

The Macabre on Quimby Square
By
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How precious are the memories of a privileged girlhood. When the House of Lords was in session, Mother and I would accompany Lord Rockingford from his ancestral estate at Rockingford on Quimby to Quimby House in London to help ease his transition from country lord to passionate advocate for aristocratic causes. Mother, who was in service, often left me alone in the evenings, whilst she awaited Lord Rockingford's return from his club in the event he desired a hot toddy or other refreshment. Our room was on the third floor overlooking Quimby Square.

Like a sailor high upon the mast, I watched for the carriage lights that would signal His Lordship's return. Across the Square loomed the black, unlit bulk of Jaeger House, where in my childish fantasies I imagined all sorts of evil things dwelt. When I stared at it long enough, the façade emitted a pin prick of light, as if some monster were peering out for its next victim.

Of all seasons, I particularly enjoyed the opening of Parliament, which happily coincided with Guy Fawkes Day. How I thrilled to hear the story of the doomed conspirator on that long ago November 5, 1605, packing the basement of Westminster Palace with gunpowder to blow up Sovereign, Lords, and Commons at the opening of Parliament, only to be captured just before he could strike the fatal match. Lord Rockingford always gave me sparklers to wave from the window as we watched the bonfire in Quimby Square celebrating the discovery of the Gun Powder Plot.

What to an adult is sordid to a child is magical. Looking out the window on a November evening, watching the moving shadows in Quimby Square blend and merge

with those of the trees and shrubs, I thought of the faerie tales Mother and once even Lord Rockingford himself had told me. Yes, there were creatures dark and bright who inhabited our world, awaiting just the right moon or convergence of the stars to come together. The stars had missed for poor Guy Fawkes; perhaps they would align for me.

During the day, when I was not at school and Mother was performing some necessary service for His Lordship, I watched nannies pushing trams along the raked gravel paths or sitting talking on the benches. When they were nearest to Jaeger House, however, that colonnaded monument seemed to compel their attention, as if something malign might be watching from behind its curtained windows. Caked with the smoke and coal dust of generations, the façade appeared as if it had survived an ancient conflagration.

My one regret was that Mother did not allow me to play in Quimby Square. She would never say the reason. Cook, however, told me there were rumors about children disappearing.

“How can a child disappear?” I wondered.

“Some say the Macabre on Quimby Square carried them off.”

Now in the 1920s, children were always disappearing, at least according to their mothers and nannies and cooks. Sometimes, it was learned later, they had fallen into an old cistern or coal bin, or tried to cross the railroad tracks when the express was running a few moments early, or had wandered into a gypsy encampment never to be seen again. The best way to prevent such a disappearance, Cook assured me, was always to hold tight to Mommy’s hand and to avoid unsavory persons.

“What is an unsavory person?” I asked.

“You have a lifetime to find out,” she replied, ending our conversation.

What is it that so draws a child to the hidden and the strange? At the age of seven, I decided to test Cook’s and Mother’s warning. In all my days staring out the window at Quimby Square, I had never seen a cistern or a coal bin or even a single gypsy, and I could not imagine what an unsavory person might be. So after school one fine November afternoon, when all the children had been talking happily about building bonfires for Guy Fawkes Day, I slipped away from Quimby House and walked into the Square.

Have you ever entered a space all your own, knowing that you have wandered through it so many times before in forgotten dreams that every inch is familiar? Delightedly I wandered about, sometimes walking, sometimes running, sometimes skipping through the gravel, waving at the babies and smiling at the nannies. I did notice that the nannies were not as well dressed as one would expect for a public promenade, but perhaps today was their wash day. My only surprise was when I glimpsed something limp and sallow underneath one of the bushes, as if a tiny bunny had shed a synthetic skin and hopped away. I bent down to examine it closer.

“Don’t touch that!” called one of the nannies, a big boned woman pushing two carriages.

I withdrew my hand and fled. Without knowing where I was going, I suddenly found myself on the steps of Jaeger House. The massive portico covered a dark porch that smelled like a cave where pools of stagnant water spawned blind and poisonous reptiles. Unlike Quimby House, there was neither iron fence nor doorman to shoo away vagrants and curious children. I climbed the steps slowly, wondering how long the leaves would build up until someone swept them.

At each step the Square behind me receded farther away, whilst the huge doors loomed larger and larger. What could be drawing me there? At the back of my mind I heard music, the music of faerie kings singing of the conquest of toads. Another step, then another, and then I could hear it clearly: trumpets and a woman shrieking as if she were riding in a chariot drawn by dragons. I was so entranced that I did not notice that the door had swung open until I was nearly inside.

“I was about to have tea,” a kindly voice said. “Will you join me?”

Towering above me was a tall gentleman, elegantly attired in a smoking jacket much like the one Lord Rockingford wore when he came upstairs to visit Mother and they shooed me away to Cook. Like Lord Rockingford, he had graying hair and a kind and engaging smile. Such men have always been dear to me. I cannot imagine what he thought seeing a blue eyed child with auburn hair suddenly appear on his doorstep.

“First tell, me, Sir, are you the Macabre of Quimby Square?”

“Most certainly not,” he protested. “I doubt such a creature exists apart from the tales of nannies and washwomen.”

“Are you a gypsy, Sir?” I pursued my inquiry.

“Of course not, dear child,” he cried.

Mother and Lord Rockingford always said that one must accept a gentleman’s word except, Mother would add when we were alone, in certain matters. So I followed him into a hall lined with lances and helmets and cuirasses hung like a hunter’s trophies on the walls. It was all very exciting and strange, and I wondered why the gentlemen had not installed electric lights to help the visitor admire his collection. The farther we went, the closer the music came, until we were in a two story library with glass fronted

bookcases rising so high that they could only be accessed by sliding ladders hung along the walls.

Suddenly a loud shriek took my breath away. If I had not been so scared, I would have turned and fled.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “It is only the phonograph.”

He led me to a table where a phonograph record was spinning helplessly on a turntable, the needle having slipped from the last groove into the center. He lifted the arm, turned the record over, and again the sound of orchestral battles filled the room.

“Do you enjoy Wagner?” he asked, pulling the bell chord and motioning me to the huge couch beside his desk.

So I sat down, crossing my ankles exactly the way Mother had taught me and hoping my pinafore did not bunch up. I was struggling to find something to say when his man brought the most delicious assortment of sandwiches and cakes and the most extravagant silver tea service I had ever seen.

“My ancestors brought it from Hanover when the Prince Elector ascended the throne as King George I,” he said, seeing my admiration. “Now, dear girl, enjoy some *Kuchen*.”

Even Lord Rockingford could not boast of such a close connection to the monarchy. My mouth was so full and my excitement so great that I was unable to continue that polite conversation that is the mark of a person of quality.

“Whatever can *Kuchen* be?” I said when I had recovered myself.

“Another name for cake,” he laughed. “Each time you come to tea, I shall teach you a new word.”

I had never had such an afternoon: so much cake that I spoiled my dinner, and more about a German composer and his operas than I ever knew existed. At one point, when he was bending over to change the record, I saw a little telescope on his desk. It was pointed toward a break in the curtain at the front of the library. I was about to inquire whether he could see the porch with it, but he suddenly turned, announced that he must dress for dinner, and I must be home.

“Do return, dear girl,” he said. “I can see that you and I are kindred spirits.”

Descending the steps I looked back and saw a little wink of light through one of the windows, confirming the gentleman’s ingenious mechanism to survey his estate from the privacy of his library. It was only then I realized that I did not know his name.

Elated and exhausted, I returned to Quimby House only to find the door to our apartment locked, and neither Mother nor Lord Rockingford inclined to answer my knocking. When they finally let me in, Mother had fixed him a whiskey from a bottle she kept for such occasions.

“A question, Sir,” I said. “Who lives in Jaeger House?”

“What a thing to ask,” exclaimed Mother.

“Sir Parsifal Jaeger,” he laughed. “Why do you ask?”

“Knight or baronet?” I continued.

“Baronet, and damned lucky he still is after what has transpired.”

“Really, Sylph, that is quite enough,” Mother said, ending my inquisition but not my investigation.

Nothing excites a child’s curiosity more than being told not to inquire into a forbidden subject. Several days later, whilst Lord Rockingford was at Parliament arguing

for repeal of The Catholic Emancipation Act and Mother was resting with one of her headaches, I returned to Jaeger House. Before I could knock, the same kindly voice greeted me, and I followed Sir Parsifal to his library.

“I have not been properly introduced, Sir Parsifal Jaeger,” I said, declining his invitation to take my place upon the couch.

“And who might you be, dear child?”

“Sylph.”

“Just Sylph?” he said, as if he found that unusual.

“His Lordship once said that he may acknowledge me some day, but I have no understanding whatsoever of what that may mean.”

“Do you speak of Lord Rockingford?” he said, apparently quite amazed.

“Lord Rockingford of Rockingford on Quimby.”

“Then you must be seated, dear Sylph, whilst I ring for tea.”

Again his man brought such cakes and cookies as might be from a faerie’s kitchen. So, like any young lady of quality, I took my place on the couch.

“Here, Sylph,” Sir Parsifal said, offering me the most beautiful piece of chocolate cake one could ever imagine. “Try a *Sacher Torte*.”

I had never experienced something so delectable.

“Have you attended His Majesty?” I finally asked, remembering as Mother had taught me that tea is more for polite conversation than for sweets.

“Alas, I have not,” Sir Parsifal said, looking sadly away.

“But you must have performed important services for the crown,” I protested.

“Indeed I have, dear Sylph. Now it is time for you to be home. I am devoting this evening to my scientific researches.”

Several days later, I found Lord Rockingford in our little sitting room, amusing himself with a whiskey soda until Mother returned from some errand. This, I thought, was an ideal time to inquire again into the life and character of our neighbor across the Square.

“Tell me, Sir,” I asked him. “Is some unfortunate event associated with Sir Parsifal Jaeger?”

“Damned fool blotted his copy book in India in ’12!” he exclaimed. “Jaeger commanded the Ladamivar Rifles, the only first rate native regiment we had. For the first time since Sir Charles Napier, he cut off the bloody Pashtuns in the Khyber Pass and had them surrounded. All he needed to do was to blast them to hell with his mountain guns.”

Never had I been so excited. Sir Parsifal was a hero!

“What, pray tell, is so wrong with that?”

“Why, the damn fool let them surrender,” Lord Rockingford sputtered. “He had them in the bag, and he let them out again!”

Had I been more perceptive, I would have learned then that mercy in war is not to be tolerated amongst the advanced nations.

Lord Rockingford was so distraught that I had to make him another whiskey soda to recover himself.

“What happened next?” I asked, fearing the answer.

“Relieved of his command, of course, and sent home with no hope for another just as the Great War began.”

So Sir Parsifal Jaeger, one of England's few soldiers capable of maneuvering troops in the field, was dismissed from the service just when the need for such officers was greatest.

"They say he has not left Jaeger House since his return," Lord Rockingford added.

Just then Mother arrived, surprised to find His Lordship waiting, and asked me to "run along" until she and he had conducted some necessary business. I hurried across the Square to Quimby House.

"Dearest Sylph, you flatter me with your presence," Sir Parsifal cried, throwing wide the door.

"Do you have a tiger's head to show for your adventures in India?" I asked after we were seated in the library.

"Alas, I could never force myself to participate in blood sport," he said.

"Is that not a defect in a soldier?"

"I thought not, but events have proven me mistaken."

His man appeared with a tray of pastries and the same enormous tea service.

"Today I shall introduce you to *Schnitten*, dear girl," Sir Parsifal said, offering me the most delectable *petit fours* I had ever tasted.

Moments passed until I could recover myself.

"Is it true, Sir Parsifal, that you have not left Jaeger House since your return from India?"

"Let us never prejudge what the future may hold, dearest Sylph," he answered softly.

So I continued to visit that unhappy man and gradually increased my German vocabulary beyond pastries and food to the conjugation of irregular verbs and the most abstract philosophical speculations. I kept a notebook at my bedside, lest I lose an important thought that came to me in the night. Indeed, my teachers were much amazed that a child who struggled with elementary French could read Rilke with such enthusiasm. I fear I was the only girl who could recite from Goethe's *Ossian*, the detritus of many happy hours reading that splendid text aloud to Sir Parsifal as he lounged on his couch.

Nevertheless, I was frustrated that Lord Rockingford and Sir Parsifal appeared implacable enemies. Lord Rockingford, too, had sat out much of the Great War, not from some perceived military impropriety but as the Kaiser's houseguest in his palace at Sans Souci. One glorious fall afternoon in Flanders, Lord Rockingford had spied the Kaiser and his entourage passing behind the German lines and led the doomed charge of the Rockingford Hussars to capture him. As His Lordship so elegantly phrased it, he had hoped "to end the War before tea." Happily, the Kaiser never resented the attempt. Despite a feat that had not been seen since the days of knightly chivalry, Lord Rockingford became the subject of scandalous speculations concerning his devotion to crown and country.

One afternoon, whilst Sir Parsifal was tuning the new wireless that he had installed in the library and I was nibbling *Oblatten*, those delightful chocolate covered wafers, I asked him why he and Lord Rockingford were not reconciled, given their common admiration of the German nation.

“I have given that much consideration,” he replied. “The problem is that Lord Rockingford stands for the old Germany, and I for the new.”

Just then a roar like the end of a football match emitted from the wireless. Sir Parsifal sat back satisfied.

“Tell me if there are any words that you do not understand,” he said.

That is how I first heard Adolf Hitler address the German people.

As my friendship with Sir Parsifal progressed and my knowledge of the German language grew, I often read aloud to him from the great German philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Spengler, and Martin Heidegger. He was particularly impressed with Werner Heisenberg, because he shared common research interests with the great physicist. Although he had occasionally referred to his researches, Sir Parsifal had not disclosed their subject to me.

“Sir Parsifal,” I inquired one afternoon when he appeared expansive. “Pray tell me what your research interests may be.”

“Dear child,” he exclaimed. “I am perfecting a new method to refract star light. I judge myself on the verge of a great accomplishment.”

“How thrilling.”

“Come, allow me to show you.”

Arising, he led me out of the library to the grand staircase, which I had never before ascended. Portraits of his ancestors, all bewigged and dour in their robes of office, lined the walls. Then up another, smaller flight of stairs through the forlorn and nearly empty servants’ quarter to an iron ladder leading to an opening to the roof.

“Come, come, dear Sylph,” he cried, ascending so quickly that I nearly lost sight of him.

I followed him up the ladder onto the roof, where he had installed lamps tilted to shine upwards in a compact circle.

“When I have my equipment installed on the rooftops about us, I shall be able to conduct the experiments that will prove my theory and restore my reputation.”

I still could not imagine what those experiments might be.

“But Sir Parsifal, will not the lights confuse aeroplane pilots flying over the city at night?”

“On the contrary, dear girl. Certain pilots will find them most helpful.”

Because of his retirement from the world, Sir Parsifal could not permit himself to install the lights necessary for his proof on the tops of other buildings. One afternoon, after listening on the wireless to a particularly stirring address to the Reichstadt by Chancellor Hitler, I suddenly imagined that I could be of service to him.

“Sir Parsifal,” I inquired. “Would it advance your project if I were to install your refracting lamps on the roofs of appropriate buildings?”

“Dearest girl, I should forever be grateful,” he said. “However, I must caution you to be most careful about how you go about this. I should not want my enemies to know about the project, lest they disable the equipment before my work is complete.”

Like Sir Isaac Newton, he was dogged by the jealousy and deceit of lesser men.

At first he gave me just one lamp with a long insulated electric cord, and instructed me to install it on the roof of Quimby House. My only difficulty was opening the door to the roof, which had been closed so long that I could hardly pound it open. One

night, when mother was downstairs attending to Lord Rockingford, I opened the door again, plugged in the electrical cord, and saw with pleasure the lamp pulsing into the night sky like a little beacon. Suddenly across the Square another light appeared on Jaeger House. How delighted I was that Sir Parsifal was finally able to obtain the measurements necessary to prove his theory of refraction. We celebrated the next afternoon at high tea.

Soon afterwards, Mother and I accompanied His Lordship back to Rockingford on Quimby for the summer. How we all loved to lounge on the banks of the River Quimby on Boating Day, when the Cambridge and Oxford racing shells swept in and out of view so quickly we hardly had time to cheer. This year, however, there were no cheers on Boating Day.

Lord Rockingford's new estate manager Mr. Devon Scintilton, much taken with biological experimentation, had discovered a method to extract the venom of the spiders that inhabited the oil closet in the Great Garage. He was so excited by his discovery that he gave a vial of the venom to Ronald Quimby, eighteenth in line for the title. Unaware of how quickly spider venom coagulates in the blood and in the air, Ronald allowed the vial to dry out and brought it to the kitchen, where he placed the venom in an Imperia Paprika tin sitting beside the deviled eggs and promptly forgot about it. Who can blame poor Cook for carelessly sprinkling it onto the deviled eggs?

Lord Rockingford was quite addicted to deviled eggs, and all 15 of his closest relatives and putative heirs followed him in that indulgence. Only Ronald, Mr. Scintilton, and I avoided the poison: Ronald searching for a place to relieve himself after too much tea, Mr. Scintilton from an aversion to eggs, and I because of an allergy attack brought on

by sniffing that fatal mixture of synthetic venom and paprika. When Lord Rockingford's will was opened, to the surprise of all except Mother and myself, he acknowledged me as his daughter, making me next in line for the estate, should Ronald die without issue.

When we returned to London for the opening of Parliament, however, great changes were in the air. Sir Winston Churchill was thundering in the House of Commons about the loss of air parity with Germany, whatever that might mean. I visited Sir Parsifal to advise him of my change in status, but he was not disturbed.

"You and I shall always remain the best of friends, dear Sylph," he promised.
"We shall never be separated by rank."

"But who shall assist you in your researches?" I persisted.

"I am engaged in mapping exactly where the lights should be placed for the greatest effect. If you can assist me during your holidays, I assure you that will be sufficient. And dearest Sylph," he added. "This must remain something only the two of us know."

"Your secret is safe with me," I promised.

After finding my true calling in poesy at Miss Trillingham's Country School for Young Ladies, I became one of her most persistent pupils. How eagerly I looked forward to the holidays, when I would rejoin Mother and the new Lord Rockingford at Quimby House. I shall never forget Christmas 1938, when Lord Ronald made his maiden speech in the House of Lords, urging Their Lordships to stop the digging of a tunnel for the underground beneath Quimby Square and placing a station on the corner nearest Jaeger House.

“Are not carriages good enough for persons of quality?” Lord Ronald intoned.

“Are not omnibuses sufficient for the lower classes?”

The speech was met with a chorus of “Hear, Hear” from Their Lordships and howls of execration from the Commons and the popular press. Despite the construction of the underground, the new station increased the transient population of the Square particularly after hours when, as Mother expressed it, a particular type of gentleman was known to linger.

Sir Parsifal welcomed my return.

“What has happened to my little girl in pinafore and dress?” he exclaimed, looking at me in my new blouse, skirt, low heels, and with my hair freshly curled. “Are you still so fond of cake?”

I blushed in reply. How little we regard the changes in ourselves, until we see them reflected in the eyes of others. Indeed, cake was probably the reason I did not exhibit that austerity of figure that Miss Trillingham assured us could make young ladies unapproachable to sensitive young men. Tea with him remained the happiest part of my day.

Sir Parsifal showed a new urgency for placing his lamps atop as many buildings as possible. How exciting it was to walk self-confidently through London’s busy streets to find the designated structures. I would enter unobtrusively, avoiding or ignoring the staff, and place a refracting lamp on the roof, ready to be lit at the right moment. On the few occasions when a caretaker dared question my presence, I dispelled all concern with an authoritative, “I am not used to being questioned!” just as Miss Trillingham had taught us, and all their concerns vanished.

“Sir Parsifal,” I once inquired. “It would appear that I have installed one of your lamps on every important rooftop in the City with the exception of Westminster Palace.”

“Let us save that for Guy Fawkes Day,” he replied.

For reasons I never discovered, Sir Parsifal had taken to enjoying a whiskey soda at tea, spoiling his appetite for late afternoon sweets, but enabling him to preserve an outward calm. Little did I know, when I returned to Miss Trillingham’s in January 1939, how close Sir Parsifal’s researches were to a dramatic conclusion.

The Declaration of War against Germany in September 1939 changed my life forever. Instead of going up to London for the new session of Parliament, Lord Rockingford called the Rockingford Hussars to his banner and spent a most delightful fall training in the field. Indeed, His Lordship found little difference between chasing foxes and hunting Germans, a lack of discrimination that was soon to cost him and others dearly. I shall never forget Guy Fawkes Day 1940, when Lord Rockingford paraded his troop before the Great House and set a huge bonfire as we had so often done on Quimby Square.

In the spring of 1940 he embarked his brave troop aboard *Le Scourge de Quimby* for the Norwegian front. His Lordship, however, had failed to note certain changes in tactics necessary to deploy heavy cavalry against machineguns and other such infernal devices. Nevertheless, on his return, he was more criticized for sailing away in the night, leaving the Rockingford Hussars to their fate, than for not knowing better what he was about. In his defense, I must affirm that lack of knowledge of modern warfare has never been a serious obstacle to command of His Majesty’s forces.

I spent the summer of 1940 attending to the new Lord Rockingford whilst all about the populace was going mad. To my surprise and wonderment, Devon Scintilton began to favor me with his presence, or at least as much of his presence as propriety would allow, given the difference in our stations. Having been spared the bolder sex during my education, I found his attentions not unwelcome. Only once, as he confided that as Lord Rockingford's estate manager he had been exempted from the draft, did we test propriety by holding hands.

Such pleasant thoughts all dissipated when, to my horror, *The Times* reported that there had been popular demonstrations in Quimby Square not only against Lord Rockingford but against the privileged classes in general. As the Blitz intensified and bombs rained down night after night, people lost all respect for property and position; the nation was confronted with anarchy by day and inferno by night. I owed my own equanimity to Sir. Parsifal's quiet confidence that the war could not last long; our two nations had a common duty to defend Western civilization against barbaric and degenerate Bolshevism.

By fall Lord Ronald had recovered sufficiently from the great emotions that had possessed him on his return from Norway to contemplate a return to active life. Although Mother counseled against it, he began to speak of going to London at the opening of Parliament to inspire the populace as an icon of aristocratic fortitude. By the end of October, his informants advised him the Quimby House was so far intact, having miraculously escaped the worst of the bombing. The underground station that he had so strenuously opposed offered the timorous a place of safety from the bombers that continually troubled the great city's sleep.

The significance of His Lordship's return to London was enough for me to obtain Miss Trillingham's permission to accompany him for a fortnight. So I shared his compartment on the London Express, and we soon found ourselves in a taxi moving slowly through the blacked out streets of the capital. Lord Ronald later admitted that removing the Rolls Royce to Rockingford on Quimby may have sent the wrong signals to the populace he so wished to encourage by his presence.

"Damned Huns have made an absolute muck of it," Lord Ronald huffed as the taxi wound slowly amongst collapsed buildings and piles of rubble.

Slits of light from the taped over headlights caught people huddling before the ruins of their homes as shocked and frozen as if they were posing for daguerreotypes.

"Damned sluggards," His Lordship said. "If they can't sleep, they should be filling sandbags. Don't they understand we're at war?"

The driver let us off two squares from Quimby House, further provoking His Lordship's ire. I was quite exhausted when we finally arrived. After such a difficult night, I greatly looked forward to reacquainting myself with Sir Parsifal the next afternoon at tea.

Whilst Lord Rockingford was presenting himself at the House of Lords, I set out across the Square. He had been quite correct about the deleterious effect of an underground station on the tranquility of the Square. Nervous, frightened looking people were forever scurrying in and out, like ants escaping from their hole after a summer shower. But the weather was turning cold, and many Londoners were contemplating winter in a bomb shelter or refugee center. I counted us fortunate that the Germans had not made Quimby House, that center for patriotism and devotion to the crown a target.

The only casualty was that the windows were taped up, marring their appearance from the Square and spoiling the view from within.

“Dearest Sylph!” Sir Parsifal greeted me when I called upon him. “You have appeared at a providential hour.”

Despite the war and rationing, his man presented the same delightful assortment of pastries and sandwiches as in happier days.

“Whatever can be the issue?” I inquired.

“My researches have been absolutely stymied.”

“How can that be?”

“The buildings and houses where you so carefully placed my equipment have all been bombed.”

Only then did I recognize the full extent of our national peril.

“Is there nothing to be done?” I exclaimed.

“Indeed there is. Dear Sylph, I need you to place a refracting lamp atop Westminster Palace and illuminate the lamp on Quimby House this evening, so I may make my final measurements.”

“Were you then able to conduct some researches in my absence?”

“My man illuminated the lamps you had placed before the bombs obliterated them.”

So all was not lost! I cannot describe my relief.

“Due to the Blitz,” he continued, “I am now using battery powered lamps. Pray turn it on after you have placed it.”

“Of course,” I agreed. “Today is Guy Fawkes Day, and I shall want to be at Quimby House to see the bonfire in the Square.”

“I can assure you it will be an exceptional night,” Sir Parsifal confided.

What a thrill to know that despite this terrible war, English science persisted and would persevere. After placing a new battery lamp atop Quimby House, I took the underground from Quimby Square into the City, only to arrive at Westminster Palace just as Lord Rockingford was exiting, followed by several of his ermine hooded colleagues. They were abusing him most dreadfully. I nearly called out to him, but he was so anxious to hail a taxi and escape that I feared to distract him.

Now unless you lived through the Blitz, you will not understand how furtive and desperate people were. Westminster Palace was surrounded by soldiers and Bobbies like an armed camp. As I squeezed between huge banks of sandbags at St. Stephen’s Entrance, a Bobby stopped me as if I were some common girl.

“Miss, may I see your bag?” he said, holding out his hand for the bag containing Sir Parsifal’s lantern.

“I beg your pardon!” I exclaimed.

Very much ashamed, he stepped back and saluted. As I hurried through the Central Lobby, I glanced back and saw him still staring at me as he called someone on a telephone. Everyone I saw appeared so distracted, constantly glancing up as if some hovering menace were about to descend, that I dared not ask my way. Without a guide, it is nearly impossible to find one’s way through such a vast and sprawling structure. As if I had a special affinity for the place, however, I reached the Royal Gallery and ascended a series of dusty staircases and finally a ladder to the roof.

Looking down, I had a grand view of the City as it merged into the gray of evening, for no lamps were lit in London during those dark days. Carefully placing Sir Parsifal's lantern on a flat surface, I turned it on, hoping the battery would last long enough for Sir Parsifal to complete his measurements. Considerably relieved, I was hurrying back to the opening on the roof when I saw emerging the head and shoulders of the Bobby.

"I say, young lady!" he called, climbing out of the opening. "Please come with me."

Instead of awaiting an explanation, he picked up the lantern and shooed me before him down the ladder to the staircases and on to the ground floor. There two huge men in trench coats and trilbies awaited us.

"What have we here?" the older one demanded, looking from the flashing lantern in the Bobby's hand to me.

"I do not speak to any man without a proper introduction," I replied.

He reached into his coat pocket and produced an official looking card that identified him as Inspector Hale of Scotland Yard.

"And this is Sergeant Cole," he said, as much of an introduction for his companion as I would ever have. "Now who might you be?"

"I am Sylph Trillingham Quimby," I replied proudly, raising myself up to my full height to counter his tactless attempt to intimidate. "I am assisting Sir Parsifal Jaeger in his astronomical researches."

"And just who might this Sir Parsifal Jaeger be?"

"England's most distinguished investigator of star light refraction."

From far away, the first air raid sirens sounded.

“It appears we have found you just in time,” the Inspector said.

“No, you have ruined everything.” I exclaimed as the Bobby switched off the lantern.

“Take us to Sir Parsifal,” Inspector Hale said in a most unpleasant tone.

“I doubt the underground is still operating,” I replied, worrying that it might fill up with persons seeking refuge from the aeroplanes.

“Then we shall take my car,” the Inspector announced.

There is nothing more melancholy than driving through a darkening city as the sirens moan, and every ear is attuned to the awful sound of aeroplane motors. The Bobby sat beside me in the back seat cradling Sir Parsifal’s lantern between his knees. None of them had ever heard of Jaeger House.

“I wonder if the children will have their bonfire on Quimby Square this evening to celebrate Guy Fawkes Day,” I said to make polite conversation.

“I should think not,” Inspector Hale replied.

When we arrived at Jaeger House, there was a strange droning overhead, as if hundreds of far away motors were running at different speeds. At the corner of Quimby Square, people were queuing up at the entrance to the underground.

“Damned Jerries nearly beat us here,” Sergeant Cole said.

They were looking about for a bell rope when Sir Parsifal’s man, carrying a valise, opened the door. He appeared quite startled to see us.

“Sir Parsifal advises you to take shelter in the underground,” he said before he recognized me. “Oh, it’s you, Sylph.”

“These gentlemen are most anxious to meet Sir Parsifal,” I said, introducing my companions.

It was too dark to see his expression, but the sudden appearance of three policemen and the refracting lamp that Sir Parsifal had entrusted to me evidently did not please him.

“Sir Parsifal is on the roof conducting his researches,” he said.

With a rush the Inspector and his Sergeant and Bobby shoved past him and dashed up the grand staircase. Sir Parsifal’s man picked up his valise and ran for the underground, leaving me to choose whom to follow. I raced up the stairs after Inspector Hale.

Whatever could have so excited them, I wondered. Had someone been filling their heads with those ridiculous stories about the Macabre on Quimby Square?

When I reached the roof, I saw Sir Parsifal seated in his favorite chair illuminated by a circle of refracting lamps. He was wearing his smoking jacket and sipping a glass of whiskey. Beside him stood a table with his phonograph and a crystal decanter. As I stepped between Inspector Hale and Sergeant Cole, I heard above the aeroplane motors the voice of Madame Schumann-Heinke in the role of Fricka in *Die Wulkyre*, the very recording Sir Parsifal had been playing when we first met so many years before.

Something quivered in the corner of my eye, and across the Square I saw the lamp I had lit atop Quimby House vibrating like a bright white beacon into the night.

“Oh, I say, Sylph. I didn’t expect to see you again so soon,” Sir Parsifal greeted me. “And how went the illumination at Westminster Palace?”

“I fear that my efforts were frustrated,” I said.

“And who might these gentlemen be?” he asked, surveying my companions.

I was surprised that they had not announced themselves.

“Inspector Hale and Sergeant Cole of Scotland Yard and one of their men.”

“Then I must advise you to hurry to the underground station, Sylph, for I fear my researches are complete.”

“Pray tarry with us a while,” Inspector Hale said to me in a loud voice.

At that moment an enormous explosion rocked Jaeger House, sending Inspector Hale and his men reeling across the roof like sailors on the deck of a ship in a stormy sea. Still seated, Sir Parsifal slid across the roof in the opposite direction, gripping his glass and decanter, until he struck the little wall at the edge. Had I not been wearing my plimsolls, I fear I would have lost my balance altogether. As it was, one of my suspenders snapped.

“Please hasten, dearest Sylph,” he said, refilling his glass to the brim. “Polite young ladies should not be exposed to such disturbing events.”

I last saw him standing on the roof, glass in his left hand and his right raised palm up, as if to shield his eyes from the commotion overhead.

My passage through Jaeger House was an adventure, as pictures of Sir Parsifal’s ancestors seemed to leap from their frames, whilst swords and pikes clattered down from the walls as if they were striking at me. How I made it to the street and to the underground I shall never know. My last memory before descending into the darkness was of Jaeger House bursting into an inferno of flames like the beautiful Guy Fawkes Day bonfires on the Square that had so entranced me as a child.

I would never have found Lord Ronald amongst the wraiths in the underground had not I heard His Lordship complaining about the quality of the air. We spent a most unpleasant night there, made even more unpleasant by the attendants not permitting persons of quality to leave before the others after the “All Clear” sounded. When we finally reached the surface, the landscape was entirely changed. Quimby Square was gone, filled with piles of rubble from the ruins of Quimby House. It was the first time I had seen His Lordship entirely overcome. When I looked in the opposite direction all that remained of Jaeger House was its blackened façade, standing like stage scenery before the debris of its noble past.

“Please excuse me, Miss,” a familiar voice said.

Still carrying his valise, Sir Parsifal’s man hurried past us.

“Oh, I say!” I called after him. “If you are looking for another position, I can introduce you to Lord Rockingford.”

“I have decided to leave service,” he replied, raising his hat to me before disappearing into the crowd.

After the Blitz, no one needed the Macabre on Quimby Square to frighten children. Thus, like Guy Fawkes himself, the Macabre faded into memory to become my companion on melancholy days, when I recall my girlhood and those happy afternoons with Sir Parsifal Jaeger in his library. Children are to be envied their delicious terrors and the insubstantial monsters that lurk beneath bushes and bridges.

Now that poor Lord Ronald is gone and I am 18th Lady Rockingford, I have the servants light a bonfire on the lawn every November 5th, confident that we shall never see another Gun Powder Plot in England. My only regret is that the results of Sir

Parsifal's researches were lost, so he will be remembered only as a brilliant soldier too kind hearted for his times.