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A Warning

Madame!

You have asked me to write down everything I know about the man known as Shetland Jack. I'll do that. I'll tell you about his hard life and I'll tell you the awful truth of his violent death.

But the story of Shetland Jack did not come to a close with his death. His story has become part of my own story and I'll have to write about that, too, though it will be hard for me. I'd sooner forget much of what has happened to me during the past year.

It will take me some weeks to give you a full account. Possibly as much as a month. But you're welcome to read it piece by piece as I write. Every evening I'll put my latest pages on the small mahogany table by the grand piano in the drawing room.



The typewriter you've lent me is really superb. I've never typed on an Imperial before. My own typewriter is an old Underwood No. 5, but it's back in Lisbon, packed in my seaman's chest on board the *Hudson Queen*.

The *Hudson Queen* is our ship. The Chief and I bought her in New York years ago and she's been our home ever since. And our living. We've crossed most of the great oceans of the

world and I've lost count of all the harbours in which we've loaded and unloaded our cargoes.

Five years ago we arrived in Lisbon. There we were hired to collect a cargo of tiles from a small port called Agiere on the River Zêzere, a dozen or so miles inland. It seemed to be a simple enough job but turned out to be our great misfortune. The *Hudson Queen* was hijacked by bandits in Agiere, and shipwrecked in the river.

The Chief and I were lucky to escape with our lives, but when we got back to Lisbon the Chief was arrested by the police. He was charged with murdering a man called Alphonse Morro and sentenced to twenty-five years in jail.

Suddenly I found myself a beast without a master in a great foreign city. The streets were full of people, yelling at me and hunting me. They called me the "Murderer's Ape" and wanted to do me harm.

I'd lost the Chief, and the *Hudson Queen* was gone, too. I had nowhere to go and nothing left to hope for. But just when I thought everything was over I met Ana Molina. If it hadn't been for her I wouldn't be alive today. She hid me and protected me when everyone else was saying I was the murderer's crazy ape.

Ana's home became my home. And her friend Signor Fidardo, the instrument maker, also became my friend. He let

me work in his workshop and he taught me his trade. Thanks to him, I am now a skilled accordion repairer and, if needs be, can even change the neck of a guitar.

Bit by bit and with the help of Ana and Signor Fidardo, I uncovered the truth behind the shipwreck of the *Hudson Queen* and the murder of Alphonse Morro. It took four long years. But in the end the Chief was freed. The day he was released from jail was the happiest day of my life.



Some time later the Chief and I returned to Agiere. We were able to salvage the *Hudson Queen* and have her towed to Lisbon. After four years sitting on the riverbed, our ship was a wreck. We took any and every casual job we could in the port of Lisbon in order to earn enough money to make her shipshape again. But the wages were miserable and almost everything we earned went on food and the necessities of life.

So far we've managed to renovate the cabin and we've started work on restoring the wheelhouse. But there is an awful lot still to do. The worst thing is that the main boiler exploded and was destroyed when the ship was wrecked. I don't know how we'll ever afford a new boiler, which is why I sometimes wonder whether the *Hudson Queen* will ever plough the great seas again.

I'm telling you all this because the story of the *Hudson Queen* is, in part anyway, the story of Shetland Jack. You'll understand later what I mean.



Lisbon and the *Hudson Queen* feel very far away at the moment. Through the windows of this tower room I can see the sun rising behind the wooded hills to the east. The warm light paints the whole valley a fiery yellow. Down by the river the morning mist is drifting in and out between the trees. A little while ago I saw the Chief mount his bicycle and pedal off down towards the main road. I think he's on his way to Lodève to pick up the new blade for your steam saw. In that case, I'll maybe join him and test the saw when he returns. That would be fun.

The Chief has told you, hasn't he, about how he and I became acquainted. It was obvious that you didn't believe him at first. That doesn't matter. You're not the first to doubt that a gorilla can learn to work as a ship's engineer.

But I've lived almost all my life among human beings and on their terms. So I'm no longer simply an animal. But nor am I a human being. So what am I? I don't really know. The only thing I'm absolutely sure of is that I am a friend to my friends. And that's quite enough.

Even though you and I only met recently, Madame, I count you as one of my friends. Which is why I must warn you that the story you've asked me to tell you is an unpleasant one. And sad. So you must be prepared to find yourself hearing of things you will later wish you had never heard.

PART ✦ ONE



BROCKDORFF'S FUNFAIR



The Dinner Guest

I'll start by telling you about Harvey Jenkins. After all, he's the one with whom it all started. And finished. We first met Jenkins in Lisbon. It was an evening in April last year and the Chief and I had spent the whole day lugging boxes of ice around the fishing harbour. As part of our pay we had been given a pound of anchovies to have for dinner. The Chief was up on deck peeling potatoes and I was lighting the wood stove in the galley. We may have been short of money but we didn't have to skimp on firewood. The firewood bin beside the stove was always full of scrap wood. That particular evening I was lighting the fire with planks from our old cabin.

While the potatoes were boiling we each took some soap and a towel and went ashore. We only treated ourselves to visits to the bathhouse a couple of times a month, otherwise we washed in the River Tagus. A little way upstream the water

was reasonably clean and there was both a landing stage and a changing hut on the shore.

After bathing we walked slowly back along the quay. The sun was low in the sky and made the river gleam red and gold. The Chief was whistling to himself. He was in a good mood, as he had been every day for almost a fortnight, ever since hearing he'd got a job as second engineer on a passenger liner called *Funchal*. He'd be signing on in just a week's time and he'd be away for a month.

We were still about fifty yards from our quay when I saw there was someone on board the *Hudson Queen*.

"Who can that be?" the Chief said, shading his eyes with his hand to see better. "Let's hope it's not someone wanting money from us. Have we paid the harbour master for our drinking water this month?"

I nodded. As far as I knew we had paid all our bills.

When we got closer we could clearly see that it wasn't one of the harbour officials waiting for us. The man was dressed in a long shabby overcoat and wearing a narrow-brimmed hat that looked a couple of sizes too small. And on his shoulder sat a big greyish bird of some variety.

The man was inspecting the *Hudson Queen*'s ship's bell, which hangs forward of the mast. On hearing us come aboard, he turned round in no hurry, let go of the worn old bronze bell and came to meet us.

"Now then," the Chief said. "And who might you be?"

I guessed the man was in his sixties. He smiled and held out a hand covered in fading seafarers' tattoos. His thin, weather-bitten face was marked with a mosaic of wrinkles. I saw now that the bird on his shoulder was a cockerel, and it must have been ancient. Its plumage was sparse and there were glimpses of pale skin showing through here, there and everywhere. Its eyes were staring, watery grey-white and blind.

"The name's Jenkins," the man said in a gruff voice and an accent that was unmistakeably Scottish. "Harvey Jenkins. I apologize for coming aboard without permission. Are you the skipper?"

"I am," said the Chief.

"I just happened to be walking past along the quay," Jenkins said. "And I saw your ship. She's a Clyde Puffer, isn't she? There are a lot of them up and down the west coast of Scotland and I used to work on one myself. As engineer. We carried the mail and all kinds of cargo between the mainland and the Hebridean islands. That was a long time ago, though."

The Chief beamed. It's not often we meet someone who knows what kind of ship the *Hudson Queen* is.

"I couldn't take a look below deck, could I?" Jenkins asked. "Old memories… well, you know…"

"There's not a lot to see," the Chief said with a sigh. "She lay on the bottom of a river for four years."

"I'd like to look round anyway," Jenkins said. "It's nice to be on board a Puffer again."

That's how the Chief ended up showing this Harvey Jenkins around the *Hudson Queen*. And it took some time as Jenkins wanted to look into every nook and cranny. Meanwhile, I was frying the anchovies. The Chief asked Jenkins whether he'd like to eat with us and he said yes.

We found ourselves sitting round the galley table for a couple of hours. Jenkins was very curious about how a Clyde Puffer had ended up in Lisbon. The Chief told him how we'd found the *Hudson Queen* in New York ten years or more before and about all the voyages we'd sailed in her since.

Then Harvey Jenkins told us the story of his life.

"I was at sea for heaven knows how many years," he said. "But suddenly one day I'd had enough. I went ashore for good and bought a small farm in Oklahoma. In the middle of America, as far from the sea as I could get. I kept chickens and pigs and a couple of cows. And I had six acres of land under the plough. One day I took my horse and cart and drove to South Bend to buy seed. On my return a couple of days later, my farm was gone. Pigs and cows gone too. And the barn I'd built with my own hands. Everything had disappeared. A tornado had passed through—it's the kind of thing that happens in Oklahoma. Among the wreckage I found this cockerel, more

dead than alive. He was the only thing the tornado had left me, so I took him with me when I moved on. He and I have roamed here and there around the world ever since."

The bird opened its beak and Jenkins gave it a piece of potato.

"At present we're working for a travelling funfair," Jenkins continued. "Not so bad. You get to see places. We arrived in Lisbon a week ago. We've put up our tents and parked our wagons on vacant ground by the Cais do Sodré. My job is to look after the steam engine for the merry-go-round and Cock—I've never come up with another name for him—he terrifies children with his white eyes."

The cockerel leant forward, put his head to one side and opened one of his blind eyes wide. He was given another piece of potato as a reward.

"You're welcome to come and visit one evening," Jenkins continued. "Entry is free and you can have as many rides on the merry-go-round as you want!"

"Thanks," the Chief said, "but in a couple of days I'm signing on with a liner sailing to Brazil. And there's a lot to organize before that. We'll have to put off riding on your merry-go-round until the next time your circus comes to Lisbon."

Jenkins looked from the Chief to me and then back to the Chief.

"Aha…" he said hesitantly. "So Sally Jones will be alone on the *Hudson Queen* while you're away at sea? I see!"

The Chief nodded. "Sally Jones will manage fine on her own, I can tell you. And anyway, she has friends here in the city."

Jenkins looked thoughtfully at me. I had the feeling that he'd just come up with an idea of some sort.

There was a bit more small talk about this and that before he thanked us and prepared to leave. He wished the Chief a successful voyage to Brazil.

When he reached the gangplank, Jenkins turned to me and said, "It strikes me you would make a good merry-go-round operator. Being both engineer and gorilla… you're actually made for fairground work!"

The Chief and I exchanged a quick look. Then the Chief said, "We'll take any work we can get. We're saving money for our ship."

I nodded. I wouldn't say no to a job as fairground engineer.

"That's good then," Jenkins said. "I can't promise anything. We don't have any work for you just now. But fairground workers are footloose types, who come and go at whim, and a job could just turn up out of the blue. I'll see what I can do, I promise!"

And with that we said goodbye to Harvey Jenkins. The Chief and I helped each other tighten the ship's moorings for

the night, while Jenkins walked off along the quay with the cockerel on his shoulder.

I watched them go, and wondered. Jenkins had seemed nice enough, I thought. But there was something about him that wasn't right. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on.



It was half an hour later, after I'd slipped into my hammock and blown out the night light, that I twigged what it was that had felt strange about our guest:

He hadn't seemed in the least surprised when he first saw me.

People meeting me for the first time are always inquisitive. They ask questions. Not to me, of course, but to the Chief. He then has to explain that, yes, I'm a gorilla, but that I can understand what people say and I am as skilled at my job as any ship's engineer you care to name.

But Harvey Jenkins hadn't asked the Chief a single question of that sort. Why was that?

The answer was quite simple, I thought. Jenkins had no doubt seen so much of the world that nothing could surprise him.