

**GEORGINA TALBOT ~
STEAMPUNK PRINCESS**



**THE SECRET LIFE OF AN
EXTRAORDINARY
GENTLEWOMAN**

BY MISS EMILY AUSTEN

**EPISODE THIRTEEN ~
DEATH BECOMES HER**

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The Story So Far...

It is 1870 – and in a freak accident Bournemouth gentlewoman Georgina Talbot has inherited the special power of electrical projection, whilst her sister, Marianne, has become bride to vampire Lord Winton.

The sisters have continued their philanthropic work – yet a final chapter is drawing near...

I

Change, so much *change*! The urban sprawl of Bournemouth had all but obliterated the smuggling trade that used to occur across its beaches though (of course) it still went on.

Change. Queen Victoria's reign had seen so much. First the rise to dominance of factories, the harnessing of steam, then the discovery of the aether and of wonder fuel Victorium. As she faced her final curtain Georgina Talbot, gentlewoman, could reflect upon a life well lived, the worthy life of the good philanthropist. There was the ladies' finishing school she'd endowed. The village she'd built as an example to others of all classes, to the poor of how to avoid the workhouse through industry and thrift, to the rich on how to assist the advancement of their inferiors.

Regrets? She had a few. But then again, too few to mention. Perhaps she could have done more to save her sister Marianne from becoming a vampire? But no – she'd been too wilful – the prodigal elder sister. And now? In this new year of 1870 St Mark's, the church she had endowed for her 'model village', would soon see her own funeral as the consumption she'd contracted took its inevitable hold.

And with that final thought she coughed again, convulsed, and moved back to her bed to await her end, to meet her maker.

Her only hope Mr Harker and his associates would arrive in time to save her poor sister's soul...

In the bar of '*Isaac Gulliver*' tavern Steven Jones sat nursing a pint of beer, the smell of roasting food and watered ale permeating the dank atmosphere of the pub. Named after a local smuggler of the last century it had been built upon the edge of the Talbot Estate – on the Poole side of the border - for



upon the sister's land alcohol had been banned because of the sin it induced.

Was it not always thus?

Outside the sky hung heavy over the bay, towns awaiting a storm that could be anything from a hurricane to a damp squib.

The pub was busy that lunchtime. Ok, it was busy every day, but today some contraband brandy had been shipped in from across the Channel, stolen from Emperor Napoleon III's cellar itself, they said. They always 'said'. At age thirty-five Jones was tall, moderately attractive, and exceedingly ambitious. He and his family had been saved from the poorhouse by the benefaction of the Talbot sisters.

And now it was time to return the compliment.

"Aha!" one of the smugglers thought it amusing to slap the bum of a barmaid as she bent to lay tankards afore him and his shipmates. Brunette, slim - but twenty summers - the curls of her hair simply made her unfeasibly pretty rather than attractive.

'Thwack!' full of feist she slapped him full in the face to a roar of amusement from his friends.

"Don't touch what you can't afford!" the spirited girl chided.

"E wouldn't say that if I's was a Toff!" the seaman took it all in good part, but she was already gone from the table. If it wasn't tourists it was smugglers – and if it wasn't smugglers it was tourists. Either way their habitual use of the present tense irritated beyond measure. But then Jones was an orphan from a workhouse. And he felt sorry for the girl, forced by financial necessity to work for a fat, lecherous, innkeeper and his humourless spouse...

Reflecting upon her life Georgina recalled the outset of her village was anything but encouraging or cheerful. Mr Tuck... 'David's' untimely death in the fracas with *HMLS 'Warrior'* had seen to that. The first inhabitants had been unused to any restraints; the women, many of them very lax in their behaviour; the surrounding gentlemen and clergy of the area having no sympathy with improvement for the lower classes. Yet, after a few years, everything had indeed been mended though her efforts, and those of Marianne. Enough to save her dear sister's soul? That would be for the Lord to sit in judgment upon. If only she had not so willingly *embraced* Winton and his vampiric ways...

Georgina next fondly recalled how the sisters had sought to employ the poor to clear the 465 acres of land to build cottages at their own expense, and these were completed between 1850 and 1862. The workers were permitted to remain to swell in the cottages, and slowly Talbot Village began to develop in a virtuous spirit of thrift, sobriety and hard-work.

Homes for working class families? Georgina wanted them to have nice living conditions: she did not wish them to end up back in the workhouse. Thus each cottage had an acre of land so the families could grow vegetables and fruit trees to eat, animal pens for pigs and hens, a top-of-the-range outside toilet;



nearby heathland upon which to graze. Altogether 126 souls abode in Talbot Village. They must, of course, earn a living – no lodgers and overcrowding permitted. Also no trade, bar the petty selling of eggs, bacon and poultry. The residents were charged but a rent of between 4 and 5 shillings per week.

And yet they had done more. Seven almshouses had been built for the elderly and widowed, infirm working-class men and their wives, around each a beautiful garden. Constructed by Mr McWilliam of nearby Portland stone, designed by Mr Creeke, they were finished by 1862. Each resident was given 6 shillings a week, and coal, had space for pigs and hens. There is a doctor, should they become sick and – when they die – the funeral is paid for. A fitting end for the old who cannot otherwise earn a living to alleviate the misery and want of the end of life.

It was, for Georgina, a fitting legacy to bequeath...

Just then *'The Gulliver's'* door catch lifted and the portal opened. A chill entered the room. Behind the chill stepped a man – only the tavern fell silent because he wasn't a 'man' at all. Certainly he looked like a 'gent', but his pale skin and cold eyes marked him out as something unreal.

"What you be a wanting here, Sir?" the innkeeper challenged his social superior, his pet mouser racing out of the room to hide from what its sixth sense told it was wholly *unnatural*.

Yet mortal men endured. "Not a drink, that's for sure", the well-groomed and wealthy newcomer showed modified teeth, the handsome fangs of what all locals believed to be a *vampire*.



Behind him his servant, a well-dressed Indian, joined his master from seeing to their coach. “We don’t serve their kind in here”, the fearful innkeeper deferentially apologised. “Foreigners”.

“I do not *drink* alcohol”, the servant amused in perfect English, his face grinning in amusement. “Luckily for me Allah forbids”.

“Not my idea of luck”, someone muttered.

“My... my Lord”, one of the smugglers stuttered. “The brandy shipment has only just arrived. The crew brought it in but hours ago”.

“I heard”, safe inside, with no bright sun shining, the vampire removed his top hat to look around the room, his reflection failing to fully register on the small glass windows. “Chaudry here will take my cut tomorrow. I come for something else”.

Where his gaze fell across each table in turn so did a chill. All in ‘*The Gulliver*’ knew Lord Winton – the ‘thing’ that had once been a man, the ‘thing’ that now resided in Downton Abbey, the great heathland gothic folly a mile outside the town, a complex worked by the labouring rural proletariat, a place of dread overseen by his Lordship’s minions, where workers were obliged to tend turnips, barley and beans from dawn ‘til dusk with but an hour for repast¹.

“So, what *do* I come for?” knowing no wooden bullets or hunters were here present the vampire’s eyes stared all humans down.

“Him, My Lord”, to murmurs from the smugglers Jones rose to point at shocked and surprised tavern lad, Richard Tuck. “He’s the one. He has fire and rain, he has *spirit*. He *is* his father’s son. His grandfather’s grandson”.

“I’ll wager his is the only spirit here not watered”, Winton looked at young Tuck – startled at his agent’s surprisingly prescient selection.

“No!” whatever it was Richard refused with a wave of his strong hand. “I’ll not become one of *you*!”

“That is *not* my intention”, the vampire smiled at his informant’s, excellent detective work. “I simply require a *companion* for my friend. My *human* friend”.

Truth – or dare? It was explanation enough for the townspeople to stir no protest, for the sweaty, fat innkeeper to justify ‘letting the apprentice go’.

“We own his indenture, my Lord”, his pecunious wife endorsed. “Fair and square, from the workhouse. He’s your apprentice for twenty pounds”.

“See to it Chaudry! Mr Jones”, the vampire ordered his lackeys. “We leave immediately”.

¹ Generous by the factory standards of the time – but who enjoyed their job back then, eh? (*Ed.*)

“Immediately, My Lord”, had the Indian enjoyed a conscience he’d have felt sorry for the lad.

The boy ran, of course, but there was no escape from the combination of landlord and musselman. Each barred an exit to enable Jones to apprehend, the child’s appeals to the full force of the justice helpless – the law used in Britain and the colonies to enforce security these ten years.

As the boy was led away, protesting, the chatter in *‘The Isaac Gulliver’* returned to normal, the incident forgotten as the tavern went back to what passed in this part of Dorset for business as usual, to smuggling, to decadency, to survival of the fittest.

But for Richard Tuck – grandson of David - life would never be the same again...



II

Love? What's love got to do, got to do with it? What's love but a second-hand emotion?

Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?

Georgina had never married. Nor (in the eyes of God and her sister) had Marianne. As her finale approached, as she faced the final curtain, Georgina recalled the role-model of celebrated nurse Miss Florence Nightingale; 'good works' not considered a suitable activity for married ladies in polite society. Had she *ever* lived? If Mr Tuck had but survived²...



The village church, St. Mark's, was now complete to match the school erected in 1862. Built upon three acres of land by Mr McWilliam, and designed by Messers Evans and Fletcher, St. Mark's second service – the first after consecration – looked destined to be Georgina's own funeral. Her village sat amongst trees, a rural idyll, the 'lungs of Bournemouth'. A suitable place to rest? Or but vain glory? Soon she would meet her maker.

Soon He would decide...

Working for vampires? Not as bad as the critics claimed. Having no fortune, nowhere else to hang his hat, Steven Jones had yet another good reason to remain in Lord Winton's employ.

And that reason was Lady Emily.

Steven had been but ten, a groom for his Lordship, when plucked from the Workhouse by the vampire's *consort*, Marianne Talbot. Through diligence, quick wits and sheer hard work he'd risen to become first a gangmaster, then a 'land agent', a model of thrift, sobriety and hard-work. With this last promotion had come access to the house, where he'd spied and fallen in love with the vamp's still very human niece. If Emily Winton was destined to some day become an undead herself, it would probably not be for years, not until natural aging threatened, not until she'd married and had children to carry on the Lord's true bloodline.

And then, before then, Steven Jones was determined he'd rise so far he could save her soul, take her away from all this and...

² See 'Episode Two – A Greater Love Hath No Man' (Ed.)

The carriage pulled up at Downton Abbey to shatter his reverie. “Get out!” he ordered the new apprentice. “*Please*”.

Richard Tuck saw the driver at the reins not turn a hair to his plight, the hired ruffians stare cruel, lifeless eyes as they too gestured him alight. Run? Where to – to the smugglers of Poole Quay? They’d be a worse haven...

Lord Winton’s horse pulled-up some distance ahead. “I’ll get you for this!” Richard hissed an angry promise at the ‘agent’ who’d procured him, who must have stalked him for days to so set him up.

“I’m from the Workhouse too, I’m already damned”, Jones sarcastically shrugged. Privately he thought the lad had spirit, that he’d make an excellent protective companion for the lady in question. “No fangs, though”, he bared his teeth in mockery of the youth’s plight. “Inside - out of the noonday Sun - and I’ll introduce you”.

Intrigued, seeing he had no choice, Richard Tuck followed into a whitewashed, classically pillared and well-glazed mansion house, a minion behind with a loaded whip, always ready in case of trouble for his master...

Less than five miles away, in Bournemouth’s premier inn, ‘*The Royal Bath Hotel*’, Jonathan Harker – vampire slayer – sipped upon a scotch whiskey as he surveyed the bay to plot his next mission.

“I thought I’d find you here”, a handsome young woman bustled her skirts to join him on the terrace.

“Part of being a team is being aware of your associates likely actions”, he cryptically grinned a retort. Despite appearances the slight blonde, Miss Bouffet Summers of Lymington, had a natural inclination for the work of slaying the undead.

And who would suspect a young lady such as she?

“Am I yet permitted to know the target?” observing they were not being overheard she professionally questioned.

“Two targets”, Harker swilled his scotch around his glass in contemplation. “Lord Winton and his *consort*, one Marianne Talbot”.

“A challenge?” his young apprentice considered. “To dispatch two at one time?”



“Not as impractical as it would first appear”, he rationalised. “We have an entrée thanks to her sister, the philanthropist Miss Georgina Talbot. *She* believes she has engaged us to but exorcise her dear sister of Satan’s embrace”.

“You have again been disingenuous?” Bouffet approved his wanton duplicity.

“I’d prefer the epithet ‘economical with the truth’”, Jonathan instead euphemised.

“Where are we to strike?” she next asked the pertinent question.

“Near here. His Lordship’s residence. Downton Abbey”.

Miss Summers looked quizzical. “Did I not read in the Court Circular that Her Majesty herself was intending to stay there soon?”

“Indeed you did”, Harker’s lips contorted into a half-smile of demi-cruelty. “Then we shall see if Victoria really *has* been consorting with Count Dracula”.

“Such a lack of respect?” Bouffet’s eyes glistened with admiration for her associate’s cavalier daring, his so freely using their lawful monarch’s personal name – her heart pounding at the very thought of it. Tall, powerfully built, intelligent – she had to quell a dark urge to unseemingly grasp his hand and clasp it into hers.

Yes! Jonathan Harker was indeed a catch for any lady who could prove her worth, thereby win his affections...

Clearly a prisoner Richard found himself walking through a sumptuously decorated vestibule, up an imposing staircase decorated with portraits of long-dead heroes of the Civil War. Ahead of him he sniffed the air and took in Jones’ scent, noting him well turned-out and prosperous for a servant, for one as low-born as he.

Maybe there *were* prospects here?

At the top of the staircase they turned right, then into a heavily perfumed *boudoir*. “The boy Richard Tuck, your Ladyship”, Steven spoke a suppressed smile, bowed, then withdrew to close the door behind him.

Was it locked? No - but for the moment escape seemed impossible.

“Welcome to Downton Abbey”, said the voice of a fashionable lady at a dressing table. She looked young, white of face, pampered and spoilt. “I’m Miss Talbot. You are to call me that, or Miss Marianne if my sister is around”.

“So you *are* real!” Richard saw her admire her face in the looking glass, and in turn to scrutinise him from a distance in the very same reflection.

“A popular myth – it doesn’t always happen”, the Lady of the mansion bared fangs to explain. “I’ve not fully become...” She hesitated. “Like His Lordship”, she was polite. “Not yet, leastways”.

“Why did he do that?” Richard blinked a question he’d always wondered of vamps.

“Don’t *you* want to live for ever?” his new mistress turned a smile to justify.

“But to lose your immortal *soul*?”

“My dear parents and brother died of disease”, Marianne huffily retorted. “I’ll no abandon myself also!”

“I’m sorry”, the boy tried to comprehend perhaps there were good reasons. “I never really knew my parents”, he explained. “We were separated in the poorhouse”.

“A terrible thing my sister and I have striven against”, Marianne Talbot looked down in something like shame – then up again with a smile as self-interest quickly re-asserted itself. “You see, I know your story”.

“You *do*!” Richard was incredulous. He’d heard tales and theories – but never the truth. “How?”

“Your grandfather was Mr David Tuck, the builder of my sister and I’s charitable village. Your father was Michael. Your grandfather died saving my sister Georgina’s life”.

“I never knew my father – let alone my grandfather”

“Precisely! Your father was given – as was right and proper – to the care of your aunt. After which we – my sister and I – lost contact”.

“My aunt died. I was taken to the poorhouse”, Richard was cagey in his explanation.

“A fact we have only just discovered”.

It was all too confusing. “And I am here because...?”

“You are here because I feel there is a debt to be repaid. You’ll be fed well. We shall find you clothing as befits your new station”.

“Your ladyship”, Tuck hesitated – thought of all the foul men who frequented ‘*The Isaac Gulliver*’ – the drunken innkeeper and his cruel wife – and decided to advance.

Maybe he’d fallen on his feet here, after all?

“May I ask what is my new station?”

“You shall become the escort of my sister, of course. After she crosses over. *Transforms*. Like myself and his Lordship”.

More vampires? No, no, and thrice no...

Dinner in ‘*The Royal Bath*’. Vegetable soup followed by roast chicken; the Spotted Dick plus coffee and liqueurs. Spartan by some standards: a feast as reckoned by most citizens for the British Empire.



“So?” Miss Summers engaged her employer as he lit a cigar. “When do we start?”

“Before our vampire adversaries sense a disturbance in the aether”, Mr Harker smiled. “*Tonight*”.

“And our cover?” she knew the optimum way to inveigle inside a country house was to bluff one’s way past the servants.

“I think it’s time Lord and Lady Suffix made an unexpected call”, he amused. “The weather looks like it’s closing in – and carriages frequently break down in the wet”.

“I’ll wear my best jewels”, she smiled benignly it was a perfect opportunity. “And Her Majesty?”

He grinned. “The best way to avoid a hue and cry is to remain at the scene of the crime”.

Meanwhile, back in Downton Abbey...

“So you see”, Miss Marianne twittered like the ruthless yet engaging vampira Richard had decided she undoubtedly was. “I wish to save my poor sister’s life”.

“I suppose we can’t have the lower classes not knowing their place...” Tuck’s reply verged on sarcasm.

“Oh my!” her Ladyship exclaimed. “Wit *and* rebellion! I’m so *glad* James purchased your indenture! Mr Jones was *so* right – you’re quiet like your grandfather. You’ll do us *so* well!”

“I understand”, eyes on the doors and windows Richard continued to plot his escape. Back now in ‘*The Gulliver*’ he’d be humping firkins from the basement under the watchful eyes of the world’s most grumpy couple. Was he a slave here too? Maybe? But a full belly. Baths! Yet be it ever so gilded, a cage remained a cage. All he had to do was be ‘nice’ to this spoilt vamp and her aged sister (whoever she was) for as long as it took to slip away, to take ship to the colonies, to America...

Anywhere.

“Your consort?” as casually as he could he tried to gain information.

“Are you and he the only ones of your kind here?”

“Oh yes!” Marianne smirked. “At present. You mustn’t fear him, Richard. He is good, and kind, and generous to all who obey him. It’s not *true* what they say”.

“That they suck the blood of mortal souls?”

“He drinks it from a goblet”, the female smirked amusement. “That way he’s not tempted to *bite*”.

“Whose blood?” Tuck wondered.

“Animals, mainly. This ‘biting’ thinks over-rated. Church propaganda. Vamps *don’t* want to make everyone else vamps, just to live for ever. That’s not so bad, now is it?”

“No Ma’am, I suppose not”, Richard thought it a fine distinction. *If* it were true.

So for his own preservation he vowed to find out...



III

Hammer of the Gods? That night a fierce electrical storm lashed into land over Bournemouth Bay. Not quite a hurricane, it blew and rained but a major inconvenience upon the inhabitants of Her Majesty's premier seaside resort, and across the neighbouring boroughs of Christchurch and Poole. To quote the poets the latter was, 'the wretchedest hive of scum and villainy in all the world': in the bawdhouses and bars it would be very much business as usual.

"They're shut away, my Lord", inland at Downton Abbey Chaudry indicated to his vampire master the indentured workers were secure.

"The crop?" looking at the foul weather through the great window of his mansion Lord Winton feared for his practical livelihood.

"Light rain is good, my Lord", unable to discern the Indian's possible reply Mr Jones instead offered one.

"But this is heavy rain?"

"Nothing compared to a monsoon", Chaudry recalled his homeland.

"I doubt it will worsen, Sir", Steven shrugged he was 'half-full' type of man.

"Business, business, business", Miss Marianne admonished as she bustled in, the waft of her considerable dress causing distress to the candles, her presence always a distraction. "James – I'm famished!" she declared as she took the vamp by the arm. "I've had *such* a tiring day!"

"Doing *what*?" he indulgently amused.

"Making young Tuck here feel at home", she beckoned to where their acquisition nervously stood at the doorway, a youth transformed to a more than a fair approximation of a 'Gentleman'.

"Astonishing!" looking at him the vampire's jaw visibly dropped in surprise – clearly exposing his characteristic fangs. "The family resemblance to his grandfather! I do believe he'll *do*..."

"Indeed", Marianne agreed. "It is time for you to meet my sister".

At which point a pall of thunder and a shaft of lightening announced the final burst of the gathering storm - the tension and ozone in the air rising to a climax only Mother nature could release.

It was followed by the sound of the doorbell to announce the early arrival of their expected *guest*...

"Chaudry!" his Lordship ordered the Indian attend to the matter.

"Jones. Inform Lady Emily dinner is served..."

"Can I help you?" the musselman eyed the unexpected arrivals with deep suspicion - so *not* the dinner guest he had expected to hasten here to avoid the breaking storm.



“Is you Master home?” like one who expected to be obeyed the sharp-dressed gentleman instantly demanded.

“And you are, Sir, Madam?” versed in the dark arts of Bengali *Khorma* the dark-skinned servant refused to be intimidated by their obvious wealth and taste.

“I am Lord John Suffix, and this is my wife, Lady Bouffet. Our carriage has broken down. I’ve sent the driver to bring help - but the numbskull has yet to return”.

“*Please* fetch your master”, the female implored. “The weather has clearly turned inconveniently inclement”.

“Is shelter too much to ask in a civilised country?” Lord Suffix persisted as - outside the cover of Downton Abbey’s extensive main porch - the rain began to pelt down in cats and dogs.

“Problem?” Jones emerged to reinforce his counterpart.

“Please show our unexpected guests inside”, the suspicious Chaudry, however, took command. “I will inform Lord Winton...”

“My niece and heir, Lady Emily”, Lord Winton introduced the unfeasibly beautiful young girl who arrived in a fashionable blue gown.

“Oh goody! Chicken canopies!” she clucked like one over their *entree* - forcing Richard Tuck conclude she was no more than a vacuous upper-class breeding machine, groomed to be sold off to the highest bidder when the time was right.

“Please, sit”, Winton urged and - after years in the poorhouse, months in the tavern, Richard found it decidedly queer - for the first time in his life - to be waited upon by servants. Dressed in one of the vamp’s suits, hair neatly coiffured, he sat opposite Winton, Miss Marianne to his left,

Miss Emily to his right, a spare place unseated for the unknown visitor. What was interesting was - with no guest appearing to take the vacant seat - his sworn enemy Steven Jones (for so he'd decided he assuredly was for bringing him here), was not considered to be of the social station he was invited to enjoy.

"It appears our guest is delayed. By the weather, perhaps?" Marianne suggested a desire to make small-talk. "They call it climate change, apparently".

"Everyone knows the world is not as it once was?" Richard again tried to solicit information from the *thing* that ruled Downton Abbey, effectively governed this area in the name of the Queen.

The *thing* that had yet to eat, but stared in amusement through flickering candlelight...

"Aye, they do. With justice too", the vampire nevertheless agreed to elaborate. "The Industrial Revolution, the increase in trade, Victorium... But what of you, Master Tuck?" he deflected by pouring some wine. "Is your life here not already superior to your previous apprenticeship?"

"Perhaps", Richard feared the unearthly charm in his eyes, the *power* vamps were known to hold over mortals. "Perhaps it is too early to tell", he wisely elected to reserve judgement. "Until I know what my role here is to be?"

"I'll tell you now it will be better", Marianne amused, yet declined to elaborate, "No 'perhaps' about it", she looked directly at Miss Emily, her lamps on but no one home.

At which point the Chaudry enigmatically returned...

"Interesting", once the Indian had finished whispering in his ear Lord Winton amused. "We have sufficient?"

"We have, my Lord", Chaudry confirmed.

"Uncle?" Lady Emily detected brewing excitement.

"Thanks to the turn in the weather it appears we have some unexpected visitors. Lord and Lady Suffix?"

"They are known to *us*?" Marianne's loaded phraseology was confused.

"They are not of *us*", Winton coded his reply, "but then the House of Lords is most large, full of boys of all *persuasions*".

"Like a boarding school, Uncle?" the mentally challenged Lady Emily made imprecise parallel.

"In a way my dear", her uncle humoured, "and like at school not *all* the students pay proper attention to their lessons".

Amusement erupted at his wit. "Lord and Lady Suffix!" Chaudry formally announced - and in stepped the unexpected visitors, servants scurrying to create further places at the extended dinner table.



“Good of you to take us in Winton”, Suffix grimaced. “My wife, Lady Bouffet”.

“Of course”, if the vampire was suddenly uneasy - thanks to the electrical interference of the storm raging outside - he could sense nothing more precise. “May I introduce my niece and ward, Lady Emily. My guest Mr Richard Tuck, and *this* charming lady is Miss Marianne Talbot”.

“Talbot?” Lady Suffix alarmed. “Related to... Miss Georgina?”

“My sister, yes. You know her?”

“Only, er, by repute”, locking pertinent eyes with his spouse Lord Suffix interjected. “Her, er, philanthropy is known throughout the civilized world”.

“Please, be seated”, the host encouraged. “Tell us your tale”.

“Usual story, broken carriage”, the pair sat to dinner as – outside - the distant rhythmic rumble of thunder commenced, followed by the sound of rustic folk music.

“Shall we shut them up, my Lord?” Chaudry quietly suggested from the sidelines.

“No, let them have their head”, Winton dismissed. “My tenants are but simple Dorset countryfolk”, he explained to his guests. “It pays to keep the workers happy”, his eyes again engaged Richard with an almost physic resonance. “They’re totally loyal – and I’m not a cruel man – never was”.

“*Man?*” hoping for the new arrivals assistance in his predicament he challenged.

“Like I said”, James Winton raised his glass to him. “I never *was*. If the people wish a little recreation on their time off – I say indulge it”

Nervously Richard Tuck averted his gaze - as again the doorbell rang. “Ah!” Miss Marianne observed. “*Finally!*”

“Finally?” Lord Suffix observed as the servants brought their entrees.

“Chaudry!” Winton ordered.

“My Lord”, the servant departed, as did the others to fetch more food, leaving but ‘the Nobs’ momentarily alone.

“We ask again, ‘finally’?” Lady Suffix insisted upon pressing the newcomer’s interrogative

“Yes, my dear sister Georgina arrives. Our expected dinner guest. You shall at last get to meet her”.

“*Indeed*”, Lord Suffix knowingly locked a glance with his spouse - who but nodded. “*Now!*” he further exclaimed - and suddenly all Hell broke lose.

Pulling a wooden knife from his waistcoat Suffix lunged toward the surprised Winton - who recoiled in shock - his chair falling over - its legs blocking and otherwise impeding the unexpected assailant. Lady Emily screamed as - likewise - Lady Suffix made to attack Miss Marianne - who blocked with a handy (and quickly sundered) breadstick.

“Vampire slayers!” the inactive young heiress screamed the now blindingly obvious - but took no actual action to assist her benefactor. Because she was in line to *inherit*? As the brace of melees continued Richard Tuck was left in a bind. Which side *should* he back?

In a split-second - he decided. Grabbing the table’s central candelabra he swing it wide to hit Suffix square on the side of the head - allowing Winton the chance to disarm the potential assassin, twist his arm and hold him to the ground whilst his young recruit delivered the *coup de grace* to send him unconscious.

Miss Marianne? With the enhanced agility of a vampire she was thus far she holding her own against the younger lady. Never hit a woman? Luckily it fell not to Richard to intervene - at that moment the doors to the dining room blew open. Hearing the disturbance Jones and Chaudry had returned - but it was expected guest Georgina Talbot who decisively intervened against the unexpected.

“*No!*” clearly ailing and infirm she screamed. “You were but to *exorcise* - not to *kill!*”

“Death *is* the only exorcism for vamps!” Bouffet triumphed she at last had Marianne pinned against the wall - but a spasm of plasmatic energy shot from Georgina’s outstretched hands to stun - fell her to the ground - as unconscious as her spouse.

“Thank you, Georgina”, Marianne caught her breath. “A most timely intervention”.

“What are sisters for?” Georgina replied - then suddenly collapsed to the ground - unconscious

“No!” Marianne alarmed as her sick sister convulsed - then fell still.
“Is she..?” Lady Emily wondered as Richard Tuck went to examine their saviour.

“She has yet a pulse”, he observed. “We must call a physician”.

“What shall we do with *them*, my Lord?” Chaudry requested instructions concerning their unwanted guests; Lady Emily post-traumatically sobbing uselessly in the background.

“I’ll call a doctor, my Lord?” if he so wanted to comfort the girl Jones knew he could not, had more pressing duties to attend.

“We’ll prove their propaganda untrue”, Winton’s mouth curled in grim irony. “Take them to Poole Quay! Let them go there!”

“They’ll be robbed blind - beaten?” Marianne knew as she too cradled her unconscious sibling’s head in her lap.

“But they’ll at least *live*”, her consort caught his breath. “Which is more than they wished for you, and for I”.

“At least it’s over before Her Majesty arrives for her stay”, Chaudry directed the servants repair the damage to dinner and take away the inculcators - as outside - suddenly - the music and rage of the elements ceased.

“So, Tuck, you chose the right side?” his lordship observed Marianne continue tend her ailing sister.

“How is she?” having chosen ‘sides’ a concerned Richard asked.

“Weakening”, the elder Miss Talbot pursed her lip in thought. “Which, perhaps, *is* a good sign”.

“Perhaps it is”, Winton decided. “The storms abated. Chaudry, send out more patrols - they *could* have accomplices. Now the electrical energy has discharged I can *indeed* sense a great disturbance in the aether”.

“Very good my Lord”, the enigmatic turbaned man from the sub-continent bowed, exited.

Cold to all save his undead master...



IV

“...to ashes, dust to dust, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection...”

“Amen”, though now a vampire Marianne Talbot endorsed the sentiment, along with the gathered congregation of grateful villagers - believers all - of assembled Bournemouth notables, and other well-wishers.

All then fell silent as the surviving sister turned to speak the eulogy. “We are gathered here today not only to bury my dear sister Georgina, but also to praise her”.

Approved mumbling from the poor attested the late Miss Talbot was indeed destined for a better life.

“I shall establish here a monument to her work”, Marianne avowed. “Though this village be beacon enough. So - now - I bid you - go! Depart in peace! Remember her in your prayers and follow her example. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you- only do it first! Live as she lived! Enjoy the bounties she - our foundress - bestowed”.

“Aye Ma’am”, Old Jethro agreed, “you’ve said it all”, he departed, putting on his cap as - paying their respects - the villagers departed to return to the better lives Georgina Talbot had so graciously bestowed upon them.

“Miss Talbot”, the reverend also took his leave - leaving Marianne alone with her thoughts - alone apart from a veiled woman in mourning black, who emerged from the woods, where she had been covertly yet intently observing proceedings.

“You heard?” Marianne casually inquired.

“Every word. It was... most... Most *moving*”.

“And now?”

“And now”, sighing hard the mystery woman lifted her veil to smile upon her own tomb. “What does one do when one can never achieve the release of death, merely regenerate *ad infinitum*?”

“Become anonymous?” Marianne smiled. “Continue your good works that way?”

“Aye”, her yet breathing younger sister returned her gaze. “When we lied about our ages on the census returns all those years ago, who would have thought for both of us it would become moot”.

“Aye”, likewise undead, unable to die, Marianne agreed.

And thus was born the legend that would become Georgina Talbot - ‘Steampunk Princess’ - guardian of British decency, the Empire, Queen and country.

TO BE CONTINUED...

