

The Descent of the Fire

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Strange Tales

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THE DESCENT OF THE FIRE

Dr Edith Mallet glanced admiringly at the ornate antimacassars on my friend's armchairs, settled herself comfortably, and then craned forward her head, with its unruly aureole of icicle-white hair.

'I hardly know,' she began, 'whether this is an enigma quite in your line, you know. But I could not think of anyone else. It has been rankling in my mind for a little while.'

My friend The Connoisseur, an assiduous quester after the curious and uncanny, nodded encouragingly.

She pursed her lips and frowned before continuing.

'I have made it my life's work to study the iron finials which grace so many of our older buildings. Many people do not look up as they walk, but if they did so they would see a fine display of wrought iron, in the form of arrows, obelisks, spirals, snowflake patterns and much else besides, all pointing to the sky from the top of quite a few roofs. This is an unregarded art form, and I decided, very early on in my architectural career, to make a special study of them. I have assembled a considerable portfolio of drawings and notes, and I may say that I have also published several monographs. Now, of course, a great deal of the finials one sees, especially in the industrial cities that grew up in the Victorian period, are from jobbing foundries and other manufactories; but elsewhere the finial might often have been made especially for a building by a local blacksmith, or other craftsman. I have tried wherever possible, from builders' accounts, trade directories and so forth, to attribute the known, probable or merely surmised maker of each finial that I have catalogued. Occasionally, of course, inscriptions on the finial will guide me. Ah, I see you look surprised. Yes, I

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can indeed sometimes secure a closer look at the work, wherever there is access onto the roof: I have found many owners and householders most obliging when once I have explained my interest. Most obliging, yes.'

Her sharp blue eyes dimmed a little as she seemed to withdraw her attention inward. Then she nodded, and gazed at us both in turn, before resuming her narrative.

'In my retirement, I have been making my way slowly around some of the smaller towns of Britain, and a month or so ago I found myself in High Mortain, in Shropshire, do you know it? It is mostly a single broad street rising from an old stone river bridge up and up to a tump or earthwork, now a public park, supposed to have been an ancient camp, I should say myself, very likely an Iron Age hillfort. There are a few by-lanes off the High Street and some straggling houses beyond, but though it is an ancient borough, it has never really grown beyond this hillside settlement. The people there are, I think, proud of their past and in some ways the place is like an island, for it is miles from any busier place.

'Well, now, here is the odd thing. Or, rather, the first odd thing. I should suppose there were about a hundred or so houses there. As is usual, many of these are too small or modest or recent to possess a finial, but about twenty do. Indeed, I can be precise; twenty-two do. Most of them I can quickly categorise and even make a good guess, from street level, as to their provenance. But there was one, on a turret above a café, which was the most peculiar design I have ever seen in a finial. Here, I have sketched it . . .'

She reached into a capacious haversack of faded green, and brought out a drawing pad. Flicking the pages quickly, she found what she wanted and proffered it to us. In firm dark strokes there was delineated the head of the finial, showing an abstract form comprising an elegant circle speared by a jagged prong, like a lightning stroke. The circle bore embellishments to either side, like stylised wings or tongues of flame. The top of the delicately twisted rod that held this motif was also shown.

'And is this so very different from other designs you have seen?' asked The Connoisseur.

'Yes, indeed,' she averred, firmly. 'Quite unique. But the odd thing was that I was not permitted to see it.'

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She sank back in her chair as if to punctuate this remark. Divining, however, that we had not quite appreciated its significance, she continued:

‘The townspeople were all very pleasant. The shopkeepers, the gentleman who kept their rather odd, sloping-floored museum, the people at a fine Georgian house, could not have been more cheery and obliging. Yet when I asked at this café, in a converted warehouse, if I might have a closer look at their curious finial, I met with silence, resistance or evasion. Now, you see, that is far from my usual experience. Even in the grimmest, most suspicious of areas, I generally find admittance. But here, in the café, a young woman left in charge said such things as, oh, it was very dangerous up there, never used; they didn’t have access, but only leased the lower floor; and she was just looking after the place and didn’t feel she could give permission; and so on. Of course, I have met such responses before, and quite naturally too. But there was something rather determined about this reaction that made me feel odd about it. . . .

‘I was quite eager to find out more about this unusual design, and there were of course some perfectly reasonable explanations. The most obvious was that there might be some local fire insurance company who had made this their emblem of protection, though it would be a very elaborate one. I pursued some research into this and could find nothing to support the idea: in fact, I did find elsewhere a plaque from the old Phoenix Company. Nor could I find anything in the heraldry of the town to suggest some affinity with this curious finial. I can only think it must be the work of a local craftsman, and as it is so boldly and finely made, I should like to find out more.

‘That, then, is the start of the little mystery that I have brought for you to consider. My friend Felicity Dowerley was good enough to suggest that you might assist me, as you once assisted her.¹ However, I should probably not have trespassed upon you solely on a matter which is quite firmly within my own field of study, were it not that my stay in High Mortain also included another incident that struck me at the time as distinctly odd.’

She leant forward in her seat, her white hair glinting.

‘On my second night in the town—I had decided to stay to investigate this finial further, and I can be quite determined when my specialism

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is at stake—it was wet and windswept. The rain burst like—I remember thinking this very vividly, though I cannot imagine what put the idea in my head—a cascade of fallen stars upon the pavement, lots of little silvery explosions. Seeking shelter, I was drawn again to the dim light of the narrow-fronted café, with its unreachable finial: it is let into the corner of a tall, turreted, empty warehouse, which glistened in its old bricks of burnt-orange and roof-slates of umber. I tumbled in and blinked into the little square room, which held a dozen or so tables, mostly empty. I ordered tea from an agate-eyed waiter at the counter, who reminded me oddly of a lamp-post, he had that angularity yet also stolidity: and I took it to a table by the window, though there was nothing to see but the streaming rain and stray gleams of light out on the street. So I looked instead at my fellow refugees.

‘There were three, all, like me, I thought, trying to dwell over some unwanted refreshment until the downpour should dwindle a little. There was a small man with a bristly red beard and upturned hair, whose eyes glinted through spectacles so flimsy as to almost seem *pince-nez*: he was making the most of a mug of hot-milk-and-nutmeg. There was a very old woman with a face like some withered, undistinguishable fruit, from which the bloom and the shine has long, long gone, its rind now seeming barely held together by a coarse headscarf: she sucked at a stubby cheroot and occasionally bit meagrely at a thin pale sandwich. And there was a young woman, who interspersed glances at a book that she could scarcely be reading properly, with sips of black coffee, and with striding to the door to glare out to see if it were possible to leave.

‘My meditations on these companions were interrupted by a meaningful cough from the rubicund crone, who had taken the mute black stump from her lips and was waving it vaguely. The waiter got up, crossed to her and, not without a certain distaste, offered her a light from her matchbox that had fallen on the floor. She coaxed a few sparks from the dark pellet and gave a nod more of dismissal than of thanks. Then the waiter did a rather odd thing: he placed the match-box very firmly in her coat pocket, glaring at her. Granted he may have been trying to help her not to lose it again, but it seemed somewhat over-officious. That, however, was not what struck me most about his action. I had only the briefest

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glimpse, but I could have sworn that the design on the matchbox label was the same as the finial.

‘Shortly after, seeing some slight diminution of the rain, we all began to get ready to go, and while the young woman was settling her bill, I helped the cheroot-smoker on with her coat as she tried to heave herself into it. I expect you can guess why?’

She smiled. The Connoisseur affected to look startled.

‘Surely not to steal the matchbox?’

‘Precisely. I told myself it was of no material value and I should be doing the woman a favour by preventing her from having any more of those foul things for a while. So as I helped her to garb, I slid my hand inside the pocket and—I believe the expression is—palmed the article. Then I made off pretty quickly.’

‘May I see it?’

‘I no longer have it. I shall explain why. Before I left, late on my last evening, I thought I should like to take another look at the finial which had so baffled me, so on an impulse I walked through the town towards the café. It was growing quite dark, with hardly anyone abroad, but as I approached I beheld an extraordinary golden glow emanating from the top of the building and playing around that so curious finial. It was as if some unburning flame had been lit upon it, or rather the ghost of a flame, for it was hazy and insubstantial. Now, as I say, it was dusk and of course one’s eyes can play tricks in the half-light, but I am perfectly sure of what I saw, a hovering illumination which flickered like a tongue of fire all around the finial. I watched it for some moments, unsure of whether I should summon assistance, and yet it seemed to be causing no damage. Nevertheless, I thought I had better try to alert the owners of the café and went to the door. To my surprise, although its blinds were down and all inside was only dimly lit, the door of the café was open.’

‘An elderly gentleman was receiving newcomers at the door, and just inside was a fine candelabra of many stems, partly lit, which he indicated with a slight, courtly gesture to a number of people in front of me. They each lit one of the remaining tapers, and so as I entered and the doorman looked at me quite closely, almost enquiringly, I did the same, striking a match from the purloined box. He was evidently satisfied, and ushered me

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into the café, where all the tables had been placed together and a small group was standing in silence around these, heads bowed, all in a murky half-light. My thoughts of raising the alarm about the finial were quite subsumed by this strange gathering. I did as the others had, and stood by the table in apparent contemplation. Finally, I heard the sound of the door being bolted and the doorman joined the gathering; then there came into the room the tall, angular and agate-eyed waiter, who took his place at the head of the table.

‘There was a brittle silence, and then the waiter, who looked uneasy, said in a rather thick, garbled voice, what sounded like, “Greetings, people of the fire.” But before I had time to interject, each of the others in turn uttered a phrase, each as curious as the last: “the Luciferians hail thee”, “the Sons of Prometheus hail thee”, “Hail from the Sign of the Fire Bird”, “Hail from those of the salamander’s tongue”, “the Ancient Lights also”, “And from the Men of Lumine.” I hope I have got most of those names right, they were so bizarre that they stuck in my memory quite forcibly. And they also seemed to show each other glinting miniature pictures, cupped in the palm of their hand, which I could not quite make out.

‘Of course there was a terrible pause when it came to my turn, and I could not, try as I might, conjure up some such similar phrase. The waiter, as I still thought of him, looked at me very keenly indeed, though his long, lugubrious face was impassive. Finally, he sighed deeply and announced, as if nothing untoward had occurred, “Welcome to our visitor,” then nodded to the remaining two of the gathering to announce themselves. I was so taken aback I did not quite note what they said, though one sounded like “the Dancing Foxes” and another “the Double Lion”.

‘Everyone then sat down, and the doorman brought to the table a single lamp which cast a wan glow on the alert faces all around me. There was a further silence, which was broken abruptly when there came an angry rattling at the door and the sound of spluttered curses. It was the crabbed old cheroot-smoker, and I knew that I should soon be exposed. The doorman went into the vestibule, unlatched the door, and there was the sound of a flustered altercation, before she was admitted, the doorman lingering lamely in her wake. This seemed to startle the waiter into action and he made a great show of placating that old smoking crone, whispering

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to her and listening to her expostulations, and looking up to smile indulgently at the rest of us. I expected I should soon be accused as an impostor in their midst, but in fact nothing of the kind transpired. All was settled again, the chairman-waiter cleared his throat, and announced: "Welcome all, to our philuminists' circle," and launched into a vivid description of an exhibition of matchbox-labels that had taken place. Several of the others present joined in with reports of new items added to their collection, including such—if I may so express it—'striking' names as the "Red Crab", "the Three Escutcheons", "Pandora", "Paladin", "Glosq", "Green & Dyson" and "the Templevane", which caused particular knowing interest. Examples of some labels were exhibited. The doorkeeper gave a short and indignant disquisition on foreign fakes, labels which I gathered were purely printed for collectors and had never been used on matchboxes. This, apparently, was not quite the thing. There was discussion of an elusive series of Latvian matchbox labels.

As the proceedings drew on, I soon came to understand that each of those present was a member of a group of philuminists, who had given themselves picturesque titles drawing on themes from their hobby. I was considerably mollified by this and actually began to enjoy the discussion, but at a convenient break for refreshments, I made murmured excuses. As I made to go, the looming waiter shook my hand and leered at me in what I think he hoped was a cordial grin. Then he unobtrusively opened his palm and I divined that he was asking me to return the matchbox, so of course I did, with as much aplomb as I could muster.

'As I left, I glanced up again. There was no sign of the glow I had seen on the iron finial. I made my way back to my lodgings and left the following morning.'

Our visitor paused and seemed to reflect with a renewed wonder on what she had witnessed.

'So you see, I am really not sure whether there is anything here in your line at all. There is an unusual example of the finial-maker's art, which I am not allowed to see; there is a glimpse of a sort of light around it; and there is a band of matchbox collectors with their own quaint customs, which are really none of my business. Well, what think you?'

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The Connoisseur rose and stared into the bright flames writhing in the grate.

‘Have you thought of any obvious explanation for the illumination of the finial?’ my friend enquired.

‘None, not there and then. But on my return I consulted a colleague in our Natural Sciences department. Here is her reply. . . .’ She uncrumpled a letter written on a page torn from an exercise book. ‘“Really Edith you ought to take more water with it!” . . . Ahem! We shall skip the pleasantries. . . . Ah! Here we are. “What you describe is not unlike St Elmo’s Fire, I grant you, but the conditions do not seem right. The phenomenon is scientifically known as a corona or point discharge. It occurs on objects, especially pointed ones, when the electrical field reaches about one thousand volts per centimetre. When it is great enough to overcome the resistance of the medium it encounters, a current of electrons will result (even you, Edith, will remember Ohm’s Law)”—I don’t actually, I never had any interest in stinks or in physics—physiques, possibly, ha ha. I digress. Let me see. “Normally,” she goes on, “the electrical field strength of the atmosphere is about one volt per centimetre. In the extremes of a thunderstorm, however, and just before a lightning flash, this reaches ten thousand volts per centimetre. Thus, the atmospheric electrical field is only strong enough, under normal circumstances, to produce St Elmo’s Fire during thundery weather. As you say the day was still, it would be most unlikely to produce the effect you describe. Perhaps there was a reflection from some neon light?” There was not, in fact, any artificial light except the streetlights anywhere about, and they were surely too low to have caused such an effect, and a brash yellow rather than the sombre amber I saw.’

After clarifying a few other points, The Connoisseur assured Dr Mallet that he would look into the incidents she had placed before him, thanking her for such an unusual account. After he had ushered her cordially out, he returned to his place before the fire.

‘I have heard rumours of at least two of the orders Edith Mallet encountered,’ he said. ‘Those are no matchbox-label collectors, though it was a devious ploy, doubtless prepared for just such an eventuality, the stray

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interloper. It's troubling to hear of what seems so great a convocation. But why? What are they planning, and why on earth in High Mortain?'

The Connoisseur's final remark came to have much more import—disturbingly so—than I could ever have imagined at the time.



There were lights in the hills as we drove towards the reclusive Shropshire town, flickering tongues of light: and the prevalent, sweetly acrid tang of wood-smoke in the air. Picturesque as the unfolding scene was, it had nothing of the bucolic idylls of novels by Miss Mary Webb or Dr Francis Brett Young.

After Dr Mallet's visit, The Connoisseur's researches had uncovered a point which seemed to trouble him rather: the town had a tradition of holding its annual Bonfire Night a full fortnight and more earlier than the usual custom, and the villages all around would bring an extinguished brand from their own smaller fires to place upon the town pyre. For days in the mists of mid-October there would be gatherings in all the remote settlements around to set going their own fire, to gather at night in its glow, eat the specially prepared flat and oven-warm 'soul cakes', and give thanks for the benison of the flames.

The Connoisseur had sent out his summons, by all sorts of means, without delay. When I next visited at his express invitation, my friend was most uncharacteristically whistling to himself. ' "Their sound is gone out into all lands, and their words unto the ends of the earth," ' he pronounced. 'If you are still learning the glorious Mr Handel's fine but over-rated *Messiah* for the Choral Society's Christmas concert, you will doubtless know the air that shortly follows: "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron, thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Anyway, enough! I have had the others' responses. We can be on our way.'



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I had met individual members of my friend's curious circle of esotericists before, owing to their involvement in some episode or other of his adventures in investigating the singular, but had hardly expected ever to see them gathered in one place. Around an old, deeply-lit walnut table in the creaking inn of the Talbot & Angel to which my friend had summoned them were pale, long-faced Lady Vesperine Wane; the high, coppery, almost Abyssinian features of Colonel Gaspard; the mild, bespectacled but shrewd visage of Ivo Tradescant; to which strange cenacle Dr Edith Mallet had also been admitted. After she had told again the account she had given us, 'Ivo,' The Connoisseur announced, 'You had better go next.' Young Tradescant's glasses glinted in the gentle lamplight and he offered the following addition to the doings at High Mortain:

'I went to a recital here recently, oh not more than a few weeks ago, by The Balzarths, brother and sister, of Anglo-Cretan origin; Alexander and Vivia. They have devoted themselves to the study of the most ancient music known to us, painstakingly piecing together fragments of Homeric and Delphic hymns, paeans, plaints, epitaph-songs, and of early Christian sacramental pieces. From papyrus, from vases, from funerary monuments, from stele and from friezes, they have traced hints and implications of the usages of music in the ancient days, and had copies made of what these images showed of the instruments the players wielded.

'Then they try to demonstrate shards of the drones and melodies they have reconstructed, in lectures which include brief performances on these rediscovered instruments. I've been to a few of these recitals before, and frankly they're usually a little dry. They will explain where they found the piece, how they reconstructed it and where they have had to speculate, then they'll tell you all about the instrument, and then play a bare fragment, often of quite brittle sharpness. It's far more of a lecture than a performance, but I go because I know that music of this kind played its part in the celebration of the Mysteries, and that is my chief interest.

'I've travelled distances to hear them and so when I heard they were giving a concert here I thought it was not too far a hop westward from the Peaks, and I could go and make their acquaintance again. They were playing in the local Memorial Hall, but by all the gods, what a difference in their performance. It was extraordinary. The hall—you might have seen

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it as you wandered around—is a modest provincial piece of classicism in ashlar, with a couple of fine columns. But they had transformed it inside. It was hung with viridian veils, skeins of pale faded green like webs of woven verdigris. Sharp, myrrh-based oils fumed in encrusted brass crucibles, delicate crescents barely resting upon slender stalks. Tall, honey-toned tapers flickered in niches and corners. On tables to one side, pitchers of dark wine and platters of cinammon- and cardamom-tinted sweetmeats stood. It all had more of an ambience of ceremony rather than lecture.

“They are olive-skinned, and their hair has the colour and patina of black grapes. She, I have always thought, is purer in the form and line of her face than her brother, for hers is a serene oval whereas his had the merest hint of the off-true about it, a piquant slant, a quizzicism in the countenance. Both, however, are usually shy in the eye and avoid a direct gaze; with a hesitance about them which seems to deflect any closeness of human contact.

“This time it was all different. They came onto the stage barefoot, she in a brilliant white chlamys, he in a blue robe, and without any preamble began to play, she at the sonorous double-flute and he on two great brass cymbals. The work started off slowly, languorously, winding its way into the mind with that hollow, cavernous sound of the ancient reed, accompanied by subtle shimmerings of the cymbals, but then it began to surge to a wilder pace, as they coaxed out more and more furious sounds. There were a series of insistent, soaring surges from the flute and great rippling shards from the cymbals, and as I sat there quite taken aback and drawn in, I kept seeing in my mind images of golden fire, as if the music were itself a fire turned into a new dimension.

“I saw them afterwards. Despite the exhaustion of the performance, they were exultant, fervent-eyed and feverish, as I’ve never seen them before. Vivia’s purple lips glistened with seeping scarlet beads so that they seemed, frankly, like the flesh of cleft pomegranates. Alexander’s long fingers also bled ichors of red. I asked where on earth they had found such a work, and Vivia laughed, and simply said, “Perhaps not on earth, Ivo!” I could get no more out of them, except the title of the piece: *The Bright Charioteer*.”

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Ivo glanced at each one of the gathering in turn. Gaspard's contribution, given next, was characteristically terser: he had seen the symbol on the finial before, in his travels among the Caspian and Black Sea lands, and in the more sinister quarters of several European cities. He could not say what it meant, but it seemed to originate with the people of the Peacock Angel, an highly heretical sect who believed that the Elder Son of God had been pardoned for his revolt and given all this world as his domain.

Lady Vesperine Wane's contribution, hesitant, in her gentle murmur, was the most enigmatic. 'I have been unable to discern any important celestial disposition to account for the gathering that Dr Mallet witnessed,' she observed, 'and yet I am seized by the knowledge that there is some movement of the spheres that I have missed. I shall keep searching.' And she subsided into silence as if she were conducting that very quest within the far reaches of consciousness there and then. There was a grave pause.

Dr Mallet, evidently somewhat bemused, added: 'I think I have done two things which will help me in my original mission, to discover more about this finial. In the first place, I have taken the liberty of renting the empty chambers in the old warehouse next door to the café. I am determined to inspect this finial and it occurred to me that there might be some rooftop route between the two. I shall investigate tomorrow under cover of darkness, if opportunity affords. Secondly, I have flung further afield my researches into the ironworker who might have made the finial. I reasoned that it must have been crafted within a reasonable radius of where we are, for ease of transport: and I have looked into all those locally connected to ironwork of any kind. I have drawn a blank thus far, but a few of those I went to see said the same thing when I described it to them: for its delicacy and yet strong definition, it has to be the work of Hephaestus Smith—a *nom de feu*, of course, as one might say—who has a forge in the forest not twenty miles away. He I shall visit also tomorrow, early on.'



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The next morning at breakfast, The Connoisseur informed me that he had decided to seek out what he described as ‘High Mortain’s small but I believe exquisite bookshop, as it apparently specialises in volumes concerning East European history and folklore, and I wish to see what it will have on the Iron Crown of St Stephen, and the Habsburg Rescript, which was not after all destroyed by that last Empress, the late Zita.’

I decided not to accompany him, and, catching sight of Dr Mallet lustily demolishing her scrambled egg with capers and mushrooms, I felt that a bracing excursion further unto the Shropshire countryside was in order. Accordingly I secured Dr Mallet’s permission to accompany her to visit the forge of Hephaestus Smith.

‘I am most keen to visit the smith Smith—ha ha—as I believe that I may have seen other work by him in the course of my studies.’

I hoped that Dr Mallet was better at driving than she was at word-play. I smiled dutifully. ‘And it will be good to have a vigorous young man along too, just in case our Hephaestus is not, ah, amenable to visitors.’

I made an observation about the artistic temperament, but Dr Mallet, thankfully, was concentrating on navigating the winding rural lanes towards our destination. I settled back and tried to enjoy the fusty atmosphere of her quaint old motor-car as I gazed out at the pointed hills, distant chimneys and tall clumps of trees in their shadowed green meadow-islands. I mentally rehearsed my small role as a member of the chorus in Messiah; but the tenor air kept on playing itself in my mind: ‘Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron . . . a rod of iron. . . .’

I woke up suddenly. We had stopped. The light was dim outside. Dr Mallet intoned, with mock—I hope—gravity: ‘Young man, you were quite asleep. And singing some awful song under your breath. Well, here we are! The home of the Smith of smiths, ha ha, yes, quite.’

We were indeed in the middle of a dense wood. In the gloom, I saw that the car stood at the end of a track which wound away behind us through the trees. In midwinter, when the trees were completely bare, I thought that the place wouldn’t seem so oppressive; but as it was, with the trees still bearing a remarkable percentage of their summer foliage, the effect was just that: oppressive. And silent.

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‘This way!’ Dr Mallet grabbed my arm and started to walk along the path further into the wood. Then the forge came into view, just as the silence was shattered by the sound of hammer on metal on anvil. The structure looked most precarious and temporary, but it had probably looked that ramshackle for decades.

‘Yoo-hoo! Hello!’ Dr Mallet sang out as we reached the entrance. The hammering stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and there was the whooshing sound of red-hot metal being doused in water. Then I saw that there was certainly nothing ramshackle about Hephaestus Smith.

He came to the door, a mountain of a man with a red beard and masses of flaming red hair. His face was red and lined, and judging from what I remembered Dr Mallet saying about him, he must have been at least seventy. But he was muscular and vigorous. He let the gigantic hammer he was holding drop onto the floor by his feet. It hit with a deep thud, cracking a brick. ‘Thou shalt break them . . .’ I whispered.

‘What was that? Who are you? What d’you want?’ Smith shouted, although I quickly realised that was his normal voice.

‘No need to bellow, ha ha,’ Dr Mallet said, smiling. She put out her hand. ‘I’m Dr Edith Mallet. Author of *Edwardian Finials of the Welsh Marches* and *Iron in the Sky: The Finial Art of England*. You may have heard of them? I’ve been wanting to meet you for a very long time, Hephaestus, can I call you that?’

Smith looked utterly bemused as his huge hand closed round Dr Mallet’s, and she pumped it up and down. I held out my hand too, but Smith seemed too shocked to notice me. I followed them both inside the forge.

The blacksmith was smiling by now, and he ushered us through the flickering dimness, past his fire and anvil, and into a room at the back of his workplace. Dr Mallet was talking rapidly, and Smith still looked bemused, but was clearly taking in what she was saying. For all her appearance, it seemed as though she could be a diplomat when she needed to be.

Smith made a pot of strong tea, and tipped into it a few drops of something from a small green bottle that he returned to a high shelf. I sat in a rough but firm Windsor chair and sipped my strengthened tea while Dr Mallet and Smith talked. Although the back room—which must have

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served as Smith's living quarters—was refreshingly cool after the atmosphere of the forge, I soon felt my eyelids droop, and despite every attempt to stay awake and listen, I fell asleep again.

Something tapped—or rather, hammered—on my knee, and I woke up. It was Smith, his red and grinning face a few inches from mine. 'More tea?' he shouted. 'You were asleep, trying to sing something. I recognised it, though, I'm sure I did. It will be right, let me tell you that.'

I declined more tea. For a moment I didn't know what he was talking about. Then I recalled that I had dreamt that the Choral Society's tenor had been taking suddenly ill, and that I had been called onto the stage to sing in his place. And the air I was singing over and over again was . . .

'I've finished here,' Dr Mallet announced, getting to her feet. 'We should get back now. I've found out what I wanted to know. Our friend will be most pleased, too, I think, if we can winkle him out of those precious bookshops of his.'

We both shook hands with Smith again, and returned to the car. Standing at the door to his forge, with the firelight flickering in the darkness behind him, Smith raised his hand in farewell. Dr Mallet waved back.

'Now, where is that reverse gear? I'm sure there was one,' she muttered to herself, as the engine came to life.

Once we had negotiated the track and left the woods, I settled back. Dr Mallet looked at me sharply, swerving to avoid something in the road as she did so. 'You are not going to sleep again, surely not?' she said.

'No, certainly not. Not now,' I replied.

'Good. You can stay alert by telling me what you know about Hephaestus and Phaeton. Or do you not have classical educations these days?'

As it happens, certain aspects of the ancient myths are a special interest of mine. And keeping the society of my friend The Connoisseur had also been a great incentive to learn more. 'Hephaestus was the smith to the Greek gods,' I said. He was the husband of Aphrodite, or Venus, and he made the golden chariot for Helios, the god of the Sun, to travel in across the sky.'

Dr Mallet nodded approvingly. 'Capital! And Phaeton?'

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‘Let me see—yes, he was Helios’ son. He came to a bad end, if I remember rightly.’

‘Yes, quite so. He borrowed his father’s chariot. But he was a truly terrible driver, ha ha, and Zeus had to strike the boy with a thunderbolt to stop him crashing and setting the whole world ablaze. Quite some story, eh? But Hephaestus— our Hefhy, that is—told me much more that I’m sure will shed light on, if not solve, our mystery—’

I will not set down the three words that Dr Mallet uttered next, as she swerved to avoid a cyclist whom I thought (but didn’t say) was observing the Highway Code punctiliously. I hoped that we would both live long enough for Dr Mallet to tell The Connoisseur everything that she had learnt during our visit to the dim forge in the woods.



Over tea that afternoon, Lady Vesperine Wane offered in her subdued tones a hesitant suggestion: ‘There is a disturbance in the hidden heavens,’ she murmured, ‘A great force that is not visible to us is bearing down, bringing its influence near. It is not one of our known celestial bodies, of that I am sure: I have checked all of my charts. And yet it is there, and drawing near . . .’. She subsided. There was a puzzled silence. The Connoisseur then described what he had gleaned that morning. I could see that Dr Mallet was impatient to tell our little circle about what she had found out during the morning.

She flung her teaspoon into its saucer. ‘Dash it all, I’m not interested in some holy crown with a bent cross. They should have looked after it better. Do you or do you not want to hear about Hephaestus Smith and the finial? That’s what we’re here for, after all.’

Gaspard whispered to The Connoisseur, ‘I’ll talk to you about that some other time,’ and we settled back to listen to Dr Mallet.

The Connoisseur nodded in agreement at point after point during the narrative. ‘I thought as much,’ he said. ‘And they didn’t call matches “Lucifers” for nothing, either. The Bringer of Light, you know.’

‘Yes, I did know—’ Dr Mallet said irritably.

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‘Well then,’ said The Connoisseur, ‘my dear Edith, you certainly won’t have to risk life and limb trying to get a closer look at that finial then, will you? It is already too late for that. But your friend Mr Smith has given us the answer. I am optimistic that High Mortain will not need to detain us beyond tomorrow morning, which is just as well, as the great bonfire is tonight, is it not? I shall ring for more tea.’



‘I shall not dress for dinner,’ The Connoisseur said. ‘We may not have the time, and we need to be in place for when the festivities begin. I do not think that the evening ahead will be uneventful. Is Edith going to station herself in her rented accommodation?’

I said that she would be. The Connoisseur smiled ruefully. ‘She so dearly wants a closer look at that finial. Well, I have no doubt that she will get it, one way or the other. I hope that she remembers what we discussed earlier—and what she herself found out this morning.’ He consulted his watch. ‘Time to eat, I think.’

After dinner, we went outside. The brief dusk had surrendered the last of the fading light, and the town had been transformed. High Mortain had become a hubbub of flame. Children described fizzling circles and spirals and zigzags with bunches of sparklers they had bought, and people processed through the streets with lanterns, candles and torches. We joined in. Everything seemed so ordinary and safe, just like a normal November the Fifth . . . except that wasn’t the date. . . .

After an interval I noticed that the children had disappeared. The crowds in the street consisted entirely of adults. We entered the Market Square where the bonfire was waiting to be lit, and passed the Memorial Hall. ‘Look,’ I said to The Connoisseur. ‘The Balzarths are giving a concert later this evening.’

It was now a sharp and clear night. There was still a tang of wood-smoke and crushed, dying leaves in the air, and a very slight breeze. The autumn stars were clearly visible: most houses had their lights switched off, and the streetlights had been turned off too. Great Pegasus rode high

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in the southern sky, and the bright stars of the short summer nights Altair, Deneb, and Vega, were fast declining towards the western horizon.

We followed along with the crowd, as it milled apparently aimlessly through the old streets. Leaves were now coming down from the trees, as if the festival had been a signal for them to start falling. They rustled and clattered across pavements and against the walls of houses. We must have described another circuit of the town. Soon we found ourselves back in the Market Square. A platform had appeared by the unlit bulk of the bonfire, and a man was climbing up a ladder to reach it.

‘Do you recognise him?’ asked my friend.

I peered into the darkness, illuminated as it was only by the flaming torches held high by most of the crowd, and the starlight from above.

‘He looks a bit like that waiter, that celebrant, that Dr Mallet first talked about.’

‘Exactly.’ The Connoisseur looked around. ‘The others should be in their places by now. The bonfire is about to be lit, and certain invocations made. But not everyone here is just out for the traditional High Mortain revels.’

The man on the platform spread his arms wide, just as some sort of celebrating or sacrificing priest would do. He boomed out a welcome to the crowd and to all visitors, particularly the special ones. He announced fireworks, and a surprise outdoor performance by the Balzaths of *The Bright Charioteer*. (Hearing that, the Connoisseur nudged me and smiled. ‘Or something,’ he said.) Then the fire would be lit, and the festival proper could begin.

The celebrant raised his arms heavenward and fireworks boomed out and cracked open the sky in sheets and bursts of incandescent glory. The crowd cheered, and gasped in awe. Suddenly the rooftops of the buildings around the Market Square stood out, as torches previously placed there burst into flame. There was fire in the sky, fire on the earth.

We inched our way back, away from where the fire still waited to be lit, until we reached the edge of the square and had our backs against the reassuring solidity of a house. That felt good. Then I saw the Balzarths appear on the platform. They began to chant and to clash together great cymbals like golden wheels and I was astounded at how loud they were. I

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hadn't quite been prepared for that, by what Ivo Tradescant had said. The Balzarths' unearthly music was like a form of fire itself, combined with the sounds of bursting and whistling fireworks, and the sight of the sky and earth lit up in one seeming mass of fire, coloured and white and again all colours. . . . As the music seemed to be moving towards a climax, the celebrant made a sign again, and the black bulk of the bonfire burst into flames. The crowd shouted and screamed in ecstasy. I couldn't see how he had arranged for the fire to detonate the way it had. Then people started to throw their torches onto the fire, and it roared and reached higher, and sparks danced in the hot air and gusted upwards towards the obscured stars.

'Come on. We must get to Edith. I've left us enough time, but we must not get caught or distracted on the way.' I followed The Connoisseur, as we inched our way along the sides of buildings that lined the Market Square. Our backs were literally to the wall, and no-one saw us as we reached an alley and ran along it in almost total darkness, with the central fire blazing behind us and the cries and shouts of the crowd falling away somewhat.

'Most of them don't know what is planned to happen to the town,' my friend said, as we ran. 'The light-bringers are here amongst them—those seemingly ridiculous matchbox-label collectors are here! But if Hephaestus has been true, we will yet see them brought down, just as the first Lucifer was.'

The aria from *Messiah* intruded into my mind as we ran, but it didn't quite blot out the sounds of the rest of the town, or the occasional bursts of *cerie* song from The Balzarths, who must have redoubled their outlandish performance. 'Break them, break them,' I gasped. 'A rod of iron!'

We arrived at the turreted café that Dr Mallet had described so vividly. The Connoisseur pointed up at the roof of the large building. I could see the turret silhouetted against the bright sky. I could even make out the finial. It was bathed in the strange fire that Dr Mallet had told us about. Then I saw that one window in the building was lit, and I thought that I could make out a shape moving around behind the drawn curtain.

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‘Is that Dr Mallet?’ I asked. The Connoisseur didn’t answer, because the light suddenly went out, switched off. The curtain was pulled back, and the window opened with a loud, drawn-out creak.

Dr Mallet leaned out. ‘I must get to the finial,’ she shouted down to us. ‘I can see how to get to it—’

We charged through the street door and up the stairs. When we got to Dr Mallet’s room, it was empty. The Connoisseur said, ‘She’s just ahead of us, and we must stop her getting to the finial. She said that she wouldn’t try to reach it, she knows what it’s there for. But with all the excitement of the evening, and the powers that are abroad . . .’

We rushed on up another staircase, and burst out onto a narrow space between the parapet and the steep roof. The turret was straight ahead. I could make out Dr Mallet, struggling with a ladder that had been lying against the inner wall of the parapet. She was illuminated by the weird light, the fire that still played about the delicate and hauntingly-shaped finial.

‘Edith! Stop!’

She hesitated. I looked at her, and then glanced out, away over the parapet. Over the rooftops I could see where the central bonfire was still blazing, its flames reaching to meet the fireworks that still rained down. If they *were* the fireworks—the sky was all alight now, as were the rooftops themselves. And yet the fire scarcely burned, in the sense of consuming material. That fire simply flourished there, on earth, where it had no real right to be. I looked down into the street, and the crowd was there, filling it with their torches and tumult, their dancing and frenzy. I wondered how many of them would remember this night—and if they would have the chance to.

Then, from a distance that seemed more interstellar than anything else, I heard the Balzarths’ song surge again, and what seemed to be some sort of low murmuring response. Dr Mallet stepped back, away from the ladder, and staggered against the roof. Before I could react, The Connoisseur leapt forward and grabbed her, stopping her from hitting the roof or possibly stumbling against the parapet and falling over into the parading street-fires underneath.

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I looked up at the finial again. It had started to glow. Its winged shape stood out against the sky. Flame lanced from it, at an angle, firing towards the bonfire in the Market Square. The singing grew louder again. The heat grew stronger—from above. The lone voice of the celebrant boomed out over everything, shouting and invoking in a language that I had never heard before.

All three of us backed away from the turret, with its glowing finial, as the heat and light poured out of it. Dr Mallet made one last despairing gesture towards the finial, now totally unearthly in its terrible bright beauty and deadly purpose. We rushed back down the stairs. We didn't care what—if anything—might await us back down in the street.

We needn't have worried. The milling crowd ignored us. Everyone was looking up towards the finial. Then silence fell, an incredible hush after all the noise. It was the silence of anticipation.

And then the finial broke apart. It didn't shatter or explode; it simply split where the iron rod met a slender disc of almost hairline frailty, which glowed a different, warmer, coppery colour than the rest of the structure.

A great gasp went up from the crowd, and the rooftop fires died down before flaring up for one last time. Then they went out. The sky went dark again; the autumn stars shone down again. I welcomed their return—at least they were familiar, for all their distance and utter untouchability.

The Balzarths attempted to start singing again, but their voices died away. The celebrant's voice had also fallen silent, and later we found that no-one had been able to trace what had happened to him, though Colonel Gaspard had pursued his agate-eyed quarry through the narrow streets until he was lost from view entirely: nor did the other philuminists grace the streets of High Mortain again.

We returned to our inn through streets fast thinning of revellers, who were mostly returning to their homes with a slightly abashed and puzzled air, muttering quietly to each other, and casting anxious glances about them, as if not keen to be seen abroad.



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‘What we have witnessed,’ my friend explained, ‘was an attempt to call down the influence of Phaeton, the lost planet, and a vessel of the great fire of the heavens. Its votaries believe there was once a major planet between Jupiter and Mars and its astrological force can be felt on Earth still. The qualities of that planet, which was shattered into mere asteroids millions of years ago, are those of fire, ecstasy and destruction. This night its phantom influence was at its closest to the Earth, if Vesperine’s impressions are right. And those who wanted to bring it amongst us had brought together all their summoning strength: and had chosen High Mortain because of its quaint fire customs, which provided a fine focus to support their invocation. Never would they have so great an opportunity: the planetary position of the Phaeton force nearing the Earth at the same season as the town’s fire celebrations.

‘And Hephaestus Smith had become aware of what his art was going to be used for. His *nom-de-feu*, as Edith called it, was not chosen by chance; he knew his mythology, and entered into the ancient and mythical tangles of love, hate, and rivalry that characterises those stories.

‘Our friend Hephaestus, suspicious of those who had commissioned from him this most curious finial, had put a weakness in the rod, at the disc of copper. It is the metal of Aphrodite, goddess of love, and the patroness of smiths. Hephaestus knew his iron. It was truly in his soul, as one might say.’



Some days later, visiting my friend in his rooms, I asked about Dr Mallet. The Connoisseur went over to an intricately-inlaid bureau, and retrieved a letter. ‘She was able to retrieve fragments of the finial that fell to the ground. Somehow I do not think that she will be asking Hephaestus to return it to its original form. And the remains of the finial left *in situ* on the turret will be harmless.’

I sipped at the polychromatic liqueur that The Connoisseur had served on my arrival.

‘I don’t suppose that there’ll be any more concerts by the Balzarths?’

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‘Not in rural Shropshire, at any rate. Not of *The Bright Charioteer!* And that reminds me, I heard you humming the *Hallelujah Chorus* as you came up the stairs earlier. I take it that you are still singing in *Messiah*? I think I may well attend the performance.’