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opening extract from

Montmorency

and the Assassins

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published by

Scholastic

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Chapter 1

The *Knochenprüfer*, Würzburg, Germany, May 1898

In the darkened hospital room, Montmorency's skeleton lay illuminated on a flat board a few inches from the floor. Lord George Fox-Selwyn stood in reverential silence with his hat in his hands, looking down at the bones of his old friend. Beside him, Doctor Robert Farcett affectionately pointed out the many places where wounds had repaired themselves after Montmorency's catastrophic accident nearly a quarter of a century ago. He spoke softly, almost whispering in the gloom.

"I remember that one," he said, indicating a lump just above the elbow. "Thought it would never heal. Look at it now. It's probably one of the strongest limbs of the lot."

Fox-Selwyn bent forward to get a better view. Suddenly, the bones on the slab started to shudder beneath him. The ribcage seemed to swell and twitch. Then the whole skeleton folded at the

middle, twisted, and rose up in a spasm. Fox-Selwyn pulled back just in time to avoid being hit in the face. There was a gasping rising groan, like bellows filling with air, and then a violent sneeze sent droplets of moisture cascading into the unearthly green light. A second later, after a creak, a rattle and a click, the men were in total darkness. The skeleton had disappeared, but a voice came from its direction.

"Sorry!" cried Montmorency, with a sniff. "I was trying to hold it in. Have I ruined everything?"

Farcett tried the switch on the wall. No luck. He opened the door to let in some light from the corridor. It cast a monstrous silhouette high on the opposite wall: the irregular outline of a great machine. Farcett's shadow gently stroked the mechanism, checking that it was not irreparably damaged.

"No, I think it's all right," he said, relieved after a moment of frozen terror. "Nothing serious broken. It looks as if they'll just have to reattach a few wires. But you should have been more careful, Montmorency. These X-ray things are expensive. If the glass had smashed I'd have had a lot of apologizing to do. Professor Krauss didn't want to leave us alone in here with the *Knochenprüfer* in the first place. We'd better disconnect the power and get the technician back."

The real Montmorency had been suspended on a

stretcher between the machine and the screen that had displayed his bones. As he struggled to slide his feet to the floor and steady himself upright, Doctor Farcett gingerly detached two thick wires from a large box in the middle of the room, putting them down well apart from each other, so that the circuit was definitely broken. Montmorency blew his nose into a big linen handkerchief.

"Better hang on to that," joked Fox-Selwyn. "We could take it downstairs to the laboratory and get it analysed."

"Actually, we could," said Doctor Farcett, picking up Montmorency's wrist to feel his pulse. "This hospital has one of the best labs in Europe." He touched Montmorency's forehead gently. "You're very hot, you know. I hope you're not going down with something serious."

Montmorency shrugged. "It's nothing," he insisted. "I'm just a bit achy and shaky after the journey. It was worth it, though. I've seen little X-ray pictures in London, of course, but this *Knochenprüfer* thing is wonderful."

"I'd love to have one at home," said Farcett. "Imagine, being able to look right inside the whole body at once without having to wait for plates to be developed. And to be able to see patients moving, too. Think what we could find out about the way the body works. If we could get the image a bit

sharper we could probably even see your breakfast making its way down."

"And all with just electricity, glass tubes, some metal and some wires," said Fox-Selwyn, looking at the component parts of the *Knochenprüfer*. "It's just a question of knowing how to put them together, I suppose."

"Don't touch, George!" said Farcett, sensing that his bear-like friend was about to have a go at repairing the machine. "It's not as simple as it looks. Why don't you two go back to the hotel and pack for your trip? I'll find Professor Krauss and own up about what's happened. See you at the station at four-thirty."

"You don't have to come and see us off, you know," said Montmorency. "We'll be back in London in a few weeks."

The doctor laughed. "Montmorency, I've known you two for long enough to be well aware that your little foreign escapades never run according to plan. I'm not going to let you go to Italy without saying a proper goodbye."

"Four-thirty at the station, then," said Fox-Selwyn, gently setting the stretcher swinging from the ropes that attached it to the ceiling. "It's a shame I didn't get a go under the *Knochenprüfer*. But to be honest, I was a bit worried about whether it would take my weight. And I don't think there would have been any

breakfast left to see." He patted his ample tummy. "Fancy a spot of lunch, Montmorency?"

"Just a quick one, I've got a lot of packing to do."

"You and your luggage! When will you learn to travel light?"

"You never know what you might need on a job like this," Montmorency insisted. "And I like my comforts around me. You don't understand, George. You don't know what it's like to go without."

The two men left, joking with each other. Doctor Farcett watched from the dark room as the couple strode away along the bright corridor ahead of him. Lord George Fox-Selwyn was still as large and jolly in his mid forties as he had been when they first met, some twenty years ago. Montmorency, though a year or two younger, had changed more. Farcett had first come across him as a ragged burglar. Clinging to life after a fall, he had been little more than a crushed pile of bones in bloodstained clothing. Doctor Farcett had returned him to health and strength in prison, and Montmorency had emerged as a lively, muscular man, charming those around him in high and low life with his easy manner and boyish dark good looks. Now the thick brown hair was beginning to recede. He had flecks of grey in his sideburns, and there were the beginnings of wrinkles round his eyes and across his forehead. In early middle age, Montmorency had an air of trustworthiness about

him that belied his time as Scarper, the thief who had robbed his way across London using the sewers as his highway. But his fanatical preservation of his fitness kept his body straight and strong, and from the back, as Farcett watched him walking away, Montmorency looked much younger than his forty-odd years.

As he reached the end of the corridor, Montmorency stopped and dived for his pocket. Another loud sneeze echoed against the bare hospital walls. Montmorency had definitely caught something. Farcett hoped it wasn't the influenza that had been darting its way across London before they left. He went over to the basin and washed his hands thoroughly, just in case he had picked up any germs.

Chapter 2

The Job

It wasn't the first time that Lord George Fox-Selwyn had taken a sick Montmorency on a train. More than ten years ago, he had watched his friend struggle with the effects of drug addiction on a painful journey from London to Scotland. This sneezing was nothing by comparison, and didn't even seem to dent Montmorency's usual high spirits. But it made Fox-Selwyn gloomy for another reason. It brought back a fresher memory, of the suffering of his sister-in-law, Lorna, the late Duchess of Monaburn, who had been overtaken by influenza only a few months before.

Fox-Selwyn's brother, Gus, the Duke of Monaburn, had sent an urgent telegram calling George to Glendarvie Castle, and he had arrived in time to witness the Duchess's last desperate struggle as her lungs filled with fluid and fever burned her speech

into a delirious ramble. Her staring eyes spoke of her terror and anger at being dragged from the world too soon to guide her two adored sons through their early years of manhood. The family watched at her bedside as she wrestled for life, but without air she grew weak, eventually settled into quietness, and then faded into death. The Duke – big, blustering Gus – who had always seemed offhand with her in public, was flattened by her loss.

George had become so worried that he had taken control of his brother's affairs. He had organized a foreign holiday for Gus and the boys, and they had been touring Europe together, trying to put the loss of their wife and mother out of their minds. Fox-Selwyn's latest commission, involving as it did a trip to Italy, was a welcome opportunity for him to check up on the family. They had arranged to meet in Florence. Lord George Fox-Selwyn was hopeful that he would find Gus in a better mood.

The train climbed through the Alps, crossing ravines spanned by dramatic viaducts, and plunging into tunnels carved into the rock at the cost of hundreds of human lives. Fox-Selwyn took down his portfolio from the overhead rack and spread out a dozen pieces of paper on the seat beside him. They were to be the guides for Montmorency and Fox-Selwyn on their new mission. There were samples of handwriting, diagrams, and lists of long Latin names.

This was different from their usual work. In the past they had been used secretly by the British Government to seek out enemies abroad, and once they'd tracked an elusive bomber in London itself. Few people knew of their real activities. Most assumed their excursions to the continent were purely for pleasure; and indeed, an outsider watching the two of them on their travels, and seeing the fun they both had, would not have thought of asking for a deeper reason for each trip. But some friends in high places knew of their skills, and the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police had recommended them, off the record, for a private job.

Their new employer was an amateur scientist, a member of both the House of Lords and the Scientific Society where Montmorency had been exhibited as a medical specimen long ago. Max, 2nd Baron Astleman, the wealthy son of a great international banker, was the proud owner of one of the largest private collections of natural history specimens in Europe. His imposing home in Dulwich in South London was so full of glass cases, jars and stuffed animals that even the professionals at the great Natural History Museum sometimes turned to him for advice and information.

Members of the public could even arrange to visit, though they would be lucky to catch a glimpse of the Baron himself. He was embarrassed by his short

stature, and he could not bear the way some people would stare at the livid birthmark across his face, while others made a self-conscious show of ignoring it. He could not travel. Instead, he surrounded himself with tokens of exotic lands, learning every detail of each specimen's structure, searching all the time for the new and uncategorized, in the hope that one day some discovery might bear his name.

Early that year, after a week in bed with flu, and restless dreams when he fancied he heard the muffled sound of carriage wheels in the rain, Lord Astleman had returned to his collection and noticed something odd about a display of jellyfish. To the untrained eye everything might have seemed in order. Each specimen was safe in a special jar, a tall cylinder filled with powerful preserving spirit and sealed with a flat glass lid. A paper label was pasted on to each one, detailing the precise name and categorization of the contents in Astleman's minute handwriting. The jars were evenly spaced on the shelves, and a less obsessive man might not have realized that anything was missing. But Lord Astleman sensed at once that the beautiful but lethal *Physalia utriculus* was not there. He had always been fond of it. A fellow enthusiast had sent it from Hawaii, and its bright blue body, flecked with touches of gold and yellow, retained some of its glory, despite its long journey in the pickling fluid.

Once he realized that the jellyfish was missing, Lord Astleman checked the rest of the collection. There were gaps everywhere. Fine examples of reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates and mammals were gone. With a growing feeling of grief, he waited for his assistant, Mr Lopello, to arrive. Together, they could draw up a full list of what was lost. By lunchtime he admitted to himself what he'd known in his heart for a while: Mr Lopello would not be coming that day, or ever again. He was the thief.

Baron Astleman called the police. Respectful of his social status, they did their best. They searched Lopello's rooms in a dingy house amongst the ramshackle slums of Saffron Hill, where London's Italian immigrants clustered together. There was no sign of him. His neighbours pretended (the police thought) that they could not speak English. After three months of fruitless enquiries, often interrupted by new and more immediately exciting cases, the detectives abandoned the hunt.

Lord Astleman accepted that he might never see Lopello face justice. But he wanted his treasures back. He agreed with the police that the specimens had probably been stolen to order, and might well have gone abroad. He was horrified at the thought of traipsing round Europe looking for them, but the Police Commissioner regretfully insisted that Scotland Yard could not help him, and suggested that

Lord George Fox-Selwyn and Montmorency might take on the job. They were intrigued by Astleman's invitation and, in a spring downpour, took Fox-Selwyn's carriage up the hills of South London to his home, hidden at the end of a winding drive through a garden rich in unusual plants.

Lord Astleman's maid answered the door, and helped Montmorency with his wet umbrella, shaking it out and placing it in a wide drum at the side of the front door. It was a few seconds before Montmorency realized that the umbrella stand was in fact the hollowed-out foot of an elephant, and the coat hooks were animal horns and tusks. The wildlife theme continued in the decor of the drawing room. Stuffed birds perched among the bookshelves, there was a splendid fan of peacock feathers above the fireplace, and the tiger-skin rug by the hearth included the beast's head, complete with ferocious teeth.

When the Baron entered, Fox-Selwyn was facing the wall, inspecting a huge butterfly pinned out in a picture frame.

"That's a great favourite of mine," said Lord Astleman, as George spun round to face him. "I captured it myself. I must have been about ten. Father gave me a butterfly net for my birthday, and after that my interest in the natural world just grew and grew."

Fox Selwyn did his best not to betray his shock at

the sight of the purple splodge running from Astleman's right ear to the other side of his chin.

"How do you do, Lord Astleman. I was more of a stag-beetle boy, myself. I'm George Fox-Selwyn. This is Montmorency."

Montmorency shook hands, groping for small talk. "I didn't really advance beyond worms, I'm afraid," he laughed, thinking of his poor, urban childhood, but not inclined to mention it in detail.

"Ah, but do not underestimate the humble worm, Mr Montmorency. A peculiarly efficient creature. Can move several times its own bodyweight in soil every day. Did you know that our modern tunnelling machines are based on the common earthworm? Without the worm we wouldn't have all our underground railways, pipes and sewers."

The slightest flicker resonated between Fox-Selwyn and Montmorency. They were both thinking of Montmorency's old underground life, a world he wanted to forget, and managed to put out of his mind most of the time.

Lord Astleman continued: "I've got all sorts of worms in my collection. They don't take up much space, of course, though some of the longer ones are a bit tricky to display. I'll show you them when we go through to the museum. In fact, why don't we talk there? Then if the rain stops we can have some tea on the veranda afterwards."

He took his visitors along a corridor and through high double doors into a barn-like structure that dwarfed the main house. The size of the collection astonished Montmorency and Fox-Selwyn.

"How on earth do you keep track of it all?" asked Montmorency, making conversation.

The answer told them all they needed to know about Lord Astleman's obsessive nature and passionate attention to detail. He opened a cabinet to reveal a series of leather-bound ledgers. Fox-Selwyn thought to himself that they looked like the huge cash books used in banks. Then he realized that that was exactly what they were, originally. Lord Astleman had adapted the tools of the family trade to accommodate his special enthusiasm. His punctiliousness in noting down the details of his collection was simply a different manifestation of his forefathers' care with money. The specimens were cross-referenced by species and subspecies, and a pencil note indicated where each was to be found within the museum, right down to its place on a shelf or position in a glass cabinet. Alongside the ledgers was a pile of loose sheets of paper. These were headed "*Missing, 1898*", and showed exactly what had been taken.

Lord Astleman told them about the theft. "I've made you your own copy of the list, with some drawings of what the exhibits look like. If they've left the labels on, you should be able to tell straight

away if something is mine. As you'll see, I have my own way of marking things."

They toured the exhibition. Every stuffed bird and animal had a small luggage label tied to its foot. Minute writing neatly told its Latin name, the date of its acquisition, and other coded symbols linking back to the ledgers. Visitors to the collection on its public open days often imagined that Lord Astleman must be a very dry and dreary man. But, as Fox-Selwyn and Montmorency were privileged to find out, having him as their personal guide, Astleman was boisterously in love with every item, and not afraid to show it. Indeed he was incapable of disguising it from people he trusted. And he had known from the moment of the stagbeetle and worm conversation that he could depend on Fox-Selwyn and Montmorency.

"Now, gentlemen," he said when the tour was over, and he had shown them all the gaps. "It has stopped raining, so let's sit outside and discuss how you can get my things back. I'll ring for tea."

They sat looking out across the terraced garden. In the distance they could see the grey smoke of central London, but here, less than five miles away, they felt as if they were in the country. Lord Astleman started discussing tactics.

"I had thought of putting the word out in the natural history world. There aren't that many of us,

you know. Someone might have heard or seen something. But I decided that was a bad idea."

Montmorency got his drift. "You mean the person who robbed you – or arranged for you to be robbed – is likely to be a fellow enthusiast?"

"Exactly. If they know we're looking, they'll hide the stuff away. So I've thought of a plan. You're the professionals, of course, but tell me what you think of it."

The maid arrived with the tea. Montmorency took a sip, and then balanced his cup on a side table made from the shell of a giant tortoise. A moment later he noticed ripples on top of the liquid, and a thick foot slowly emerged from under the dome. He rescued the cup and saucer as the shell moved away. Lord Astleman smiled.

"Oh, I should have warned you. Not all my treasures are dead. This chap wanders around at will. I sometimes think he's my very best friend. Seems to radiate wisdom. His name's Darwin. It's a bit of a private joke, you understand. Now this is my idea. I'd do it myself, but it involves travelling incognito, and as you can see, unlike most of the specimens in my collection, I am not a perfect example of my species. This disfigurement precludes any but the most grotesque disguise."

Astleman suggested that Montmorency and Fox-Selwyn should visit private and public collections

across Europe, posing as amateur enthusiasts. They would check the displays for the specimens and, if they drew a blank, make a judgement about whether they could take the local curators into their confidence. That way they could set up a network of trustworthy people silently on the watch for Astleman's property. It was agreed that because of Lopello's background they would start in Italy, in Lopello's home town of Florence, which boasted one of the oldest and best collections of natural curiosities: the museum known as *La Specola*.

Setting off across Europe, Fox-Selwyn and Montmorency were enjoying themselves. This job, with its unworldly scientists and spineless life forms in glass jars, seemed to present none of the dangers of their usual political work. It was almost a holiday. They wanted to find Lord Astleman's specimens. They really would do their best, even if in their hearts they didn't expect much luck. But they intended to have some fun while they were trying, and by the time they crossed the Italian border, watching the sunlight playing on the lakes and mountains, Montmorency could tell that his cold was clearing up too.