

Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know



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Felix Turner nodded to his tailor, Mr Hepstein, as he surveyed his new attire. The charcoal grey frockcoat emphasized his shoulders in the best way, exactly as the current fashion required. The black trousers felt strange, possessed of more space than his usual breeches. Plus, they reached his feet, rather than stopping at his knee, his calves felt unnaturally warm. He'd chosen a white shirt with pleated front, ruffles were too ostentatious and he needed to appear business-like and professional, not like some fop. Yes, even Beau Brummel would approve, he decided. He complimented the tailor on the quality of his work.

'Attending a soiree, sir?' the old man asked politely.

'Actually, I am. But in a professional capacity.'

'I'm sure you will make quite the spectacle, Mr Turner. Few of my clients have gathered up the courage to indulge in the latest fashion.'

The comment, intended as a compliment, made Felix frown. He didn't want to be a spectacle; the Bureau wanted his presence to be purely observational. He was to monitor proceedings and report back. If he drew attention, people might ask too many questions. The old man tottered into his work room, at the back of the shop to write his invoice. It was too late now, Felix decided. If his appearance prompted questions, he needed some convenient lies.



He nodded and chuckled. Lying was what he was good at. His family still had no idea about his work. They believed he spent his days with ledgers and numbers, the kind of work the third son of minor aristocracy might expect. His father still hadn't forgiven him for ending his engagement to Fanny Richardson, but he'd had no choice. The girl asked too many questions and refused to accept his excuses for missing their trysts. An agent of the British Bureau for the Arcane couldn't marry; it was impractical and risky. His would be a lonely life, though compared to Fanny's endless giggling and suspicious interrogations, it would be an exciting one.



With the invoice stuffed into one of the many pockets in his frockcoat, another advantage to the new design, Felix Turner left the tailors and strode onto Piccadilly. With March proving to be surprisingly balmy, Felix savoured the sunshine and the admiring looks from passers-by. His reasoning reassured him his new look was necessary; he needed to fit in with the lauded individuals he was about to meet.

The old Felix would have looked out of place, more a servant than someone who belonged among London's elite. He arrived outside the imposing edifice of 139 Piccadilly and stepped up to its entrance with a confidence borne of a right to be there. Admittedly, his invitation was fake but bluff was everything.



Sure enough, the servant glanced at the embossed card he presented and opened the door. Felix strode into a grand hallway, where an imposing staircase led upward. He let the noise of laughter and conversation direct his footsteps.



The room was large, light flooded the space, illuminating men and women who preened like swans. Daytime social events required women to wear walking dresses; French cambric and satin was everywhere, punctuated with ostrich feathers. Men looked no different to his own outfit, reinforcing the correctness of his decision. They encircled the figure in the centre of the room.

He wore eastern garb, including a turban made from flamboyant red and gold silk. Felix had been warned of the host's eccentricity, a consequence of his travels to Constantinople, four years earlier. He reclined on a Mahogany couch, upholstered in silver threaded silk. The smile, the sparkling eyes, the relaxed demeanour, displayed just how much the host savoured all the attention; he thrived on it.

Felix could only stare in awed admiration: he was in the presence of Lord George Byron.



A servant appeared at his side, bearing a silver salver holding crystal flutes of champagne. Felix took one and sipped its bubbly goodness, an excellent vintage. He hovered at the periphery of the adoration. Everyone listened in awed fascination, as their host read from his recently published poetry, Hebrew Melodies. He spoke eloquently about how his travels had inspired his writing, his adventures, including swimming the Hellespont.

The only person not slavish in his attention, stood to one side, watching the reverential faces with a sly grin. His black hair and olive-skinned features, betrayed the man's Italian ancestry. It was his influence over the lauded aristocrat which had provoked the Bureau's interest. Doctor John Polidori was Byron's physician, though his medical qualifications were dubious; he fulfilled the role of companion with greater confidence. As a writer, he offered an empathetic ear to the great man, cementing their friendship in the process.



Felix couldn't take his eyes off the man. It wasn't just his contempt for the admiring audience, it was more than that. Felix wondered if it was just the man's black frockcoat and trousers, emphasizing his naturally dark features, that made him look like death was a close friend. There was something in the eyes, turning them into pieces of coal, that made him look something other than human.

Felix did his best to focus his attention on the speaker, when those eyes found his. He felt the stare penetrate his composure, ripping away his fragile confidence, to expose the nervous Bureau agent beneath. That stare didn't waver. It forced Felix to engage, bowing his head slightly in greeting. The other man didn't react. Rude.

Instead, he cleared his throat. Lord Byron glanced at the man and gave him the slightest of nods. 'Ladies and gentlemen, I have bored you enough with my ramblings. I have someone I would like you to meet. He's a fascinating character, one who inspired me to write in new and exciting ways. Would you like to meet him?'

Universal agreement followed, gushing, exhilarated.

Servants appeared, to pull curtains across the impressive windows, darkening the room, while others lit candles.

Byron stood up. 'My friend struggles with an aversion to daylight, a terrible affliction. I'm sure you will accommodate his little foibles.'

More agreement, accompanied by frowned sympathy and whispered concerns expressed at such suffering.

With attention focused on their host, Polidori moved over to a small door sat snugly in the corner, obscured slightly by a silken screen. Felix moved discreetly to watch the man. Darkness inhabited that part of the room, Felix had to peer into the gloom to see an entrance appear that was even darker, an open maw into oblivion.

The figure that appeared did so hesitantly.



Felix Turner hadn't been with the Bureau for long. He'd heard stories from his comrades, but didn't believe them. They were too unlikely, intended to frighten newly recruited young men, whose experiences didn't extend beyond the rugby pitch at Eton and nanny's strictures. The figure who entered the room caused him to swallow hard. He found himself wishing more experienced personnel had been despatched to 139 Piccadilly.

The new arrival wasn't human.

The figure was tall but a height derived from ungainly, long limbs, like those of a crane. Too thin to support even the emaciated body. Arms, equally as long and thin, hung down at the side of the body, as though there wasn't the strength to hold them up. And the face. Beyond ugly, sallow skin sagged from the skull, as though the thing had been dead for years. If the creature hadn't moved, he might have thought it was no longer alive. Where it not for the eyes. They possessed a sharp intelligence as they surveyed the room.

The creature's mouth, little more than a blackened smear across the face, formed into a bow. A smile. An expression which even Felix's inexperience told him had nothing to do with offering a pleasant welcome.



The creature stumbled clumsily into the room. There were gasps, loudest from the women, who clutched their mouths to stifle their shocked reactions to the new guest. Even some of the men moved back a few steps, a couple placed their wives behind them.

Byron's voice boomed. It startled many of his audience, the atmosphere had grown tense and wary. 'Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce my friend, Abhartach. Newly arrived from Ireland, I've invited him to join John and I, so we may illicit inspiration from his experiences in that mystical isle.'

The creature bowed. Lank hair tumbled over its face, exposing brown scalp on the top of its skull. It raised its head, stroking its disobedient strands back over its head. One of the women gasped loudly and sank onto a nearby divan, to be attended by her distracted husband.

'I'm very pleased to make the acquaintance of all you fine ladies,' the creature hissed. Its smile broadened. 'And your husbands too.'

Intended as a joke, no one laughed. More of the women clung to the nearest man.

Byron appeared not to notice. Polidori had stepped back, to lean against a marble fireplace, looking utterly relaxed. Something felt awry. Felix peered around the darkened room, searching for the cause of his anxiety. It took a moment.

All the servants had left. The doors were closed too.

As discreetly as he could, he moved to the door he'd used to enter the salon. Polidori watched him but didn't react. With his back to the door, looking as casual as he could, he tried the handle. The door was locked.

Polidori smiled at him. A leering look of satisfaction.

Lord Byron's voice filled the salon again. 'Abhartach has travelled far to be with us today, the journey has quite exhausted him. I promised him refreshment when he arrived, but his diet is somewhat restrictive, another factor which arises from his infirmity. I'm sure you will all be aware of the desperate poverty in Ireland, where a grand lifestyle is defined by a diet of potatoes.'

He paused for laughter. There was little more than a murmur of awkwardness.

'This makes things difficult for my friend, which is why I invited him to join us. I'm sure none of you will object if Abhartach feasts now?'

Several of the men and women gazed at the table, where glasses of champagne awaited, but the absence of any food was glaringly obvious. They frowned in confusion.

'Would you mind, ladies and gentlemen?' Byron asked again, louder, more assertively.

A few of the men grunted approval.

'Good. On behalf of Abhartach, I thank you.' He turned to the creature, beaming. 'You heard the good people, tuck in.'

Felix watched dumbfounded. The only thing in his head, the words of a Bureau veteran during his training. He'd explained how, in moments of extreme shock, people didn't react. They'd simply stare, unable to comprehend what their eyes told them. Felix was no different, he couldn't stir himself into action. It was Byron's invitation, shocking in the way he'd employed social protocols, to facilitate the horror. He and Polidori stood back and watched, grinning at the carnage.





There was no other word but carnage. Within seconds, blood was everywhere.

Abhartach leapt at the nearest person, a handsome young man, about Felix's age. The creature's claws raked the man's throat, shredding tissue, to be gulped down hungrily, before moving on to the next victim. Another man, older, upright and with a soldier's bearing, but too slow to react. The same fate, slashed throat, instantly consumed without any attempt to chew. By the time the third body had hit the floor, the older man's wife, chaos ensued.

With shock dispelled, everyone came to life and panic followed. No one attempted to stop the creature, their efforts focused on escape. They ran for the doors, found them locked, banged and hammered on them, demanding freedom.

Abhartach followed, leaping, into their midst. He grabbed necks, yanking them back, to bite into the throat tissue, sucking and swallowing noisily. A couple of men tried to wrestle him to the ground, they failed and died in the attempt. Like sheep, everyone flocked together for safety. A meaningless concept. Abhartach only had to launch himself, with astounding vigour, into the middle of the flock, to grab his nearest victim. At other times, he ran on all fours, like a wolf, to pounce, dragging the unfortunate quarry to the ground in order to feed. The crowd ran screaming across the room, only for the same thing to occur. The monster laughed. An unnaturally high-pitched cackle that sounded equally manic and crazed.

As an agent of the British Bureau for the Arcane, Felix Turner had a responsibility to act. He knew that. He couldn't stand by and allow people to be murdered. Except he'd arrived without a weapon, he'd been told to monitor the event, not defend the guests.

Nothing in his training had prepared him for this moment. The regular glances from Polidori suddenly made sense to him. They knew who he was. His presence made the Bureau complicit, purely by his inaction. It would be the end of his career, something of a record after just five months. He had to do something.

Without any form of a plan, doubting whether he'd even survive, once he'd reacted, Felix ran over to the nearest window. He yanked the curtain back hard, a column of sunlight streamed into the room, to land on the feasting creature. It looked up, shielded its eyes and emitted an ear-piercing shriek. Felix grabbed another curtain, did the same, letting in more sunlight. Byron yelled at him to stop, to close the curtains, if he knew what was good for him.

Opening them wasn't enough. Felix wasn't a big man, but sometimes size wasn't everything, physics was. He grabbed the next curtain and swung on it, yanking downward at the same time. With pinging sounds, part of the curtain came off its rail, it wouldn't be closed again any time soon. He called to a couple of the bigger men to help, recognising the effect sunlight had on the monster, they joined in.

Abhartach abandoned his feasting, scrabbling out of the way of the beams of sunlight, cowering against the darkened wall in trepidation. Demanding his host did something to protect him, Byron and Polidori marched across the room. Felix's allies cowered at their advance; they wouldn't be of much use. He needed to create a threat. When he was weaponless.

Felix looked around the room and grinned. On the wall, beneath the table filled with champagne flutes, he saw what he needed. He leapt onto the table, sending the glasses flying in his haste, to snatch one of the swords displayed above a painting of some battle or other. He jumped onto the floor, in front of the two angry men, wielding his blade at them in as threatening a way as his trembling hands allowed.



He'd learned to use a sword at Eton but had never used it in a proper fight, he hoped his two opponents weren't experts.

'Unlock the doors and let these people out, or so help me, aristocrat or not, I will run you through.'

Byron guffawed. Polidori looked less assured. It was all Felix needed to continue with his bluff.

'You know who I am and who I represent. On behalf of the Bureau, I order you to stop your crazed actions. Disobey my instruction and you will be lucky to escape prison, perhaps even the executioner. If I kill you, in defence of these good people, I will be declared a hero, you will be the villain. Is that what you want?'



Byron glared but Polidori's whispered advice calmed the man. Polidori took a key out from his frockcoat, strolled over to the door and opened it. The guests stampeded.

Byron hadn't moved but stared at Felix with searing malice.

Felix's mind raced. He'd just threatened to kill a member of Britain's elite, a celebrity of the highest order. The man's finances were a mess, everyone knew that, but it wouldn't stop him from taking legal action, against the Bureau and Felix personally. There needed to be another option, a way out that offered the great man some form of escape.

Felix glanced at the cowering figure in the shadows, behind the silk screen. It had lost much of its frail appearance, its stomach was bloated, skin no longer hung from its bones. The thing must have acted out of starvation.

Felix nodded at the creature. 'We can tell the authorities that thing attacked your guests unexpectedly, you were as surprised as the rest of us. It can join the other prisoners we keep imprisoned in our cells. There will be no trial, my witness statement will suffice. What do you say, your lordship?'

Byron continued to glower but with less vehemence now. Polidori had returned and whispered his advice. There was no reply. Byron turned on his heels and marched out of the room.

Polidori sighed. 'We accept your offer. I will ensure Abhartach is restrained.'
'I will need you to swear, on your honour.'

Felix's demand received a polite bow. 'I swear. I knew this would end badly.'

Felix looked around the room, at the bloody corpses, the pools of blood soaking into the carpet, the torn curtains hanging limply in the windows. A handful of servants waited at the door, appalled, frightened and uncertain what to do next. Felix beckoned one of them over and instructed him to hurry outside and fetch a messenger. He needed to get agents from the Bureau to the scene as a matter of urgency, they had a major situation to handle.

As the servant scuttled off, Felix instructed the others to leave the room as it was, he had taken command of the situation. They obliged with relief. Polidori turned to lead the creature out of the room.

'What is that thing called?' Felix asked. He'd need to label the monster in his report to his superiors.

Polidori paused, as pale as the creature now, his shoulders drooped and he looked defeated. 'The Celts call it droch-fhuil, in their language it means tainted blood,' he replied. 'They are primarily found in the Balkans, his lordship heard about them on his visit to Albania. In that country they are called vampyre.'

He escorted the creature through the same door which had heralded its arrival.

Felix sighed with relief. He could only hope his actions had prevented the creature from wreaking more havoc. Albania was a long way away and had no contact with Britain and its empire. He hoped their vampyres would remain where they were, and such monsters would never trouble the British Bureau for the Arcane ever again.

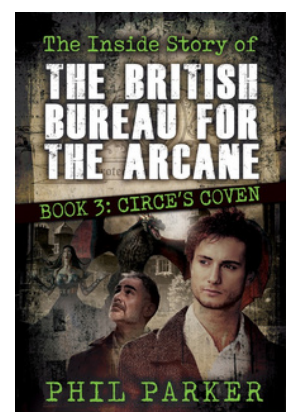
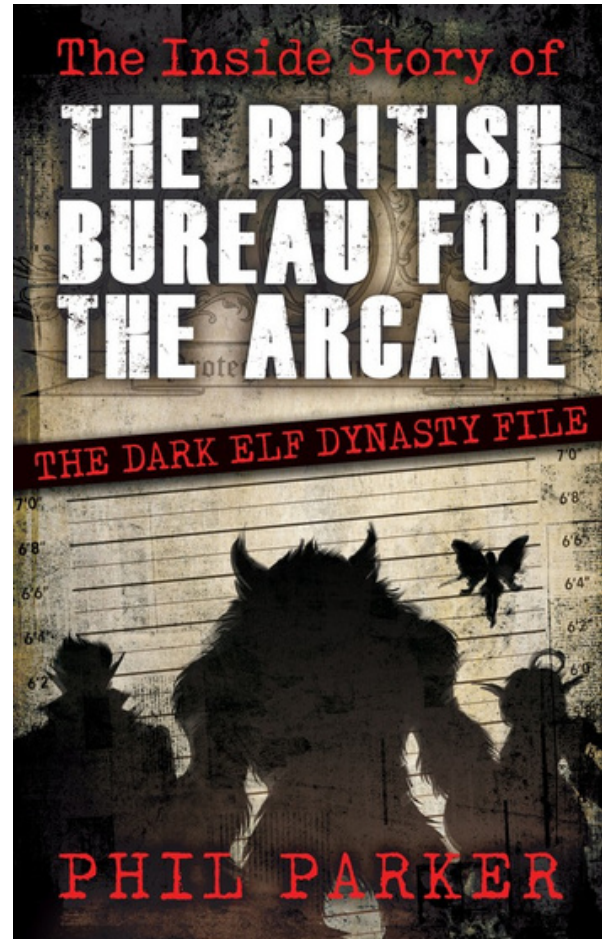


THE BRITISH BUREAU FOR THE ARCANE SERIES

The British Bureau for the Arcane has kept people safe for centuries from the arcane species that seek to harm human beings. Their range extends to Commonwealth nations that were part of the British Empire. A once-proud part of the British Secret Service, their success in controlling the arcane races has been their downfall.

These beings now live on the edge of survival in remote parts of Britain. Or, at least they did. For Arlo Austin, a loyal but troubled agent for the Bureau, something is wrong. When he's sent to protect the citizens of the Shetland Isles from rampaging Norwegian trolls, it soon becomes apparent it was an attempt on his life. When another agent dies in mysterious circumstances, and Arlo is warned of an impending war with arcane species, his instincts are proved right.

But who is behind this rebellion? Could it be linked to Arlo's own bloodline as a Dark Elf? His traumatic childhood holds secrets, ones that are going to test his loyalty to the Bureau. In their cells another Dark Elf is held prisoner, one who is so despised by its staff, their hatred has extended to Arlo. This species is violent and vengeful, can they recruit one of their own to bring about the destruction of the Bureau? And in so doing, enable the arcane races to wage war against the human race.



Described by one reader as the “fantasy version of Men in Black”.



More details: https://linktr.ee/phil_parker

