I rediscovered it."

"What does it do?"

"Watch and wait."

To my everlasting surprise, the corpse opened its eyes and smiled. Yes! The dead woman awoke, and arching her back, retched violently onto the sheet.

Lightfoot looked wonderingly at Holmes.

"Why, you are a magician, sir!"

"No, a scientist, but the two are easily confused. As I suspected, the algae contains some narcotic poison to which the stimulating properties of *miruvor* are antithetical."

"Astonishing!" said I.

Holmes laughed and slapped me on the back. "You can be certain that whatever attacked the unfortunate Miss Bolger was not a Balrog, Bingo."

I turned to the poor woman who was now sitting up with the Doctor's assistance. "I — I cannot begin to tell you how overjoyed I am, madam —"

"I fear she cannot speak yet," said Holmes, "though I fancy she hears you well enough."

The woman nodded and took several deep breaths. Holmes stroked her hair and patted her hand soothingly. "There is nothing more to fear. You are quite safe."

She looked at him questioningly with her big, dark eyes and sank back on the pillows.

"Will she regain the power of speech?" asked the Doctor.

"Once the poison is out of her bloodstream I am confident she will make a full recovery."

Belladonna seemed to understand him, and squeezed his hand.

"Your timely intervention has saved that poor woman's life, Mr Holmes," said the Doctor. "Is it too late for her brothers?"

"I fear so," replied Holmes. "But I will have Miss Beaverburrow send some of the drug over to you this afternoon and you may use it upon them

if you wish.”

At that moment there was a heavy footfall on the stairs and a loud knock on the door. Holmes sprang up with his finger upon his lips and leant against the door. “Do not let him see she lives!” he whispered.

“But surely,” said Lightfoot, “He has the right to know it?” “Possibly so,” said Holmes, “But I would rather he remained in ignorance of the fact until I have clearly established he had no part in her death. Bingo — cover the woman!”

I hurried to do as he asked.

“You suspect Lotho?” asked the Doctor.

“Do you not?”

“Well — yes, I suppose so..”

“Then for pity’s sake do not expose her to further danger!”

With that, Holmes opened the door and admitted Lotho.

A strong feeling of revulsion, and something akin to fear took hold of me as the big hobbit strode into the room. His broad, rugged face was gaunt, and an anxious light was in the lecherous eyes that peered out from deep hollows under his heavy brows.

“Have you finished?” he asked.

“I will be down directly,” said Holmes, and motioned me to accompany Lotho. As I left the room I saw him draw Lightfoot toward the bed and engage the Doctor in a whispered conversation.

I had not long to wait before he joined me in the doorway of the library.

“I have asked Doctor Lightfoot to take Belladonna to his home in the town to care for her, and not to mention her recovery to a living soul”.

“Will she be safe there?” I whispered.

“Quite safe,” replied Holmes. “There is no love lost between the good Doctor and Lotho Bolger.”

“Won’t he suspect something?”

“Why should he? What is more natural than a physician taking the body of the deceased away for sepulture?”

“Will you make your examination now, Mr Holmes?” called Lotho anxiously from within. As soon as we entered the room my nostrils recoiled from the atmosphere. A misty, foul-smelling haze still hung in the air. Mingled with it was the smell of burned paper, cloth and stale cigar smoke. I coughed and flung both windows wide. Lotho pulled vigorously on his cigar and blew a fragrant cloud of smoke in my direction.

“I see you are something of a pipeweed connoisseur, Mr Bolger,” remarked Holmes casually.

“Pray take one, Mr Holmes. And you, Mr Bracegirdle,” said he, proffering a small, wooden cigar box. “I can recommend them, they are specially prepared for me by Hornblower of Hobbiton. An old man has few pleasures. Pipeweed and archaeology are all that is now left to me.”

I lit my cigar and noticed that Holmes slipped his into the inside pocket of his jacket whilst Lotho glanced nervously around the room.

“Pipeweed and archaeology, but no family!” the old hobbit repeated. “Alas! Who could have foreseen such a terrible catastrophe!”

“You know something of the history of the area, then?” I enquired.

“No one knows more,” replied Bolger without any trace of complacency.

“Perhaps you have read my treatise on the *Magnum mysterium of Orthanc*?”

“Unfortunately not, but if my recollection is not at fault, that was the former name of the ruined tower in the centre of Lake Isengard, was it not?”

“Indeed it was Mr Bracegirdle. The locals call it ‘Sharkey’s tooth’ and it is believed that an individual of that name once held sway over this area. A mighty powerful alchemist and conjurer he was too, by all accounts. Had I known the subject interested you I would have been only too glad to share my knowledge with you. Unfortunately, under the present, distressing circumstances...” He stifled a sob and passed his hand over his face.

Whilst we had been talking, Holmes had begun a detailed examination of the chaise longue on which the unfortunate Belladonna had so nearly met her end. Holmes was tense and alert, his eyes shining, his face set, his long limbs quivering with eager activity. His magnifying glass was in his hand and his heavy brows were drawn down over his eyes in a frown of concentration.

“What have you found?” I asked him.

“This!” said he, handing me a riding crop whose thongs were matted with blood.

“Merciful heavens!” I cried, “It is the murder weapon!”

“You are mistaken, Bingo. “It is merely the instrument of the poor woman’s torture.”

Without further explanation he dashed out of the room and I saw him, moments later, running over the lawn, peering in through the windows, and climbing up to the roof, for all the world like a Shire-hound scenting mushrooms. After a further exploration of the shrubbery at the bottom of the garden he vanished around the corner of the hole, and I heard his footsteps in the hall, before he bounded back into the library. The windows appeared to give him some fresh cause for excitement, for he thrust his head out of them with many loud ejaculations of delight. Then he rushed to the fireplace and threw himself at Lotho’s feet. His lens swept over the carpet in a blur, and several samples were soon deposited in a variety of envelopes. Next he made another rapid circuit of the room, paying particular attention to the glasses on the dining table and the contents of a large, brass ashtray which he scrutinised with the greatest care, before dropping into a chair with a gesture of impatience.

“Well, sir, have you found any evidence of the Balrog?” asked Bolger.

“None,” said Holmes. “But I have found evidence of a conspiracy to torture and murder the woman who was tied to that couch.” Lotho’s face was a study in confusion and alarm. He puffed on his cigar and stared at us.

“C-conspiracy, Mr Holmes?”

“Yes!” cried Holmes, rising from his chair with the riding crop in his hands. “Unless you would have me believe that a creature of fire and slime would trouble itself to poison its victims’ wine and tie a woman to a couch, before murdering the one, and driving the others out of their minds!”

“P-poison, Mr Holmes?” stammered the old hobbit.

“Yes, poison! In the port and in the so-called ‘discharge’ the foolish Doctor imagined to be the seed of some libidinous, supernatural creature!”

“But,” cried the old scopophilist, “what other explanation is there?”

“It is our task to find that out,” replied Holmes; “so, now, if you please, Mr Bolger, I would like to put some further questions to you.”

The big hobbit scowled and strode toward the window.

“What can I tell you that you do not already know?” he asked peevishly.

“Whose riding crop is this?”

“I have no idea. I do not ride, sir.”

“Did your brothers?”

“No.”

“Did you profit from your sister’s career?”

“No - yes, I-”

“Come sir, which is it?”

“Not at first. Later I may have employed her in one or two Zoetrope entertainments.”

“Such as *Spanking for Pleasure*?”

“Possibly. I do not remember.”

“Surely you remember *Goldilocks and the three bare bottoms*?”

“I have told you; she sank into an abyss of depravity. After that I disowned her. I had no wish to profit from a sick woman’s degradation.”

“Your sister had never married?”

“No.”

“Did she have any especial friends?”

Lotho blanched but quickly recovered himself.

“Dozens - Milo Brockhouse was one.”

“Milo Brockhouse?” I asked. “The famous explorer and orc-hunter?”

Lotho nodded.

“And the others?” asked Holmes.

“I never saw them. She picked them up and discarded them as easily as you or I would a newspaper.”

“It is curious that you should mention newspapers,” said Holmes softly.

He took a small piece of paper from his jacket pocket, and carefully unfolding it, handed it to Lotho.

“I found this advertisement in your sister’s wardrobe.”

Lotho scanned it briefly, swore under his breath and handed it back with a trembling hand.

“Never seen it before in my life, sir.”

Holmes handed the faded paper to me and beneath a small lithograph of a very young Belladonna tied to a couch, I read:

This accomplished and obedient nymph has just attained her twenty-fourth year, and fraught with every perfection, enters a volunteer in the field of Venus and the harbour of Sappho. She plays on the pianoforte, sings, dances, and is the mistress of every manoeuvre in the amorous contest that can enhance a discerning gentlehobbit’s pleasure. She is of middle stature, with fine dark hair, brown eyes, an ardent nature, and a most prepossessing countenance. Her slender loins are a poem of perfection eager to accommodate the arrow of Eros and her dainty posterior will reward the more adventurous votary with the keenest enjoyment. Under corrective discipline she is all the heart can wish, or eyes admire; every limb writhes in charming abandonment, her delicate lip trembles, her cries are truly amorous; her price is but a trifling ten gold pieces. All enquiries should be addressed to Mr B at the Blue Tit in Longbottom.

"This is monstrous!" I exclaimed.

"Quite so," said Holmes through clenched teeth. "Tell me, Mr Bolger, who is the author of this salacious advertisement?"

"B is a common enough initial, sir. It could have been any one."

"You do not deny that the subject of this paean of praise is your sister?"

"Why should I? Have I not told you that she was a vicious libertine? Perhaps one of her lovers published it on her behalf."

"Once again I must ask you; did you flagellate your sister?"

Lotho gave a great cry, whether from shock or anger it was difficult to say. I had already deduced that he was an accomplished actor and was not surprised by his next remark.

"Never!"

"Then who did?"

"Brockhouse!" he cried hoarsely.

"You mentioned him earlier," asked Holmes. "Does he ride?"

"He is rarely out of the saddle," said Lotho fiercely.

"Then you have proof that your sister was involved in acts of algolagnia with him?" asked Holmes.

"Algolagnia?" I interjected.

"Really, Bingo, I should have thought that a hobbit of your wide experience would be familiar with the practice of giving and receiving pain for amorous pleasure!" said Holmes sharply.

"Oh, that." I answered with a blush.

Holmes repeated his question.

"Bella made no secret of her unnatural affection for Brockhouse," said Lotho. "It was largely to get her away from him that I insisted she come back to live with me at Sharkey's End."

"Are you suggesting they were intimate together?" asked Holmes.

"What else is a hobbit to think when his own sister shamelessly shows him the wheals on her body and proudly names the brute who inflicted them?"

"You did nothing to prevent it?"

"She revelled in his abuses and would brook no interference from anyone."

Holmes' face was ashen and the knuckles of his hands stood out as he gripped the arms of his chair.

"Good gracious!" I exclaimed. "It's come to something when the most famous explorer in the Shire stoops so low to gratify his unnatural appetites!"

"That remains to be seen," said Holmes grimly.

"Do you doubt me?" exclaimed Lotho angrily.

Holmes pushed back his chair and leapt to his feet. He towered over the hobbit by a good two feet and fixed him with a malevolent look that turned my blood to water.

"If I discover that you had any hand in this tragic matter, or the sufferings of your sister, and you come under my hand - expect no mercy!"

Lotho stepped back and cowered before Holmes.

"I meant no offence, Mr —"

"— Thank you," interrupted Holmes icily. "I don't think we need

intrude on your grief and patience any longer, Mr Bolger.” With a brief word to the Doctor who was just climbing onto the seat of his donkey-cart, we turned our faces for home.

“Ah, Tea was never more welcome,” said Holmes with a weary sigh, accepting the cup Belinda offered him when we were safely back in our familiar parlour. She smiled at me and fetched his tobacco pouch from the mantelpiece.

“Well, this is a tangled web, and no mistake,” said I. “I feel like a small fly that has blundered into a whole nest of spiders, each more loathsome than the last.”

“It is certainly a very bad business, Bingo,” retorted Holmes grimly. “Quite the worst I have ever encountered. My better judgment tells me we should all take to our heels at once, but the case presents too many intriguing aspects for me to abandon it now.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Belinda nervously.

“Do?” repeated Holmes, taking his pipe from his pocket and rapidly filling it. “I think we shall take an early luncheon and then Bingo will go and interview Mr Brockhouse.”

“I?” I cried with a start. “Beard that fearsome hobbit in his own den? How do I know he will not murder me, Holmes?”

“You do not,” said Holmes with a smile. “But I do. Does it not strike you that the only clues that implicate Brockhouse were furnished by Lotho Bolger?”

“What about that lewd advertisement?”

“As Lotho himself pointed out it could have been published by anyone with the initial ‘B’ — even you Bingo! Moreover, it was at least twenty years old and should have been as dusty as the other papers in the wardrobe, yet it was quite clean. Plainly it was planted there for me to find.”

“How can you be sure it was that old?” I asked.

“The lead type with which it had been impressed has been obsolete for twenty years.”

“Well,” said I, “I suppose I must trust to your judgement, Holmes.” Holmes chuckled. “That would be best,” said he. “While you are out you might also call on Doctor Lightfoot and ascertain if there has been any change in Miss Bolger’s condition.”

“And what will you be doing?”

“With your permission, I have a mind to soak in a hot bath with Belinda for an hour.”

Our housekeeper’s eyes widened in surprise not unmixed with pleasure. “Oh, Mr Holmes!” she cried, “Are you sure you are ready for stage two yet?”

“Never more so!” said he, rising from his chair with a mischievous smile.

“Really, Holmes! I protested, not a little put out, “You have come on a long way if you can bring yourself to share a bath with a woman! Whatever next?”

“Marriage?” he enquired with a chuckle.

Belinda blushed furiously and rushed from the room in giggles.

*Chapter III**THE SPAWN OF MORGOTH*

After luncheon I went out to call on Mr Milo Brockhouse at his isolated home on the moors. The Orc-hunter's accommodation was spartan and cramped by hobbit standards; no more than a tunnel dug into the bare hill behind it, with a small parlour and a bedroom on one side, and a kitchen and scullery upon the other. I was admitted by a strikingly handsome young hobbit of five and twenty with the same black hair and penetrating eyes as the explorer that I had come to visit. He made no effort to disguise the feelings of antipathy he evidently held towards me, and uttered the one word 'Bracegirdle' as he flung open a door and stood back to let me pass.

The parlour was littered with maps and manuscripts and an untidy assortment of boxes which I surmised contained the artefacts Brockhouse had collected on his many foreign journeys. The explorer waved me impatiently to a seat by the fireplace and sat down opposite me in an ancient, leather armchair. At least I hoped it was leather, and not the skin of the terrifying orc whose head glared down at me from above the fireplace, its lips drawn back in the snarl of rage that had evidently been its last emotion.

"A trophy?" Mr Brockhouse," I enquired with a shudder.

"No," said he, "A warning to be vigilant."

"Who was that young man?" I asked, "Your servant?"

"I have no servants," said he.

His formidable reputation did not incline me to pursue the subject and I contented myself with observing the most unusual hobbit I have ever encountered. I had heard of his astonishing exploits long before I came to Isengard. At five feet three, Milo Brockhouse was a good head taller than the average hobbit and could not only ride a horse, but was reputed to do so with a skill that few of the Big Folk could match. The long limbs, the weather-beaten and deeply tanned face with the fierce, penetrating grey eyes and hawk-like nose, the untidy shock of black hair — greying at the temples, and the hornbeam pipe clamped between his stained teeth — all these were as well known in the Shire as in Old Gondor, and could only be associated with the greatest Orc-hunter and explorer in Middle-Earth. It was said that he had single-handedly slain five huge Orcs in the Misty Mountains, and had journeyed to the strange new lands that had arisen from the seas beyond Old Gondor; a thousand leagues to the south. We had heard of his presence in Isengard and I had once or twice caught sight of his tall figure during my perambulations across the moors. But he had made no advances towards me, and knowing him to be as ardent a lover of solitude as Holmes himself, I had not pressed my company upon him. So far as we were aware he spent the short intervals between his long journeys in this small burrow high on the moors and had no other company than the singular young manservant who had admitted me.

"Well," said he gruffly, "Are you going to arrest me?"

His bluntness startled me and when I did not immediately reply he

railed against the moral corruption and unnatural vice that had given the area its sinister reputation, for which he made it clear, he thought Lotho and Odo Bolger were responsible.

“Surely you exaggerate?” I asked.

“Exaggerate!” he cried, thumping the arm of his chair. “Tell that to the mothers of the young girls who service Lotho’s perverted customers! Tell it to the three women whose broken bodies were found on the moors last week!”

“But surely,” said I, “they were attacked by wild beasts?”

“I am a hunter, Mr Bracegirdle,” said he through clenched teeth. “And have yet to encounter an animal that flagellates its victims with a riding crop before violating them and then severing the limbs from their bodies!”

I turned pale and stared at him in disbelief. “I have heard nothing of this,” I said.

“That does not surprise me,” retorted Brockhouse. “Half the district is in league with the Bolgers and the other half are frightened out of their wits.”

“What do you mean?” I asked,

“Surely you know what the Bolgers are?” he asked.

“I know that Lotho is a scopophilist.”

Brockhouse spat into the fire and knocking out the dottle from his pipe, slowly refilled it. “You may use whatever fancy name you wish, Mr Bracegirdle. I know him to be the worst scoundrel who ever drew breath; may the devil take his black soul!”

“Then you accuse him of the murder of the women you mentioned?”

“Aye, and worse,” growled Brockhouse; “much worse.”

“He has said the same of you,” said I.

“And that fool of a detective believed him?”

“I cannot speak for Mr Holmes,” said I, “But the evidence we found supports his accusation; a riding crop with Miss Belladonna’s blood on it was found at the scene.”

Brockhouse’s face turned livid and he clenched his hands. Then he relaxed and leaning back in his chair, burst into laughter.

“My riding crop?” he exclaimed. “So that’s who took it! If that is all your clever detective can muster he is a bigger fool than I took him for.”

He was plainly labouring under the delusion that Holmes had been paid by Lotho Bolger to blacken his good name and when I attempted to correct him, launched into a long tirade against the interference of men in the affairs of hobbits. I could get little more from him except the admission that he and Belladonna had been intimate some years before, and that she had broken off the relationship — why he would not say. He seemed particularly pleased that Odo had been driven insane and commented that: ‘It is poetic justice that a monster who has driven so many out of their wits should lose his own.’ When I showed him the lewd advertisement we had found in Belladonna’s wardrobe his whole manner suddenly changed. He leapt to his feet with a livid face and shook his fists at me. A spasm of pain contorted his features; his eyes dimmed with tears and he trembled in every limb. Never have I seen such a look of desperate suffering on a hobbit’s face.

“You cannot know what horrors that good and loving woman has

endured at the hands of those devils,” he said thickly, and added threateningly: “But I promise you this, I will make Lotho suffer more in one hour than she has suffered in twenty years! If Mr Sherlock Holmes gets in my way I will not be answerable for the consequences!”

With that final outburst, he thrust me roughly out of the door, and I hastened to take my leave of the terrifying explorer, and hurried down to the town to call on Dr Lightfoot.

I did not return to our burrow until just before supper time and found Holmes pacing morosely up and down the hall. Then he stalked into the parlour and flung himself down in the armchair, his drawn face hardly visible amid a blue swirl of tobacco smoke, his heavy brows drawn down, his eyes vacant and far away. I began to fear that he had been at the *miruvor* again, or that Belinda had exhausted him, but one glance at her expressive eyes and sweet face showed me that Holmes’ malaise had quite another origin. Finally he laid down his pipe and sprang to his feet with a snort of impatience.

“It won’t do Bingo Bracegirdle! It simply won’t do. The bath sent me to sleep, your bound collection of sapphic lithographs bored me to death, and poor Miss Beaverburrow was hard put to it to retain my attention, never mind raise anything more substantial. I fear my indifference will mean a sleepless night for you both. Come, my lad — let us walk on the beach. We need the sunshine and fresh air to clear our heads.”

So it was that beneath the shadow of the great ruined tower, with the surf cooling my feet and the evening sun on my back, that he expounded our position to me. “In the first place let us exclude any supernatural intervention in the affairs of men or hobbits.”

I began to object, but he waved his hands and continued. “No, I will not entertain Balrogs, Ringwraiths, Goblins, giant spiders, or fire-wielding wizards in pointy hats. They may be the stuff of living legend to you, but they are stuff and nonsense to me. Three persons appear to have been grievously stricken by some unknown agency; that is a fact. The presence of a vegetable poison in the port and in Miss Bolger’s body, are another fact, as is the foul atmosphere in the library.

“What about the camiknickers?” I asked.

“I confess their loss troubles me, but I have no doubt we shall get the bottom of their part in this mystery. While you were out I checked Bolger’s movements to verify his claim to have spent the night at the *Blue Tit* with Mrs Chubb and her charming daughters. Knowing my methods as you do, you will, of course, have seen through my somewhat clumsy trick in upsetting the watering can, by which I obtained a clear imprint of two sets of footprints, Lotho’s, which I traced back to the inn, and another set which began below the library window and stopped by the shrubbery at the end of the lawn.”

“A hobbit’s or a man’s?”

Holmes gave me a queer look and his voice sank to a whisper.

“Bingo, they were the footprints of some gigantic creature!”

“You mean the fiend is a Balrog after all?”

"I did not say so."

"Then what is it?"

Holmes shrugged his shoulders.

"I have hitherto confined my investigations to this world," said he. "In my modest way I have combated evil in many guises, but to take on the Spawn of Morgoth himself would, perhaps, be stretching even my prodigious abilities. Yet, I confess that the footprints are not those of any creature that I have ever encountered. What perplexes me more is why they do not continue. Also, the ground by the shrubbery was much disturbed, as if by the wheels of some heavy agricultural engine. It almost seems that whatever made those tracks simply flew away."

"Then it is the Balrog."

"I see that our long intercourse has not succeeded in dispelling your superstitions, Bingo. But tell me this: if you hold that view, why has no one seen the creature?"

"Odo and Drogo saw it, as did their sister."

"Belladonna cannot yet speak of her ordeal and when I visited Odo and Drogo at the asylum I was told that they had expired on arrival."

"Great heavens, Holmes!" said I. "That is dreadful news!"

"On the contrary," said Holmes, "It is most welcome."

"I do not follow you?"

"When I asked to see the bodies I was told they had been cremated on Lotho's instructions."

"Is that not highly unusual?"

"Exceedingly, and suspicious in the extreme. The excuse I was given was that they were contagious. A story as improbable as the fiction of an imaginary fire-breathing creature out of the ridiculous mythology of the Shire which no one has seen. I rather think it must be a very bashful Balrog we are seeking, Bingo!"

"Very droll, Holmes. But what about the umbrella that Bolger claims his brother Odo saw in the garden?"

"That is certainly remarkable, not least because of the old hobbit's clumsy attempt to dismiss it. There is some significance attached to umbrellas that I am certain we are missing. It is difficult to conceive how an outsider could have made such a terrible impression on the company without leaving a single trace behind. Except for the stuffiness of the library reported by all three visitors, that we ourselves experienced strongly, and the poisonous pondweed, there is nothing to lead us to our adversary. Moreover, we have yet to find any possible motive for so strange and elaborate a crime. You perceive our difficulties, Bingo?"

"They are only too clear to me," I replied, opening my pocket book. "But Lotho does have a motive in wishing his sister dead, that much is evident from his confession about her earnings. His brothers owned the most prosperous Pipeweed emporium in the district and with them out of the way he stands to come into a great deal of money. As we expected, Mr Brockhouse vehemently denied any impropriety between himself and Belladonna when I interviewed him this afternoon. Yet it was clear to me that he entertained the strongest feelings for her. Given what we know of her reputation in the town it seems only too plausible to me that he finally tired

of her vile debaucheries and killed her in a jealous rage.”

“Then, he, too must have had wings,” said Holmes, “since there were only two sets of footprints in the garden.”

“I must admit that is a serious difficulty,” said I. “Yet he freely admitted that the riding-crop was his when I questioned him and made no secret of the fact that he and Belladonna had been intimate. He also threatened your life, Holmes.”

“He threatened me?” asked Holmes, with a faint smile.

“It was not a jest, Holmes,” said I. “*If Mr Sherlock Holmes gets in my way I will not be answerable for the consequences* — those were his exact words.”

“Intriguing,” said Holmes. “Was there anyone with him in his burrow at the time?”

“Yes — a young hobbit who I took to be his manservant. Why, how did you know that?”

“An intuition, Bingo. How young?”

“No more than five and twenty I should say.”

“Most interesting.”

“Have you no more to tell me?” I asked.

“Not at present, Bingo. I am beginning to wonder if all the inhabitants of this unsavoury district are not entirely degenerate.”

“Perhaps it is the mephitic influence of that old tower in the lake?” I suggested.

“Perhaps, yet Lotho could not have been in two places at once, and that, my dear Hobbit, leaves us with Brockhouse, who cannot possibly have entered the house without leaving some evidence behind — and I found none. Our choice lies between a notorious scopophilist and a jealous explorer; neither of whom are possessed of wings. So it seems we are left with your ridiculous Balrog — you know my feelings about Balrogs! Come, let us stroll over the causeway to the old tower, and see if we cannot find some more of those artefacts which Miss Beaverburrow tried to interest me in when she was soaping my back.”

I may have commented upon my mentor’s power of mental detachment, but never was it more in evidence than that warm, spring evening in Isengard, when he discoursed to me upon the cake recipes of the vanished Elves as lightly as if no sinister mystery was waiting upon his solution.

The sun was setting when we returned to our dwelling to find a great black horse tethered to the gatepost, and a longbow lying on the hall table. Neither of us needed to be told who the big hobbit reclining on the sofa was. It was no surprise to me, therefore, to hear the famous orc-hunter complaining passionately to Belinda about the incompetence of the authorities in bringing the murderer to justice.

“Proudfoot is a worse villain than Lotho if he lets him remain at large,” he exclaimed, as we entered and hung up our hats and cloaks. “The entire district knows that Bolger is the worst scoundrel who ever breathed. Why haven’t you thrown him in the lockholes, answer me that?”

“Mr Brockhouse was most anxious to see you, Mr Holmes,” said Belinda, offering him a cup of tea with a trembling hand.

Holmes sat down and spoke a few soothing words to the irate explorer.

“Due process!” snorted Brockhouse, snapping his fingers. “That for ‘due process’ Hang the black-hearted rogue and have done, I say.”

Holmes raised his eyebrows. “Might I enquire exactly what your interest in this affair is?”

Brockhouse sat up and glared at him. “If you must know I am acquainted with Miss Bolger - or, rather, was acquainted with her many years ago.”

“In a professional capacity?” asked Holmes quietly.

“What the devil do you mean by that, sir?”

“Only that I understand Miss Bolger to have been an actress of some renown and singular talents, and thought perhaps that you may have assisted her unusual career in some way?”

For a moment I thought our visitor was going to strike Holmes. Brockhouse’s face turned a dusky red, his eyes glared, and he sprang up with clenched hands. With a violent effort he controlled himself and resumed his seat with a cold, suppressed anger which was, perhaps, more dangerous than his sudden outburst.

“I have lived among the worst savages in Middle-Earth, Mr Holmes,” he said, clamping his pipe to his mouth, “addicted to practices you cannot begin to imagine. Yet nowhere have I found a more vicious or degenerate monster than Lotho Bolger, or a finer woman than his sister, Belladonna.”

I was on the point of reminding him what the whole world knew about that ‘fine woman’ when a look from Holmes quelled me. Brockhouse clenched his hands into tight fists and growled at me.

“Aye, I know what they say,” he continued bitterly. “And I daresay much of it is true, but what drove her to it, eh? Odo and Lotho Bolger! They were the demons who corrupted her! Oh yes! I was there and saw how deeply she feared and hated them. But I had to go away and it was many years before I returned, and by then it was too late. She was steeped in vice; yet she never ceased to struggle against it. But I have said too much.”

“Oh, Mr Brockhouse!” exclaimed Belinda, “How dreadful!”

Brockhouse clenched his hands and bit his lip. “You do not know the half of it, madam.”

“You have not mentioned Drogo, Mr Brockhouse,” I asked. “Is he not equally culpable in your eyes?”

“I know nothing of Drogo,” said Brockhouse, “aside from what Belladonna told me of him. He was a vain and weak hobbit by all accounts who was dominated by his elder brothers. I know nothing against him. So, Mr Holmes, will you bring Lotho to justice or must I do your work for you?”

“I have not yet cleared my mind entirely on the part certain persons may have played in this case, and until I do, it would be premature of me to say any more,” replied Holmes.

“Do you suspect me?”

“No. I can hardly say that.”

“Then I have wasted my time and will not impose upon you further.” The famous explorer slammed down his teacup with a clatter and rose from his chair with a muttered oath.

“One more thing Mr Brockhouse,” asked Holmes. “What can you tell us about Balrogs?”

“Balrogs?”

"Surely you have heard of Balrogs?" said I.

A violent change came over the explorer's expression; his eyes blazed, his jaw dropped, and a spasm of pain twisted his lip. Then he drew himself up to his full height and gave me a withering look from beneath his bushy brows. "Stuff and nonsense!" he snarled, and sweeping up his hat and longbow, stormed out of the door without another word.

"Well, what did you deduce from that?" asked Holmes when our visitor had gone.

"That Mr Brockhouse has as great an aversion to mythological monsters as you," I replied.

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Holmes with an ironic laugh.

"I beg your pardon?"

Holmes shook his head sadly. "Really, Bingo! Have you learned nothing in all these years? How many times must I tell you that detection is a matter of careful observation and deduction?"

"I don't follow you."

"Mr Brockhouse believes in Balrogs," said Belinda, fearfully

"Our housekeeper sees more clearly than you, Bingo," said Holmes with a chuckle. When I still looked at him in bewilderment he continued. "It's as plain as the vacuum which separates your furry ears, my dear hobbit. Mr Brockhouse's response was out of all proportion to your question. It is obvious he knows a great deal more about Balrogs than he was prepared to admit. I would not be at all surprised if the creature that we seek is not intimately known to him."

"You amaze me, Holmes!"

"Quite possibly!" With that, Holmes snatched his hat from the hall table and bounded for the door. He spun round on the threshold with a feverish glint in his eyes. "I may be gone for some time, Bingo. Don't wait up for me!"

We saw no more of Holmes until he returned late in the night, with dragging steps and a haggard face, carrying a heavy bag. When I pressed him for some explanation of his preoccupation, he assured me that he had made no great progress with his investigation, and refusing all Belinda's tearful entreaties to take some supper with us, retired to his room without another word.

Belinda and I arose rather late on Monday and found Holmes in the kitchen, trying unsuccessfully to boil an egg. Belinda ushered him out, and we were soon rewarded by the heartening sound of sizzling bacon and the appetising aroma of wild mushrooms. Over breakfast Holmes seemed taciturn and preoccupied, and I feared the worst when he pushed back his plate and took the familiar morocco case from his pocket. But to my profound relief it contained nothing more sinister than a microscope slide. He laughed at our expressions of disapproval, and rising from his chair, flourished the case triumphantly under my nose.

"This is not my hypodermic case, my dear Bingo, but another I keep for scientific samples. Come, I will show you what I have discovered."

I followed him into his room and was astonished at the paraphernalia that had appeared in it, seemingly, overnight. He sat down before a table

littered with Bunsen burners, retorts, crucibles and a cabbalistic cornucopia of mysterious instruments that would not have been out of place in an alchemist's laboratory.

"Good gracious, Holmes!" I exclaimed, "Where in Middle-Earth did all this come from?"

"I prevailed upon the good Doctor to furnish me with a few essentials early this morning and acquired the rarer items during my excursion last night when I followed Mr Brockhouse to the ruined tower of Isengard. "We did not hear you go out?"

"That does not surprise me in the least," he replied lightly. "I could hear Belinda's voluptuous sighs clear across the garden."

"Really, Holmes, you exaggerate my abilities," I exclaimed, laughing. "What did you find at the tower?"

"Rather more than I expected. But — here; tell me what you make of this," said he, and pushed a microscope toward me.

I peered into the lens. "It looks like pond scum to me."

"It may be 'pond scum' to you Bingo, but this blue-green algae was well-known to the Elves under the name *Vanwafea* which means 'lost soul' in their ancient tongue. The common word for it was *Lovewort*, or, *Hapalosiphon sarumanensis* — to those that know something of botany."

"When did you discover that?"

"Last night when I collected these samples from the Eastern Shore of the lake."

"Do they match the sample you took from Belladonna's body?"

Holmes nodded and clipped another slide into the stage of the microscope. "As you will observe, I have cultured a suspension of the sample in alcohol which reveals the presence of the chloroplast structures which are intimately associated with cynoerotic poisoning."

"Cynoerotic poisoning?"

"A deadly poison which at first excites the sexual impulse and removes all natural restraints. This is followed by uncontrollable erotomania, terrifying hallucinations, paralysis of the mental faculties, and extreme prostration. In very large doses it completely paralyses the nervous system and results in death within minutes. Its common name of *Lovewort* is something of a misnomer, my lad. *Vanwafea* is one of the most virulent toxins known to Hobbit. But that was not what asphyxiated the Bolgers."

"What was?"

"Marsh gas. The gas from the marshes near Lake Isengard contains much higher concentrations of methane, carbon monoxide and hydrogen sulphide than is usual. When mixed with air, the result is not only toxic to hobbits, but also highly explosive. That explains why both the housekeeper and the Doctor fainted when they first entered the library at Sharkey's End."

"By Jove, Holmes! You astound me!"

"It is simplicity itself," he remarked, chuckling at my surprise. "Once I knew that two separate poisons had been employed it was simply a matter of observation and deduction to discover their origins."

"But that still leaves the missing camiknickers and umbrellas unexplained?"

"True," said Holmes, rising and lighting his pipe. "But it does show us

we are dealing with a criminal mastermind with a deep understanding of poisons.”

“Mastermind?”

“Only a handful of men still possess the knowledge and skill to manufacture and employ these poisons, Bingo, and I fancy that Lotho Bolger may be among them.”

“Then he is the fiend we are seeking?”

“Possibly, or it may be that Lotho acquired his knowledge from a third party.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Lotho claimed that he knew a great deal about Orthanc and its former resident. What he did not tell you was that his treatise on the *Magnum mysterium of Orthanc* was plagiarised from a little-known work written by your great-grandfather Hugo in 1765.”

“How in Middle-Earth did you know that?”

“Because Hugo’s *Among the Orcs of Isengard* is in your library, you silly hobbit!”

“Then you suspect someone else?”

“The bashful Balrog?” Holmes suggested with a laugh. “Hardly, Bingo!”

“Then who?”

“Someone who is a great deal cleverer than Lotho and infinitely more dangerous.”

“Brockhouse?” I asked.

“Hardly. He is clever enough but I have no reason to believe he knows any more of poisons than you do, Bingo.”

“How would we unmask such a formidable opponent?”

“I think he will unmask himself, Bingo. Meanwhile I think we should take the rest of the day off. I fancy we will need all our wits about us in the dark days ahead. The game is afoot, my lad!”

I left Holmes to his retorts and experiments and went down to the lake with Belinda to search for Elvish artefacts on the north shore. By the end of the day I had found precious few artefacts but made considerable progress in my exploration of the finer nuances of my housekeeper’s pleasure threshold. Belinda was especially pleased to discover that the black business in which we were embroiled in no way blunted my enjoyment of the novel techniques she had developed in her treatment of Sherlock Holmes’ indisposition.

The weather took a turn for the worse on Tuesday, a cold wind blew steadily from the east, an iron-grey bank of lowering cloud darkened the lake, and a steady downpour drummed on the roof of our burrow. The foul weather matched the black mood that hung over Holmes during breakfast. Soon afterwards he went out into the storm and I spent the rest of the day writing up the notes of our interview with Lotho Bolger. It was not until six o’clock that the rain finally ceased and Holmes returned, with a spring in his step and a sardonic smile playing over his lips. Belinda quickly brought our supper to the table, and I although I plied Holmes with questions he resolutely refused to answer any of them until he had finished his meal and lit up his pipe. He smoked in silence while Belinda towelled his hair dry and

I cleared the table. Then, to my astonishment, he seized her hand and kissed it affectionately. I am compelled to record that she responded rather more warmly than I should have liked by flinging her arms about his neck with a glad little cry. Holmes gently disengaged himself and planting a light kiss upon her blushing cheek, pushed back his chair, and rose from the table with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

“Is the bath water hot?”

“Yes Mr Holmes,” Belinda replied. “But I was going to do the washing up first.”

“Bingo can do that, can’t you, old chap?”

I swallowed the exclamation that was on my lips and nodded.

“In that event,” said he briskly, “I think I am ready to move onto stage four.”

“Stage four, Mr Holmes?” Belinda replied with a puzzled frown. “There aint no stage four; leastways Bingo has never mentioned anything beyond stage three to me.”

Holmes waved his hand in my direction with a triumphant gesture. “Quite so, my dear!”

“Oh, Mr Holmes, sir!” said Belinda breathlessly, and with a becoming blush, caught his outstretched hand, and followed him into the bathroom. It was with the greatest difficulty that I resisted the overwhelming temptation to loiter outside the door, though I confess I did pass that way once or twice during the washing up, purely to put away the cutlery. I quickly gathered that ‘stage four’ involved a great deal of splashing and not a little dexterity on Belinda’s part, since I distinctly heard her say that she did not think one could do that standing on one leg without falling over. Evidently one could, or she would not have squealed quite so delightedly when Holmes asked her if she would not care to try it a little faster next time.

When she glided into the parlour two hours later and informed me with some satisfaction that ‘Mr Holmes was sleeping like a baby’ I concluded that ‘stage four’ had been a resounding success. When we retired that evening and she refused to reveal the singular technique that had produced such a beneficial effect on my friend, I was compelled to employ drastic measures until she relented. I am happy to say that not only did she not fall over, she promised to demonstrate Holmes’ novel variation if only I would admonish her again. We awoke early to the sound of Holmes whistling in the kitchen and to our everlasting surprise were treated to tea in bed by the great detective!

Wednesday held the promise of a return to the fine and settled weather we had enjoyed during the earlier part of our holiday. The sun blazed brightly from a cloudless sky and a warm breeze, fragrant with the scent of the May blossom outside our door, ruffled the surface of the lake below. Holmes was bright, eager, and in excellent spirits, a mood which my readers will know alternated with fits of the blackest depression and deepest ennui from which the *miruvor* bottle had been his only release until Belinda had taken a hand in the matter. After breakfast we took the teapot into the garden and I lit my pipe while he reviewed our situation in his usual, precise manner.

“There is no great mystery in this case,” he said, taking the cup of tea

that I handed him. "The facts appear to admit of only one explanation."

"What! You have solved the mystery?"

"Well, that would be a little premature. I have discovered a most suggestive fact, that is all. I have found, on consulting the records at Longbottom Sherriff's Court, that Belladonna deposited a will in May of this year naming her brothers as her sole heirs. This document revokes a previous will made twenty-three years ago, on the occasion of her coming of age at twenty-eight, which named one Rollo Brockhouse as her heir. Rollo Brockhouse's birth certificate shows him to have been born illegitimately."

"I may be very obtuse, Holmes, but I fail to see what this suggests?"

"No? You surprise me, Bingo. Look at it this way. Milo Brockhouse admits to you that he has been intimate with Miss Bolger. He then disappears from the area for many years. Soon afterwards the woman embarks upon the sordid career which has made her notorious. What could have driven her into so odious a profession? Plainly, the threat to harm her child unless she fell in with her brothers' vile schemes. Three weeks before our arrival the young Rollo disappears. Within a week of his disappearance Milo Brockhouse returns to Isengard in the company of a young manservant who bears a striking resemblance to his master. Immediately afterwards Belladonna makes a new will in favour of her brothers, and a few days later she is found dead at their home. Have you any alternative theory which will meet the facts?"

"What a strange series of links! But why should Lotho murder his sister now?"

"That is a difficulty. I suspect Lotho threatened to initiate the boy into his ring of vice and that compelled Belladonna to finally reveal the secret of her youthful indiscretion to the boy's father - Milo Brockhouse. Once Lotho discovered what she had done he lost his hold over her. The only way he could be sure of getting his hands on her wealth was to force her to change her will in his favour."

"How did he do that?"

"Torture, probably; *Lovewort*, certainly."

"Why murder his own brothers?"

"We cannot be certain that he did. We only have his and Proudfoot's account of the events of that night. Now that Odo and Drogo are dead the only other person who knows the truth has lost her memory and cannot assist us."

"Perhaps Belladonna confided in them in the hopes they might protect her. In any event they stood in Lotho's way and may have contested the will?"

"Excellent, Bingo! I confess I had not thought of that. Perhaps there was a conspiracy as I suspected and one or more of the conspirators fell out with his accomplices."

"Can you prove this?"

"That I hope our expedition of this evening will show."

"What expedition?"

"I think it is past time that we made a closer inspection of the mysterious tower of Isengard."

"But it's been a ruin for centuries and has been thoroughly investigated

by every archaeologist and treasure-hunter in Middle-Earth.”

“Except one,” said Holmes.

“Who?”

“Myself!”

After luncheon Holmes and I went for a long walk on the moors in the hopes of meeting Brockhouse. But he was not at his burrow and his son, Rollo, if son he was, would tell us nothing further than that his master was away ‘on a private matter’ and would not return until the following day. When we returned Belinda was standing anxiously in the doorway, and rushed into my arms the moment we entered.

“Oh Bingo! I’m that glad to see you!” she exclaimed. “A dreadful woman was here demanding to see Mr Holmes and when I explained as you’d gone out walking on the moors she threw a frightful tantrum and accused him of blackening her good name!”

I drew her into the parlour and sat her on my knee and stroked her hair. “There now,” I murmured. “Don’t upset yourself. “I am here now.”

“Who was the visitor?” asked Holmes.

“Rosy Chubb. Oh, she was in such a state I was afeared she’d murder me!”

“There now,” I said. “No harm will come to you, my sweet.”

“Mrs Chubb, the proprietress of the infamous *Blue Tit* inn?” asked Holmes.

Belinda nodded vigorously and I gently disengaged her hands and kissed her remaining tears away.

“Did she state her business?” I asked.

“She would only say as she was afeared that Mr Brockhouse would do something unnatural to her and her babies.”

“Babies?” asked Holmes.

“Daisy and Peony - her daughters.”

“Did she give any reason for her fear?”

Belinda shook her head.

“Curious, most curious,” said Holmes. “I think we should pay Mrs Rosy Chubb a visit directly we return from our expedition.”

“What do you make of it?” I asked.

“Plainly something or someone has put the fear of God into that woman — or the devil.”

“Brockhouse?”

“Possibly. It might equally well have been our bashful Balrog.”

“Then you do not entirely discount the existence of such a creature, Holmes?”

“I discount nothing that may assist us in unravelling this mystery, but until we have discounted the obvious I do not intend to embrace something as improbable as an imaginary fire-breathing creature out of the ridiculous mythology of the Shire with a fetish for women’s undergarments, Bingo!”

“So you keep saying, Holmes, yet I can think of no other explanation that can account for the facts we have accumulated so far.”

“Dear me!” said Holmes, “If you are going to start thinking we shall never get to the bottom of this mystery!”

*Chapter IV**SHARKEY'S TOOTH*

After supper on Wednesday I retired to the garden to smoke while Belinda sat at my feet and sang to me. She had a sweet and expressive voice well suited to the simple hobbit ditties we both enjoyed. The sun was sinking behind a towering bank of purple clouds, and the lake was ablaze with scarlet and gold, when Holmes tapped me lightly on the shoulder. All was quiet and peaceful in the golden evening light that streamed into our sheltered garden, and it seemed hard to imagine that somewhere beyond its comforting glow, there lurked a malignant fiend the like of which we had never encountered before.

We shouldered our packs and I kissed Belinda fondly; instructing her to lock and bar the door and windows, and admit no one until our return. I confess that I was not a little alarmed by our expedition. The old tower of Insengard had an evil reputation that filled my heart with grim forebodings. It was said that the old conjurer had practiced unspeakable rites and raised unholy spectres from the deeps to serve his wicked ends, and that his imps still haunted the dark pits and foetid tunnels that honeycombed the valley beneath his ancient seat. Very few were brave or foolhardy enough to pass its shadow by day and none would venture within a dozen leagues of it at night. Yet here were we, an underweight and slightly frightened hobbit and a cynical, world-weary detective, creeping stealthily along a ruined causeway that might lead to unimaginable horrors. I gazed up at the soaring tower which seemed to rise from the very bones of the earth; black as pitch and hard as iron, bound by four jagged buttresses of many-sided stone that had once opened into gaping horns at the summit, but were now broken off like the remains of some enormous, rotten tooth. *Sharkey's Tooth* it was called and well merited; though what the old wizard had named it none could now recall. Two hundred feet and more it soared above the lake, its few remaining windows opening into darkness amidst the deeper darkness of the slimy rock they pierced. Its foot was a wilderness of stunted gorse and tumbled rock, pitted with blackened holes and rotting posts to which, it is said, the conjurer's victims had once been tied. Holmes stepped onto the broad pediment at the base of the eastern buttress and began to ascend the broken steps that led to a shattered door ten feet above us.

"The light is going," said I.

"I have brought lamps and this—"

With that Holmes drew out a long wooden box from his pack and opening the lid, proceeded to assemble a weapon the like of which I had never seen before - at least I assumed it was a weapon.

"Good Gracious, Holmes, whatever have you there!" I exclaimed.

"It is a crossbow, Bingo, made for me many years ago by *Mablung and Boromir*, the finest armourers in Old Gondor. You will observe that it has a detachable limb system which is held to the stock with these clamps. The entire bow can be assembled in seconds and is constructed from yew and mithril."

"Mithril!" I ejaculated. "The miraculous metal of the ancient dwarfs!"

"Quite so, Bingo, and exceedingly rare, but harder than steel and many times stronger and lighter. Note the precision roller guides that pre-tension the string and keep it aligned in exactly the same position around the natural cocking centre. The break-action trigger mechanism is the finest of its kind and allows the archer to fire as many as sixteen bolts a minute. Finally, I attach the long-range monocular which makes this formidable device the most deadly weapon in expert hands."

"And in yours?" I enquired.

He laughed as he set the trigger and fitted a bolt to the runnel. "Adequate for our purposes."

We made our way through many shadowy halls and dismal tunnels until I lost all sense of direction, but Holmes seemed to know his way about, and we came at last to a long winding stair that terminated before a stout door secured with a massive, brass padlock.

"By Jove!" I cried, "the door and lock are in perfect condition!" "Not quite, Bingo, but they were not made by the original owner."

Accustomed as I was to Holmes' prodigious resourcefulness I was not greatly surprised to see him produce a key from his pocket and unlock the door. I found myself in a large, circular chamber lit by eight narrow windows spaced equally around the wall.

"Do you notice anything, Bingo?"

"Why, yes," said I, "You have obtained a key to this place."

"No, not that, try again."

"The room has been used!" I exclaimed.

"Quite so. Here is the source of those cabbalistic instruments that so amazed you yesterday."

He strode over to a large table in the centre of the room as I glanced about me. Shelves and cupboards filled every available space; some stacked with items I recognized, such as books, ropes, tools, and boxes, others with strange retorts and even stranger instruments whose purpose I could not even guess at. Holmes waved his hand across the table. "Here, too, are the manuscripts from which Lotho learned the secret of manufacturing the poison *Vanwafea* or *Lovewort* and under the table you will find the canisters he used to store the deadly marsh gas."

"I am astounded, Holmes!" I exclaimed. "How did you manage to find this place?"

"When Brockhouse left our burrow on Sunday evening I followed him here."

I gaped at him in disbelief. "Then Brockhouse is the murderer after all? I can't believe it!"

"Nor should you," said Holmes with a chuckle. "He may have been a visitor here just like us, though I suspect that he has known of the existence of this place for a good while."

"Why do you say that?"

"I took the liberty of searching his coat when he called on us on Sunday and found a key. In fact, I found three keys and took impressions of all of them. Only one fitted this door, the others presumably fit locks in his burrow."

“You never cease to amaze me, Holmes.”

“It is the scientific method, Bingo, as I keep telling you. Come - I have something else to show you.”

He led me over to large cupboard, and opening the doors, pulled out a hideous mask.

“Good grief! It’s monstrous! Look at those frightful horns!”

“There’s your Balrog, Bingo, and here are his claws and his enormous webbed feet.” Holmes thrust the items into my arms one by one with a satisfied gleam in his deepset eyes.

“I don’t know whether I am relieved or disappointed,” said I.

“How so?”

“Well, relieved that the Balrog may turn out to be nothing more than a wicked hobbit, but disappointed that Lotho is an even worse scoundrel that I imagined. I suppose that in a corner of my mind I had hoped that you might be wrong. It is powerfully hard to stomach any hobbit committing the crimes that monster has perpetrated!”

“You have a gentle heart, my lad,” said Holmes with more warmth than I was accustomed to from him, and patted me affectionately on the head.

“Finally, here is the proof that Lotho or his brothers were also frequent visitors here.” Holmes showed me several cigar butts and tipped a pile of ash into my hand. As you know I kept the cigar he gave me on the morning of the murders at Sharkey’s End. These are the same brand from the same manufacturer - Hornblower of Hobbiton.”

“Then you have solved the mystery, Holmes!”

“Not quite, Bingo. There are some small problems that require further elucidation, though one, at least, is a little less intractable than it was.”

“And what is that?”

“The inexplicable umbrella shortage.”

“You’ve found an umbrella in here?”

“Not one, Bingo, dozens of them; over here, in this chest.”

“Astonishing!” I exclaimed as he opened the lid. “But what are they doing here?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

I laughed. “Well, that makes a refreshing change, Holmes!”

“There is one other problem that puzzles me.”

“And what is that?” I asked.

He indicated a large, gray metal box underneath the table.

“The lock of that box has been forced, evidently some time ago since the scratches left by the chisel used to break into it have oxidized quite badly.”

I knelt down to inspect the box and found a sheaf of advertisements inside that were, if anything, even more obscene than the sample Holmes had shown me when he interviewed Lotho. Underneath them lay a pile of faded receipts and a few unexposed daguerreotypes.

“I see nothing here to puzzle us, Holmes,” I remarked.

“That is because your attention was focused on the lewd nymphs in those salacious advertisements, Bingo. If you look more closely you will observe that the daguerreotypes are covered in dust whilst the papers are quite free of it. Moreover, only one edge of the bundle of receipts has faded and there is a clear impression in the bottom of the box which is entirely free of dust.”

"You are right, Holmes; but what does it mean?"

"It means, my dear Bingo that the box once contained a large folio, approximately twelve inches by nine and some three inches thick, with a pocket inside the back cover for receipts. Plainly it was a common ledger which the owner took great pains to conceal and the thief stole because of the value of its contents."

"Great Heavens!" said I, "Then whoever broke open the box is in possession of a secret account book that could unmask the ringleader of the gang who committed the murders!"

"Excellent, Bingo! You are scintillating this evening. Your conclusion had not escaped me. What puzzles me is who it belonged to and why the thief has not handed it in to the authorities."

Then you know who the thief is?

"Certainly, don't you?"

I shook my head.

"Our friend the orc-hunter - Mr Milo Brockhouse."

"Astounding!" said I.

"Elementary, Bingo. He dropped his pipe when he broke open the box, and did not trouble to get rid of the ash which you will observe still adheres to the surface of the uppermost daguerreotype."

"My word Holmes!" I exclaimed, "you have excelled yourself!"

The faint smile that crossed his face was quickly replaced with a deep frown.

"There is one more surprise, Bingo, but I am not sure you should see it."

"You have never shrunk from exposing the more unsavoury elements of your cases to me before, Holmes, what is so different about this one?"

His lips compressed into a tight line and he clenched his hands. "This is very bad, Bingo. Indeed, I do not think that I have ever encountered such horrors before."

"Well then," said I, "The sooner we see them the sooner we can get out of this filthy place. The light has all but gone outside and with only our lamps we shall see mercifully little."

"I thank God for it," said Holmes bitterly. With that he led me to a trap-door concealed beneath a low bed and we descended into the vaulted chamber below.

At first I could see very little, but as Holmes lit our lamps and hung two aloft on iron hooks which were embedded in the damp walls, I gave a great cry. I was in a torture chamber the like of which I pray never to see again. The walls were covered with the most loathsome paintings of the worst depravities known to Man or Hobbit. Demonic forms out of another age performed unspeakable acts upon mountains of writhing victims of every age and race, and from the vaulted ceiling a leering, yellow eye rimmed in crimson fire, glared malevolently down at us.

"Eru save me!" I cried, "it is the lidless eye of the Dark Lord himself!"

"That is not the worst this pit can show," said Holmes through clenched teeth. "Look about you and weep."

It was true; down the centre of the chamber marched a double row of squat pillars from which heavy chains and rings trailed in disorder across the

rusty floor. But it was not rust that stained the floor, or the pillars, and discoloured the walls around me - but blood! I fell to my knees and covered my eyes. But there was worse to come. Holmes touched me gently on the shoulder and pointed to a pile of bones - hobbit bones, some with scraps of rotting flesh still adhering to them.

"Merciful heavens!" I cried. "This is devilish, Holmes, devilish! With what are we dealing?"

"What indeed," said he grimly, and handed me a box. "Open it, and then we shall leave."

I raised the lid with trembling hands and drew forth a daguerreotype. Oh, the horror! It was Belladonna and she was chained to one of the pillars in this very chamber. My readers will forgive me if I draw a veil over what I saw in that picture, and in the others, without number, that were in that dreadful box. We left that chamber of horrors and in after years I am proud to record that I was instrumental in having that foul tower levelled to the ground and the whole valley drowned, though I was an old gaffer by the time it was accomplished.

We had scarcely closed the trap-door when Holmes gripped my arm and pointed to a narrow window high in the opposite wall. A winged, black shape was approaching rapidly from the west, silhouetted like some monstrous bat against the dying embers of the setting sun. A freezing horror took possession of me. I felt my hair rising and the blood pounding in my veins. I dragged Holmes away from the window, but he shook me off and took aim with his crossbow. It was a mighty shot and must have struck the creature in some mortal place, for it swerved and slackened in its flight. I rushed to the window and saw it turn away from the tower, swooping low over the lake, rending the air with a fearful shriek as it rushed away from us.

Holmes fired again, but the creature was out of range.

"Damn!" he exclaimed. "I nearly bagged a Balrog!"

"Holmes, you are irrepressible," said I. "No one else would make light of so dangerous a foe, or so evil a night, but I am grateful for it, for you have lightened my heart."

I do not remember much of our journey home that night and we three slept together in Holmes' room with his crossbow at our side.

On Thursday morning we awoke late and Holmes and I called on the Sherriff after breakfast to lay our latest intelligence before him. Proudfoot was clearly frightened out of his wits at our news; but had the courage to agree to Holmes' suggestion to confine Lotho to his house under guard until such time as we could furnish him with sufficient evidence to bring the criminal to justice. He seemed unconvinced by my assurance that Brockhouse was innocent and handed me a letter, which rekindled my doubts. Holmes took one glance at it and slipped it in his pocket book with a snort of derision. Then we visited the good Doctor and were delighted to see that Belladonna was much improved. She had recovered the power of speech, but as yet could recall little of the terrible events of the night upon which she had almost lost her life. All that she could remember were the terrified shrieks of her brothers and the presence of some unspeakable ghoul with burning eyes that lashed her with a whip until her senses left her.

Holmes gave her another injection of *miruvor* and we left her sleeping peacefully under the watchful eye of Doctor Lightfoot. We returned home in good time for an early luncheon and were smoking our pipes afterwards, when Holmes sprang up and smote his brow.

"Mrs Chubb!"

"The proprietress of the *Blue Tit*?" I asked.

"We never did return her call, Bingo!"

"That's hardly surprising, Holmes, after all that occurred yesterday."

"Nevertheless, my lad, I propose we should go, and at once. If she can be persuaded to testify against Lotho Bolger we shall have enough evidence to hang the scoundrel and his accomplices."

"By Jove, Holmes, you're right as usual!"

Thither we now bent our steps. I confess that the filthy business was getting me down. Good-hearted frolicsome fun was one thing, and I was as fond of a light spanking as the next hobbit, but this business of whips and chains and cruelty was not natural; it was Orc's work and I hated it quite as vehemently as Holmes. What I had seen in the tower convinced me that some devilry was behind the evil that had corrupted the district and the sooner we got to the bottom of it the sooner we could all go back to Hobbiton. Presently we arrived at our destination and Holmes cautioned me to say nothing of the discoveries we had made on our expedition of the previous night.

The *Blue Tit* was a dilapidated estaminet that had clearly seen more prosperous times. The inn stood a little way back from the road, sandwiched between two tall buildings which leaned precariously away from it, as if they wished to disassociate themselves from its ill favoured reputation. The front was pierced by a wide arch that led into a paved courtyard around which the principle public rooms were huddled. Above the arch hung a peeling sign depicting a sorry-looking bird whose breast had once been blue, but now matched the dirty brown stucco walls that reared above us. On the right, a new, three storied wing had been tunneled into the grassy bank, and to it we had been directed. I rang the bell and the door was opened by a pretty slip of a hobbitmaid with a mop of curly blond hair and dimpled cheeks; a pout was on her red lips and a saucy light shone in her bright blue eyes. She reminded me a little of Belinda, but lacked our housekeeper's grace and charm. I introduced myself and handed her Holmes' card. The girl took it, curtsayed, and turned it over in her hands with a puzzled frown.

"I - I never learned my letters, sir."

"The matter is of some urgency, miss —?" I said.

"— Peony, sir."

"No — thank you. I'd rather not, if it's all the same to you, miss; though it was kind of you to ask."

"Peony, sir," she repeated.

I blushed and stared her.

"Peony," she repeated. "*PE-O-NY*, is my name, sir."

"Oh dear, dear oh dear. I do beg your pardon miss, er — Peony."

"You may pee on me if you've a mind to, sir," said the brazen little minx, hitching up her skirts provocatively with a pout of her cherry-red lips.

“But mama charges extra for that.”

Holmes regarded the girl with distaste. “We did not come here for urolagnia,” said he, “but to ascertain why your proprietress called on us yesterday.”

“Eh?” said the girl.

“We wish to see the lady of the house!” snapped Holmes.

“Well, why didn’t you say so?” said Peony, sulkily, and advancing into the hall, unlocked a door, and led the way up two ill-lit flights of stairs to a spacious apartment on the second floor. She pushed open the door and we found ourselves in what I can only describe as a bagnio, decorated in the most vulgar style, and dominated by a rococo mirror above a fireplace embellished with lewd carvings. Several priapic satyrs and reluctant nymphs leered down from the crimson walls in artistic attitudes that left no doubt as to the singular amusements to which the room catered.

Peony left us in the company of a striking, auburn-haired girl with the most languorous eyes I had ever seen; her pouting lips were parted in an insolent smile and her tightly-laced corset thrust her bosom forward and upward in a most provoking way. The girl exposed a tantalising glimpse of a pair of tight, black silk camiknickers as she curtsyed to Holmes.

“How may I serve you, sir?” she asked provocatively.

“You are not Mrs. Chubb?”

“Indeed no, sir. I am her elder daughter, Daisy. Mrs. Chubb is my mother. What is your pleasure?”

“We are here to call on your mistress,” retorted Holmes stiffly.

“My sister Peony has gone to fetch her. May I entertain you whilst you wait, sir? I can dance and sing, and play the pianoforte. Or perhaps I may serve you in some other way?”

Her last remark was uttered with a lascivious smile which left me in no doubt as to the ‘services’ on offer. Holmes’ eyes flashed dangerously and I could see he was controlling himself with some difficulty.

“We are here to see Mrs. Chubb, not — not to be ‘served’ or ‘pleased’, madam!”

The girl shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

“As you like sir. My person is yours to command. Should you change your mind it would be my pleasure to accommodate your every desire.”

“I don’t doubt it!” retorted Holmes, and stalked over to the fireplace, where he flung himself in a hideous leather armchair and began to fill his pipe.

My word, she was a provocative little hussy and she knew it! When she saw the admiration in my eyes, she planted her shapely foot on the arm of a sofa and brazenly hitched up her skirts to expose her slender calf, and wriggled her bottom invitingly. I confess, that had I been alone I would have filled *her* pipe without a moment’s hesitation! Holmes had no sooner lit up than Peony returned and beckoned us toward the door. We followed her down a wide corridor furnished with small tables and low chairs, which, by the number of doors we passed on our right, evidently served as a private waiting room for Mrs. Chubb’s more demanding patrons. Presently she knocked at the last door and ushered us into a small sitting-room, where we were greeted by the subject of our visit. My first impression of Mrs Chubb

was one of superficial beauty. Her eyes were the same deep blue as that of her daughters, and her dainty chin and pretty mouth were framed by the most lustrous, brown hair I have ever seen. But on closer examination there was a hardness of eye, a coarseness of expression, and a looseness of mouth that had all the hallmarks of a sensuous nature long addicted to unnatural vice.

I suppressed a shudder as I shook her limp, clammy hand and took the seat she indicated beside Holmes. My friend's brows contracted in a disapproving frown as his piercing eyes made a rapid circuit of the libidinous lithographs with which the room was decorated. Peony curtseyed and asked if we would like some refreshment. In doing so, she exposed her upthrust bosom to my gaze, and I am not ashamed to say that her considerable charms brought an even hotter flush to my cheeks than her sister had. Not for the first time I devoutly wished that I were possessed of the steely asceticism of my friend, rather than the hot, libidinous nature with which we hobbits are cursed by our animal ancestry.

"Tea," I muttered self-consciously.

"Cream?" she enquired in a suggestive tone.

"No, milk please.

"Something to nibble on, sir?"

I swear the saucy wench was teasing me, for she put her hand on my thigh, and squeezed it.

"Er, no, tea will be sufficient, thank you" I replied, and hastily crossed my legs.

She giggled and turned to Holmes.

"Nothing for me, thank you," he said curtly.

Peony curtseyed, winked at me, and left the room.

Holmes smoked his pipe and turned to our hostess. "My time is precious, madam, and has many calls upon it. Please tell me in as few words as possible what can I do for you."

"You could begin by hanging that scoundrel Brockhouse."

"That is not within my power, madam."

"Then get Proudfoot to do it."

"On what evidence?"

"Evidence?" she exclaimed, rising from her chair. "Why, the whole town knows he had unnatural relations with that strumpet and lived off the wages of her debaucheries. Isn't that enough?"

"I was given to understand that it was Mr Lotho Bolger who profited from her earnings, madam."

"Then you were misled, Mr Holmes. It was Mr Lotho who rescued her from that devil."

"Really, madam, you are too disingenuous!"

Mrs Chubb resumed her seat and avoided Holmes' eye. "What do you mean?"

"Are you not the proprietress of this disorderly house?"

"What if I am? It is not against our byelaws."

"Possibly not, but torture certainly is!"

The woman looked up with an angry gleam in her hard eyes.

"What is the object of these questions?"

"The object is to avoid another death."

"Whose death?"

"Yours madam!"

The defiance went out of her eyes and her face paled.

"Is that not the reason you called on me yesterday?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Then I would be obliged if you would answer my questions."

"What are they?"

"Are you intimate with Lotho?"

"Yes."

"And your daughters?"

"Yes"

"Does he flagellate them?"

"Yes."

"With or without their consent?"

"They are good girls. They are well paid to do what they're told."

"That is not what I asked."

"That is the only answer I am prepared to give you."

"Very well," said Holmes, leaning forward and fixing her with his gaze,

"What can you tell me about Sharkey's Tooth?"

Mrs Chubb flushed with anger. "Really, sir, that is an extraordinary question!"

"I am sorry, but I must repeat it."

"Then my answer is, nothing at all."

"Even if I were to tell you that the tower contains daguerreotypes of your daughter Daisy being flagellated by Lotho Bolger and stores of the drug *Lovewort* used to inflame her appetite for unnatural vice?"

The flush faded from her cheeks, and her face turned deathly white.

"Still, no."

I sensed, rather than heard the denial that escaped her lips.

"Surely your memory deceives you, madam. Perhaps you are confusing the daguerreotypes with a secret account book kept in the tower that is now missing?"

I thought that Mrs Chubb had fainted, but she recovered herself with a supreme effort.

"I dare not answer," she gasped.

"You place yourself in grave danger in not co-operating fully with me, madam."

"I would place myself in even greater danger by answering you, Mr Holmes."

"What reason have you to fear Mr Brockhouse?"

"It is not Brockhouse whom I fear."

"No? That is not what you said earlier."

"I - I made a mistake."

"Then Mr Milo Brockhouse has not threatened you?"

"No."

"Then I would be obliged if you would tell me who did. Who is it that you fear?"

"I - I cannot say."

"Come, madam, I cannot help you if persist in this prevarication!"

"The fiend," she whispered.

"Fiend? What fiend? Speak plainly, madam."

"The Balrog! Ah, I see by your faces that you have seen him!"

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Holmes. "It is a simple contrivance designed to frighten and intimidate, nothing more."

"Then you have not seen him," she said with a shudder.

"I assure you that there is no such supernatural creature!" said Holmes sharply.

"Then you are a fool!"

Holmes swallowed the retort that was on his lips as the door opened, and Peony Chubb entered with my tea. She crossed the room and placed the tray upon a small lacquered table on my right, and then sat down on the left arm of my chair. This artful manoeuvre was not lost on Holmes, who shot me a disapproving glance from under his brows. Peony deliberately put her left hand on my thigh as she leant across me to fill my cup.

"One lump or two, Mr Bracegirdle?" she asked provocatively.

"Three," I replied stoutly.

"You must have a very sweet tooth," said she.

"Not as sweet as your lips," I replied, brushing them with mine as she handed me the teacup.

"You'll make me spill your tea," she pouted.

"I'll warrant you'd like me to spill something a lot hotter than tea, you saucy young wench!"

She giggled, and almost overbalanced, and I caught her slender hand, and carried it to my lips, and kissed it.

"Oh, Mr Bracegirdle!" she murmured breathlessly.

My word, she was a comely lass! Her perfume was like strong wine in my nostrils and her adorable, upthrust bosom was inches away from my lips. I saw the hunger in her eyes and was on the point of slipping my hand beneath her rustling petticoats, when Holmes rose from his chair with a self-conscious cough.

"I shall have those knickers off you the next time we meet!" I whispered in her ear.

"Oh, I am that mad for you, Mr Bracegirdle," she replied huskily. "You might take them off now and I shouldn't care a bit."

She drew away from me, her bosom heaving; her blue eyes wide with desire, and scrambled hurriedly to her feet.

"I am afraid we have no time for tea, Bingo," said Holmes coldly, "or anything else this singular house may have to offer."

I hastily put down my cup and took the clammy hand Mrs Chubb held out to me.

"I — I am sorry I could not be of any more help, Mr Holmes," she said woodenly.

"You have been of more help than you may realise, madam," said he.

With that, Peony showed us out, and our interview was brought to an abrupt and inconclusive end.

*Chapter V**A FORMIDABLE HUNTER*

My mind dwelt upon the sweet face and voluptuous charms of Peony Chubb as we walked home from the inn. Her face had neither the sensitivity of expression nor refinement of beauty that Belinda possessed in abundance, and yet I had never looked upon a countenance which gave a clearer promise of an innocent and sympathetic nature. Even upon so short an acquaintance it grieved me that such a sweet-natured young girl should have fallen into the clutches of so vile a scoundrel as Lotho Bolger. Her dainty limbs and petite bosom were made to be adored and cherished by a lover who would wring sighs of delight from her pouting lips, not defiled by the brutish appetites of a moral degenerate. I shuddered, and turned to Holmes with a thoughtful mien.

“What an attractive lass!” I exclaimed.

Holmes lit his pipe and regarded me with an impassive face.

“Is she?” he said, languidly; “I did not observe.”

“You really are an automaton!” I cried. “You have the mind of an abacus and the sensibilities of a block of wood!”

He smiled gently.

“It is of the first importance to me,” he said, “not to allow my judgement to be swayed by a prepossessing person. A woman is a mere unit to me; a factor in a problem. Personal emotions are antagonistic to clear reasoning. The most attractive woman I ever knew was the madam of a bawdy-house who was hanged for murdering eight of her customers for their pocket-watches, and the ugliest hag of my acquaintance is a philanthropist who has spent almost a quarter of a million in gold upon the poor of the city where I was born.”

“But Peony is —”

“Addicted to *Lovewort*, and no better than a common strumpet.”

“That is a little harsh, Holmes. The girl is little more than a child and is clearly dominated by her mother and her vile ambitions. I think you are allowing your singular prejudices to influence your better judgement.”

“Perhaps, Bingo, but the fact remains that she is part of the gang we are pursuing, however unwilling, and cannot be trusted any more than her odious mother. It is clear that Mrs Chubb and her daughters are terrified of Mr Brockhouse, yet he is not the author of this vile conspiracy.”

“I am more confused than ever,” said I.

“I am not surprised, Bingo,” Holmes replied.

“If Mr Brockhouse is not the murderer, then who is?”

“Someone has put the fear of god into that woman, Bingo,” said he. “Does Brockhouse strike you as the sort of hobbit who would violently threaten a woman?”

“No,” said I. “He is a man of action, not threats.”

“My sentiments exactly,” said Holmes. “Which leaves us with Lotho Bolger.”

“Then why don’t we simply arrest him?” I asked.

“We do not have enough evidence, Bingo. Mrs Chubb is plainly terrified

out of her wits and will say no more. Belladonna cannot. All the evidence we have gathered is worthless without their testimony or that confounded account book!”

“Then we must find it.” I said.

“I fancy it will find us, Bingo.”

“I do not follow you, Holmes?”

“Think, Bingo!” said he. “We know that Mr Brockhouse stole the book and has not handed it in to the authorities. Why? The only possible reason can be that he does not trust them. Plainly Proudfoot or some of his constables have been bought off. Milo Brockhouse’s only hope of clearing his name is to produce the one piece of evidence that can exonerate him.”

“By Jove, Holmes!” I exclaimed. “Then he has no choice but to reveal it to us!”

“Exactly.”

“What do you propose to do now?” I asked.

“Wait for Mr Milo Brockhouse to call on us,” said Holmes with a smile. “If I am not mistaken that is supper that I can smell wafting out of our kitchen window. I have a ravenous appetite for mushrooms and bacon accompanied by fried potatoes and white beer, Bingo!”

Ten minutes later we sat down to supper and Holmes was in the most cheerful and frivolous humour. “My dear Bingo, when I have rounded up those last few mushrooms and exterminated that fourth rasher I shall be ready to put you in touch with the whole situation. I don’t say that we have solved the mystery — far from it — but when we have located the missing camiknickers—”

“— Camiknickers!”

“Dear me, Bingo, it is possible that you have not penetrated to the fact that the mystery hangs upon Belladonna’s missing lingerie? Well, well, I had hoped that a hobbit of your amorous inclinations would have nosed the camiknickers as the most significant of all the clues so far presented to us. Consider a woman of taste and refinement without any camiknickers! Picture to yourself the discomfort, the draught, and the ever-present danger of an accidental leakage. Shocking, Bingo, shocking!”

He sat with a mushroom impaled on his fork and his eyes sparkling with mischief, revelling in my intellectual misery. Finally he pushed back his plate, emptied his glass and lit his pipe.

“We are confronted with lies and half-truths, Bingo. Lotho’s whole story is a tissue of lies from beginning to end. How do I know that he is lying? Because his story does not stand up to scrutiny. According to the account given to us, the family were playing ‘hunt the ring’ in high spirits when Lotho left them. Where is this ring? I found no trace of it when I searched the room. Lotho fabricated the story to support his claim that the family were in high spirits. The full port decanter and the poison in their glasses plainly showed that they were in very low spirits when they were drugged; a lie! Neither did they dine together, as I discovered when Mrs. Tipplebottle revealed that Belladonna would rather dine with the devil, than Odo and Drogo — another lie. Why had the fire been lit on a warm night? To destroy the fragments of the canister of marsh gas that Lotho had thrown upon it to render his victims unconscious. More lies, Bingo. The marks on

Belladonna's wrists and thighs prove that she was tied to the chaise longue for some considerable while, presumably to give the poison time to enter her bloodstream through the wounds the murderer inflicted on her thighs."

"Why not simply pour it down her throat?" I asked

"Too quick, Bingo. The murderer needed time to make his preparations and wished to prolong her agony while he violated her one last time."

"The beast!" I exclaimed, dropping the potato that was halfway to my mouth.

"The creature entered the room soon afterwards through the library windows. You may argue — but I have too much respect for your judgement, Bingo, to think that you will do so — that the windows are too small to admit the creature we encountered yesterday. The fact that they were both much burned and scraped shows that it did, or at least thrust its head or wings into the room, which would have been quite sufficient to drive Odo and Drogo out of their senses; of that I have no doubt. The cynoerotica was the poison that did for them as it nearly did for Belladonna. The fire was an additional touch of the murderer's to maintain the fiction of the Balrog."

"If this is so, how are we to explain that Lotho's footprints led away from the burrow to the inn, where we know he spent the entire night with Mrs Chubb and her daughters?"

"I am convinced myself," said he, "that there is an understanding between the murderer and this creature. If it was Lotho, he could easily have walked to the inn and there summoned the creature to carry him back to Sharkey's End; where he completed his foul work. It could also have returned him to the inn afterwards. From what we saw it is large and strong enough to carry a hobbit with ease, and could complete the trip between Longbottom and Sharkey's End in a few minutes."

"And how do you propose to prove all this?" I asked, laying down my knife and fork.

"Well, if this creature can be captured that would help. Belladonna's Will provides the motive. Assuming she recovers her memory her testimony would be invaluable as she can identify the murderer. Finally, if we can find this secret account book that would be the most effective of all proofs."

"And the camiknickers?"

"If I am not mistaken," said Holmes gleefully; "the man who can solve the mystery of their disappearance has just tied his horse to our gatepost!"

As he spoke there was firm knock on the door. Holmes rose from the table and settled into his armchair by the fireplace while I lit my pipe and made myself comfortable on the sofa.

"Mr Milo Brockhouse," announced Belinda.

"Come in!" cried Holmes effusively. "There is beer upon the table and I believe that there may still be some bacon on the hob."

Belinda shook her head apologetically.

"Ah, well, beer then, Mr Brockhouse?"

"Thank you, no, Mr Holmes," said the explorer, taking the chair Holmes indicated. "I have already dined."

"Mushrooms?"

"No."

“Bacon, then?”

“No, soup.”

“Soup! Dear me, Mr Brockhouse, soup is hardly the fuel for a redoubtable warrior like yourself. It is evident that your domestic arrangements are in urgent need of a woman’s intervention!”

“It is largely about a woman that I have come.”

Belinda rose to go, but Holmes caught her wrist, and pushed her gently back into her chair.

“This is our housekeeper, Belinda Beaverburrow.”

“Does she indeed!” said our visitor, raising his eyebrows. “I fail to see what that has to do with the matter I have come to discuss?”

Belinda blushed furiously and I hastened to correct our distinguished visitor. “Beaverburrow is her name, sir. You may say anything before this lady that you would say to us,” I explained.

“I beg your pardon, madam. Please forgive me, I am under something of a strain at present.”

“I am aware of that,” said Holmes drily.

“My life is in danger and I have to take every precaution. To speak plainly, the matter implicates the leading inhabitants of this area.”

“I am also aware of that,” murmured Holmes, settling himself more comfortably down in his armchair and closing his eyes. Our visitor glanced with some surprise at the languid, lounging figure of the man who had the reputation of possessing the finest mind and most energetic manner in Middle-Earth.

Holmes slowly re-opened his eyes and looked enquiringly at the explorer. “If you would be so kind as to explain how you came into possession of the facts of this matter,” he remarked softly, “I should be better able to advise you.”

“It is not for advice that I have come, Mr Holmes.”

“No?” murmured Holmes, “Then what have you come for?”

“To demand you release the body of Belladonna Bolger to me!”

“That is not in my power, Mr Brockhouse.”

“Then you leave me no alternative but to take it by force!” growled the explorer, rising from his chair with clenched fists.

“That will not be possible.”

Belinda whispered to me and I coughed noisily. Holmes ignored my interruption and shut his eyes again.

“You would do well, Mr Holmes, not to forget that I have hunted Orcs; I have no wish to do you an injury!” said Brockhouse, controlling himself with an effort.

“Nor have I any desire to do *you* an injury, Mr Brockhouse,” said Holmes quietly.

Brockhouse sat down abruptly with an oath, overawed for, perhaps the first time in his adventurous life. There was a calm assurance in Holmes’ face and manner, which could not be withstood. Brockhouse hesitated for a moment, his fists opening and closing in his agitation.

“What do you mean?” he asked at last. “If this is some game on your part, Mr Holmes, you have chosen the wrong man to play it with. I am a plain man and will thank you to speak plainly.”

"There is no body."

Brockhouse sprang from his chair in a towering rage and waved his fists in the air.

"What! Do not tell me the fiend has given it to his master!"

"Belladonna is not dead," said Holmes quietly.

Brockhouse sat down abruptly and passed his hand over his forehead.

"She lives? Do not play with me sir, or by God it will be the worse for you!"

"The facts are briefly these," murmured Holmes, without opening his eyes. "Belladonna was poisoned on Sunday night by an unknown assailant. I administered an antidote and revived her. Doctor Lightfoot then spirited her away to his house in the town. When last I saw her she had recovered the power of speech and something of the memory of the assault upon her."

Brockhouse leapt from his chair with an inarticulate cry and paced the room in uncontrollable agitation, his face contorted with the most violent emotion, the more striking in him as he was evidently a hobbit of strong character, with an immense capacity for self-restraint. Belinda burst into tears and rushed from the room. Horrified at the suddenness and severity of the shock, I hastened to help him to his chair and poured out a glass of Holmes' apple brandy. He seized it in his hands and drained it at one gulp.

"Good heavens, Mr Holmes!" he gasped while I refilled his glass.

"She lives! She truly lives?"

"Yes."

"Then I must see her at once!" said Brockhouse, starting from his chair. Holmes languidly waved our visitor back to his chair and opened his eyes.

"That would not be wise whilst Lotho is still at large."

"Lotho?" cried the explorer.

"Do you think I fear that miserable scoundrel?"

"No, but I think you fear the singular creature he is in league with. Until it is captured I am not prepared to put Miss Belladonna's life in any further danger."

Brockhouse turned pale and slumped back in his chair.

"Lotho is unaware that his sister is still alive?"

"For the moment," said Holmes. "But the fact cannot be concealed from him indefinitely. He has repeatedly pressed the Doctor to proceed with the funeral arrangements. If you should be seen entering Doctor Lightfoot's house, any advantage we have gained will be lost, and the lady's life will be in the gravest danger."

"What do you advise me to do?" asked Brockhouse.

"You might begin by explaining how you came into possession of the facts of this matter."

"It is a long story, Mr Holmes which began many years ago." "I am aware of that," said Holmes, closing his eyes once more. "The salient facts will do."

"Lotho is the centre of a monstrous conspiracy."

"I am also aware of that," said Holmes with a faint smile. "He began by preying upon young women to pander to the prurient desires of dissolute young hobbits and sybaritic old lechers, but quickly moved on to more degenerate practices once he discovered how to manufacture *Lovewort*. You might

call it an aphrodisiac, and that is no doubt how he described it to the satiated wretches he drew into his net. But unlike *Elvish Fly* and the other drugs long known to excite the baser passions, *Lovewort* at first suspends, and then utterly destroys, the moral judgement, leaving its victims in the grip of an ungovernable lust which they can only gratify through algolagnia. Eventually their depravity compels them to embrace practices so abhorrent, I cannot bring myself to recount them."

Brockhouse groaned. "How the devil do you know all this?" asked he, rising from his chair.

"I have my methods," said Holmes. "Also I followed you to the tower of Isengard after you called on us last Sunday, and visited the chambers where the gang and their acolytes keep the drug, and transact their vile business."

"I saw no one!"

"That is what you may expect to see when I follow you."

"But how did you get in?"

"With your key, Mr Brockhouse, or rather the copy I made of it."

Brockhouse drained his glass and sat down with a gasp. "Upon my word, Mr Holmes," said he. "Do all your successes depend on these prodigious sharp practices?"

"Not all," laughed Holmes, opening his eyes and sitting up.

"Do you have any more surprises for me?" asked Brockhouse.

Holmes drew the letter Proudfoot had given him from his pocket and handed it to the explorer. "Only one," he said.

Brockhouse muttered an oath as he read the letter and threw it to the ground with a shaking hand.

"It is a forgery!"

I picked it up and read the following:

My Dearest Milo,

I can still feel your lash upon my belly, and hear the screams your cruelty wrung from my lips. Lotho and Odo will be back at any moment so I must be brief. Oh, I long to escape this dreadful nightmare and return to their safe and loving arms.

My love, I cannot bear the shame and torment of my existence any longer, and have decided to accept Lotho's offer to stay with him and my brothers at Sharkey's End for the little time that is left to me. The terrible wounds your cruelty has inflicted upon me have done for my poor heart.

Odo says that if you try to see me again you will surely kill me. I know it is so, and beg you for the sake of the love we once held for one another not to risk my life any further.

Your own Belladonna.

"This is monstrous, Mr Brockhouse!" said I "If this is a forgery then I beg you to produce the proofs that will convince me you are not that woman's murderer!"

"The proofs are under your very nose, Bingo," said Holmes, clapping his hands behind his neck, and settling himself more deeply in his chair.

Brockhouse stared at Holmes with astonishment. "You believe me, sir?"

"Naturally," said Holmes languidly, once more closing his eyes.

"I familiarised myself with Miss Bolger's handwriting when I examined the private papers in her bedroom. I also took the liberty of getting her to sign her name when I visited her yesterday. As Bingo will tell you, I have made a study of handwriting, and concluded that this letter was a forgery the moment I set eyes upon it."

"Then this letter does not match Belladonna's handwriting?" I asked.

"On the contrary, Bingo," said Holmes softly; "they match almost perfectly; as Mr Brockhouse will no doubt confirm."

Brockhouse nodded his assent and continued to stare dumbfounded at Holmes.

"This is too much!" I exclaimed. "Explain yourself Mr Brockhouse!"

"I cannot," said the explorer, clutching at the arms of his chair. "That letter condemns me as a murderer and had it remained in Proudfoot's hands I would be a dead man. Yet I swear to you by all that is holy that it is a forgery."

"Take my glass and hold it up to the light, Bingo," said Holmes, opening his eyes.

I did so and saw nothing that I had not seen before. "It seems completely genuine to me, Holmes," I said. "I can see no evidence that it has been tampered with in any way. It has a faint floral watermark at the bottom left that I take to be the maker's mark, and Miss Bolger's address is pre-printed in three lines at the top, in gold ink. It was evidently written on her own, personal stationery. I admit that the hand is a trifle laboured, and the lines uneven, but given the poor woman's state of mind at the time she wrote it, that is hardly surprising, and is not, of itself, an indication that the letter is not her own work."

"You are mistaken," said Holmes. "It is a forgery."

"How the devil do you deduce that?" asked Brockhouse.

"Tilt the letter on edge, Bingo, so as to shorten the lines."

I did so and squinted at the letter.

"What do you see?"

"There appears to be some slight irregularity in the word-spacing, Holmes. Some words seem to have narrower or wider gaps between them than others."

"Excellent!" ejaculated Holmes, leaning forward and rubbing his hands. "Which words, precisely?"

"The word *your* in the first line," said I. "The first instance has a wide space after it, and the second a very narrow one. There is another, similar narrow space, after the word *your* in the second line. There is almost no space after the words; *decided to accept Lotho's*, in the second line of the second paragraph. By Jove, Holmes, this letter was traced from an original, or a copy, and certain words altered to change the meaning!"

"Splendid, Bingo! You have excelled yourself!"

Brockhouse mopped his brow with his handkerchief. "Had I not seen this performance with my own eyes, I would never have believed it was possible!" he exclaimed.

"It is the science of detection," said Holmes lightly. "I imagine that you

use similar methods when you track the spoor of your quarry, do you not?"

"Indeed, Mr Holmes," replied the explorer, gazing at Holmes with unabashed awe, "But never one so fiendishly cunning as this!"

"Of that I have little doubt," said Holmes.

"Do you know what the original letter said?" I asked.

"Do you not?" asked Holmes with a smile.

"I would hazard a guess that the first *your* was originally *Lotho's*; it cannot have been *Odo*, or *his*, as that would leave too much space around the words."

"Carry on," said Holmes, "You are doing splendidly."

"The second *your* must then have been *his*; the entire sentence might then have read:

I can still feel Lotho's lash upon my belly, and hear the screams his cruelty wrung from my lips. The second sentence is probably unaltered as it makes sense in either case. Obviously she would not wish to return to *their safe and loving arms*, so the altered word is *your*; *to return to your safe and loving arms*. The word *you* in the final sentence must have been *he*, and not *you* — *he will surely kill me*. The very loose spacing around *my* would also suggest that *my life*, was originally written, *your life*. The complete letter might then have read:

I can still feel Lotho's lash upon my belly, and hear the screams his cruelty wrung from my lips. Lotho and Odo will be back at any moment so I must be brief. Oh, I long to escape this dreadful nightmare and return to your safe and loving arms.

My love, I cannot bear the shame and torment of my existence any longer, and have decided to accept Lotho's demand to stay with him and my brothers at Sharkey's End for the little time that is left to me. The terrible wounds their cruelty has inflicted upon me have done for my poor heart.

Odo says that if you try to see me again he will surely kill me. I know it is so, and beg you for the sake of the love we once held for one another not to risk your life any further.

"Astonishing!" exclaimed Brockhouse.

"You made one mistake, Bingo," said Holmes. Belladonna did not *accept Lotho's demand*, but decided to *resign myself to Lotho's command to stay with him*."

"If you say so, Holmes," said I, not without a tinge of irritation at his annoying habit of belittling the smallest of my triumphs by picking holes in my deductions.

"I do not suppose that you have the original, Mr Brockhouse?" I asked.

"No, I am afraid not," said he sadly. "I destroyed all her letters years ago; the memories they held were too painful for me."

"That alone would prove this to be a wicked forgery," said I, "Not that Proudfoot would set much store by your admission. The man clearly had you marked as the murderer. One thing puzzles me, Holmes; why go to the laborious trouble of fabricating this forgery and then make the stupid mistake of not matching the word spacing to the original?"

"Would you have spotted the discrepancy if I had not pointed it out to you, Bingo?"

"No, I confess that you are right, as usual, Holmes," said I glumly.

"Also," added Holmes, "I fancy this letter was an afterthought of Lotho's;

written in some haste when he realised that we had not been taken in by his clumsy attempts to incriminate Mr Brockhouse."

"Then Lotho is our quarry?" I asked.

"Or another."

"What do you mean by that, Holmes?"

"Something that Mrs Chubb said, and has also been echoed by others; I tell you, Bingo, that we have never had a foe more worthy of our mettle."

"What do you propose to do now?" asked Brockhouse.

"Bingo will return to the 'Blue Tit' to wait for Lotho."

"Why should he come to the inn?" asked Brockhouse.

"Once he learns of my visit to Mrs Chubb he will undoubtedly conclude that she has betrayed him to us, and will make an attempt to silence her; then we will get to grips with him at last!"

"And what will you be doing, Holmes?" I asked.

"I should very much like to have a look at the book Mr Brockhouse took from the tower."

Brockhouse gave a violent start and stared at Holmes in astonishment.

"I believe you are the very devil, sir!" he cried. "I am beginning to regret that I did not seek you out sooner."

Holmes laughed. "My sentiments exactly," said he. "I take it that the book is the reason why Lotho's business is now all but ruined?"

Brockhouse smiled grimly. "As you know, I am a hunter, Mr Holmes. Once I had the names of the principle conspirators it was not difficult to persuade them to give up their evil work. Those that refused did not live long enough to warn the others."

"You are a formidable hunter," said I.

"I face a formidable foe," said he.

"What can you tell us of that foe?" asked Holmes.

"That it is more deadly than you can possibly conceive," said Brockhouse, with a pained expression. "Twice I have cornered it, and twice it has eluded me. On the last occasion I was hard put to it to escape with my life. It is altogether evil." He shuddered and bent his head.

Holmes was silent for some time, and then rose from his chair and crossed to the window.

Presently he re-filled his pipe, and lit it. "Is it a Balrog?" he asked softly.

"I am convinced of it," said Brockhouse.

"I feared as much," said I.

"One more question, if I may," said Holmes, stifling a yawn.

"What can you tell us about a pair of black silk camiknickers?"

Brockhouse sprang from his chair with a terrible sob that shook his great frame.

"What do you know of those?" he cried.

"That they were taken from Miss Bolger and hold the key to this entire mystery."

Brockhouse sat for some time in thought with his face sunk in his hands. Then with a sudden, impulsive gesture, he plucked the mysterious undergarments from his coat pocket, and laid them reverently upon the table with a trembling hand.

"Lotho sent these to me on the night of the murder," said he.

“For years I have loved her. For years she has loved me. There were two children — one Mr Bracegirdle met this morning, the other Lotho foully murdered in it’s infancy. That is the secret Belladonna kept from me for more than twenty years. Under the laws of our kind she could not marry without Lotho’s consent until she was eight and twenty. I went away. When I returned he had corrupted her.” His shoulders heaved with emotion and he clenched his hands. Then with an effort he mastered himself and spoke on:

“Mrs Tipplebottle knew of our love. She would tell you Bella was an angel upon earth. It was she who wrote to me to warn me that my beloved was in grave danger. But I returned too late; alas! Too late!”

Holmes studied languor evaporated, and he darted forward, his lens in his hand, his eyes alight with a sudden and eager excitement.

“Hullo! What’s this,” he cried as he pounced on the camiknickers. I leaned over his shoulder and recoiled in horror. The gusset of the garment was pierced with a neat row of holes, evidently made with a cigar, and spelled out the letter ‘B’.

“Good gracious!” I exclaimed.

“Look at this, Bingo!” said Holmes, carefully teasing out a visiting card that lay inside with the stem of his pipe. It bore the arms of the Bolgers — a barrel of Pipeweed between two rampant cocks surmounted by a golden ring. Beneath it, a florid hand had scrawled this note:

‘A small memento of my regard. The whore who wore these begged me not to soil them, so I was obliged to express my copious affection between her wide-spread thighs. You will be delighted to hear that the caress of your riding crop upon her writhing posterior caused her to shamelessly spend herself while she expired.’

“The monstrous Fiend!” I cried.

“Remarkable!” ejaculated Holmes. “Did I not tell you that the garment bore a monogram? I hardly dared hope it would be after such a manner, or so deeply incriminating!”

“What does it mean?” I asked.

“Really, Bingo! How much plainer could it be? Lotho branded his sister with his mark and then sent this odious note to Mr Brockhouse to serve as a reminder of his total domination of her.”

“Mr Holmes is quite correct,” growled Brockhouse. The camiknickers were a present from me — handmade in Old Gondor from Elvish silk, and embroidered with a small flower in gold thread. No doubt it amused Lotho to vent his spleen upon them. They represented the one thing he could not befoul; Belladonna’s love for me. They arrived on Monday, and had my son Rollo not restrained me, I would have done for the blackguard that very night!”

“My word,” I exclaimed, “How that woman has suffered at the hands of that monster. He cannot be allowed to live, Holmes!”

“No doubt,” said Holmes grimly, “But he is not yet in our hands. I must away with Mr Brockhouse and you have an appointment at the inn. Be on your guard! Trust no one, especially Mrs Chubb’s lecherous daughters. They are steeped in vice and will stop at nothing to protect the vile gang they serve!”

With that warning, Holmes snatched up his hat and coat and bounded from the room with Brockhouse at his heels.

*Chapter VI**INTO THE FIRE*

A light drizzle was falling when I reached the inn. A chill wind blew from the lake and the leaden clouds held the threat of heavier rain to come. Mrs Chubb informed me that the common room was at my disposal and added, rather sourly, that the company was not what it was owing to the shadow the Balrog had cast over the town. I entered and found a seat by the fire to wait for Holmes and glanced cautiously about me. Two elderly Hobbits, farm hands by their attire and weather-beaten faces, leaned on the bar. Opposite me, a couple and their two daughters were huddled around a table absorbed in pouring anxiously over several maps. It was a chilling reminder to me that they were but one among the many hobbit families fleeing the unknown terror that stalked Isengard. On the other side of the room, a party of three garrulous gentlehobbits and a squint-eyed, evil looking man, were picking over the remains of their dinner. Aside from Mrs Chubb, there was only one other occupant of the room, an elderly female hobbit with a hooked nose and rheumy eyes who was having a vocal argument with the pretty, blond-haired barmaid who I recognised as none other than the saucy wench, Peony Chubb, to whom I had taken a fancy during my previous visit to the *Blue Tit*. The old woman piqued my curiosity quite as much as Peony's pouting mouth, clinging dress and petite, upthrust bosom, aroused my ardour. I rose, and crossed over to her table to introduce myself. "May I be of service to you, madam?" I enquired.

"Thank you, no," she replied curtly. The strong, musical voice had a certain familiarity and seemed oddly out of place with her great age and infirmity. "This impertinent girl thought to overcharge me, and then had the effrontery to threaten me when I complained."

"Is this true, Peony?" I asked.

"No, sir. 'Twas a simple mistake. I thought she asked for apple brandy and charged her for it, but she says she asked for apple wine."

"You lying baggage!" said the woman.

"Bring the lady apple wine, Peony. I will pay for both," said I, putting down a handful of coins upon the table.

"I cannot permit that," said the woman, rising unsteadily from her chair.

"I insist," said I, pushing the money towards Peony.

The woman muttered an oath and sat down.

"Fetch the lady her wine, girl!" I said to Peony.

Peony curtsied with ill grace and walked sulkily to the bar. As she leant over the counter, she lifted her right leg, and I could not help but notice the red silk camiknickers that clung tightly to the curves of her small, adorable bottom. A shiver of excitement ran through me and I coughed to hide my agitation.

The old woman gave me a piercing look. "It is none of my business whom you choose to associate with," said she in an undertone, "but I would strongly advise you not to follow your present inclination."

"What do you mean?" I asked, colouring.

"Only this. That charming girl is more dangerous than she looks and

this place is not what it seems. If you wish to leave unscathed do not drink any more ale!”

I thanked her politely and returned to my seat. What did she mean by her cryptic warning? Perhaps she had mistaken me for some rustic innocent with no understanding of the ways of the world. In any event I did not see what harm there could possibly be in an idle dalliance with the barmaid while I waited for Holmes. As for the suggestion that the beer was poisoned — the very idea was preposterous. Had I not supped here countless time with Proudfoot and others? Blast the woman’s impudence! I gave her a withering look, lit my pipe, and took a long pull on my ale. I had no sooner put down my mug when a drunken looking man, ill-kempt and balding, with a pockmarked face and shabby clothes several sizes too small for his angular frame, shambled into the room. He threaded his unsteady way between the tables, enquiring in a slurred and reedy voice whether anyone had ‘the price of a drink about ‘em’. Hobbits are generous folk and kind to strangers, and inebriation is not uncommon among us, so he soon cajoled enough coin to buy a mug of ale. Then he produced a filthy pipe from the torn pocket of his threadbare waistcoat, and patting his coat and breeches in a distracted manner, staggered over to my table, spilling beer from his mug as he came. I avoided his rolling eyes and called for more ale.

“Ah?” he said enquiringly.

I ignored him and repeated my order more loudly. Peony smiled at me and stepped behind the bar to pull my beer.

“Ah?” asked the man again, flourishing his pipe under my nose.

I raised my eyes and watched him pat his pockets once again, accompanied by many long sighs, muttered oaths and the most desperate facial contortions. Eventually he sucked in his teeth, jerked his head sideways, and favoured me with a toothless grin.

“Ah,” he said, clearing his throat noisily, “Guv’ner!”

“Yes?” I replied.

“Ah, Guv’ner,” he repeated with surprising energy, “You ha’nt got such a thing as a bit o’ weed about you, ‘ave you?”

I slapped my pipeweed pouch and tinderbox down on the table and pushed them towards him. The quick, eager way in which he dipped his gnarled fingers into my pouch seemed strangely at odds with his shambling gait and obvious intoxication, and I turned to study him more closely as he filled his pipe and lit up. His watery eyes had the brightness of fever in them, there was a hectic flush upon his pockmarked cheeks; and his short, wiry beard was matted with dirt; his hands twitched spasmodically and his voice was croaking and slurred.

“Ah,” he said, jerking his head towards Peony, who was now arguing fiercely with her mother at the bar, “She’s a pretty un, eh, Guv’ner? An’ she knows it, eh?”

“If you don’t mind,” I said firmly, “I would be obliged if you would take yourself off. I am waiting for someone and do not wish for company.”

He blew out a cloud of smoke and tapped his nose. “Ah,” said he, knowingly, “A nod’s as good as a wink, Guv’ner. Say no more, eh? Here to fill ‘er pipe, eh?”

At that moment Peony stamped her foot and with a muttered oath that

'she would do as she pleased', picked up my mug of ale, turned her back on Mrs Chubb, and flounced over to my table. "Is this tramp bothering you, Mr Bracegirdle?" she asked, as she set the mug down beside me. The man rose unsteadily to his feet with a leer in his watery eyes. "Ah," he said thickly, "She's a pretty thing, eh, Guv'ner? I've 'alf a mind to fill 'er pipe myself!"

"Be off with you!" shouted Peony, cuffing him across the face.

He clutched at the table and put his hand over my mug to steady himself. Then he winked at me, coughed noisily and staggered off toward a vacant table by the bar.

Peony mopped up the ale he had spilled when he supported himself on my mug, and, in doing so, flicked some onto my breeches. As she put her hand on my knee to brush the drops away, her pretty pink, lips parted in a smile, and she looked me up and down appraisingly.

"You're a handsome looking gent, Mr Bracegirdle, has anyone ever told you that?"

I blushed and muttered some inaudible and feeble denial.

"May I sit, sir?"

I nodded and made room for her. She drew up a chair and turned to study me, her pert chin propped in her hands, her wide blue eyes twinkling, and tossed her head back with a nervous laugh. Her golden hair whipped across my cheek and her nimble fingers travelled further up my leg. My word, she was fetching lass!

"Would you like me to pee on you? I won't charge a penny extra for it."

I swallowed a mouthful of ale to release the lump in my throat, and tried unsuccessfully to ignore the even bigger lump rapidly filling my breeches. She bent her head and whispered in my ear.

"I'll warrant you're a devil with the ladies, Mr Bracegirdle,"

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far," I replied, not a little flattered.

She edged nearer until her perfumed cheek touched mine.

"What, a handsome, educated bachelor like you, sir? I bet you have to fight them off!"

"Well, I don't know about that, miss."

She put her hand back on my leg and I made no effort to remove it.

"I'm mad for you, Mr Bracegirdle, and don't mind admitting it."

"Are you now?" I asked, taking a long pull on my ale.

"Yes," she said breathlessly. "I liked you from the moment I saw you and have not been able to stop thinking about you."

"I had no idea," said I, revelling in her flattery.

"I can scarcely keep my hands off you!"

"So I see," said I, as her nimble fingers travelled further up my leg.

"I'll warrant you could show a girl a good time, Mr Bracegirdle."

"Well, one as pretty as you, perhaps," I said with a laugh.

"Do you think I'm pretty?" she murmured.

I nodded and I took a longer pull from my mug. I began to feel strangely light-headed and the most lascivious images crowded into my mind. I wondered if the brew was indeed laced with poison as the old woman had hinted. I looked up and saw that she was watching me closely. The tramp was slumped on a bench by the door, and catching my eye, tapped his nose suggestively, and winked. If the beer was drugged, I could not detect it and

was rapidly passing beyond the point at which I cared. Peony did not look dangerous. What harm could she do me? Damn the old woman's impudence! I drank deeply, and slipping my arm around Peony's waist, slid my hand underneath her petticoats. She laughed softly and drew her chair nearer until our thighs were touching. As she did so, her dress rode up to expose her red camiknickers and I slid my fingers inside them. I confess that the moisture they encountered, and the sight of the thin material stretched tightly over her squirming bottom, brought a hot flush to my cheeks, and an even greater tightness to my breeches, that was not lost on the saucy young nymph. She caught her breath as my fingers found her little temple and parting the dainty lips, seized the erect bud between them.

"You are dripping wet, you little hussy!" I whispered in her ear.

"Oh, I am that mad for you, Mr Bracegirdle," she replied huskily. "I shall spend myself in my knickers if you don't stop that."

"Then spend in them, you wanton little nymph!"

"Not here!" she whispered, breathlessly, and twisting away from me, dislodged my hand, and placed it around her waist. A long sigh escaped my lips as her slim hand parted my thighs and the heel began to caress the bulge between them. A thrilling euphoria took possession of me; my mouth was dry and my brain swam with lewd visions of nubile nymphs writhing in libidinous abandonment. Peony passed her pink tongue over her moist, red lips and lost no time in firmly grasping the expression of my excitement. I drank deeply to cover my mounting exhilaration.

"Oh, Mr. Bracegirdle," she murmured breathlessly. "I think you *do* like me!"

"Yes," I answered thickly. "I confess I do find you uncommonly attractive, Peony."

"Would you like me to pee on you?"

"I think we are at cross-purposes, miss," I gasped, as her fingers slid deep inside my breeches and began to caress me with rising urgency. "When first we met I — I misheard your name. I am not interested in having you pee on me, or indeed, in peeing on you."

"Is that nice?" she whispered, pressing her hot lips to my ear.

I nodded and opened my legs wider as her slow, sensuous massage set my limbs on fire. The sight of her adorable bottom writhing beneath her tight, red camiknickers was more than I could bear. "Oh Peony!" I gasped, "I am going to spend myself."

"Would you like me to stop?"

"No," I groaned, and slumped back in my chair. Her hand closed tightly around my wand and began to pump me with strong, rhythmic strokes. The turmoil within my brain cast out all modesty and I surrendered myself to the exquisite pleasure flooding through my quivering limbs.

"Faster!" I gasped.

"I think I should stop" she whispered, "that lady is giving me very black looks."

My breathing became laboured and all restraint left me. "I - I think you should not," I said thickly.

"I cannot let you make a mess in your nice breeches, Mr Bracegirdle," said Peony huskily, and giving my wand a parting squeeze, withdrew her

hand so abruptly I cried out. I convulsed and would have slid off my chair had she not grasped my shoulders and restrained me. I finished my ale in a daze and put down my mug. I had never felt such powerful urges, and do not know what I might have done had she not caught me in her arms and supported me while I staggered drunkenly toward the bar. I confess I was putty in her hands, which is more than I can say for the enormous bulge in my breeches. With a nod to the old woman who shot me a disapproving glance, Peony led me to a door beside the bar, unlocked it with a key from her apron, and drew me inside.

No sooner had she closed and re-locked the door behind her, than I found myself in the same dingy passageway that Holmes and I had traversed earlier that day. Holmes! I had almost forgotten our assignation in the excitement of my uncontrollable desire for Peony, and shaking my head to clear the fog that now numbed my brain, pulled her towards me. She mistook my gesture and kissed me passionately on the mouth. Then her arms were about my neck and her knee was pressing into my groin.

"No, Peony," I protested. "I, I was waiting for a friend. I must go back to the common room to wait for him."

She released me, a pout upon her delicious lips, her bosom heaving with suppressed excitement.

"Don't you want me?"

"Yes," I murmured. "Oh, yes Peony!"

"Then why don't you want to come with me? Aren't I pretty enough?"

"Yes, you're uncommonly pretty."

"Is it my bosom? It's too small, isn't it?"

"No, your bo—, they're perfect."

She grasped my shoulders, pushed me against the wall, and pressed her lips passionately to mine.

"Do you think I'm too young for you? I'll be eight and twenty next month, and I know what a gentlehobbit likes."

"You're adorable," I replied, gazing into her lustrous eyes.

"Then what is it? Is it my bottom. It's too big, isn't it?"

"No, your bottom is exquisite. You're a stunning girl, Peony — simply stunning, but I must not miss my appointment with my friend."

"Mr. Holmes - the Detective?" she asked.

"No — not him," I muttered, "A gentlehobbit — a business colleague."

"Well, when he comes, he will ask for you, will he not?"

She encircled my waist with her slim hands and drew me toward her.

"Yes, I suppose so." I answered

Her lip trembled with excitement. She kissed me again and I fought against the hot fever in my brain and the delicious languor that paralysed my limbs.

"Then — come," she whispered, and taking my hand in hers, drew me after her. To my surprise she did not mount the stairs to the vulgar apartment Holmes and I had visited before, but turning into a small hall off the main thoroughfare, opened one of three doors, and ushered me into a small, simply furnished, bedroom.

"This is my own room, Mr. Bracegirdle. You are the first gentlehobbit I have entertained in it."

“Oh please call me Bingo, miss, I mean, Peony.”

Then her hands tugged at my belt and we tumbled onto her bed while she eagerly unbuttoned me and tore off my breeches. I now had little doubt that I had been drugged with *Lovewort*. I am ashamed to record I did not much care. I felt myself growing increasingly aroused, and grasping her hair, covered her slender neck in kisses. Peony was breathing hard, and disengaging herself from my embrace, pushed me gently back. Then she swung her long legs off the bed and stood up. I reclined against the pillows in tremulous expectation, as with slow, sensuous movements, she discarded her bodice and unlaced her tight corset to reveal the rounded perfection of her belly and bosom.

“Enchanting,” I murmured appreciatively.

She stooped to kiss me, but pulled away coquettishly before I could clasp her to me. She untied her apron, and slid her skirt and petticoats seductively down her slim thighs, before stepping out of them, and teasing down the front of her camiknickers to expose a tantalising glimpse of the silken fur between her parted thighs.

“Take them off,” I said hoarsely.

She giggled and slipped them slowly down her legs. Then wriggled her bottom and put her hands on her hips.

“Do I please you, sir?” she murmured.

“Oh yes!” I exclaimed.

My word, she was pretty! Her blond hair fell about her naked shoulders and lay like ripe corn upon the alabaster skin of her small breasts. I gazed with unashamed pleasure at her narrow, boyish waist, petite, jutting bottom and the inviting, forested mount below her fruitful belly. But what I saw next cleared my mind and extinguished the fire in my loins as surely as if I had been thrown into an icy bath. Her buttocks were barred with the marks of the whip.

“Y-you have been beaten?” I asked in alarm.

“Yes,” she said flatly. “Would you like to whip my bottom?”

I shook my head.

“Would you prefer to cane my thighs?”

“No!”

Her lip trembled and a sly, knowing expression gathered on her face. “Would you like to bugger me, Bingo? Would that please you?”

“By Heaven,” I thundered, “Who has done this to you?”

The slyness vanished from her face and she stared at me open-mouthed.

“Don’t you want to hurt me?”

“No,” I answered hollowly. “Not for all the world, Peony. I want — I wanted to make you happy.”

“B-but Loth — lots of hobbits like to hurt girls, don’t they?”

I sat up and stared at her. Did she mean to say ‘Lotho’? Her forehead was creased in a frown and her bright blue eyes moistened with tears as she put one knee on the bed. I noticed that her ankle was bruised and the skin indented with two, faint ridges.

“You have been bound?” I asked.

She nodded and tried to conceal her hands behind her back. I pulled them towards me and saw that her wrists also bore the marks of ropes or

bracelets and that her thighs were quartered with faint scars.

“Peony, this is wrong. This is evil. Don’t you understand that?”

Her blue eyes stared at me uncomprehendingly.

“B-but mama says hobbits like to whip girls. She told me that if you really love someone you want to hurt them.”

“That’s an evil lie, Peony.”

“You really don’t want to beat me?”

“No,” I repeated.

I could only guess at the thoughts passing through her mind; a mind so used to unnatural vice and cruelty that the normal affections and affinities were almost wholly stultified. Yet I was certain of one thing; never before had she had encountered someone who did not wish to abuse or injure her. The realisation shook me to the core and dispelled the last traces of the drug that still clouded my mind.

“Do you enjoy being hurt, Peony?” I asked her softly.

She averted her eyes and crept nearer until her face was close to mine. Then she rested her head in my lap and cried softly while I stroked her curls. Presently her tears ceased and she was silent for a long time. Then she raised her face to mine and murmured fiercely: “No — I hate it. I hate this place and I hate the things they make me do!”

“Who has done this to you, Lotho?”

She started and covered her face with her hands

“I mustn’t say, Mr Bracegirdle. I will be punished.”

“No you won’t,” I said, taking her face in my hands and looking deeply into her wide, frightened eyes. “Mr Lotho is in the hands of the Sherriff and cannot hurt you ever again.”

Peony looked at me doubtfully.

“I assure you he cannot harm you.”

“Oh, Mr Bracegirdle, Oh Bingo,” she murmured, “Hold me in your arms!”

Her affection had lost its former artfulness, now her kisses were those of a frightened child who suddenly awakes from a long nightmare to find familiar, comforting arms around them. She was spontaneous, eager and joyful. I felt myself responding, and drawing her towards me, kissed her trembling lips.

“You won’t hurt me?” she murmured uncertainly.

“No, I will love you, Peony and try to make you happy.”

She sighed and closed her eyes and relaxed in my arms. I took the rosy bud of her left breast into my mouth and supped on its exquisite ripeness. She moaned softly and crushed me to her bosom as my hands tenderly caressed her back and thighs. Then she raised my face and our mouths met in a long and passionate kiss. I was suddenly aroused and struggled to free my rearing steed from my bulging combinations. She gave a glad cry, and lost no time in divesting me of the remainder of my clothes. She squealed with delight as I slid my hand between her thighs.

“Now I will pay you back for teasing me so cruelly in the common room!”

“Oh, Mr — Oh Bingo!” she murmured. “You mustn’t touch me there. Mr Lotho says it’s not right to do that.”

“Lotho taught you the love of pain, now I shall teach you the joy of love.”

I lowered my lips to her fruitful belly and slowly made my careful way down to her temple mount, stopping along the way to inhale the sweet perfume of her velvet uplands, and lap the fragrant dew from her manicured lawn.

“No, Bingo, don’t!”

But I did. For more than half-an-hour Peony moaned beneath my tender caresses, until finally, she began to cry out loudly when I parted the pink walls of her little temple with my teeth, and slowly began to nibble the swollen crest where the dainty walls met. I felt her stiffen beneath my probing tongue and wrested cry after cry from her lips with no respite, until she was trembling in every limb and suddenly spent herself with a lingering sigh, and relaxed, breathless with pleasure. I lifted my head from her pasture, and smiled at her. She sighed and stretched, and gazed at me in wide-eyed wonderment.

“Oh Bingo, you have made me so very happy. You are a magician!”

“You have yet to experience the magic of my wand,” said I with a laugh, and grasping her narrow hips, pulled her eagerly onto my lap. She needed no urging, and settled her petite bottom enthusiastically between my thighs with expressions of the keenest joy. The liveliest sensations suffused my trembling loins as I caressed myself in her soft valley. I would have lingered in that verdant spot but for the impatience in her eager eyes, and losing no time, slipped inside her slippery temple. She sighed as my plunging steed broke into a trot, and flinging her arms around my neck, covered my face with grateful kisses.

“Oh, Bingo,” she murmured, “I want you so much!”

A long moan escaped my lips as she began a voluptuous dance in three dimensions; now rising, now falling, craning forwards, then lying back, but ever tightening the grip of her temple walls around me, and leading me deeper into the delicious warmth of her velvet shrine. At one moment she was all rapidity and artfulness; at another suddenly falling into a soft and languishing fatigue, and then again becoming all energy, activity, and animation. She raised her face to mine and I was rewarded by an expression of the most transparent joy upon her eager countenance. Her forehead was dewed with moisture; her glazed eyes were half closed beneath her quivering lashes, her nostrils flared, her cheeks were flushed, her mouth wide open; and the most plaintive moans escaped her trembling lips.

“Spend yourself in me!” she cried.

No thought remained to either of us but the urgent consummation of the delicious sensations that surged in tempestuous waves through our intertwined limbs. I pulled her bottom toward me and urged my steed into a gallop. The motion was not lost on her, for she clung more fiercely to me, her face expressive of the very pinnacle of bliss to which our mutual passion had raised us. We cried out together as I spent myself inside her in an explosive surge of the most voluptuous intensity. I lay back bereft of breath, while she, the wondrous author of my bliss, trembling in every limb, abandoned herself to her rapturous crises, and swooned in my arms.

When I had revived her with many tender entreaties and a thousand, grateful kisses, I cradled her trembling body in my arms and pressed my lips to her heaving bosom.

“Oh! Mr Bracegirdle, you have made me so very happy,” she murmured, breathlessly, “No one has ever loved me so deeply before, nor — nor made me spend myself so freely.”

It was true; my thighs were anointed with the copious honey of her joy. I hugged her to me while my exhausted steed rested within the warm folds of her pluvial sanctuary. She was silent for a long time, but presently drew away from me, and lay at my side. A low sob escaped her lips and tears gathered in her half-closed eyes.

“Mama wanted to murder you; Mama and Mr Lotho.”

“Hush,” said I, stroking her hair. “You are rambling.”

“No, I am not. That was why we argued. Mr Lotho told Mama to keep you in the common room. She said I must not lie with you, but I wanted you — so very much and—”

“— And?” I asked, pulling away from her in alarm.

Peony took my hand and clutched it fearfully. “I did not want them to murder you, Mr Bracegirdle!”

“Who?”

“The hobbits at the bar were Mr Lotho’s spies; set to murder you, Mr Bracegirdle.”

“What!” I cried, springing up in alarm.

Before she could say another word there was a loud explosion that rocked the walls of the inn and threw us into one another’s arms.

“Oh!” cried Peony; “The Balrog is come!”

No sooner had we scrambled into our clothes than the ceiling caved in with a mighty crash and we were flung to the ground. Then the door burst open and the drunken tramp that had accosted me earlier, sprang into the room.

“Get out, Bingo!” he cried. “While you have been dousing the fire in your breeches Lotho has fired the inn!”

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed, “Is that you Holmes?”

Holmes tore off his false nose and peeled the pockmarked skin from his laughing face. “Who else knows you so well as to be certain that you would allow yourself to be tumbled by a shameless floosie?”

“Now, Holmes that’s no way to talk about Peony. She is a fine lass who has been cruelly used.”

“Not as cruelly as I had to use you, you fur-brain!”

“What do you mean?”

“It was I that drugged your ale to save your silly neck!”

“You!”

“Yes, when I pretended to stumble I slipped a few drops of *Lovewort* into your mug; not too many I hope?”

“Oh no, sir,” said Peony. “Mr Bracegirdle was a perfect gentlehobbit.”

“I expected no less,” said Holmes with a laugh.

I blushed and hastened to put on my jacket while Holmes dragged me out into the passageway with Peony clinging tearfully to my neck.

“Quick!” he cried, “through here,” and flinging open a trap-door concealed in the floor, rapidly descended a ladder to the cellar below. Peony and I scrambled after him. The noise above our heads was deafening. It

sounded as if the inn was being torn apart by some unimaginable force. Holmes lit a lantern, and turning right, led the way into a second cellar which was evidently used for similar purposes to the vile room in the tower, though it was mercifully free of the instruments of torture we had seen there. We passed through two more cellars and a long passageway that I guessed ran under the road, before we reached a rotten door, which Holmes kicked open. Peony stumbled and clutched my hand as Holmes bounded up a narrow flight of stairs, and thrusting open another trap-door, beckoned us to follow him. I found myself in a narrow cul-de-sac between two buildings, directly opposite the inn. The *Blue Tit* was engulfed in tongues of writhing flame that lit up the night sky, and little now remained of the West wing from which Holmes had rescued us. To right and left the walls of the adjacent buildings were kindling, and sparks were falling upon the town hall. Two lines of hobbits with terrified faces were passing fire buckets to the constables trying to douse the raging inferno. They might as well have tried to put out a forest fire by spitting at it. There was a roar and a great confusion of falling timbers and cracking stone. The fire leaped up and black clouds of oily smoke snaked towards us.

“Look out!” I cried, “the main roof is falling!”

Flames engulfed its riven eaves; its gables bulged and crumbled. The hobbits saw their danger and scattered as a shower of burning timbers and blackened masonry descended into the road. Peony sank to her knees whimpering like a little child, and pointed aloft with a shaking hand.

“Lotho’s bat!” exclaimed Holmes. His face was ashen and his eyes were wide with horror. I followed Peony’s outstretched arm and all hope left me.

Into very the heart of the inferno, with a hideous cry that froze my blood, the Balrog came on black wings. Gouts of fire belched from its maws and smoke poured from its streaming mane. Like a great shadow it descended towards us and I saw it was a winged bat-like creature, but greater than any bat that I had ever seen. Its vast wings were as webs of leather between gleaming ribs, and it stank abominably. Down, down it came, and then, folding its pinions, settled upon the roof of the town hall with a croaking cry. Between the folded wings I saw a man-shape, but greater; black-browed and threatening, with yellow eyes ablaze with fiendish malice.

Peony covered her face with her hands and wept. Never had I seen a hobbit in such a pitiable fright; her teeth were chattering and she was shaking in every limb. The remaining hobbits in the road scattered and we were alone with the fell creature.

“What can save us now, Holmes?” I cried.

“Only Mablung and Boromir!” he cried, and stooping down, picked up his crossbow and carefully fitted a bolt to the runnel.

I marvelled at his composure as he took careful aim and fired at the creature. Oh, his aim was true! The Balrog let out a hideous yell, and beat its black wings, and the wind of them was foul. Slowly it climbed into the air, and then swiftly turned to the east, and streaked away as Holmes sent bolt after bolt after it.

“Blast!” he exclaimed, lowering his weapon. “I may never get another chance to examine it alive, whatever it was.”

“It was a Balrog,” said a soft, female voice at my elbow. I started back in

amazement as I turned around, and beheld the stern face of the woman from the inn I had befriended earlier!

“Madam!” I cried, “Thank God you are safe. How ever did you escape that awful conflagration?”

“The same way you and Mr Holmes did, Bingo,” she replied with a mischievous smile.

“Do I know you?” I asked.

In answer, she laughed, and grasping her thin, silvery hair, pulled it away and shook her head to reveal a mass of rich, dark curls beneath. It was a wig! Then she plucked at her nose and tore the skin from her cheeks and forehead, and stood, laughing softly, before me.

“Miss Belladonna!” I exclaimed in astonishment. “Then you, too, were part of Holmes’ plot?”

“Not exactly,” said Holmes with a wry smile. “Belladonna was set to watch the scoundrels whom Lotho had employed to murder you while I kept my eye on Mrs Chubb. Unfortunately, there were rather more of them than I had anticipated, and I had to change my plan. Drugging your beer was a last resort to get you out of the room while I dealt with them.”

“But I saw nothing suspicious.” said I

“You did not notice that the two rustics at the bar had knives tucked into their breeches?”

“No,” said I.

“Or that the squint-eyed fellow across the room was watching you?”

I shook my head.

“Dear me, Bingo. Young Miss Chubb must have been a more compelling distraction than I dared to hope!”

“She was,” I murmured shamefacedly, squeezing Peony’s hand. “And I was completely taken in by your disguise, Holmes — your ghastly face?”

“With a little beeswax around the mouth and a false nose and beard; rouge over the cheeks, onion in the eyes, and Miss Belladonna’s assistance — a very satisfying effect is readily produced.”

“Miss Belladonna?” I asked.

“I was an actress, Mr. Bracegirdle, have you forgotten?”

Holmes chuckled softly. “I confess it was touch and go when Miss Chubb struck me. It nearly dislodged my nose into your beer which would have produced precisely the opposite effect to the one I intended.”

At that moment the walls of the inn crumbled with a loud detonation that sent a shower of debris hurtling across the road toward us.

“Come”, said Holmes, “We cannot stay here, the fire is out of control and will soon engulf the houses on either side of it.”

“But we cannot simply abandon the town, Holmes!” I protested.

“There is no need, Bingo,” said he, “Look, Nature has come to our aid.”

I looked up as the first few drops of rain began to fall. Presently the drizzle turned into a torrential downpour and we hurried away as the frightened hobbits crept warily back to stare at the gutted inn. I saw Mr. Proudfoot and a detachment of hobbitry-at-arms amongst them, but Holmes drew me away before I could speak to them.

“I would rather not discuss my doings with the Sherriff,” said he, and setting a brisk pace, jogged beside me as we made our way back to our

burrow on the hill above the town.

“Oh miss!” cried Peony, grasping Belladonna’s hand, “I am so afraid!”

“Whatever it is, Mr. Holmes has wounded it, and it will not trouble us again this night,” I said to her.

“Bingo is right,” said Holmes, “though I fear we have not seen the last of the creature, or of Lotho!”

“What happened at the inn?” I asked. “I was all so sudden.”

“They intended to murder you, Bingo,” said Holmes, giving me a queer look from under his brows, “but thanks to your hot blood, and my timely intervention, their plan misfired.”

He stopped to catch his breath under a spreading beech that overhung the lane, and we gathered around him.

“What happened, Holmes?” I repeated.

“I was delayed and Lotho gave me the slip at Sharkey’s End while you were dallying with Miss Chubb at the inn. As I forewarned you, Bingo, the creature appeared shortly after six o’clock and drove off one constable while the other two jumped into the cart they had come in, and galloped off down the hill. I saw Lotho’s grinning face appear from under a sheet behind the driver, and deduced he had concealed himself there before I arrived. Plainly, he had suborned the two constables, or they were already in his pay. When I reached the inn Lotho’s henchmen were about to spring their trap and I was determined to stop them.”

“But why me? Why murder me, Holmes?”

“Because they thought that with you dead I would give up the case. Do not forget that I am a man and have no jurisdiction in the affairs of hobbits.”

“What happened after I left the room?”

“All hell broke loose,” said Belladonna grimly. “I fought the two hobbits at the bar, and Mr Holmes tackled that squint-eyed fellow and his cronies.”

“That was uncommonly brave of you,” I said.

“But foolish,” said Belladonna. “Even as Mr Holmes felled the tall man, and I killed one of the hobbits with his own knife, the Balrog came and fired the inn. We were almost trapped by the flames. I tried to get that idiot Proudfoot and his terrified constables to rescue the remaining guests while Mr Holmes went after Lotho.”

“Did you find him, Holmes?” I asked.

“Eventually, Bingo. He was in that dreadful bagnole with the innkeeper and the pretty auburn-haired girl we met before.”

Peony turned pale and clutched at my hand. “My sister, Daisy?” she gasped.

“I am afraid so.” Holmes’ voice had sunk to a strained whisper. “The girl was on her hands and knees in front of her mother and Lotho stood astride her with his riding crop in his hand.”

“Dear heaven!” I cried.

“As I entered he gave a great cry, and jerking back the terrified girl’s head, slashed her neck with a knife he pulled from his belt. Then he threw her body aside, and flung himself at me. My word, how the dog fought! I have rarely encountered so strong a hobbit.”

“That would be the *Lovewort*, Mr Holmes,” said Belladonna quietly, “He was addicted to it, and it gives strength beyond imagining to those as inured

to it as he was.”

“Despite my height and strength I was hard put to it to hold him off,” continued Holmes. “In the end he tired of the game and backed toward the door with Mrs Chubb clinging to his arm. While I was fitting a bolt to my crossbow, he plunged his knife into her chest and dashed for the stairs. My bolt caught him in the left leg and he screamed and fell. I thought I had him then, but the rogue sprang to his feet and limped down the stairs before I could get off another shot. When I got to the bottom he had vanished.”

“There is a secret way from the west wing to a house across the road, Mr Holmes,” said Peony through her tears.

“I suspected as much,” said Holmes. “I searched long for the entrance but did not find it. By then the whole wing was ablaze and I went to seek you out, Bingo. Finally, I stumbled into the smoke filled passage outside your room; you know the rest.”

“How did you know I was within?”

“Really Bingo!” snorted Holmes. “Who else could wring such indelicate cries from a young woman’s throat?”

Peony buried her face in my chest.

“What happened then?” I asked Belladonna.

“I had gone to look for you when the common room was engulfed, but was driven back by the fire and made my way out through the same trap-door that you did.”

“Then that foul poison saved my life?” I asked.

“Barely,” said Holmes. I confess I was not sure how much of it to give you, Bingo,” said Holmes. “Every experiment I have so far conducted shows that *Lovewort* is the most complex and insidious poison I have ever encountered; I greatly feared that you might succumb to the same degenerate vices as Lotho and his gang.”

“You need not have feared,” said I. “Even during the worst of my delirium I recoiled from the unnatural acts that the drug suggested to me.”

Peony lifted her blue eyes to my face with a look of wonderment that brought a lump to my throat. “Ah!” said she in a low and trembling voice. “I owe more than my life to Mr Bracegirdle. Mr Lotho taught me all that is wicked and sinful and cruel. Oh, Bingo, he was so cruel! But it was the only love I had ever known — until you took me in your arms. If you saved his life, Mr Holmes, Bingo has done more for me — he has rescued me from hell.” She lowered her head and burst into passionate sobs while Belladonna took her in her arms and comforted her.

“My word, Bingo!” exclaimed Holmes. “You really are the most surprising hobbit! But I fear you will pay a heavy price for your unconventional philanthropy.”

“How so?” I asked him

“If I am not mistaken, Belinda now has a rival for your affections!”

“Really, Holmes!” I snorted, “You cannot understand us hobbits very well if you imagine that my affection for Peony in any way diminishes my profound respect and love for Belinda!”

“Remarkable!” ejaculated Holmes. “Hobbits really are the most astonishing creatures! I fear I shall never understand them. Why, if your ways were adopted among Men I would very soon lose half my clients!”

*Chapter VII**UNSPEAKABLE THINGS*

The rain stopped in the early hours of Friday morning, and I was awoken by the sound of Peony crying softly in her sleep. She lay curled up beside me wearing one of Belinda's pretty floral camisoles, her pert bottom peeping out from under the lace hem. The convulsive jerks of her limbs and fluttering eyelashes showed me that she was reliving the horrors of the attack on the inn, or perhaps the long nightmare from which I had released her. Belinda was awake, and putting her finger to her lips, drew the sleeping girl toward her, and rocked her tenderly in her arms until her sobs subsided. I slipped noiselessly out of bed and crossed the hall to Holmes' room and softly knocked. There was no reply. Quietly I opened the door and saw Belladonna fast asleep in his bed, her long limbs drawn up to her chest, and her slim hands tucked under her chin. I sighed and closed the door. I found Holmes asleep on the couch in the parlour with his right hand draped over the stock of his crossbow, and his pipe lying on his chest. I carefully retrieved it and returned it to its customary place on the table by his armchair. It seemed the whole house was peacefully enjoying what Peony's nightmare had denied me. I stole into the kitchen, and flinging a few cushions from the parlour under the table, made a cosy nook, and stretching out, quickly dropped off. When next I opened my eyes, it was to find Belinda had curled up beside me with one arm flung across my chest and the other tucked under my neck. Apparently we had not stirred when Holmes' found us at eight o'clock, but he did not have the heart to awaken us, and the warm sun was shining on Belinda's face, before his need for breakfast, overcame his courtesy, and he nudged me awake with his foot, and called loudly for tea and eggs. It was almost eleven o'clock before we all sat down to breakfast together. Peony was somewhat in awe of Holmes, and cast him many a troubled glance from beneath her long lashes while he attacked his bacon and eggs with gusto. I gave Peony's slender thigh an affectionate squeeze and smiled at her.

"This is like a dream to me," Mr Bracegirdle," said she. "I fear that any moment I will wake up back in that horrid place."

"There is no chance of that," said Belladonna, helping herself to more toast, "the inn is a pile of ashes and Lotho is confined to the lockholes together with that scoundrel Proudfoot and five of his constables"

"Proudfoot!" I exclaimed, dropping my fork with a clatter. "How do you know that?"

Holmes refreshed himself with a mouthful of tea and putting down his cup, turned to me with his familiar smile playing over his aristocratic lips.

"Belladonna and I were afoot early, Bingo, and went for a walk whilst you were camping out under the kitchen table. At the foot of the hill we were met by a most impressive body of mounted hobbits under the command of a stalwart Captain-at-arms."

"More tea, Mr Holmes?" asked Belinda.

Holmes held out his cup while she filled it and bent once more to his breakfast.

“Is that all you have to say?” I asked impatiently. “Why has Proudfoot been arrested and who is this ‘Captain-at-arms?’”

Holmes skewered a rasher of bacon, cut off a portion with his knife, and dipped it into his egg, before transferring it to his mouth with an ejaculation of delight.

“Can it have escaped you,” said he, through a mouthful of bacon, “that Lotho could have maintained his evil grip upon this unfortunate district without the connivance of the local authorities? I do not say that Proudfoot was a willing accomplice, but does it not strike you as a singular coincidence that Lotho should have been so well informed as to our movements? Only one man other than ourselves knew you were to visit the inn — Proudfoot. Only one man knew that I was on my way to Sharkey’s End to apprehend Lotho; again — Proudfoot!”

“More toast, Mr Holmes?” asked Belinda.

Holmes took the plate she proffered, and picking up a piece of toast, proceeded to pair off a long sliver which he then dipped into his egg, and transferred to his mouth with a theatrical flourish.

“Capital eggs, Bingo. Belinda collects them early each morning from those magnificent hens you wanted to evict from our gazebo.”

“But who is this mysterious ‘Captain-at-arms?’” I persisted.

“Captain Fairbairn,” said Belladonna.

“Really, Holmes,” I said petulantly, “You are infuriatingly close this morning! Who is this ‘Fairbairn’? Am I supposed to know him?”

“You should, Bingo, he is your great uncle Stingo’s second cousin, twice removed on your mother’s side, as I believe you hobbits describe such obscure familial relationships.”

“Can I press you to another fried tomato, Mr Holmes?” enquired Belinda. “There are still two left and Bingo does not like them.”

“I will take one if Mr Holmes will take the other,” said Belladonna. “Thank you,” said Holmes, “You are most kind. I confess that I am particularly partial to the solanaceae. Bingo limits himself to but two members, *Nicotianam tabacum longbottomiae* and *solanum tuberosum*, but I embrace the entire genus and find the *Apple of Love* the most perfect compliment to mushrooms.”

“Not Frodo Fairbairn?” I asked. “Wasn’t he killed in a boating accident when the Buckleberry Ferry caught fire?”

“Apparently not,” said Holmes, “for we met him this morning riding a Pony with forty armed hobbits at his heels.”

“Apple of Love, Mr Holmes?” asked Peony shyly.

“*Lycopersicon esculentum*; the inestimable tomato, Miss Chubb,” said he, quartering the succulent fruit with his knife and fork.

“I see you like to mix the tomato juice with the liquor from the mushrooms,” said Belinda.

“Yes,” replied Holmes, “It is the most delicious combination of flavours; sweet, yet savoury, with an indefinable smoky aftertaste that lingers on the palate.” He suited his actions to his words and enthusiastically mopped up the juices with a piece of toast.

“So who is this Captain Fairbairn, and what is he doing in Longbottom?” I asked, with diminishing hope that I would receive a satisfactory answer.

"The Thane of Rohan appointed him," said Belladonna.

"Did you know, Bingo," said Holmes, through a mouthful of egg and toast, "that the tomato is a close relative of *belladonna* — perhaps better known to you hobbits as 'Deadly Nightshade', and that both have been employed as aphrodisiacs?"

"I cannot answer for 'deadly', Mr Holmes," said Belladonna, with a chuckle, "and the other is not something I am prepared to claim."

"You are too modest, madam," quipped Holmes.

"Another rasher, Mr Holmes?" asked Belinda.

"Thank you, yes," said Holmes skewering the bacon and sliding it deftly under the yolk of his remaining egg.

"Will you stop feeding him!" I expostulated, flinging down my napkin. "He doesn't eat from one week to the next and now you have turned him into a gourmet with the appetite of a starving rabbit and the manners of a boorish yokel!"

"Well!" said Belinda, "Is it my fault that you have kept him away from the civilizing influence of my sex for so long?"

"Or indeed, any sex," added Belladonna mischievously.

"I?" I spluttered, choking on my tea, "Was it I who expressed such reluctance to relieve Mr Holmes of the tensions which Dr Rogerghast said were the cause of his indisposition?"

"I did not know Mr Holmes as well then as I do now," said Belinda, with a blush.

"Come now, Bingo," said Holmes with a laugh, buttering the last piece of toast Belinda offered him, "You are outnumbered and outwitted by the ladies. Give in gracefully while you may."

"Well, really Holmes!" I exclaimed, "I never thought to hear such fulsome praise of the fairer sex from your lips!"

"Ah!" said he, "I did not know them then so well as I do now!"

Belinda gave me a triumphant smile and squeezed my knee rather more firmly than affection demanded. I pinched her bottom in retaliation and swept the last rasher of bacon onto my plate with a defiant gesture.

"Will someone please tell me what is going on!" I exclaimed.

"The Thane of Rohan has taken charge and given the Captain the task of bringing Lotho and his gang to justice," said Belladonna.

"Lotho was arrested this morning," added Holmes, "and is under close guard in the Lockholes."

"Then our work is done," said I.

"Not quite," said Holmes, demolishing the remainder of his breakfast with undiminished enthusiasm. "There is still the matter of the Balrog. But I have every confidence that with Lotho under lock and key his creature will soon be under our hands."

"I pray you are right, Mr Holmes," said Belladonna thoughtfully.

"Eggs!" he exclaimed, rapturously, dabbing his mouth with his napkin. "Can you beat them, Bingo?"

Peony giggled and Belinda looked up and laughed.

"Of course you can, Mr Holmes," she said merrily, "Or Bingo would be a very unhappy diner. You know he will only take them scrambled."

"Then they are not eggs," said Holmes, "But gegs!"

“Gegs?” asked Peony.

My toast was halfway to my mouth before I saw the joke, and spluttering with laughter, I dribbled marmalade over Belinda’s freshly laundered tablecloth.

“Gegs?” repeated Peony.

“Well really!” cried Holmes, and then he choked and laughed again until he was obliged to lean back, shaking with mirth.

“Scrambled eggs — gegs!” exclaimed Belinda, “It is too funny!”

“What are gegs?” asked Peony. We three looked at her puzzled face and collapsed into peals of helpless laughter.

After breakfast, Brockhouse called with the intelligence that despite his long vigil at the tower the Balrog had not returned to its lair. Belladonna was greatly distressed by the news and Holmes suggested she spend the remainder of the day with the explorer at his home while he went down to the town to interview Lotho, though, he added, “I have little hope he will be in any mood to talk to me!” Peony asked to go with her, and I gladly acquiesced as I could think of no better influence on her mind than that of a woman who had suffered as she had suffered, and could give her the comfort that she so badly needed. When Holmes returned just before luncheon, he informed us grimly that Lotho had escaped with the aid of his creature before he could speak to him.

“There was nothing I could do, Bingo,” he said, as he flung himself into his armchair and reached for his pipe. “The Balrog drove off the guards and then set fire to the roof of the lockholes. It was all over in ten minutes. Like a fool, I left my crossbow at home!”

“Then Belladonna was right,” I said. “She suspected as much. Will she be safe?”

“Brockhouse and their son Rollo are with her.”

“And Proudfoot?”

“Dead, along with the other prisoners.”

I poured Holmes a cup of tea and handed it to him. “What an evil fate!” said I.

He sat motionless in his chair, his hands buried deeply in his trouser pockets, his chin sunk upon his breast, his eyes closed. I had seldom seen him so dejected, and was searching for some word to comfort him, when there was a loud rap on the door.

It was Captain Frodo Fairbairn. I had seldom seen a more remarkable-looking hobbit. He was tall for our kind, over five feet, and dressed in full military uniform with a long sword at his side and a curved knife tucked into his belt. There was a sensitivity about his face and a lightness in his limbs, that suggested some elvish blood in his recent ancestry. His refined, aquiline face was turned towards Holmes, and a pair of piercing grey eyes swept the room with keen intelligence.

“Mr Sherlock Holmes?” He enquired in a quick, eager voice.

Holmes nodded and shook hands with him.

“The Thane instructed me to give you this, Mr Holmes.” Fairbairn took a heavy leather bag from his coat pocket and laid it upon the table.

“Here are sixty gold pieces,” he said “In disbursement of the expenses

you have incurred in clearing up this matter.”

“The Thane is most kind,” said Holmes, “but there are still one or two problems outstanding, and until I have resolved them to my complete satisfaction, I feel it would be premature of me to accept any recompense for my labours.”

“What problems?” asked the Captain.

“Lotho for one; the so-called Balrog, for another,” said Holmes bitterly.

“We have made a thorough search and found no trace of it,” said the Captain confidently. “Sixty armed hobbits are now combing the entire district for Lotho. Neither he nor his creature can elude us for long.”

“It will, you can depend upon it,” said Holmes, with surprising earnestness. “We are dealing with a criminal mastermind, Captain.”

“I thought that was Lotho, sir?”

“Lotho is a pawn in a much bigger game,” said he.

Fairbairn raised his eyebrows and unbuckled his long sword.

“May I sit?”

“Please do,” said Holmes indicating the sofa. “Would you care for tea — or beer?”

“Thank you, no. There are many calls on my time and I can spare you but a little of it.”

Holmes smiled. It was a phrase he might have used himself and I could see him warming to our singular visitor.

“Then I will be brief,” said Holmes briskly, and launched into a rapid account of our doings to which Fairbairn listened without interruption. The Captain stroked his chin thoughtfully in silence for some considerable time and then asked:

“Is it a Balrog?”

“Do you want my professional opinion, Captain Fairbairn, or my instinctual response?”

“Do they agree?”

“Sadly, no,” said Holmes with a laugh. “Professionally I cannot accept a supernatural creature of fire and slime stalking the Shire.”

“Neither can I,” said the Captain. “And instinctually?”

“I cannot discount what I have seen and related to you. All the evidence points to a Balrog, or something disguised as one.”

“Is that also your view, Mr Bracegirdle?”

“I am not entirely convinced by my friend’s arguments,” said I.

“I see,” said Fairbairn. “Then you do not believe such a disguise is possible?”

“It may be possible,” said I, “but that does not make it likely. What I saw was undoubtedly a Balrog, not some hobbit masquerading as one.”

“My colleague,” said Holmes, “is not convinced that the considerable quantity of masks, claws and other items we found in the tower, were used to impersonate the mythical creature that has been terrorizing the district.”

“And you are?”

Holmes leant back in his chair and put the tips of his long fingers together. “My methods have always relied on the simple premise that when one has eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Since a Balrog is clearly an impossible proposition, I am

compelled to deduce that someone has been impersonating one.”

“And yet a winged creature has been seen by many witnesses, including yourself and Mr Bracegirdle, which conforms in every particular to all that we know of Balrogs?”

“I see you perceive our difficulty, Captain,” said I.

“How do you propose to solve it?” asked Fairbairn.

“I have not yet made up my mind,” said Holmes.

“I am not unfamiliar with your reputation or your methods, Mr Holmes,” said Fairbairn, “coming as I do from that part of the Shire to which you have chosen to retire. If anyone can solve this mystery you are the man to do it.”

“It is kind of you to say so,” said Holmes with a faint smile.

“Forgive me, Captain,” said I, “but there is one thing that has been puzzling me about you.”

“And what is that, Mr Bracegirdle?”

“Some years ago there was a boating accident on the Brandywine when the Buckleberry ferry caught fire. I had heard —”

“—Ah, that,” laughed Fairbairn. “I myself was puzzled by your enquiring glances. The solution is simple. I would have been aboard that day if I had not been called away on urgent business. My brother took my place. As we look very much alike and my business took me away from the Shire for many months, there was a mix up of identities.”

“May I also ask why the Thane appointed you to take charge here?” I asked.

“That too, is simple, Mr Bracegirdle. “I hunt Orcs.”

“Then you are acquainted with our famous explorer, Milo Brockhouse?” I asked.

“We have worked together once or twice. No one knows more of the fell creatures than he. I understand that the he is assisting you in your investigations?”

“Yes,” said Holmes. “He has been of inestimable value in clearing up a number of difficult points.”

Fairbairn stood up and gave Holmes a searching look.

“He has done much more than that, has he not, Mr Holmes?”

Holmes smiled and leant back in his chair. “I could not possibly say, Captain.”

Fairbairn grunted and retrieved his sword.

“I take it that I can rely on your full co-operation?”

“You have my word on it,” said Holmes.

Fairbairn pushed the Thane’s gold across the table. “I should not leave that bag there if I were you, Mr Holmes.”

“I have already said that I cannot accept it,” said Holmes, pushing it back.

“Nonetheless,” persisted the sheriff, “I am instructed to give you this payment. The Thane was most insistent.”

“Very well,” said Holmes. He took out his pocket book, and tearing out a sheet, scribbled a receipt upon it and handed it to the Captain. “Please thank the Thane,” said he, “and inform him that I hope to bring this business to a conclusion quite soon.”

“And if you do not?”

“Then you may tear up that receipt and return the gold to the Thane.”

“Why should I do that?”

“Because you will be able add the name of Mr Sherlock Holmes to the list of our adversary’s victims.”

“Good Heavens!” I cried, surely it will not come to that, Holmes?”

“I hope not,” said he, “I had counted on being present at your wedding to Belinda.”

“You jest, Holmes,” said I.

“I was never more in earnest,” said he, rising from his chair. “And now, if you will excuse me Captain, I have certain important preparations to make.”

The Captain bowed and took his leave.

“A most remarkable hobbit,” said I when he had gone.

“He is clearly not afraid of Orcs, Bingo, said he, “which is rare among your kind. That alone makes him a formidable ally.”

Peony returned to us after supper and I was pleased to see that she had evidently benefited greatly from Belladonna’s company earlier in the day, for she was happier than I had dared to hope after our terrible ordeal at the inn.

“How is the great Orc hunter?” Holmes asked her.

“Hunting for Lotho,” she replied.

“And Belladonna?” I asked.

“She has gone to stay with Captain Fairbairn at the house he has taken in the town.”

“Excellent,” said Holmes, “She will be safe there.”

“Does Mr Brockhouse hunt alone?” I asked.

“He has always hunted alone, Mr Brace — Mr — Bingo,” she stammered.

“I think we can dispense with formality, Peony”, said I, slipping my arm around her slender waist, and kissing her blushing cheek affectionately.

“Oh, Bingo!” she said breathlessly, “I wanted so much to come back to you and Miss Belinda, but I was so ashamed. It was Miss Belladonna that persuaded me. I thought that you would not want me any more now that, that—”

“That what?” I asked.

“You know—” she whispered. “— now you know I am — a *whore*.”

“But you are not a whore, Peony, and never were, except in the eyes of the vile brutes who abused you.”

“B-but I thought you only lay with me because of that, that —”

“That what?” I asked, kissing her ear.

“That drug — the *Lovewort*.”

“It was not *Lovewort* that that attracted me to you, Peony, but your beautiful smile, kind heart, and lovely eyes; not to mention your firm, pert bottom and adorable little bosom.”

“Oh Mr Bingo! She murmured, “Whatever will Belinda say?”

“It was Belinda who insisted I continue your treatment.”

“Treatment?” asked Peony softly.

“Surely you haven’t forgotten that I promised to teach you the joy of love?”

“Oh, but you *did*,” she whispered in an embarrassed undertone.

“That was just the introduction,” said I.

Peony buried her face in my chest and dissolved into giggles.

Holmes coughed self-consciously as Belinda entered the room and we left Peony in the capable hands of our housekeeper while we lit our pipes and smoked in silence.

Presently I turned to Holmes and said: “Brockhouse is not hunting Lotho, is he?”

“Very astute of you, Bingo. No, he hunts something altogether more dangerous.”

“The Balrog?”

“That remains to be seen.”

“I cannot believe that our adversary is a hobbit, Holmes. All my instincts tell me it is a supernatural creature of fiendish cunning and extraordinary strength; it has done unspeakable things.”

“Why do you persist in your belief that evil must have a supernatural origin, Bingo?” asked Holmes. “You seem to imagine that evil can be distilled, drop by stealthy drop into the spirit of Hobbit or Man, like Lotho’s drug was distilled into the veins of his unfortunate victims, whereas all my experience has taught me that it is the darkness within our own breasts which is the cause of all the evils that afflict us.”

“I cannot believe that Hobbits would willingly commit the crimes that we have witnessed,” I replied. “It may be otherwise with Men, who, it is said, were ever quick to embrace the evil of the Dark Lord who once held sway over these lands”

“Perhaps you are right,” said he. “I am no philosopher, yet it is clear to me that some malignant agency has been at work behind the scenes. All my instincts tell me it is a Man with whom we deal, and not some supernatural being of fire and slime.”

“I pray you are proved right,” said I.

“I usually am,” said Holmes with a sardonic smile.

Saturday brought no new intelligence of the whereabouts of Lotho or the darker foe we sought. The sun shone fitfully from an overcast sky, but before noon heavier clouds moved in from the west, and a light rain drummed on the roof of our burrow. Holmes disappeared into his room after luncheon and we did not see him again until supper time. I was shocked by the change in his appearance as he sat down to eat. Heavy rings shadowed his deepset eyes, and his cheeks were pale and sunken. He picked at his dinner with a restless melancholy that broke Belinda’s heart, and unable to bear his monosyllabic replies to her entreaties as to the cause of his dark humour, fled from the room in tears.

“Holmes!” I cried when she had gone, “You are a perfect brute this evening! Will you not share your preoccupation with me?”

His answer was to fling down his napkin and stalk to his room. Deprived of his company and loath to intrude on Belinda’s unhappiness, I went out for a walk on the moors. It was a fine evening and I felt considerably brighter when I returned to the burrow just as the first stars were rising over the lake. When I entered the parlour, Holmes was slumped in his armchair

by the fire with his right sleeve rolled up, and his familiar morocco case lying open beside him on the table. I feared the worst when I saw the hypodermic in his twitching hands and the *miruvor* bottle on the table.

"You need not trouble yourself to admonish me, Bingo," he said languidly. "I decided over an hour ago that I would not require an injection of the stimulant that you find so abhorrent."

"Then why are you playing with the damnable thing, Holmes!" I asked sharply.

"There is always the possibility that I might change my mind," said he weakly.

For years I had witnessed this performance, and custom had not reconciled my mind to it. His powers were so great, and his manner so masterful, that I had the greatest difficulty in confronting him about it. But during his recent illness I had become more and more irritable at the sight, and my conscience had at last given me the courage to persuade him to take a holiday in order to wean himself off the vile drug. Now he was at it again! I could hold myself in no longer and rounded on him: "Which is today, Holmes?" I asked, "A twenty-percent solution or a new mixture?"

He raised his eyes languidly. "Thirty-three-percent actually, Bingo. Would you care to try it?"

"No, indeed!" I answered brusquely. "My constitution has not got over the foul *Lovewort* you spiked my beer with at the inn. I have no desire to throw any extra strain upon it."

He smiled at my vehemence. "Perhaps you are right, Bingo. I suppose that *miruvor's* influence is physically a bad one, but I find it so transcendently stimulating and clarifying to the mind that its secondary action is a matter of some indifference to me."

"I don't doubt it!" I retorted irritably, and poured myself a glass of apple brandy. "But think what it is doing to your mind and body in the longer term. Why should you risk the loss of your great powers for a passing pleasure? Surely the game is not worth the candle, Holmes?"

He did not seem offended. On the contrary, he carefully emptied the syringe into the *miruvor* bottle, replaced the hypodermic in its case, and slipped both items into his jacket pocket.

Then he sat up a little, leaned his elbows on the arms of his chair and put the tips of his fingers together. "I think I dare risk a small apple brandy now, Bingo."

"Is that wise?" I asked, "After your bout of self-indulgence?"

"Self-indulgence, Bingo?"

"Really Holmes!" I exclaimed, "What else would you call it?"

"An antidote to cynoerotica."

I choked on my brandy and stared at him. "What did you say?"

"An antidote to cynoerotica, Bingo," said he, smiling at my confusion. "After subjecting you to the singular effects of *Lovewort* at the inn without your permission, my conscience pricked me, and I concluded that it was only fair that I should try the experiment on myself."

"Good heavens, Holmes!" I cried, "You don't mean to tell me you have taken some of that filthy stuff tonight?"

"Eighteen grains, Bingo; approximately three times the dose I gave you."

I had to make some allowance for my greater size and weight.”

“What did you see?”

Holmes lay back in his chair and clenched his hands. “Unspeakable things, Bingo.”

“Will you not share them with me?” I asked.

“I could share them with no one else, my dear hobbit. The effects began surprisingly quickly. Within minutes my imagination and brain were beyond my control. Dense, coloured vapours swam before my eyes, and my mind told me that in those mists lurked all that was depraved and inconceivably wicked in the world. Vague forms swirled amid the mist, a delicious languor stole over my limbs, and — to my surprise — an overwhelming urge to commit the unspeakable debaucheries the spectres suggested to me, took hold of my mind.”

“Good heavens! You have described the very symptoms that afflicted me, Holmes!”

“And how did you resist the vile suggestions?” he asked softly.

“I — I do not know that I did. I almost made a disgusting spectacle of myself with Miss Chubb in the common room of the inn.”

Holmes closed his eyes and his lips twitched spasmodically. “I was aware of it Bingo.”

“Fortunately Peony had the good sense to get me out of there.”
“And afterwards? The salient facts will do, Bingo; I do not require a blow by blow account of your amorous contest with your nubile young nymph.”

“It was when I saw her injuries — you know she was regularly beaten, Holmes?”

“Naturally. Lotho has long since passed beyond the milder perversions.”

“Well — when I saw those I sobered up pretty jolly quickly!”

“They did not inflame you further?”

“On the contrary, they nearly made me take to my heels.”

“That would have been unfortunate.”

“Indeed it would. And you, Holmes; what happened to you next?”

“I was unable to resist the suggestions. One particular image detached itself and appeared to take visible form before my horrified eyes. It was naked woman of such physical perfection and transcendent beauty that I instinctively reached out to clasp her to me. Even as I took her in my arms her face dissolved into that of a hideous ghoul with glaring red eyes, and I recoiled in horror. At that same moment, in a desperate effort to escape, I reached for the syringe, and as I did so, I had a glimpse of Belinda’s face, white, rigid, and drawn with terror, staring into my own. In that instant I realized that it really was Belinda, and that I stood astride her body with your walking stick in my hand.”

“Merciful heavens!” I cried and sprang from my chair.

Holmes opened his eyes and waved me back to my seat with a languid gesture.

“Calm yourself, Bingo. I struck her only once, and that but lightly. She was quite unharmed and is sleeping now; there is no necessity to wake her.”

I sat back and drained my apple brandy. “So that was the reason for the *miruvor!*”

“Quite so, my lad. Though, as you now know, I did not have to use it.

Belinda's face and the sudden realization of what I was about sobered me up quite as effectively as your sight of Miss Chubb's appalling injuries. Her face was quite the most shocking thing I have ever seen."

"What do you mean, Holmes?"

"The look of sorrowful resignation in her eyes and the forgiveness it expressed. I am convinced that that good woman was quite prepared to be beaten to death without the slightest complaint. If you do not marry her when this business is over, I swear I shall!"

"By Jove, Holmes!" I said, "I believe you mean that!"

"May I have that apple brandy now?" he asked weakly.

"Of course," said I, hastening to fetch his glass and fill it.

Neither of us spoke for some time. Then Holmes lit his pipe and tossed his pipeweed pouch over to me. "Well," he said. "This is turning out to be a most singular holiday, Bingo."

I finished my pipe before him, and bidding him goodnight, retired to my room. Whether out of some misguided loyalty to Holmes, or the shock of the assault he had made upon her, Belinda disdainfully spurned my attentions, and when I attempted to kiss her, cruelly brought her shapely knee into sharp contact with that part of my anatomy that normally afforded her such exquisite pleasure. Peony was fast asleep beside her with her thumb in her mouth, and not wishing to awaken her, I am compelled to record that I was obliged to retire to the bathroom, where, inspired by my bound collection of sapphic lithographs, I relieved myself of the tensions that Holmes account of his experience with *Lovewort*, of which I have given the barest sketch, had aroused in me. When I returned to our bedroom, I am sure my guilty countenance betrayed my momentary lapse, but if Belinda divined it, she had the tact not to mention it, and we fell asleep in one another's arms.

*Chapter VIII**THE HORROR OF ISENGARD*

It was a sombre face that stared out at me from the mirror as I shaved the following Sunday morning; made more so by the cut I inflicted upon it as Belinda burst into the bathroom, and informed me in a shocked voice that there had been another death in the night. Holmes was already dressed as I entered the parlour and I greeted our visitor, whose face was so distorted by the emotion that consumed him, that it was some moments before I recognised him as our good friend, Doctor Lightfoot.

"We are Balrog-ridden, Mr Holmes! My poor practice is Balrog-ridden!" he cried. "A Demon is loose in it. We all cower beneath the shadow of his dark wings!" He danced about in his agitation; a ludicrous object if it were not for his ashen face, dishevelled sandy hair, and staring eyes.

"Calm yourself," said Holmes, steadying the Doctor with his hands. "What has occurred?"

"Mr Lotho was murdered during the night — with exactly the same symptoms as before! A week to the very day that his poor brothers were attacked, and poor Miss Belladonna was ravaged by the Balrog!"

"Mr Lotho?" I exclaimed in astonishment. "But he was our prime suspect!"

"Please hurry, Mr Holmes," said the Doctor.

"Can you fit us both into your donkey-cart?"

"Yes, I can."

"Then — Belinda," cried he exultantly, "we will have to postpone breakfast. Doctor Lightfoot; let us hurry before things get disarranged by Captain Fairbairn and his hobbitry-at-arms."

Holmes leaped up onto the box with an exclamation of impatience and I climbed in hurriedly behind him. With a jolt that jarred my spine we set off at a brisk pace towards Sharkey's End. Holmes was a changed man from the haggard, mawkish individual of the previous evening. His eyes were alight and his limbs quivered with eager anticipation as he urged the terrified Doctor to whip the two straining ponies to ever-greater speed.

"Why in heaven's name should Lotho come back to his house?" I shouted above the noise of the wheels.

"Wait and watch, Bingo!" said Holmes.

"But how did he get by the guards and why should the Balrog murder him? None of it makes the slightest sense to me, Holmes!"

"Wait and watch!" he repeated.

"Do you know how he got back?" I asked the Doctor.

"On the wings of the Balrog sir; on the black wings of the fiend!"

"Mad as hatters, both of them," I muttered under my breath as we sped on up the hill and rounded a long curve that brought the lake into sight. Presently the cart came to an abrupt halt outside Lotho's front door, and Holmes bounded from the box and sprinted into the burrow, a ripple of energy animating his sinewy frame.

When I entered the library, Holmes was on his hands and knees with his glass in his hand. The atmosphere made my head swim with the same

nausea and revulsion I had experienced on my previous visit. Had Holmes not thrown open the windows we should surely have suffocated. Beside the fireplace in a wing chair, sat the dead hobbit, his sensuous lips drawn back in a lecherous spasm of lust; his florid face contorted with a hideous expression of unholy glee, utterly different from the horror that had marked the features of his sister and brothers. His limbs were convulsed, and his toes and fingers contorted, as though he had expired in a very paroxysm of fear — or bliss. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I took in the full horror of his shocking death. The big hobbit's legs were splayed apart, and his trousers had been ripped from the groin to the knee — as if with sharp claws. The material was much burned, and the same green slime we had seen on Belladonna's body, coated the naked flesh between his thighs, and dribbled out of his gaping mouth. I recoiled in shock as I saw he had been flagellated about the thighs and stomach, and stumbling to the window, was violently sick.

When I recovered, I saw that Doctor had turned the body, and Holmes was examining it with his magnifying glass.

“Good gracious, Holmes!” I ejaculated, “his injuries are appalling!”

“Quite so, Bingo,” said he briskly. “I expected nothing less.”

“Then you anticipated his murder?” said I in surprise.

“It was inevitable.”

“But why should the Balrog turn on him?” I asked.

“Why indeed!” said Holmes, smiling broadly, “Perhaps they had a disagreement?”

“I see no occasion for merriment,” said I stiffly.

“That is because you persist in clinging to the ludicrous fantasy that we are looking for a Balrog.”

“Are we not?”

“Not any longer.”

“I do not follow, you, Holmes?” said I

“Then follow your nose! There is nothing more to be learned here.”

“What about the scorching to the body, the unspeakable lust on his agonized face, and the arrow embedded in his groin?” I asked.

“And the same foul miasma in the air, Mr Holmes,” added the Doctor, coughing into his handkerchief

“There is no mystery here, Bingo,” said Holmes, and turned his attention to the windows.

“Has the body been moved?” I asked the Doctor.

“No, Mr Bracegirdle. Everything is as I found it at eight o'clock this morning.”

“Was that whip stuck into Mr Lotho's bottom in that way when you arrived?” I asked.

“Yes, nothing has been moved, Mr Bracegirdle.

“I say, Holmes,” said I, “The murderer has sodomized Lotho with his own riding crop!”

On turning around to note his reaction, I was somewhat surprised and not a little nettled, to see that I had been addressing myself: Holmes had vanished!

“Where is Mr Holmes?” I asked the Doctor.

"I think he went into the garden, Mr Bracegirdle."

Drat the man! I eventually located him, or at least his familiar legs, poking out from under a large hydrangea at the bottom of the lawn.

"Have you taken up horticulture, Holmes?" said I; "or is this some novel recreation you have been keeping from me?"

"Neither, Bingo," said he, "I am looking for the rest of this umbrella."

"Umbrella? What on earth is an umbrella doing in the shrubbery?"

"That we shall shortly discover."

His legs gave a convulsive jerk and disappeared from sight. Next moment the shrubbery was violently parted and he sprang out with a triumphant exclamation on his lips, brandishing what appeared to be several gentlehobbit's umbrellas, crudely joined together.

"What have you there?" I asked.

"The Balrog's wing — or at least the tip of it."

"It looks suspiciously like a collection of umbrellas to me, Holmes."

"So it is."

"I don't follow you?"

He thrust the object into my arms and I observed it was a length of wing, badly charred about the edges, that had been assembled from several, black, gentlehobbit's umbrellas.

"At last, Bingo!" said Holmes, rubbing his hands, "We appear to have solved the perplexing contradiction of an umbrella shortage in the town and a glut in the tower. My case is almost complete, but we must not fall into the trap of overconfidence. Simple as the solution now seems, there is still the problem of the bashful Balrog."

"Simple!" I ejaculated.

"Surely," said he with the air of a gaffer addressing a particularly dim-witted class of young hobbits. "Our bashful Balrog is nothing more than a primitive flying machine powered by marsh gas. You will observe the item you are holding in your arms is designed to articulate about this shaft that I found in the flower bed, beneath the library window."

Holmes handed me a short metal object to which several, trailing wires were still attached. "I found several more fragments on the roof. Together they would form a sizeable structure that once comprised part of the Balrog's right forewing. The most interesting discovery was this arrow which, as you will see, is still embedded in the creature's false claw." Holmes thrust a hideous looking foot into my hand, and stepped back with a complacent smile on his lips.

"It is like the thing you showed me in the tower."

"Precisely. Had I not been influenced by your silly superstitions, and what we saw at the inn when the creature attacked us, I would undoubtedly have penetrated to the mystery earlier."

"This is preposterous," said I. "You cannot construct a flying machine from umbrellas and bits of old string, Holmes!"

"Then how do you explain what you are holding in your hands, Bingo?"

"It is absolutely impossible," said I. "There are no such things as flying machines."

"I might say the same about Balrogs."

"But Balrogs have been known from time immemorial."

“So have flying machines,” said Holmes, “though I confess not ones made from discarded umbrellas.”

“No hobbit could have built such a contraption,” I protested.

“Without aid, possibly not. But suppose Lotho discovered the secret of flight? Then, I think, if you were an evil and unscrupulous hobbit, who was already addicted to unnatural vice, you might seize the opportunity such a flying machine afforded to you, to indulge your appetites without fear of discovery, or retribution. If you were then offered a drug that not only increased your own pleasure, but also brought you willing acolytes, eager to share in your debaucheries, would you not pay almost any price to gain your evil ends?”

“That is all very well,” said I; “but brings us no nearer to the identity of this mysterious accomplice. Who is he, and why should he murder Lotho?”

“He didn’t, Brockhouse did.”

“Brockhouse?”

“Dear me, Bingo, did you not see the underpants lying under Lotho’s chair, nor the message written on the card inside them?”

Holmes took my arm and striding across the lawn, guided me back into the library.

“There,” he said, pointing to the chair in which Lotho sat.

I followed his gaze and picked up what appeared to have been the unfortunate hobbit’s underpants. They were badly scorched and coated in the now familiar, pondweed. In the crotch the initials ‘MB’ had been burned, and inside them lay one of his own visiting cards, upon which the following phrase had been written in the dead hobbit’s own blood:

A small memento of my affection with no kind regards.

“Astonishing, Holmes!” said I.

“And here is the quill that was used to write the note, together with the horn Lotho used to summon his accomplice, unfortunately too late to save him. Wind it, Bingo, I think you will find it emits a not unfamiliar tone.”

I picked up a long metal, trumpet-like instrument, lying by the dead hobbit’s trailing hand. “I would prefer not to,” said I with a shudder.

Holmes laughed, and taking the instrument from me, wiped the mouthpiece with his handkerchief, and raised it to his lips. A long, wailing cry filled the room. The Doctor cowered by the fireplace and I covered my ears. “Enough, Holmes!” I cried. “The sound is enough to freeze a hobbit’s blood! I have no wish to meet that dreadful creature again.”

“There is little chance of that at present, Bingo. I fancy it will take it some time to repair the damage to its flying machine.”

“If it has a flying machine,” said I. “I am not convinced by your arguments, Holmes. I know what I saw at the inn. Oh, I daresay that you will remind me of the claw you found in the shrubbery, and the hideous disguises you showed me in the tower, but the fact that Lotho may have used them to conceal his identity, does not mean that the Balrog does not exist.”

At that moment Captain Fairbairn and his soldiers arrived, and I followed Holmes and the Doctor out into the garden.

“I am glad to say that my investigation has been most rewarding,” Holmes remarked to the Captain. “I cannot remain to discuss the matter with you, but I am confident that the solution of this mystery is within sight.”

If you need me, I shall be at home. And now, Bingo, I think that we have earned our breakfast!"

After breakfast the sun shone brightly, and the clouds, which had threatened rain in the morning, drew away to the east, promising a fine and warm day. Peony had gone back to bed, and Holmes and I were smoking in the garden, when Belinda came out to inform us that Belladonna and Mr Brockhouse were within.

The composed and determined woman who sat on our sofa bore little resemblance to the wretched creature Holmes had brought back from the dead barely a week before. Although her beautiful, intense face had not lost the marks that grief and sorrow had etched upon it, the sensuality and vice had quite departed, to leave in their place a grim determination that compressed her lips and smouldered in her dark, liquid eyes. Now she pressed her hand to her breast and Brockhouse twined his strong arm around her waist.

"I won't deny that I'm glad Lotho is dead," she began softly. "But there is another who ought to be in a lower hell if there is any justice in this world or the next. That is the monster you are after, Mr Holmes."

Holmes smiled grimly. "I gather you are referring to our bashful Balrog, madam?"

"I could not speak to that, Mr Holmes."

"Then who?"

"Odo". Belladonna clenched her hands and stifled a sob.

"But he is dead," said I.

"I wish I could believe it, Mr Bracegirdle."

"But surely," I continued, "He died together with your brother Drogo in the asylum?"

"We have no proof of that," said Holmes softly. "I told you at the time that I thought the circumstances of the brothers' precipitate removal and their sudden death, highly suspicious. Pray continue, Miss Bolger."

"Please call me 'Bella', Mr Holmes, I — my connection with that family is not something I wish to be reminded of."

"Forgive me," said Holmes.

"There were many brutes who beat me, Mr Holmes, but Odo was the worst of them."

This was said with such bitterness that I instinctively reached down to grasp her hand. She looked up and smiled, and for a moment, I looked into the eyes of a beautiful young girl alight with hope and joy, then her eyelids drooped, and the light went out, and she was a middle-aged woman struggling in the grip of a nightmare that would never end.

"Oh, I tried to escape them. Only God knows how hard I tried, but there were always eyes and hands and pain — hands on me, and in me — Oh Heaven help me! Oh, if only I had had the courage to murder him while he lay in a drunken stupor on his bed! But there was always Sharkey, he was the real power behind them all, and he was — cruel."

Holmes sat up in his chair. "Sharkey?" he asked. "I have heard that name before. Do you mean the Balrog?"

"I — I do not know, Mr Holmes," she answered falteringly. "I saw him only twice. I was bound and drugged, but I fear — I fear it was an Orc."

Holmes was suddenly keenly alert. "An Orc! Are there Orcs hereabouts, Mr Brockhouse?"

Brockhouse shuddered and gripped Belladonna's hand. "There are few of the creatures left in Middle-Earth; I do not know why, but I think their race is dying. In the bitterest winters one or two sometimes come down from the mountains in search of food. They do not live to see the spring."

"Food?" Holmes asked.

"They will eat anything at need, even filth, but in the hardest winters there is only one source of food left to them."

"And what is that?" asked Holmes.

"Hobbits," said Brockhouse through clenched teeth.

"My word," said Holmes. "I knew nothing of this. It explains much that has puzzled me about this business from the first, and confirms my worst fears."

"And mine," whispered Belladonna.

"What do you mean?" I asked her.

"I — I think Sharkey ate the wretches Odo and Lotho had no further use for."

Holmes let out a long sigh, leant back in his chair, and buried his hands deeply in his trouser pockets, his chin sunk upon his breast, his eyes closed. He was silent for a long time. I raised my head and looked up as he began to speak again.

"Whilst I have no wish to dwell on matters that must be exceedingly painful for you to recall," he began, "I would be most grateful if you would clear up a few remaining points for me."

Belladonna sighed and drew Brockhouse closer to her. "I will try," she said.

"Do you remember who assaulted you?"

"Odo and Lotho."

"Who administered the poison?"

"Odo."

"Then he was part of the conspiracy?"

"He was the instigator, Mr Holmes."

"How did you come to be in the library with your brothers?"

"Odo told me Milo and my son Rollo had come to take me away."

"And you believed them?" I asked.

"I was not in my right mind, Mr Bracegirdle. They had drugged me as usual and — and Lotho and Odo had repeatedly abused me that evening. I was ready to grasp at any straw that offered a way out of my nightmare."

"Oh, madam! Oh, Bella!" I exclaimed.

"What happened then?" asked Holmes.

Belladonna sighed; tears gathered in her luminous eyes and her lips trembled. Presently she began to speak again in a strained undertone.

"Odo seized me the moment I entered the room. He — he gave me more of the drug and then he stripped me, and they — they beat me."

"To force you to reveal the whereabouts of your son?"

Belladonna's voice sank to a whisper. "Yes," she said.

Holmes bowed his head and his face was pale. "And then?" he asked.

"I — I think I fainted. When I recovered Odo and Lotho were arguing

heatedly with Drogo.”

“What about?”

“Me — I think. Drogo was weak and cowardly but he was no murderer.”
“I take it they bound and drugged him?”

“Yes.”

“Then they bound you to the chaise longue?”

“Yes”

Belladonna remained silent; her eyes were fixed upon Brockhouse with a preternatural intensity that seemed to penetrate to his very soul, for he drew her pale hand to his lips and kissed it with a tenderness that was wonderful to behold.

“What happened then?”

“Odo and Lotho gave me more of the drug and rubbed it into my — my legs. There was a lot of smoke and fire. Then they abused me again. I think they made Drogo rape me. I think he screamed. Perhaps they were my screams; I do not remember — then — then the Balrog came.”

“You saw it?”

“I saw a winged ghoul with the face of a devil. I cannot tell you more, Mr Holmes. I must have fainted away again, for the next thing I remember is waking up in your arms.”

“Dear God, is there no end to the catalogue of their foul crimes?” I asked in a broken voice.

Holmes lay back in his chair and passed his hand over his eyes. “There is one more problem I should like to satisfy myself upon, Mr Brockhouse,” said he.

“What is that?” asked the explorer.

“Why did you murder Lotho Bolger?”

The explorer paled and clenched his hands.

“I did not,” he said softly, “I executed a murderer and a criminal.”

“I will not argue over the form of words,” said Holmes. “You had better tell me all.”

“As you know I left Longbottom years ago and only return at long intervals. On the last occasion I discovered that Lotho had greatly expanded his evil trade and was determined to put a stop to it. Once I had his account book he was finished, and he knew it. That was when he attempted to draw my son Rollo into his net. When I foiled that plan, he threatened to kill Bella unless I left the district and promised never to return. I went away to think. On the very day I returned I received his perverted note. Then I knew Belladonna had paid for my indecision with her life. That night you will remember I called on you, and begged you to arrest Lotho, but you refused me. What was I to do? Should I appeal to the law? I had no proof.”
“You had the camiknickers,” said I.

“With the letter ‘B’ burned into them, Mr Bracegirdle!” said Brockhouse bitterly.

“But the card?” I persisted. “Surely Lotho’s card identifies him as Miss Belladonna’s murderer?”

“Only in our eyes, Mr Bracegirdle. Lotho was too clever to incriminate himself in that way. The card named no one, but it did refer to a riding crop. I am the only hobbit in these parts who possesses one. Unless the card could

be linked to the garment in the way Mr Holmes has linked it, it would only have served to condemn me. Proudfoot would have denounced the card as a forgery and used the camiknickers to hang me with."

"You could have confided in me," said Holmes.

"True," said Brockhouse, "but in my grief and rage it never occurred to me. You gave me little reason to trust you, Mr Holmes."

"I admit it was grave error on my part," said Holmes softly. "How did you find Lotho?"

"I knew the hole he would bolt for, and I knew the dainties Sharkey liked. So I laid a trap for it with the bodies of Lotho's accomplices. As soon as it emerged from the tower I drove it off with a volley, and then dragged Lotho out of his hole. I was not gentle with him, and flogged him to within an inch of his life. The pervert seemed to enjoy it. The rest you can no doubt supply from your own investigation, Mr Holmes."

"Was it strictly necessary to sodomize him with the handle of your own riding crop, Mr Brockhouse?" I asked.

"You do not know what a colossal pervert he was, Mr Bracegirdle. He was so aroused by the strokes I applied to his thighs that he snatched the whip from my hand, and thrust it into his own bottom."

"Then the monster died in the throes of his own, degenerate excitement?" I asked.

"No," said Brockhouse. "He died from the arrow I shot into his privates."

"Monstrous!" said Holmes with revulsion.

He sat for some time in silence. Presently I turned to him and asked: "What are your plans now?"

"To flush out that fiend and burn its nest to the ground!"

"You will need my help to accomplish that," said Brockhouse.

"I was counting on it," said Holmes.

Brockhouse stood up and gripped Holmes' hand. "Tonight, at moonrise, I shall be waiting for you on the causeway; bring your crossbow."

"You can depend upon it," said Holmes.

When our visitors had gone, Holmes re-filled his pipe and handed me his pouch.

"Some fumes which are not poisonous would be welcome change," said he, dropping into his armchair. "I have never loved, Bingo, but if I did, and if that woman was half the woman that Belladonna is, and had suffered so, I might act even as Mr Brockhouse has done."

That evening, as we prepared to face our foe, a terrible scream — a prolonged shriek of horror and anguish, shattered the silence of the night, and trailed off into a shivering wail that echoed over the moors.

"In Eru's name!" I gasped. "The Balrog! The Balrog is come!"

Belinda clutched at me and hid her face on my breast. Peony sank to her knees at my feet, and began to cry hysterically. Holmes sprang to his feet, and I saw his dark, athletic outline at the door of the burrow, his shoulders quivering, his head thrust forward, his face peering into the darkness.

"Oh Eru save us all!" sobbed Belinda.

Holmes picked up his crossbow and slid a bolt into the runnel. "Quiet!" he whispered. The cry burst upon our ears again, nearer, louder, more desperate than before.

“Where is it?” Holmes whispered; and I knew from the tremour in his voice that he, the man of iron self-control, was shaken to the core.

I led Belinda and Peony into the kitchen and told them not to open the door to anyone. Then I locked it and joined Holmes in the porch.

“Where is it?” he repeated.

“There,” said I, pointing toward the ruined tower of Isengard.

Now at last we saw the quarry we had sought so long. A vast, dark shape crossed the face of the moon, beating the air with its bat-like wings. I dropped to my knees and covered my face with my hands. Holmes fired as the shadowy creature stooped and turned, and dropping lower, passed right over our heads with a rush of wind. A terror went before it and a foul reek followed after. Holmes sprang forward, and running swiftly through the garden, leapt over the fence and sprinted toward the causeway. I followed hard at his flying heels. We raced across the broken stones as the winged monster hurtled back to the ruined tower. Holmes dropped to his knee and fired again and again, but the creature swerved and avoided his bolts, and beat its leathery wings to gain height. Suddenly there was metallic clang, and a flash of fire lit up the face of the tower. Again the agonized shriek swept through the night, louder and much nearer than before. And a new sound was mingled with it, like the lament of some tormented soul crying out for release.

“Come, Bingo! Great heavens, the creature is injured, look — it stoops; it falls!”

Blindly we ran through the gloom, blundering against broken flagstones, forcing our way past the twisted branches of the stunted trees that overgrew the ancient road. Suddenly Holmes stopped and peered eagerly into the darkness ahead.

“Can you see anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Hark — what was that?”

A deafening roar smote our ears, followed by the sound of metal grinding against stone. A long, wailing cry came from the tower and then there was silence.

Holmes dashed forward. Directly in front of him the polished stone foundations loomed out of the darkness. At the foot of a great buttress lay some huge, dark form, of man-shape maybe, but greater, and a power and a horror seemed to be in it and about it. Without warning, a tongue of flame erupted towards us, and a noxious black smoke swirled in the air. The dark figure stirred, and once more that hideous cry shattered the night.

“The Balrog!” I cried. “What an evil fortune! We are alone and your quiver is empty!”

“Wait!” said Holmes, holding up his hand.

The form shuddered and lay still. The fire in it seemed to die and the smoke curled out towards us like a vast and grasping claw, terrible and threatening; but even as it reached out, the wind took it, and it melted away into the night. As we stepped forward, the vague, shadowy outline hardened into a definite shape. So grotesque was the attitude of the limbs that I could not for an instant recognise that what lay before us was a man.

Not a moan, not a whisper, rose now from the huge wreck over which we

stooped. Holmes lit his lamp and laid his hand upon its monstrous, bat-like wings, and stepped back with an exclamation of astonishment. The light revealed a mangled framework of twisted metal stays, ripped fabric and knotted ropes, in the midst of which hung the broken body of an orc suspended in a leather harness. An Orc! What an evil revelation! Finally the extent of our folly was revealed to me and I seized Holmes' arm to prevent myself from falling. So this was the fiend that had terrorised the district and baffled the mind of the greatest detective in Middle-Earth?

Holmes stepped closer and reaching up to the creature's horned head, ripped off what I now saw was a cunningly contrived mask from which a long, trumpet-shaped horn projected.

"So that is what made the dreadful cries!" said I.

"It is evidently a similar instrument to the one we found beside Lotho's corpse," said Holmes.

He held aloft the lamp, and its light shone upon something which turned my heart sick and faint within me — the agonized face of a creature that was neither man nor hobbit; its lips drawn back in a rictus of pain and terror, and the shaft of an arrow embedded deeply in its neck. From the wound a thin trickle of blood ran onto its armoured chest, and dripped onto the cold stones at our feet.

"Merciful heavens!" I cried, "what in Eru's name is it!"

"Odo Bolger," said a quiet voice at my elbow.

I started back in astonishment and looked up into the grim face of Milo Brockhouse.

"So it was you that brought the creature down!" I exclaimed, "But how can that thing be Odo Bolger?"

"I assure you it is," said Brockhouse.

"Whatever it is, it is still alive," said Holmes.

I recoiled in horror as the hideous creature flexed its limbs and opened its eyes. Any trace of hobbitness that it may once have possessed had vanished from its bestial face. Foul lesions festered in its shrunken cheeks and pitted the grey skin which was stretched tightly over its bony, hairless, skull. Two glaring, yellow eyes regarded us with malignant fury from beneath its overhanging brows; stained, yellow fangs protruded from its writhing lips, and its hands, sheathed in leather gauntlets, terminated in long, curved claws that twitched spasmodically.

"It lives!" I exclaimed.

"Not for long," growled Brockhouse, fitting an arrow to his bow.

"Wait!" cried Holmes imperiously.

Brockhouse relaxed the tension on his bow but kept the arrow trained on the centre of the creature's face.

"What are you?" Holmes demanded, raising his own bow.

The creature laughed; a shrill, mocking sound that was bereft of any human emotion.

"The great hunter knows. Oh yes, he knows!" The voice sank to a sibilant whisper that froze the marrow of my bones. If the thing had once been hobbit it was so no longer.

"I have told you Mr Holmes," said Brockhouse, "It is Odo Bolger."

"Is this true?" asked Holmes.

“I — I was Odo, once,” rasped the creature. A spasm of pain distorted its face and the yellow fire dimmed in its eyes. For an instant I caught a glimpse of the hobbit it had once been; it had no knowledge of who or what it had become. All it knew was terror, loss, and a limitless darkness in which it walked, utterly alone and forsaken. The moment passed forever, and what had once been Odo, shrivelled, shrieking into the darkness. What remained was altogether evil and filled with malice. Once more the eyes blazed up.

“So this is the great man who meddles in matters he doesn’t understand. Ah! If only you had given me a little more time — detective!”

“What do you mean?” asked Holmes.

The creature licked its lips lasciviously. “Ask Lotho’s whore!”

Brockhouse trembled in every limb and drew back the string on his bow.

“No!” said Holmes, stepping in front of him, “Not yet!”

“Why do you hesitate?” cried Brockhouse “It will not answer your riddles; it knows no human emotion. It can only gloat and mock and curse; it is altogether evil.”

“What did you do with the bodies of those you killed?” asked Holmes.

The creature greedily smacked its lips and laughed.

“Dear god!” I groaned.

“Do you mourn your pretty maidens, little halfling?” it croaked, “Sharkey didn’t eat them all.”

“What do you mean?” asked Holmes in broken voice.

“They are his brides now. Can you guess what strange fruit ripens within their swollen bellies? Sharkey would have filled the belly of Lotho’s whore, too, but the hunter filled it first, didn’t you? Lotho never forgave you for that. Sharkey wanted to eat the dung she spewed from her stinking hole, but in the end he gave it to Lotho to play with.”

The creature coughed, and gout of blood and something fouler, reeking of carrion, erupted from its twisted lips. Holmes staggered back into my arms, his face ashen, his crossbow hanging limply from his nerveless fingers.

“What do you know of my son?” asked Brockhouse hoarsely.

Again the creature laughed and the sound froze my blood. “It made a tasty morsel,” it croaked. “Tis a pity Sharkey did not eat the second dung she spawned! But the filthy whore hid it from us, curse her!”

Brockhouse gave a great cry and his bow twanged. The creature gave a hideous yell and black blood gushed from its forehead.

“S-Sharkey will make you pay for that, little halfling!”

Again the bow sang and two more arrows pierced its neck. The creature expired with a long, shivering moan that echoed through the night and was lost in the darkness.

“Oh the horror!” I cried, sinking to my knees with Holmes’ lifeless body in my arms. “Oh, Holmes, what monstrous evil has been spawned in this dreadful place?”

*Chapter IX**THE SECRET OF THE TOWER*

I was rudely awoken the next morning by a loud hammering on our bedroom door. "Belinda!" I groaned, "Tell whoever it is to go away!" The next thing I knew Holmes himself was shaking me awake with a triumphant light in his piercing eyes, and an ironical smile upon his lips. Belinda awoke with a start and hastily covered herself. Peony was nowhere to be seen.

"Come, Bingo, stir yourself! We're at close grips with our adversary!"

"Adversary" said I, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"Yes!" he cried. "Sharkey; or, if you prefer it, your bashful Balrog!" With that, he flung back my sheets and bounded from the room.

When I had washed and dressed, I found Peony had already prepared breakfast, and what little remained was rapidly disappearing as Holmes helped himself to more toast.

"I say, Holmes!" I expostulated, "leave some for me!"

"The late bird must be content with the crumbs from the table, Bingo," said he cheerfully, spreading marmalade on his toast.

"Tea, Bingo?" asked Peony, sitting down beside me.

I nodded and held out my cup. Then I made a lightning sortie with my left hand across Holmes' right flank, and out-manoeuving him, swept the last egg and remaining rashers of bacon onto my plate.

"Well done!" said he, "You will need those excellent reflexes later."

"You seem uncommonly chipper this morning, Holmes," said I. "What has occurred to put you in such a high humour?"

"Our Balrog has vanished in the night", said he.

"Oh, Eru preserve us!" cried Peony.

"Vanished?" I exclaimed, dropping the rasher that was halfway to my mouth.

Holmes pushed back his plate and wiped his mouth with his napkin.

"I should have thought that would put you in a very low humour,"

"On the contrary," said Holmes, "It means that we have our adversary on the run."

"I do not follow you."

"It was the flying machine that was taken, not Odo's corpse. Its theft can mean only one thing."

"And what is that?"

"That Sharkey means to use it to escape."

"When did you discover this?"

"I was abroad betimes, Bingo," said he, "and revisited the scene of our grim encounter just after sunrise. The island was deserted and the flying machine had vanished. Someone, or something had cut the straps of Odo's harness in the night and left him lying on causeway — a regular orckish trick, so Mr Brockhouse thought."

"Mr Brockhouse?" I asked.

"Yes, he called with the news that the machine had vanished just before dawn."

It was only when I looked up from my plate that I saw that Milo

Brockhouse and Belladonna Bolger were deep in conversation with Belinda in the parlour.

"It seems I have missed more than breakfast," said I.

"Indeed," said Holmes.

"What did you find?"

"There was not enough light to make a thorough examination of the ground, but it was clear that the flying machine had been dragged up the steps and through the front door in the eastern face of the tower. There the trail ended. We think there are other, hidden chambers, because we found a broken rope at the base of one wall. On our way out I looked up, and stepped back just in time to avoid a rock that was hurled at us from one of the upper windows. Mr Brockhouse fired while I was still stooping to retrieve my weapon from the ground. There was a shriek from above, and then silence. Fearing that where there was one assassin, there were sure to be others, we beat a hasty retreat and laid our intelligence before Captain Fairbairn, before returning here to awaken you. We shall have a full day today, Bingo, mark my words!"

I laid down my knife and fork.

"By Jove, Holmes," I exclaimed, "then there is a whole nest of Orcs within that dreadful place?"

"A crèche at any rate, Bingo," said he grimly.

"What a curious thing to say, Holmes. Whatever do you mean by it?"

"That remains to be seen."

I was on the point of replying when Peony gripped my hand and whispered in my ear. "Don't go back to that awful place, Mr Bingo."

"I fear we must, Peony," I murmured, holding her trembling hands in mine. "If there are Orcs there we cannot let them live to continue their evil work."

"Then let the big man go. Why do you have to go?"

The 'big man' looked up and smiled kindly at her. "This is not my affair; Hobbits started it, and hobbits must finish it," said he.

"Mr Holmes is right," I said. "Only we can put a stop to this."

"What do you propose?" I asked him.

"To flush the rats out of their nest!"

"Oh, Mr Holmes!" cried Peony, covering her mouth "Must Mr Bingo go into that dreadful place again? Can you not burn it?"

"Stone will not burn, Peony," said I. "Fire would only drive the rats into some deep pit where we should not be able to get at them."

"Bingo is right," said Holmes.

"When?" I asked him.

"Immediately you have finished your breakfast, Bingo. It is past ten o'clock and I arranged to meet Captain Fairbairn at the tower at eleven."

"Then he is to accompany us?"

"Us?" asked Holmes.

"Surely you do not intend to go alone?"

"No, indeed not, Bingo," said he, with a laugh. "Mr Brockhouse is only too eager to accompany me, but neither of us thought that you would wish to join us."

"I am not a coward, Holmes!" said I.

"I never meant to suggest it," said he, laying his hand on my arm with surprising affection. "But this is not a pleasant ramble, Bingo. We shall be hard put to it to outwit our foe, and even if we do, there is every possibility we may not survive the encounter. I am not willing to risk any life but my own, in so desperate a venture."

"I have never known you to fail in anything that you have put your mind to, Holmes," said I. "If you are prepared to risk your life for us hobbits, I cannot do less."

"Well spoken!" said Holmes. "Now we must prepare. I have modified my crossbow to fire three shots in rapid succession before I need to reload. I hope it may give us an edge. Mr Brockhouse has found you an even more remarkable weapon."

"And what is that?" I asked.

"I will let him show it to you while I collect the remaining essentials we shall require for our expedition."

With that Holmes pushed back his chair and strode to his room.

"Oh Bingo!" cried Peony, flinging her arms about my neck, "Don't go! Please don't go!"

I gently disengaged myself from her embrace, and setting her on my knee, stroked her hair tenderly.

"Mr Holmes knows his business. I have never known him to embark on a course of action unless he was certain of success. We have faced many desperate foes together, and he has always emerged victorious."

"But none like this!" cried Peony, wringing her hands in fear.

"Not a — a Balrog!"

"It is *not* a Balrog," said I. "Did you not hear that we found its wings? It is an Orc or some half-breed goblin that used the flying machine to do its evil work."

"But that is quite as bad," said Peony.

"Hush," said I, kissing her forehead. "I am determined to see this through to the bitter end. Do you think that I would do so if there was no hope of success?"

I heard Belinda's soft footfall behind me and then her arms were around me, and her lips sought mine. "You will not change his mind," said she, quietly, as she knelt beside us. "I know him better than you. He has screwed himself up to go, and go he will."

"Oh, Miss Belinda!" sobbed Peony, clambering from my knee and throwing herself into our housekeeper's arms.

"I cannot bear it!"

"If I can bear it, so can you," said Belinda, with a determined smile. "I am afraid, horribly afraid; yet my heart tells me all will be well. Bingo is not meant to die in that dreadful tower; of that I am certain. I hope it may be in my arms, or in another's who loves him as I do, but I swear to you, Peony, that it will not be in the maws of an Orc!"

Peony swallowed and gazed in wonder at Belinda. "I — I did not know. I am sorry. I — I thought that—"

"You thought that because Bingo has loved you, he must now love me less?" laughed Belinda softly. "Ah, Peony, you have a lot to learn about love; but I do not blame you. You have been ill-used and led into strange paths that

are dark to me. Love is greater than anything you or I can ever learn of it.”

I stared at Belinda in astonishment.

“You are a wonder to me,” I murmured at last.

“And you to me, Bingo,” said she.

“But now we must put aside our wonder and do the deed that lies before us.” With that she lifted us up and kissed me. I embraced her and my eyes followed her as she led Peony into the kitchen. I sighed and stepped into the parlour to greet our visitors.

Belladonna was dressed in green jacket and black breeches and her long, dark hair was tied into a ponytail. A short knife was tucked into her belt and a stout beech staff was in her hand. I gave a start of astonishment as she took my arm.

“You seem to enjoy giving me a fright,” said I.

A rich, liquid laugh broke from her smiling lips. Oh! It was joy to hear her laugh. I could never have believed that the broken creature we had snatched from the very jaws of death could be so quickly transformed into the formidable woman whose sparkling eyes now gazed so confidently into my own. Brockhouse saw my surprise and slipped his arm around her waist.

“Never again shall we be parted, Mr Bracegirdle,” said he.

“Not even by death.”

Belladonna leant against him and smiled.

“Milo has been saying cheerful things like that all morning.”

“You are very brave, madam,” said I.

“Revenge has made me brave,” she replied.

“I see you have brought a new bow with you, Mr Brockhouse,” said I, indicating the magnificent weapon lying on the sofa.

He picked it up and stroked it reverently. “I face a new and deadly foe,” said he. “But I also have something for you.”

“That is a fine blade!” I exclaimed, as he handed me a long, leaf-shaped sword.

A line of intertwined runes ran down the polished blade and the jewelled grip sparkled with an unearthly light.

“It has come down to me through countless generations of my family,” said he. “It is said to be the work of the Men who came over the sea when the world was young. Bright eyed men, and tall, who fought the Dark Lord and banished the darkness from Middle-Earth. Stinger is its name and well merited for it has never failed me yet. Keen is its edge and deep its bite”.

“So I observe,” said I.

“It has one especial virtue.”

“And what is that?”

“It shimmers with a bluish flame when Orcs are near.”

“Remarkable! It seems our strange adventure has carried us back into another age, Mr Brockhouse, when bright-eyed elves still ruled this land and wove their magic spells about the startled eyes of men and hobbits. I have heard it said that our world was a waking dream to them and their dreams a living reality. Is it then so strange that their marvellous weapons could forewarn them of danger when yet there was none to be seen?”

Brockhouse laughed. “You may have it so,” said he, “but Mr Holmes gave a less poetic explanation when I showed him the blade.”

“Oh?” I asked, “and what was that?”

“I believe he called it ‘a simple chemical reaction’, or some such. I am a hunter, sir and do not pretend to understand such things.”

“A simple chemical reaction to subtle changes in ambient odoriferous resonance.” said a voice behind me. “In short, Orcs smell abominably and that remarkable weapon noses them out, Bingo.”

I turned around to see Holmes smiling at us, his crossbow cradled in his arms.

“I prefer my own explanation,” said I stoutly.

“I am in no doubt of it,” said Holmes. “But come, it is nearly eleven and we must hurry if we are not to be late for our rendezvous with Captain Fairbairn.”

He disappeared back into his room and emerged moments later dragging some outlandish wheeled contraption behind him.

“What is that confounded thing, Holmes?” I asked.

“It looks like a wheeled milk churn with a water-pump attached to it.”

“It is wheeled milk churn with a water-pump attached to it,” he chuckled.

“What on earth do you mean to do with it?”

“Surprise our opponent,” said he, picking up his crossbow and making for the door.

I shook my head, took up my formidable sword, and followed him.

The sun was climbing to its zenith by the time our preparations were complete; wispy clouds floated in an azure sky above the snowy peaks of the distant mountains that ringed the southern end of the valley. A shimmering haze lay upon the golden-green slopes that swept down to the lake, out of which jutted the fantastic shape of the black tower of Isengard upon its rocky island. Over the wide expanse of the moor there was no sound and no movement other than the soft footfalls of our feet upon the turf and the heavier tread of the explorer’s horse. The barren slopes we were descending and the still lake below us struck a chill into my heart, which the purpose of our grim mission did nothing to warm. The causeway was empty. But beyond it, ranged in a circle around the base of the tower, I saw the bright spears and helmets of Captain Fairbairn’s hobbitry-at-arms, and in their midst the tall form of their leader, gazing up at the dark windows of the sinister ruin. My heart leaped within me. At last our feet were upon the threshold of the dark lair of our foe, and his secret was within our grasp. As we stepped onto the causeway, and walked warily toward the tower, a great shout went up from the assembled hobbits and Holmes gripped my hand eagerly.

“By thunder,” said he, “they have found something! Come, Bingo, the fiend is within our grasp!” He hoisted his strange contraption onto his shoulders and sprang forward with his crossbow in his hand, and I hurried after him. Brockhouse’s horse neighed and reared up. He drew his sword and with a rush like the sudden onset of a great wind, he swept past us, and galloped down the causeway with Belladonna clinging to his waist.

When I reached the tower Holmes and Captain Fairbairn were gazing up at the doorway, ten feet above their heads. Framed within it was our foe. Suddenly it let out a hideous yell that made the hobbits cover their ears, and

unfurling its vast wings, launched itself at us. Brockhouse lifted his bow and let fly, but his aim was ill-judged and his arrow went wide.

“Sharkey!” shouted a hobbit from behind me, and the others scattered as the winged creature passed right over my head and soared out over the lake. There was deafening roar as a jet of flame erupted from it and ignited the gorse bushes along the causeway. Fairbairn’s hobbits cowered on the ground, but their Captain kept his head, and hurled an axe at the creature as it wheeled about, and prepared to attack us again. The Orc shrieked in rage as the blade tore through its right wingtip and struggled to maintain its flight. The great shadow descended upon us; its vast pinions outspread. Down, down it came, gouts of fire belching from a long tube attached to its scaly chest, and with a hideous yell, settled upon the cowering body of a stricken hobbit, digging in its claws and stooping to devour him.

Brockhouse did not blanch; he stood his ground and fired again as it beat its hideous wings, and his arrow burst into flame as it tore into its scaly chest. Now Fairbairn leaped forward and hewed at its right arm; black blood spewed forth and the claw shored off, and the vast, webbed wing, crumpled to the ground. Out of the ruin of his flying machine rose the Orc, tall and threatening, his yellow eyes ablaze with hatred, his black lips drawn back over his protruding fangs, and with a triumphant yell, he bit the head off the hobbit beneath him. His cruelty maddened me, and stumbling forward, I thrust my blade into his thigh. It was a deadly stroke and the fiend staggered back, screaming in pain. Yet he was not beaten yet, and drawing a curved scimitar from his belt, he bounded towards me, yelling as he came. “You shall pay dearly for that!” cried Fairbairn, rushing to meet him.

A croaking voice answered him: “Pay? I do not think so. It will take more than a squeaking rat from the Shire to hinder me, little halfling!”

His sword whirled out and wrenching back the head of a terrified hobbit that stumbled against him, clove his neck asunder with a single stroke. Suddenly there was a sharp hiss behind me, and I saw that Holmes had ignited his strange contraption, and was pumping the handle with feverish desperation. Lifting it up, he aimed it at the Orc and a long, sinuous tongue of fire leaped towards it.

“Taste the fire of Morgoth!” he cried. The writhing stream engulfed the Orc and its mane burst into crackling flame. It staggered back and fell to its knees, beating frantically at the air. Holmes dropped the flame-thrower and took up his crossbow. The Orc screamed in torment as bolt after bolt ripped into its scaly hide and the leaping flames licked hungrily at its writhing limbs. Then Fairbairn rushed up with his long sword, and with a mighty swing, hewed its head from its shoulders. A long, shuddering cry went up into the air and was swallowed up, and was never heard again in Isengard. Holmes lowered his crossbow and sank down onto the stones.

“It is done,” said he with a weary sigh.

Captain Fairbairn touched him gently on the shoulder. “Will you help us to destroy the rest of this brood, Mr Holmes? Like as not there are more Orcs within.”

“I said I would flush them out of their nest and by Heaven I mean to do it! Said he springing up. “Lead the way, Captain.”

The hobbits soon had the steps secured, and with Fairbairn and Holmes

leading the way, and Brockhouse and Belladonna bringing up the rear, I entered Sharkey's Tooth for the second time. Two Orcs jumped us as we crept stealthily into the old conjurer's chamber. But they were used to intimidating frightened slaves, and were no match for armed hobbits and a grim-faced man. Holmes shot one, and Fairbairn decapitated the other. It was Brockhouse who finally located a hidden door behind a tall cupboard, and we descended a spiral stairway to a second chamber. This was much smaller than the room above it, occupying only a quarter of the circumference of the tower; bounded on one side by two narrow windows, and upon the other by two, bare walls. The walls were faced with the same smooth blocks of black stone as the exterior of the tower, and although Fairbairn examined them carefully, he could find no sign of a hidden door. Brockhouse suggested he give up and start on the floor when Holmes uttered an exclamation.

"By Jove!" he cried, "This section of the wall is hollow!"

Fairbairn tapped it with the hilt of his sword and nodded in agreement. "But where is the entrance?"

"Here!" said Holmes, pointing out a joint that was fractionally wider than its neighbours. "And look," he added excitedly, "There is a bloody handprint just beneath this block. I should not be at all surprised if it is not a concealed lever."

"My word, you're right, Holmes," said I pressing on the wall, which gave a little beneath my weight and widened the joints around it.

"Hold onto my belt", said Brockhouse, "it may be a trap." With that he put his full weight upon the block, and had Holmes not held him back, would have fallen into the hole that opened beneath his feet. Craning forward I saw a large, square opening and a flight of steps leading into the twilight below. A foul stench smote my nostrils. Fairbairn lit his lamps and with Brockhouse leading the way, we descended. The stairs were quite short and led into a broad passage, high enough for Holmes to stand upright in. At one end there was a low arch, and beneath it, a wooden door. No sooner had I set foot in the passage than the door burst open and four huge Orcs rushed us. Wicked-looking scimitars were in their taloned hands and their cruel, yellow eyes blazed with fury. But Holmes was prepared for them, and the first went down with a crossbow bolt in his glaring eye. Brockhouse shot two more as they swung at Captain Fairbairn, and the fourth dived straight for Belladonna. I felt its curved blade part my hair as I ducked, and slashed desperately at its leg. It gave a hideous yell as it bounded past me. My sword bit deep, and the Orc stumbled, and crashing into Belladonna, pinned her to the ground with a triumphant shriek.

"I have the filthy whore!" It croaked.

Belladonna struggled to free her knife from her belt as three more Orcs bounded into the passage. Fairbairn swung round to engage them as Brockhouse dropped his bow, and drew his sword. I lunged wildly at the brute that was astride Belladonna, but it fended me off with its blade, and ripping the front of her skirts, clawed at her thighs.

Now her knife was in her hand and she plunged it into her attacker's chest. But the blade turned on its mail shirt and snapped, and clattered to the ground.

“Milo! Help me!” she cried.

But even as Brockhouse slew the huge Orc who grappled with him, and rushed to her aid, Belladonna’s legs were wrenched apart, and tearing open its filthy breeches, the Orc mounted her with a snarling grunt.

She screamed as the brute clawed at her neck and struggled to free herself as it tried to force itself between her legs.

“Open your stinking hole!” it snarled, “And Gorbag will make you sing a different tune!”

Blue flames erupted from the brute as I plunged my sword deep into its back. It staggered to its feet with a harsh cry as Fairbairn and Brockhouse hewed at it simultaneously. Then Holmes sprang forward and put two bolts through its neck, and it crumpled to the ground and was silent. Brockhouse took off its head with one blow and helped Belladonna to her feet.

“Are you hurt?” I asked.

Belladonna shook her head and smiled grimly.

“I have suffered worse, Bingo,” said she.”

“Yet it was a close call,” said I.

“Let us hope there are no more of the brutes within.”

Stealthily we crept forward and entered the small chamber from which our foes had assailed us. It stank abominably and was clearly used as guardroom of some sort. The light from a small opening in the corbelled roof dimly illuminated two filthy beds and a table littered with plates and bottles. I shuddered to imagine the nature of the scraps of meat that still lay on the plates or the contents of the bottles that had stained the table a rusty brown. Two dead hobbits and another Orc lay against one wall. By the look on their faces and the attitude of their limbs it was clear there had been a fight here.

“They must have been brave lads,” said I, “to take on all these Orcs.”

“At least they died trying to redress the evil they had done,” said Belladonna softly.

“Only two out of so many,” said Brockhouse, shaking his head. “If others had had half their courage Odo would never have been able to carry out his evil work.”

“It is not courage that was wanting,” said Fairbairn, “but sympathy. It was indifference that allowed this evil to take root and flourish in Isengard.”

Holmes held up his hand and cocked his head on one side. “Did you hear that?” he asked. I listened and through another door at the far end of the room came the low murmur of voices. They sounded like hobbit voices; very frightened hobbit voices.

Captain Fairbairn strode to the door and hammered on it with the hilt of his sword.

“Open in the name of the Thane!” he cried.

It was very strong and thick and no answer came to us through it.

“We will have to break it down,” said he.

“What with?” asked Brockhouse.

“Wait!” cried Holmes, and turning on his heel, sprang from the room. Moments later he returned with a bunch of keys in his hand.

“How stupid of me,” said Brockhouse. “It is a guardhouse and the guards must have keys.”

“Quite so,” said Holmes, trying different keys until he found the one that worked the massive lock.

The door swung open with a crash and at first I could see very little. We were in a barrel-vaulted chamber dimly lit by two, narrow windows high in the opposite wall. In the centre of the room crouched two hobbits; one, I recognised as Tom Tunnely, a dissolute rogue who I had seen in Lotho’s company, the other was unknown to me. Both glared at us sullenly. Around them were huddled half-a-dozen women with vacant, staring eyes, clothed in fine gowns that had once been grand, but were now torn and streaked with dirt, and barely covered their nakedness. The women were silent, or sobbed beneath their breath, but Tunnely cried out in a quavering voice: “Mercy! Have mercy on us!”

“Did you have mercy on these wretches?” demanded Fairbairn, pointing to the women.

“We had no choice!” cried the terrified hobbit; “Sharkey made us do it! He said he would eat our wives and children if we did not obey him!”

“Is your wife here?” I asked.

Tunnely shook his head.

“And you?” asked Brockhouse, grasping the hair of the other hobbit and laying his sword across his neck, “What reason can you give us not to slay you?”

In answer the hobbit pushed one of the women forward. “Tell him,” he said, in a croaking voice, “Tell him I’ve been good to you!”

The girl turned to her captor with terrified eyes.

“But he hasn’t been good to me, sir,” she said sullenly.

“Tom only fed me when he wanted to lie with me, and when that no longer pleased him he beat me.”

She lifted up her tattered dress and displayed her breasts and belly to us. They were barred with old scars and fresh, livid wheals. The hobbit cringed as Brockhouse pulled his head back.

“Don’t listen to her! She lies, she lies!” he whimpered.

“It was Tunnely who whipped her!”

“Did you whip these women?” asked Fairbairn.

“No, never!” cried Tunnely, flinging himself at Holmes’ feet.

“Be merciful, master!”

“I find it interesting,” said he, coldly, grinding his heel down on the hobbit’s outstretched hand, “that you should beg for mercy when you have shown none.”

“Sharkey said he was the Dark Lord!” wailed the hobbit. “He said that if I disobeyed him in anything, or tried to escape, he would feast on my living flesh until I died in screaming madness!”

I heard an indrawn breath behind me and turned my head. Belladonna stood at my elbow with tears in her eyes. Other women now got unsteadily to their feet to show us their scars. One pawed at my hand and ground her pelvis against my leg. “Give me wine master, and lie with me,” she pleaded. Another was more brazen, and lifting up her petticoats, proudly showed her scarred belly to Belladonna. “Sharkey himself lay with me. Give me wine mistress, and quench the fire in my belly.”

“Yes! Give us wine!” cried the others “Give us wine!”

"They mean *Lovewort*," said Holmes hollowly. "They are enslaved to it."

"I shook the women off with a shudder, but the one who had spoken last would not be dismissed, and clung desperately to my legs. She stared up at me with vacant eyes ringed with livid blue shadows, her pale lip trembling with excitement, or was it fear? I could scarcely guess; she walked in a hellish nightmare where fear and lust, pain and pleasure, were blended in some twisted way beyond the reach of my thought.

Belladonna stroked her dishevelled hair and lifted her up.

"You are free," she said gently. "Sharkey is dead. He cannot hurt you any more."

"Free?" she murmured, as if tasting an unfamiliar word that had long since lost any meaning for her.

"Yes," she repeated, "We have come to take you home."

"Home?" Some dim comprehension seemed to return to her staring eyes and she reached out to grasp Belladonna's hand. "Home?" she repeated. "Where is that?"

Belladonna talked to her as if she were a child who had just awoken from a bad dream.

"A place far away from here where you will never be afraid or unhappy ever again and where no one will ever hurt you."

"Will Sharkey be there?"

"No, Sharkey is dead. Look!"

She drew the woman away and showed her the bodies of the slain Orcs in the guardroom and the passage beyond it.

A tall, emaciated girl with filthy blond hair, and dark, frightened eyes, now timidly knelt at Fairbairn's feet. "Where are our sisters, lord?" she asked hoarsely.

"Your sisters?" asked Fairbairn.

"Sharkey's brides," explained the girl. "Tom and Bob were kind to Sharkey's Brides. The master fed them from his own lips." There was a curious mixture of awe and terror in her voice, not unmixed with a desperate, lascivious hunger, that sickened me.

"What do you know of this?" demanded Fairbairn, rounding on the hobbit called Tom.

"Nothing! I swear it!" cried Tom.

"He lies!" shouted another girl. "He promised us that if we let him do what he liked with us he would betroth us to Sharkey."

"You have two choices," said Brockhouse harshly. "Answer our questions and I may let you die quickly, if not —"

"There," whispered the hobbit, pointing to a filthy curtain in front of which the remaining women cowered.

Holmes sprang forward and wrenched the curtain aside. Belladonna placed the girl's hand in mine and followed him. Behind the curtain there was another door, secured with heavy, iron bolts. Holmes drew them back and kicked open the door.

"Dear God!" he cried and staggered back with an ashen face.

I drew nearer but he held me back with his arm. "What is it, Holmes?" I cried. "What have you found?"

His voice sunk to a strained whisper.

“The secret of Isengard. Do not look, Bingo!”

A low whimpering came from within, as if some wild animal were in distress, and mixed with it was another sound; a harsh croak trailing away into guttural yelps. Belladonna brushed past me and looked, but said nothing, and covered her face with her hands. Suddenly two small squat figures appeared from behind the door. At first I thought they were children, but their arms were too long for hobbits and their faces were twisted with an expression of fiendish malignity, dreadful to behold. Behind them, on low beds, I caught a glimpse of the bodies of three young women. One was turned toward me; a dirty rag had been stuffed into her open mouth and her swollen belly had been ripped open, downward from the navel, as if with sharp claws; and between her thighs lay a hideous horror whose tiny fingers, sheathed with talons, still clutched at its mother's body. Fairbairn saw her and retched. The girl who held my hand bowed her head and slid, whimpering, to the ground.

“Get the women out, Bingo!” commanded Holmes.

When I hesitated, he pushed the creatures inside and swung the door to with a crash.

“Now!” he repeated imperiously.

Belladonna and I helped the women up the stairs to the hobbits waiting in the chamber above. When we returned Fairbairn was standing in the middle of the floor with his arms at his sides and a faraway look on his face. Holmes stood beside him with his crossbow in his hand. Both the hobbit guards were dead.

“What was in that room, Holmes?” I asked.

“Unspeakable things,” he replied. “But they are dead and the women are at peace. Mr Brockhouse slew them all.”

At that moment the inner door opened and Brockhouse emerged with a bowed head, breathing hard. His face was white and his sword trailed across the floor in his shaking hand. Dark blood dripped from it.

“Mr Holmes,” said Fairbairn, hoarsely. “You are a man and strong. “Will you help us to carry the dead outside?”

I was halfway to the inner door when Holmes put his hand on my shoulder and restrained me. “We can manage, Bingo,” he said gently. “It is the living that need your help.”

It took all my remaining strength to bring those wretched women out of that foul tower. Some, indeed, were loathe to leave it, and clung tearfully to my neck, begging me to give them the drug that had enslaved them, others shamelessly caressed themselves, and with lewd gestures and vile words, invited me to abuse them. None could believe that their long nightmare was at an end, and without Belladonna's constant reassurances I do not believe I would ever have brought them out.

At last it was done and I stumbled out into the blessed light, drawing the clean, wholesome air deep into my lungs. I slipped on the broken steps and would have fallen had Belladonna not caught me in her arms. I opened my mouth to speak but she pressed her fingers to my lips.

“Hush, Bingo,” said she. “Let the tower keep its secret. Some things are too dark to name in the light of day.”

*Chapter X**A MOST SINGULAR HOLIDAY*

Now come rapidly to the conclusion of this singular narrative, in which I have tried to acquaint the reader with those shocking events and vague surmises which transformed our innocent holiday into a terrifying adventure.

On the afternoon of our assault on the tower Mr Brockhouse and Captain Fairbairn burned the bodies of the unfortunate women who had been the unwilling brides of our adversary in a great pyre on the causeway. The Captain did not permit his soldiers or the local hobbits to see the dreadful spectacle, and it was with bowed heads and heavy hearts that Holmes and I watched as Belladonna kindled the flames that consumed the bodies Sharkey had defiled.

I turned to Holmes with an ashen face. "We were too late." I said.

Holmes nodded and passed his hand over his forehead. "The Orcs must have murdered the women while we were searching for the entrance to the guard house."

"The fiend!" I cried with clenched hands. "Oh, Holmes, I shall never forgive myself for having left them to their fate. If only we had pressed home our advantage last night they might still be alive!"

"I am more to blame than you, Bingo. In order to have my case well-rounded and complete, I have thrown away the lives of these poor wretches; it is the greatest blunder of my career. But how could I know — how *could* I know that the secret of Isengard was not the ring of unnatural vice that we uncovered, but this unspeakable evil; to breed a race of creatures that are neither orc nor hobbit? The mind recoils from the very idea of so monstrous a perversion!"

"It might have been worse," said Brockhouse. "If they had not been gagged we might have heard their screams — my God, what screams they must have been! — and yet have been unable to save them!"

Belladonna shuddered as the flames engulfed the pyre.

"Perhaps it is better they are dead," said she softly. "You have only seen the horror of Isengard, and the monsters bred within its evil pits. But had these women lived, their nightmare would have been worse than anything I endured. At least we have spared them that." She hung her head and was silent.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"She means," said Brockhouse, stroking her soft, dark hair, "that they will never have to suckle the filth that was growing inside them and hear it call them 'mother'".

I gazed at the raging fire and cursed the fiend that had brought this evil to the Shire. My head swam and my hands shook. "If we had delayed but a little longer this would have been Peony's fate," I said brokenly.

"And others," added Belladonna.

"I cannot believe that any mother would willingly condemn her daughters to such a fate."

"I do not think they did, Bingo," said Holmes, turning away from the dread conflagration and gazing out over the placid waters of the lake.

“Odo preyed on their greed and lust. Once inured to vice and addicted to his poison it would have been easy to induce these depraved women to part with their daughters in exchange for more of the drug. Neither mother nor child could have known what awaited them here. That secret Odo kept to himself and his dark master.”

“Merciful Heaven!” I cried, “To think that while you and I were taking our ease in our garden such horrors were being perpetrated within a league of our very door!”

“I fear that such is often the way of things,” said Holmes. “Good and Evil are strangely mixed in this world and sometimes the light of the one touches the shadow of the other; yet they know it not.”

“That is very profound, Mr Holmes,” said Belladonna.

“Oh, I would not go so far,” said he with a grim smile, “but it may afford us some small comfort in our hour of grief to know that we cannot right all wrongs. I am grateful that we have not shirked from confronting evil when it was revealed to us, and played some small part in ending it.”

“You are too modest Mr Holmes,” said Brockhouse. “Without your aid we would have stood small chance of vanquishing so deadly a foe.”

On the following morning, Captain Fairbairn’s hobbitry piled the bodies of the Orcs inside the torture chamber that had been the tomb of so many of their victims, and with the assistance of Holmes, who had manufactured a primitive blasting powder, they were burnt in a fiery inferno that raged for three days. When the smoke finally cleared, more hobbits came to root out the poisonous pondweed that infested the shallows of the lake, and only then did Captain Fairbairn begin the work of dismantling the tower, to which I alluded earlier in my narrative, though the task was not finally completed until my grandchildren were full grown. I heard long afterwards that the valley had been drowned and a new town built where our burrow had stood, but neither Holmes nor I ever returned to see it.

On Thursday evening a fresh wind began to blow steadily from the south-west and the noisome smoke that had shrouded the tower finally broke up, and the sun returned to Isengard. Captain Fairbairn called after supper to ask Holmes for a supply of *miruvor*. It struck me as something of an irony, that the very drug which had been the cause of my persuading Holmes to take a holiday, should prove to be the means of curing the unfortunate women we had rescued from the tower. After some discussion, Holmes decided to administer the drug himself, so with Belinda and Peony’s help, I spent the remainder of the evening putting my notes in order. Reading aloud my account of my experiences at the inn inflamed the ladies so much, that we were soon embroiled in an amorous contest which lasted until the early hours of the following morning.

I awoke to the sound of Belinda’s warm laughter as the bright rays of the morning sun were peeping in through the windows. It illuminated her flushed face, tinting the rich coils of her disorderly hair a bright gold, and played upon her heaving bosom. One slender arm lay across my chest and the other caressed Peony with languid tenderness. Suddenly the door burst open and Holmes thrust his head into the room. Belinda coloured and

hastily pulled the sheet over her head. I put my arms behind my head and lay back whilst Peony hid her face in the pillow.

“I do beg your pardon,” apologised Holmes, averting his eyes.

“I was looking for Belinda.”

With a final, embarrassed glance at Peony, he pulled back his head, and shut the door softly.

“Oh dear,” said Peony after he had gone.

“Whatever will Mr Holmes think of me?”

“Nothing that he does not think of me already,” laughed Belinda as she emerged from under the sheets.

“Don’t stop,” murmured Peony sulkily, clutching at Belinda’s hand, “You still haven’t shown me the trick you promised.”

“Oh, that!” said she, and taking the Elvish artefact I handed to her, slipped it deftly between Peony’s parted thighs.

“The stem goes in here and the tip presses against your little bud. Then you must slide it in and out whilst giving the end a gentle little twist.”

“Oh!” gasped Peony, and wriggled her bottom delightedly.

The adorable buds of her jutting breasts quivered as she pleased herself and her rounded belly was soon bedewed with a becoming moisture. A delicious shiver of excitement ran through my limbs as I watched her, and I lost no time in supping greedily on the delicate pink button in the hollow of her navel. But Belinda was having none of it and drew me into her arms.

“Let her be, Bingo,” she murmured, “and attend to me!”

I needed no urging and was soon grazing contentedly on the proud buds of her soft breasts. She sighed languidly, and drew my head down to the flushed skin above the silky, brown fur which graced the lower part of her mount. I had lavished a hundred kisses upon her before she cried out, and clasped my face as I flicked my tongue briefly between her parted thighs. My probing lips parted the moist walls of her temple, and she opened herself to me with a glad cry as I bit down on the swollen crest of flesh between them. It was delightful to see her liquid blue eyes glaze over with voluptuous desire and her mouth widen as I wrung a long sigh from her trembling throat.

“Oh Bingo!” she murmured, “I shall spend myself if you continue.”

“Then I will stop, my beloved,” said I.

“No, please do not stop!”

“Lift yourself up a little my angel,” said I, “So that I may pleasure your bottom too.”

Belinda complied, and slipping my finger into her adorable gulley, I took the quivering tip of her tiny sceptre gently between my lips. My tongue darted into her moist sanctuary in perfect time with my exploration of her bottom, and for nearly half an hour I teased the tender flesh until her urgent cries told me her surrender was at hand.

“I — I cannot bear it,” she moaned, “I am going to spend.”

“Then spend,” I murmured excitedly, “Spend yourself, my angel.”

The sudden eruption of her sweet juices into my mouth nearly made me discharge myself, and I struggled to reign in my impetuous steed. But Belinda’s passion was soon re-kindled, and with an artful pirouette, she drew me deep inside her moist sanctuary. Then Peony spent with such a

shuddering cry that I instinctively thrust even deeper into my darling's delicious temple. Belinda held my face in her trembling hands, and crushed her lips to mine. Our tongues met in a voluptuous kiss that set my blood on fire and I urged my steed into reckless gallop. Peony squealed with delight as Belinda arched her back and locked her thighs about my loins. The intensity of my ardour was too much for my voluptuous nymph, and she began to shake uncontrollably.

"Oh Bingo!" she moaned, "I am spending again!" How my angel spent! Her temple gripped me tightly with an exquisite series of convulsive contractions as her juice anointed me. My steed was slippery with the honey of her passion and my urgent motion wrung long, shuddering sighs from Peony's lips as she caressed my buttocks with one hand and drove herself to another crises with the other.

"Oh Bingo!" cried Belinda; "I shall expire! "Oh my dearest love, oh how I love you!"

"Spend yourself!" cried Peony.

"Yes!" repeated Belinda, "Yes, my love!"

Their desperate cries lifted me to the highest pinnacle of bliss. I crushed Belinda's sweet face to my chest and emptied myself inside her so copiously she spent herself for the third time, and our juices mingled as Peony collapsed onto the bed with a lingering sigh. Trembling with the intensity of our mutual release, we lay back, exhausted, while Belinda flung her arms about me and hugged me to her bosom. It was well after ten o'clock when we three finally emerged, much to Holmes's relief, and apparently none the worse for our marathon contest, though I confess I did feel a trifle weak until Belinda restored my strength with a plate of mushrooms and bacon.

Holmes was somewhat taciturn during our late repast and politely refusing all Belinda's entreaties to share her morning bath, finally pushed back his plate with a muttered oath, and stalked into the garden.

"Really, Bingo!" said he, when I joined him, "You are incorrigible!"

"How so?" I asked.

"That woman is an angel and yet you abuse her abominably"

"What woman?"

"Belinda!"

"Whatever do you mean, Holmes?"

"To use that good woman so after all that she has done for you — for both of us — is simply unforgivable! I grieve me more than I can say to see her happy face smiling upon such an abominable womaniser!"

"Upon my word, Holmes, I have never seen you so aroused!" said I. "But I am still none the wiser as to the cause of your righteous indignation."

"A momentary lapse is understandable, after all you are a hobbit and I know how amorous your kind is, but to bed that insatiable nymph behind Belinda's back is going too far!"

"Ah!" said I with a laugh. "So that is the problem! Peony did warn me, no doubt because she has some experience of the ways of your strange race. But to answer your question, Holmes, it was behind Belinda's front bottom, actually, not her back."

"I beg your pardon?"

“Belinda was in the bed with us. Had you been in possession of your normally acute observational skills, you might have noticed that her dainty feet were poking out of the coverlet, and her left arm was behind my neck.”

“Good gracious!” exclaimed Holmes.

“Peony has nowhere to go and no one to care for her now that her family are dead. Would you have me abandon her to the streets, to go back to her old ways among the scoundrels Captain Fairbairn is still rounding up?”

“No, of course not,” said Holmes, “But do you have to share your bed with her?”

“Peony has never known love, Holmes, only lechery, vice and the whip. Hobbits are not noted for their wisdom. I know that I lack your keen intelligence and refinement of spirit, but Belinda and I did what we thought was best. We have high hopes that she can be healed, and made clean and whole again, and we know of no other way of accomplishing that than by giving her the affection and love she has been denied.”

“My word, Bingo!” exclaimed Holmes, dropping his pipe in amazement. “I am justly rebuked for my temerity! Hobbits really are the most remarkable creatures. I am beginning to deeply regret I did not retire to the Shire years ago!”

“Then Belinda’s treatment has had some effect upon you?” I asked with a smile.

“Can you doubt it?”

“Then you had better hurry or the bath water will be cold, Holmes.”

“By Jove, you’re right!”

“It makes a change to hear you say it,” said I, chuckling to myself. Holmes dashed into the house calling loudly for Belinda to prepare herself for stage five.

After his bath Holmes joined me in the parlour and tossed his pipeweed pouch over to me. “Upon my word, Bingo,” said he, lighting up. “This has been the most singular holiday!”

“Are you referring to the ablutions that have had such a beneficial effect upon your health, or to our remarkable adventure?” I asked.

“Both.”

“Then perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me how you arrived at the solution to the mystery?” I asked.

Holmes lay back in his chair and closed his eyes. “The whole course of events,” he said, “began with a few, simple facts; unremarkable in themselves, but taken together, highly suggestive of a conspiracy which immediately aroused my curiosity.”

“You mean the absence of a motive or a murder weapon? I asked.

“Not at all, Bingo, such circumstances are common to many of my cases. I was referring to three things: the inexplicable umbrella shortage, the sighting of a mythological creature in which I did not believe and the missing camiknickers. There were three other interesting points; the foul atmosphere at the scene of the tragedy, the enormous footprints beneath the library window that led nowhere; and the so-called ‘green slime’ found upon Belladonna’s person. In isolation none of these facts was particularly remarkable, but taken together they told me that we were dealing with an adversary of fiendish cunning who was able to enter and leave the house

without detection.”

“But how did you come to connect these disparate facts together?” I asked.

“Through my discovery of the poison used on Belladonna and her brothers. That is the thread, which runs through the entire mystery. *Lovewort* was the miasma that slowly corrupted the inhabitants of this district until they were so inured to vice that they willingly fell in with Odo and his vile schemes. But until I had penetrated to its complex chemistry and noted its singular effects upon all who came into contact with it I did not realise just how deadly an agent it was, nor how easily its influence was spread abroad.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Holmes opened his eyes and sat up. “The water, Bingo!” he ejaculated.

“Water?” I repeated.

“Yes! *Lovewort* is but a concentration of the deleterious constituents of the pondweed that grows in the lake. Does not the entire district, including ourselves, draw its water from the Lake of Isengard?”

“Great Heavens, Holmes!” I exclaimed. “Then it is an entirely natural phenomenon!”

“Not entirely,” said he. “Undoubtedly the pondweed has infested the lake for some time, perhaps for many centuries, but it is not natural to it.”

“I do not follow you?”

“It was introduced to the lake, Bingo. Of that I am certain. *Hapalosiphon sarumanensis* — or *Lovewort*, is indigenous to only one area of Middle-Earth: lake Nurnen in Mordor.

“Mordor!” I ejaculated. “Then the old conjurer introduced it?”

“No, Odo did, in obedience to his master’s wicked plan. A plan Sharkey did not reveal until Odo and Lotho were enslaved to the drug. Only Sharkey knew how to manufacture the poison. It was he who laid the foundations of their vicious conspiracy. From their point of view it was the perfect weapon; undetectable, or so they thought, and its use aroused little or no suspicion among a people as naturally libidinous as you hobbits — until we arrived, and began our investigations. You must admit, Bingo, that since we came here, you have exhibited a degree of lasciviousness that is excessive, even for such a libidinous hobbit as yourself?”

I blushed and avoided his eye.

I see it all now,” he continued. “It was Odo who first discovered that the tower was inhabited. We will never know what pact was struck between him and the evil creature, or how long it had dwelt within those foetid tunnels, awaiting the time when it could once more emerge into the light of day and spread its evil abroad. Soon, half the district was in league with the Bolgers and their dark master. The zoetrope entertainments which made Belladonna infamous, were simply a cover for their darker activities, as was the use of the inn to lure more victims into their net. There was no form of vice for which those fiends did not cater. Odo and Lotho were happy to indulge their perversions and grow fat on the miseries of the women they abused, until the day they discovered that Sharkey was not content to eat hobbits; but planned to interbreed with them to save his dying race. We can only guess what happened then, but I think we arrived at a critical point. Once Brockhouse had Odo’s account book he was able to shut down many

of their operations, and kill, or drive off many of their accomplices.

The whole, hideous, enterprise was teetering on the brink of ruin, and Sharkey's perverted experiment was doomed. The only hold Lotho still had over his sister was her son, Rollo, but he lost that when she spirited him away into Brockhouse's keeping. Belladonna thought her brothers argued over her fate, but we now know that was not the whole truth. The facts admit of no other conclusion than that the brothers fell out over Sharkey's devilish plan. Drogo certainly refused to go along with so foul a crime and was finally murdered to prevent him revealing it. Belladonna had become a liability and so, she too, had to die. Lotho was too terrified of Odo to resist and so compounded his catalogue of crimes by murdering Mrs Chubb and her daughter Daisy, and trying to murder you. I am still not entirely sure how Odo was able to construct his flying machine, but Mr Brockhouse has given me some additional information that may throw some light on the mystery. It seems it was Odo's father, Brego, who first stumbled on the chamber we visited. There he found the old conjurer's scrolls and note books, and among them the plans for a mythical flying machine."

"Astonishing," said I. "But how was he able to make sense of them?"

"Ah, there I was able to help Mr Brockhouse. Do you recollect my mentioning your Great-grandfather Hugo's book on this area after we interviewed Lotho on the occasion of the first murder?"

"Yes, I do. I believe you said it was in my library."

"Indeed I did — and the title?"

"Among the Orcs of Isengard?"

"Excellent, Bingo! Well, it so happens that Mr Brockhouse remembers your Grandfather visiting Longbottom when he was a lad. He was, as I need not remind you, a most distinguished scholar with a profound knowledge of the ancient tongues once spoken in this area. What is less well known, is that he could read and write the foul language of the Orcs that once lived here. It was this material that he later incorporated into his book which was dismissed as a fantasy at the time, and is still regarded as such by most Shire historians. We now know better. It was Hugo who translated the conjurer's scrolls for Brego Bolger. I have little doubt that both were horrified at what they found. Somehow, Odo learned of their discovery, and knowing his character, we can be fairly certain he tried to get them to reveal what they knew. We must conclude he succeeded, for Mr Brockhouse has told me that he found the remains of two flying machines in one of the many tunnels that honeycomb the foundations of the tower many years ago. I have studied the machine Mr Brockhouse brought down when he killed Odo. The harness was made for a much larger pilot, as were the wings, which is why Odo was able to evade my bolts. It was then that I learned where the umbrellas went; the wings are made entirely from those innocent articles."

"And the fire?" I asked.

"A crude flame-thrower, cunningly joined by a flexible framework to the body of the machine, fuelled by the noisome marsh gas we smelled as Odo flew over us that night."

Holmes sat back in his chair and closed his eyes, his brow furrowed in thought.

"We do not know, but may conjecture from the rumours that circulated

at the time, that there were several unsuccessful attempts before Odo was finally able to build a working prototype.”

“Rumours?” I asked.

“The bashful Balrog, Bingo. It was sighted here long before Odo made his grisly pact with Sharkey. We can only speculate what happened next, but it is not without significance that Brego was killed by a marauding band of Orcs in the very year that Lotho set his sister upon the slippery path that ruined her reputation.”

“So Lotho murdered his own father?”

“Or Odo’s new friends did.”

“New friends, Holmes?”

“Orcs, Bingo. There were Orcs a-plenty here in ancient times, or so your grandfather Hugo believed. Unlike their mountain relatives they were larger and stronger and did not fear the light of day. Moreover, according to Hugo, the old conjurer who once held sway over this district, selectively bred them over many centuries until they were as clever as men and twice as cunning.”

“Astonishing!” said I. “And you believe they have existed here through all these centuries?”

“I did not say so,” said Holmes, knocking the dottle from his pipe. “I rather think that Odo lured them back to the tower, or what remained of their descendants. That would explain the greater concentration of the brutes in these parts until Brockhouse began to hunt them down. It was Odo who murdered his brother Drogo, and tried to murder Belladonna; but it was Lotho who made all the preparations, including the planting of the clues which so nearly incriminated Mr Brockhouse; then they summoned Sharkey to finish their vile work, and throw me off the scent. Lotho walked to the inn as he told us and remained there until the following morning. Odo must have stage-managed his own madness for the benefit of the Doctor and Proudfoot when they arrived on the scene on the morning.”

“Then it was Odo who drove the four-in-hand that passed us on the road, Holmes?” I asked.

“No doubt,” said Holmes, filling his pipe and lighting it. “They probably had an accomplice at the asylum. Indeed, I am sure of it, or Odo would not have been able to finish Drogo off and dispose of the body. Then he slipped back to Sharkey’s End, or to the tower. Our timing was not of the best, Bingo! Had we set off but a few minutes earlier on that fateful Sunday morning we might have caught the scoundrel and saved a good few lives. Plainly it was part of their plan to delay me from the beginning.”

“One moment!” said I. “You have, no doubt, described the tangled threads of this mystery correctly, but there is one point that still puzzles me: why did Lotho involve us at all? Why not simply let Proudfoot deal with the first murders? Who would have been the wiser? After all, it was by no means the worst case we have ever encountered; one dead woman and two deranged brothers might have been quietly hushed up in a spot as isolated as this?”

“Really Bingo, your capacity for straining and gnats and swallowing camels never ceases to surprise me! Their business was in ruins, Mr Brockhouse was hot on their trail, Belladonna had betrayed them by

spiriting her son away; and Mrs Chubb and her daughters were on the point of turning the whole gang in to save their own necks. Once they knew that I was not going to be taken in by a nonexistent Balrog, what else could they do, except to try to foist the blame on the very hobbit who was ruining their infernal enterprise, and hope that in taking the bait, I would dispose of him for them?"

"I am still not sure how you connected the murders with a conspiracy to corrupt the entire district and breed a new race of Orcs?" I asked.

"I think I can answer that," said Holmes, putting the tips of his fingers together.

"I had hitherto believed that we were dealing with straightforward murders, albeit with a most perverted and unsavoury sexual element, but when Lotho was killed, I saw that I have been taken for a fool by a foe I had gravely underestimated!"

You — a fool? I cannot believe it, Holmes!" I exclaimed indignantly.

"Even I have my weaknesses, Bingo and pride is not the least of them!" retorted Holmes bitterly. "The key was before my very eyes from the first but I refused to acknowledge it."

"What ever do you mean?" I asked.

"That hideous tower, Bingo! Did it never strike you that it is the source of all the evil in this district? Why, the thing is nothing less than a monstrous phallus spewing its miasmatic poison into the atmosphere! From thence came the foul drug that was the bait that Odo and Lotho employed to enslave their victims; from thence came the flying machine disguised as a Balrog that terrorized the district, and then we learned that those who dwell there fed on human flesh; but to what end? That was the question I wrestled with in vain until Lotho was murdered. Once I understood the ithyphallic significance of the tower it all became clear to me."

"Then I wish you would explain it, for it is not at all clear to me."

Holmes blew out a cloud of smoke and chuckled. "That does not surprise me in the least, Bingo. You hobbits are such libertines in your relations with one another that it naturally escaped you that there is another, less puerile purpose, for the libidinous urges that you so enthusiastically gratify at the drop of a camiknicker; procreation, my dear Bingo, procreation! An orc must eat, and no doubt it prefers the flesh of well-fed hobbits to the scrawny creatures that inhabit the mountain fastnesses that are its ancient home, but why should it crave nubile and lithe-limbed young hobbit maids?"

"By Jove!" I cried, "how absurdly simple!"

"Quite so," said Holmes.

"Then you knew the truth even before Milo Brockhouse killed Odo?"

"Knew is perhaps too strong a word; but it seemed the only plausible explanation. As I have often told you, when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Breeding with hobbits to create a new bastard race to overrun Middle-Earth seemed, and still does seem, highly improbable; yet not impossible. When I learned from Brockhouse that the Orcs had no females and were dying out I was compelled to accept that improbability as a fact; however unsavoury. A fact reinforced by Odo's revelation about Sharkey's brides and the strange fruit that they were carrying. Once we found those wretched women the fact

became an established truth. Finding the three brides and the hideous offspring of their dead sisters was merely a confirmation of what I already knew. And now, my dear Bingo, that our most singular holiday is at an end, we may, I think, turn our minds into more wholesome channels."

"What did you have in mind, Holmes?" I asked.

"Luncheon, then sunbathing."

"Sunbathing?"

"Well perhaps sunbathing, is not strictly correct. I have a fancy to watch the ladies sunbathe whilst we smoke a pipe or two in the garden."

"By Jove, Holmes!" I exclaimed, rising eagerly from my chair, "You have come on apace! Sunbathing, eh? I've never heard it called that before!"

After lunch we four repaired to the garden. The sun blazed from a cloudless sky and the lake shimmered like a multicolored jewel beneath us. It was the hottest day of our holiday and Holmes and I had stripped to shorts and were taking our ease, and Belinda and Peony were reclining on a blanket on the grass at our feet, when I heard our gate click, and looked up to see Mr Brockhouse and Miss Belladonna walking up the path. I was on the point of rising from my deck chair to warn the ladies to cover themselves to save Holmes any embarrassment, when he pushed me back into my chair with a languid gesture.

"Oh come now, Bingo!" said he with a chuckle, "Let us have no false modesty among friends. If our delightful nymphs are not ashamed of displaying their graceful curves to our appreciative gaze who are we to deprive our visitors of so charming a view?"

"Quite right," said Brockhouse with a laugh.

"Well really, Holmes," I retorted, "I never thought to hear such fullsome praise from the lips of a confirmed misogynist!"

"Misogynist, Bingo?" said he, turning towards me with an air of quiet amusement.

"Well, prude, then," I added.

"I fear you are mistaken on both counts," said Belladonna, sitting down on the grass beside Brockhouse.

"I am?" I enquired.

"Indeed," said she, with a rich laugh. "If you had not had your nose buried in your note books these past four days you might have noticed that Miss Chubb and Mr Holmes have become exceedingly close."

"You might also have noticed them taking long walks on the moors," added Brockhouse.

"Ah, you rogue!" I cried, rounding on Holmes, "You should have been an actor. Only this morning I saw you fiddling with your damnable syringe; you looked decidedly weak, and had that melancholic glint in your eye which is always the precursor to one of your enervating bouts of self-indulgence."

Peony stifled a giggle, and drew a corner of the blanket over her thighs. It was a pointless gesture and only served to provoke Holmes to shamelessly caress her bosom with his naked foot.

"I see that the science of detection still continues to elude you, Bingo," said he mischievously.

"I was 'fiddling with the syringe' as you so charmingly put it because I had just given Belinda and Peony an injection of *miruvor* — no, do not object, my dear hobbit; it was a prophylactic dose to immunize them against the effects of the pondweed in our water supply. You may recall I gave you the same treatment on Monday after we returned from the tower. The glint in my eye, and the weakness you thought you perceived, were entirely due to the importunate demands of this adorable young lady, who, as you will observe, is even now, attempting to provoke me by her amorous manipulation of my foot."

"In one thing at least, Holmes, you have not changed," I exclaimed.

"And what is that?"

"Your perfectly irritating closeness! You might at least have told me that you and Peony had become lovers."

Holmes drew Peony up until her smiling face was cradled between his knees and stroked her hair tenderly. "What?" said he, "and give you the satisfaction of imagining you had cured me of my indisposition?"

"Have I not?"

"You had better ask your housekeeper that."

"Well?" I asked, turning to Belinda, "is he cured?"

"I am not sure about 'cured', said Belinda mischievously, "but Peony and I both agree Mr Holmes is exceedingly well hung!"

Belinda's shoulders began to shake, Belladonna clutched at Brockhouse and Peony burst into fits of giggles. Holmes slid from his chair convulsed with mirth. Presently, all six of us were rolling on the grass, writhing in uncontrollable laughter.

"Well, really!" I ejaculated, wiping my eye; "I had no idea you had come on so far, Holmes. You are more of a hobbit than any of us. If you go on at this rate you will be teaching me next!"

"Are you sure you are ready for stage six, Bingo?" asked Belinda.

"Stage six?" I spluttered. "There were only ever three stages in the treatment Dr Rogerghast prescribed for him."

"I am aware of that," said Holmes, struggling to contain his mirth, "Though you may recall that I introduced Belinda to a fourth stage which involved standing on one leg."

"Yes, we tried that, thank you Holmes, though I confess I found it a little too energetic for my build, though Belinda seemed to like it."

"Then it is probably just as well that I have not put you in touch with the complexities of stage six."

"What happened to stage five?" asked Belladonna.

"We skipped it," said Belinda.

"Skipped it?" I asked.

"It involves the use of a skipping rope and the second of the three elvish artefacts that you are so fond of, Bingo," said Holmes.

"Dash it all, Holmes!" I exclaimed, "Will you leave me no credit for your cure?"

Holmes shrugged his shoulders. "You have only yourself to blame, Bingo. You of all hobbits should have anticipated that the fair sex are our superiors in ingenuity and curiosity."

"Well said, Mr Holmes," said Brockhouse, setting his arms about

Belladonna. "But you might also add courage."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said she. "We are courageous in defence of those we love, none more so, but I do not think we possess the courage to do what Mr Holmes and Mr Bracegirdle have done to destroy the horror of Isengard. But we did not come here to dwell on that, but to invite you to our wedding next Saturday."

"How lovely!" said Peony, springing up, and climbing onto Holmes' lap. He plucked a hyacinth from the grass at his feet and wove it into her golden hair. She giggled and shyly kissed him on the cheek. "I can think of no greater pleasure than to witness the joining of two such inestimable hobbits," said he warmly, "but it will mean extending our holiday, Bingo, and delaying the publication of your sensational account of our adventures."

"Very droll, Holmes," said I. "I do not think the world is ready to hear so shocking a tale, and doubt that it ever will be."

"Perhaps not," said Belladonna with a laugh, "yet I think you will publish it, Bingo, if only to prove to the world how you solved the case of the misogynistic detective."

"The world would never believe it," said Holmes with a chuckle. "My aversion to women is too well established in the minds of Bingo's readers to ever be dispelled by a blow by blow account of the ministrations of his housekeeper and my amorous contests with the adorable wood nymph who has crept into my bower."

"Oh, Mr Holmes," sighed Peony, nuzzling his chest, "you say the most romantic things."

Belinda smiled at her and rising from the blanket, turned to Belladonna. "Will you stay for supper?" she asked.

"We would be delighted," said Brockhouse.

"Should we not undress first, Milo?" said Belladonna playfully, "I would not wish to insult our hostess by breaking with tradition."

"That won't be necessary," laughed Belinda. "We are not in the habit of dining in the nude and Peony and I only got undressed because it has been such a hot day."

"I predict it will get a lot hotter after the sun goes down," said I.

Peony giggled and kissed Holmes affectionately on the cheek. Our meal was a merry one. Holmes could talk exceedingly well when he chose, and that evening he did choose. Peony's presence at his side and the adoring looks she favoured him with, seemed to fill him with a passionate exaltation that infected us all. I have never known him so brilliant, or so profoundly happy. He spoke on a quick succession of subjects - on elvish poetry, on Numenorian architecture, on violins, on the art of love, and on the flying machines of the future that would carry hundreds of hobbits halfway around the world - handling each as though he had made a special study of it. For myself, I felt elated to be in such scintillating company, and delighted in the happiness of our two visitors whose eyes rarely left each other's faces.

When the cloth was finally cleared, Belinda stood up and put her arms about me, and called for silence. Holmes laid down his napkin and every eye was turned toward us. "There will be two weddings next Saturday. Bingo

asked me a question this morning to which I would not give him an answer at the time.”

I began to object, but Belinda pressed her hand over my mouth and then embraced me tightly.

“My answer is yes!” she said breathlessly and before I could restrain her, drew me to her, and pressed her lips to mine.

“Well!” said Holmes, rising from his chair. “It appears that I shall require the services of a new housekeeper. Would you be interested in filling such a position, Miss Chubb?”

“Oh, Mr Holmes!” said Peony, blushing to the roots of her pretty, blond hair, “I - I would be honoured!”

THE END

ENVOI

By Mr Sherlock Holmes

My friend, Bracegirdle has made much of the fact that I am averse to the fairer sex, or indeed, as he has put it more than once, *any* sex. This is not altogether true, to which my deeply enjoyable encounters with the adorable Miss Chubb that Bingo has alluded to with commendable discretion, plainly testifies. Nevertheless, I am compelled to admit that I do not altogether trust women, and find the physical relations in which Bingo so evidently delights, too transitory a pleasure to compel me to seek them out at the expense of the deeper joy attendant upon the profound exhilaration to be derived from the solution of some intricate problem to which all my mental energies have been bent for many weeks, or months at a time. Such emotions last for hours or days with me, and are not to be compared to the shallow enjoyment of the lover who basks in his brief moment of rapture after his passion is spent. I am aware that this is a most singular conceit which Bingo's readers may find perplexing and possibly abhorrent, but I feel compelled to set it down.

Having taken my pen in my hand, I do begin to realise the difficulties my biographer must have encountered in presenting the matter in such a way as to hold the attention of his readers, whilst withholding certain clues that might reveal the mystery before its proper conclusion. Had he not done so, his readers would have learned much earlier, as we did, that it was Odo, and not the ridiculous Balrog that rescued his brother Lotho from the Lockholes, and that it was Odo who, disguised as the mythological creature, put the fear of god into the unfortunate Mrs Chubb the day before I interviewed her. But that would have spoiled the denouement when we finally unmasked our foe on the causeway of 'Sharkey's Tooth'.

A more regrettable omission is my biographer's signal failure to mention earlier the miasma that infected the waters of Lake Isengard, and from which the inhabitants drew their water. When I twigged him about it, he retorted somewhat indignantly that he had mentioned it in chapter three, when, in answer to my observation that I wondered if all the inhabitants of the district were not entirely degenerate, he rejoindered that it might be due to the mephitic influence of the old tower in the lake. My response to that defence is that it would take a very attentive reader to infer that the inhabitants' predilection for unnatural practices was due to an influence so tenuously stated. Bingo argued that hobbits were by nature exceedingly amorous and the point required no further elucidation. Miss Chubb was undoubtedly the most conspicuously libidinous female I have ever encountered, though I mean no discourtesy by it, and I shall always retain the fondest regard for her affectionate nature. Perhaps Bingo is right: hobbits are simply sex-mad by nature, but I remain unconvinced that he gave this important point sufficient emphasis in his account of our

adventure. There I must leave the matter, and trust to the intelligence and discrimination of his readers who are, no doubt, better able to judge these matters than a confirmed misogynist like myself!

I would take this opportunity to remark that if I burden myself with a companion in this present mystery, it is not done out of sentiment or caprice, but because Bingo has some remarkable abilities of his own to which in his modesty he has given less attention than they deserve amid his exaggerated accounts of my own performances. An example of this is our discovery of the box in the tower from which Brockhouse had stolen Lotho's secret ledger. It was Bingo who found the box and not I, and it was Bingo who correctly deduced the nature and significance of the missing item. All in all I cannot bring myself to blame him for his aberrations. He has most faithfully recorded what I have no doubt will be remembered as one of the most remarkable cases I have ever undertaken.

I cannot conclude this memorandum without reference to one glaring omission in Bingo's record of our adventures which I feel it incumbent upon me to correct, if not for myself, then for sake of Miss Beaverburrow, who expresses in her person and in her mind, the perfection of the compassion and instinctive intelligence of her sex. It was she, and not we, who from the first perceived with intuitive genius that Lotho and Odo Bolger were the criminals at the centre of the vile conspiracy we unmasked. Never for one moment did she entertain the slightest doubts as to Brockhouse's innocence nor the nobility and decency of Belladonna Bolger. Bingo has made much of the intimacy between myself and his remarkable housekeeper, no doubt to pander to the more prurient tastes of his audience whom he fondly imagines share his enthusiasm for such things, and I do not blame him for it. But the truth of the matter is that whilst Belinda did indeed open my eyes to a freer expression of those urges which my race is apt to suppress on the one hand, or grossly indulge upon the other, our keenest enjoyment was derived from the sympathy of our minds, and not our bodies. If I emerged refreshed and renewed from our daily bath it was because her keen intelligence had grasped some emotional nuance in the manner of our many visitors that immediately suggested some new avenue of research to me. Such, indeed, was the case with Mr Brockhouse, who she recognised with that breathtaking intuition which requires no material facts to sustain it, as utterly incapable of the murder of the woman who was his very life and soul. It is with the greatest pleasure that I end this epilogue with the joyful intelligence that Belinda and Bingo were married upon the very day that I had the inestimable privilege of giving away Miss Belladonna Bolger to Mr Brockhouse. No social duty has ever given me greater joy.

Sherlock Holmes

THE CASE OF THE BASHFUL BALROG

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The Case of the Bashful Balrog is her first attempt at a full-length Novella which combines her interest in the mythology of J R R Tolkien and the detective mysteries of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

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