MIDNIGHT TREASURE

Also by Piers Torday

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The Dark Wild
The Wild Beyond
There May Be a Castle
The Lost Magician
The Frozen Sea
The Wild Before

With Paul Torday
The Death of an Owl

Plays
The Box of Delights
Christmas Carol – a fairytale

MIDNIGHT TREASURE

PIERS TORDAY

Quercus

QUERCUS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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To the memory of my grandfather Buci, who first showed me the mountains

Sometimes a lantern moves along the night,
That interests our eyes. And who goes there?

'The Lantern out of Doors',
Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1878

THEY KNEW WE WOULD COME

A CHAIN OF LANTERNS winds slowly through the night over the dark sands. These explorers march at night. For although they have, like all their kind, developed a tolerance of daylight, they cannot abide the dazzling, high sun of the Southern Claw.

'Hurry! It cannot be far now,' says the elderly female vampir marching five steps in front of the rest, her words just audible through the thin scarf wrapped around her face.

With her large straw cartwheel hat, tailored suit and lace-up boots, she looks set for a summer garden party in the City of Castles, less so for leading an archaeological expedition this far from home. But Miss Barbara Miloth is no ordinary vampir and no ordinary archaeologist.

'Miss Miloth,' says the second vampir in line, mopping

his ruddy brow with a handkerchief, 'the mortals are complaining again. They say a sandstorm is coming. Perhaps we should make a camp here and sit it out?' Count Pronay pauses for breath, leaning heavily on his brightware-topped malacca cane. Sweat patches bloom over his cream linen suit.

Miloth glances behind her at the two underfed sand horses, swaying over the dunes, weighed down by packs of bedding, food and tools. The five mortal guides accompanying them carry further supplies on their backs. They look down, away from her gaze.

'A tiny sandstorm is nothing to the dark clouds that await us if we fail,' she says. 'We don't have time.'

But as she marches over the crest of the next dune, the sight that awaits stops her clean in her tracks – and her companions, too. It is just as the frayed scroll in her leather handbag described.

She holds up her lamp.

Ahead, on a rocky plateau, its forbidding silhouette framed by the new moon, is the Forgotten Fortress of Our Fathers.

So vast, so intimidating, and so utterly abandoned.

She hopes.

Barbara Miloth has long awaited this moment. A glimpse of the empire that existed long before hers. The empire of the ancient ones.

At a snap of her gloved fingers, a porter rushes forward. He bows his head as he offers the archaeologist a chilled steel flask, which she snatches from his trembling fingers to drain in big, quenching gulps. When she returns the vessel and wipes her lips on her glove, she leaves behind a dark stain.

The porters have reached the summit of the dune, too. They can all see the looming hulk of the fortress, dark and silent. Beyond the horizon, a gathering cloud is visible in the moonlight. The porters point at the dust and begin talking to themselves in the local tongue, which Miss Miloth has studied but does not care to speak. The guides turn their sand horses around in the opposite direction.

Count Pronay roughly grabs one porter by the arm, his long nails digging into the skin. This one is just a boy. 'Shall I make them stay, Miss Miloth? I hear the local blood is of excellent quality.'

She waves their escort away without a second glance.

'Let them go. We can take it from here.'

Miloth marches down into the plain, striding through the scrub towards the plateau. Count Pronay shakes his head and stumbles after her with his cane and a kit bag that the others left dumped on the sand in their haste.

He glances up at the sky. Just as his former companions predicted, a storm is coming in.

By the time they reach the plateau, they can no longer

see further than their fingertips. But it is not just the swirling grit, scratching his nose and throat, that makes it hard for the Count to breathe.

There is something else. A vile scent in the air, one he has never smelt before. It makes his eyeballs want to shrivel in their sockets, and his flesh leech into his bones. His red face grows pale, his mind turning so faint he might topple over. His airways tighten.

'Miss Miloth!' the Count cries out in a strangled croak.

She turns to him and looks different, like a deep-sea diver encountered unexpectedly in the midnight desert. A swollen but airtight gas mask encases her head.

'Mask!' she barks through the ventilation mesh over her mouth.

Pronay's air fading, he desperately digs through his knapsack, eventually discovering a similar contraption, which he pulls on just in time. Miloth shines her light on glossy green weeds growing in the sand between the boulders. Pronay taps them with his cane. They slide innocuously apart. The acrid stench is weaker but still detectable.

'I had no idea it could grow here,' she says.

'What is it?' says Pronay. 'A herb? Poisonweed?'

She does not answer his question. 'So they knew we would come. Even then. Intriguing.' Miloth glances at the sky, which is already beginning to lighten. 'Quick, we do not have long.'

Pronay looks up at the jagged battlements of the fortress directly above and the sheer wall of rock between them. He is sweating inside the mask and dabs ineffectually at the glass visor with his handkerchief.

But Miloth does not delay. She is unfastening her jacket, tossing it aside, and there, poking out of her lace and cotton blouse are two enormous, leathery wings. They unfurl and flap, and then she is off. The archaeologist has become a giant bat soaring into the sky, her long skirt billowing as she gently lands on top of the plateau – not once casting a single shadow as she does.

Moments later, Pronay emerges from the clouds with a few flaps of his wings. Miss Miloth removes her mask, taking deep gulps of the clear night air above the gathering storm below. They have landed in the central courtyard of the ancient fort. War, weather and time have erased much of the original structure.

Fallen masonry – capitols, pillars and chunks of canon-blasted rock – litters the ground like boulders, making it hard to navigate. But Miloth's map is clear, and her lantern shows the way.

A set of stone steps, well-trodden, that lead down into the ground.

She glances at Pronay, her wrinkled face gleaming and pallid in the lamplight. In return, the Count gives a small smile of encouragement, but it is more to steady his nerves,

which is strange. Vampirs are immortal. They are over five centuries old and fearless. This world, their empire, lives or dies at their command. So what is it about this place that chills his veins?

Miss Miloth heads down the steps. Behind, in the vast deserted courtyard, a rock slips off another with a clatter. Count Pronay looks over his shoulder, his lantern swinging, but nothing is there. He follows Miloth straight into a draught of subterranean air, fetid and cold, fluttering his hair.

They are in a passage lined with heavy stones, and the pair pick cobwebs out of the way, their hair, their faces . . . that is no matter, spiders are friends to the deathless ones.

The way ahead remains dark despite the flickering lanterns.

Underneath their feet, the floor crunches with every step. A soft, gelatinous crunch. They are stepping on hundreds, thousands of tiny things. Count Pronay prays it is giant cockroaches, poisonous centipedes or scarab beetles. Something friendly of that nature.

'Don't look down,' warns Miloth, closing her eyes and pressing ahead.

But the Count cannot help himself. He swings the lantern low – and there it is. The rough stone floor is strewn with rice grains. *Rice?*

And immediately, he falls to the floor and begins sorting

them into little piles. A hopeless, futile task. Yet he cannot stop himself. He is compelled by ancient instinct. They *must* be counted, even if it takes for eternity.

Then Miloth hauls him up by the scruff of his neck.

'I told you, don't look down!' They hurry on, the passage sloping deeper and deeper into the ground. 'Whoever laid these traps knows of the old ways. When mortals defied our kind. Scattering rice grains for us to count as a distraction is one ancient trick we know of.'

'What is this gloomy place?' he asks. 'Where is all the treasure you promised me? I hardly need to remind you how much I paid for this expedition.'

'You'll learn soon enough.'

The air grows damp and harder to breathe. With each heaving step, they descend further underground. But the pair do not hurry. They are on the lookout for any further snares or tricks. And do not have long to wait.

A shallow trench blocks their path, cutting straight through the ground. The fountain spout mounted on the left wall tumbles fresh water into the trench, slopping over the edges, flashing fish silver in the lamplight.

Miss Miloth hisses and recoils. No vampir can cross running water so directly.

'Whatever is buried here,' she says, 'they did not want a vampir to find it.'

'So how do we get to the other side?' says Count Pronay,

half hoping she volunteers to abort the expedition and return home to Princeland.

'Like this, you fool!' she snaps, pushing him towards the trench. He trips and falls flat across it with a cry. Steam rises as the fresh water burns his chest and stomach, making him howl. But before he knows it, his companion has stepped lightly across, using him as a bridge, and hauled him to his feet.

His exquisite linen outfit is filthy, scorched and unrecognisable, but he is not seriously hurt.

The corridor expands into an underground, domed chamber. Miss Miloth pauses on the threshold, shining her lantern around. They can see faded paintings on the walls. There are ancient rowing galleys tossed on waves, strange hybrid animal-human creatures with bull's heads or horse bodies. Beneath sit three great carved stone urns decorated with vines.

At last, Count Pronay understands where they are.

A tomb. The only place his kind used to know as home until the Dawn of Darkness, when they rose forever.

Most extraordinary is the impressive chest at the dome's centre. It is split in half, as if struck by lightning, with more bounty spilling out than the Count has ever seen. A flood of gold coins shimmer in his lantern's beam. Rubies the colour of blood, dazzling gold plates, gems as clear and sparkling as tears.

For if there is one thing vampirs crave as much as blood, it is treasure. He steps gleefully into the chamber, his arms open wide.

'Wait!' hisses Miss Miloth. 'Don't move a muscle!' But she is too late. Her words are drowned out by the sounds of things flying through the air.

The Count does not move a muscle.

He will never move a muscle ever again – he has become something unimaginable.

An ex-vampir. Dead. Mortal, after all.

His body is pierced by five sharpened stakes of the purest hawthorn: spring-loaded and fired from concealed positions in the tomb, forever passing through his stomach, neck, eyes, brain and . . . heart.

'Greedy fool,' says Miloth, who was never here for gold. She touches his shoulder, and then he is gone, disintegrating into skin, flesh, bone and ash . . . scattered across the floor by the faint breeze.

She turns her attention to her wristwatch. Dawn will soon break in the sand-swept skies above. There is not a moment to lose. With her lantern held high, she scours the broken tomb. There is no golden treasure; of course, there never was.

Only dust spills out of the ancient casket. Sticking out of the grit is what Miss Miloth has travelled all this way for.

'There you are,' she says. Pulling on a pair of gloves so she does not touch it directly, she picks up a small, tarnished statue.

It is a brightware sculpture, not much bigger than her hand, about a thousand years old.

And it will change everything.

PART ONE

HOUSE OF GOLD

WATCHERS IN THE WOOD

One year later

TIBOR AND ROZA HURRIED through the cellar tunnels, trying not to breathe in the damp air as they explored the depths of the Baron's house. The dark labyrinth wound through crumbling vaults, each stacked with crates of dust-covered bottles or packing cases.

Stone carvings of vampirs and dragons set into the walls loomed out of the shadows as Tibor swung his lantern. His light caught a flash of brass. He stopped, reaching for the handle of a large steel safe, moss green beneath the cobwebs.

Roza sniffed at it suspiciously. A black Alsatian, her velvety black fur and pointed ears meant people often mistook her for a wolf, which suited her and Tibor both

fine. But once, Roza knew, she had been a vampir. She had been so young when she had been transformed into a dog. Vampirs could transform themselves into other beasts – bats or dogs, most often – and could only turn others into vampirs through their bite. But there were immortals who possessed the magic gift of transforming others.

Roza did not remember the act of transformation – she and Tibor had both been only four years old when the Baron adopted them from the Orphanage. She could scarcely remember what it was like to *not* be an Alsatian.

Only that she knew – would always know – that she was not meant to be trapped in the body of a dog. One day, she would be free.

Tibor rested the lantern on the ground and tried to turn the safe door handle. It refused to budge. Grunting with the effort, he tried again.

'I'm not an expert in safes,' said Roza, 'but don't you normally need a key?'

'I thought maybe we could hide in there,' Tibor said. 'You know. For a game. Give the Baron a big surprise!'

Roza stared at him for a moment, unblinking. 'You know dogs can always tell when people are lying?'

His hand fell away from the handle. 'I just want to find out where I'm from, that's all. I thought there might be something in here . . . like a letter or a diary.'

'You're from the Orphanage. *We're* from the Orphanage.'

'But what about before that? We weren't born there. Where are we *really* from?'

'What does it matter? We can't go back. We can only go forward.'

'It's easy for you to say that. You're a dog.'

Except he knew she wasn't, not really.

But he abandoned the safe, rubbing his filthy hands clean on his shorts. They pressed on into the gloom, Tibor kicking at piles of fruit crates, pulling strands of cobweb off arches, poking at loose stones in the brickwork. But whatever he was trying to find, it would not reveal its hiding place easily. 'Why is it so hard to answer two simple questions, Roza? One, who were my real parents? Two, where am I from? That's all I want to know.'

Roza's attention was suddenly elsewhere. Her ears pricked. 'Vibrations. Someone is approaching the house . . . a horse, riding through the woods.'

'The Baron! Back from his hunt!'

Without another word, Tibor turned and ran, as fast as he could, up the cramped spiral stone staircase that had led them here, Roza fast on his heels. They emerged, blinking, out of a low side door into the warm haze of a late summer afternoon and followed the clipped lawn to a line of horse chestnuts at the wood's edge.

Tibor had spent most of his life in the House of Gold

as the Baron's ward and, during the holidays, could climb trees as much as he pleased. But the Green Wood was different. Werwolves such as him were not welcome before dark.

Roza leapt, snapping at his hand. 'Slow down! Are you trying to get us both chained to our beds?'

Tibor took out a small pocket watch. The metal case was dented and the glass front cracked, but the wind-up mechanism – made by the finest clockmakers from the Cantons – worked perfectly, along with the musical chimes. Four dials showed the time in the four different provinces of the Claw, a small window showed the date, and – usefully for a werwolf – there was a moon display.

But more important than any of that, it had once belonged to his family. Grandparent, mother, father, he didn't know whose – but it was all he was left with at the Orphanage.

He studied it. 'Four o'clock. Everyone else is having their afternoon rest. And besides, we're only going in a little way.'

Inside the wood, a pale, dusty track wound through the trees. Their vaulted tops filtered the blazing summer sky into gentle, mote-filled shafts of light. Werwolves did not react to sunshine as vampirs did. (Moonlight, however, was another matter.)

An emerald tree frog fell into his palm as he brushed

past a leaf. It stared, blinking at him with bulging but harmless indignation, before springing away.

There were other less harmless creatures in these woods, though. He heard them at night, their howls, their paws padding quickly through the undergrowth. They called to him.

Would he, standing here in his silk shirt and his velvet britches, ever be ready to join them?

The clop of approaching hooves up the Green Wood Road broke his thoughts.

'He's coming!' barked Roza. Tibor scooped up a fistful of chestnut petals, shoved them in his pocket, and then shot up the trunk. Only two things drew out his wolf senses – a full moon or the threat of immediate danger. And sometimes he found, as he did now, if he closed his eyes and imagined the vast silveriness of the moon, he could sharpen his nails just enough to dig into the soft wood.

Summer was fading. In less than two weeks, his watch told him, there would be a new full moon – after which the days grew shorter and darker.

Once, this annual occurrence had been the harvest festival: a mortal day of festivity and celebration, sharing the fruits of the harvest with offerings, wreaths and dancing.

But now, in the Claw, during the Age of Darkness, it had a new name.

Spectre Night.

Instead, vampires and werwolves would dance around bonfires of green flame, celebrating the arrival of long, dark nights while mortals quaked in their homes.

Faraway, on the slopes of the distant Black Mountain, where the White Prince had tamed the eternal flame to create his legions of immortal monsters, it was said that eyeless night spectres flew through the air and that their singing was louder than the mightiest storm.

But more importantly – to Tibor – the night this year would also mark his thirteenth birthday.

At midnight, under the light of the new autumn moon, he would finally become a full-grown, able to completely transform into a werwolf for the first time.

A mounted bay horse stopped below the branches where Tibor was hiding. He spread himself flat, trying not even to breathe. He could just make out a rider wearing a snow-white cape through the cloud of drifting leaves. There was a black lantern embroidered on the shoulder.

The horse snorted with impatience. He spoke in a brusque, clipped voice. 'I don't like to linger on wooded roads without an escort.'

It wasn't the Baron, after all.

Tibor's hand, clutching the petals inside his jacket, ready for dropping a shower of flowers as a practical joke, went limp. He tried to twist around to see where Roza had got

to, but he was trapped, plastered to a branch, a mere foot or two above a rider's head.

A rider who wore a lantern on her cape.

'Now. There's a little spell I need to prepare before we arrive,' said the rider as she dismounted.

A spell? Was this visitor a wizard? Tibor had never met one of those before.

'Are you plotting?' said the horse.

'Always, Orlov, always.'

The rider's face was hidden beneath a hunting hat, sporting a pheasant feather. Her accent was not local.

Tibor didn't even dare whisper to Roza in case the visitors overheard. His skin prickled, and a bead of sweat rolled down his nose onto the branch. What were they plotting?

His guardian was one of the most influential vampirs in the country. Tibor knew that. But everyone loved him. He never fed on mortals, only cattle, and was generous with his money. If the Baron hadn't founded the Orphanage in the Town of Terrible Children, he would never have met or adopted Tibor.

He told himself that no one would ever conspire against such a good person.

A couple of leaves fluttered off the branch onto the stranger's hat. She didn't notice, being more preoccupied with whatever she had extracted from the bag, and was now fiddling with on the saddle. The woman muttered a

few words Tibor couldn't understand, then leapt back onto Orlov, who trotted smartly onwards.

'Hurry,' said the stranger, 'we don't want to be late.'

Then, as the horse rounded a bend up ahead, lost in the penumbral shade of the woods beyond, Tibor lost his grip. His wolf sense ensured he landed on all fours instead of his back, but it still hurt.

'If I could applaud very slowly,' said Roza, padding out from a bush.

Tibor scowled, rubbing the dirt off his knees. 'We have to warn the Baron. They were plotting something. I think he might be in danger.'

But they were not the only watchers in that wood. In the shadows of the chestnut trees on the other side of the dusty road, three children observed the horse and his rider, the boy and the dog.

They had been standing on one another's shoulders, concealed by low branches of leaves and flowers. And listening to everything. They had not missed a word.

The top child, who was the smallest and known as Smaller, jumped off her brother's shoulders, landing in a perfect crouch position. She looked one way, then the other, and signed at her brother to jump down, too.

He was slightly bigger than Smaller and slightly smaller

than their older sister – and therefore known as Slightly. He leapt down beside her. Their older sister was bigger and stronger than her younger siblings but was also very unassuming and known as Oldest.

Once upon a time, these children's ancestors possessed more typical first names until they met terrible, unspeakable fates. Consequently, all their descendants sought vengeance – and until they had it, these were the kind of names they used.

Smaller, Slightly and Oldest had been trained by the very best. Nobody who ever met these children ever forgot them – *if* they lived to tell the tale.

They did not utter a single word, but they slipped away deeper into the woods on a secret sign. They had been trained to leave no trace. Smaller used a brush to smooth away Oldest's footprints in the ground beneath the tree; then, a comb to straighten each leaf and twig behind them as they stole towards the safety of their wagon, hidden under fallen branches.

And a very, *very* large water buffalo.