The Remarkable Adventures of

TOM SCATTERHORN

THE FORGOTTEN ECHO

OTHER BOOKS IN THE SERIES

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THE FORGOTTEN ECHO

Henry Chancellor

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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First published 2012

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-272744-2

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain

Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

For Chloë.

CONTENTS

1. THE VISIONS OF BETILDA MARCHMONT 01
2. BEGINNING, MIDDLE . . . 019
3. WHEN THE LAZY WIND BLOWS 040
4. WELCOME STRANGERS ALL 058
5. FIGHT THE POWER 076
6. THE IRIDESCENT FEATHER 093
7. SKIN, WOOD, WIRE, AND WIT 111
8. DOCTOR LOGAN'S BIG SURPRISE 132
9. ODD WAY OUT 155
10. I RECOGNIZE THAT FACE 176
11. A TALE OF THE UNEXPECTED 196
12. THE MISSING CHAPTER 215
13. ECHOES AND EGGS 233
14. WING AND PRAYER 252
15. SURREALISSIMO 274

16. THE NEST OF TEETH 293

17. BEFORE THE COCK CROWS 307

17.5. A DUCK REMEMBERS 318

18. THE DEVIL YOU KNOW 323

19. KING OF THE MOON 343

20. STONE COLD TRUTH 363

21. LOTUS AND THE ECHO 385

22. DEATH OF THE HERO? 402

23. DAY OF THE SNAKES 423

24. THE HOOLIGAN 437

25. THE FUTURE OF ALL THINGS 442

26. TIME'S ARROW 464

27. THE LAST SECRET 484

28. HYACINTHS AND FLOOR POLISH 495

29. THE RETURN OF OTHER 508

CHAPTER 1

The Visions of Betilda Marchmont

The mist had been collecting in the bottom of the valley for some time now. It puddled in the dips, laid siege to the trees, and nestled around the walls like an unwanted guest. Miriam Marchmont was not happy. Not about the mist, but about the car headlights moving up the long drive towards her. She glanced at her watch: it was 4.20 p.m. Already the staff had gone home, the teashop was closed, as this was 31st October, the last day before they shut the castle up for the winter. Though they did not technically close until 5 p.m., and last admissions were at 4.30 p.m., Miriam had hoped, this being Friday, *and* the last day, that she might be able to wrap things up a little earlier. It was not to be.

'What is it?' asked her brother Edward, who was just cashing up the day's meagre takings in the shop.

'Someone's arrived,' Miriam replied tersely, wiping a line of dust off the window frame.

'What, now? But we're closing.'

'I know we're closing.'

'Then you'll just have to send them away, Midge.'

'But I can't just send them away.'

'Yes you can. Tell them they're too late. We've already shut for the winter, and they'll have to come back next year. That's the truth,' he added, closing the door and hastily scurrying down a passage. Miriam watched him go. The truth was Edward was a coward when it came to this sort of thing. How typical.

'Oh dear.'

With a sigh Miriam descended the great oak stairway towards the hall. This was going to be unpleasant. Visitors to Marchmont Castle had often made a great effort to get there. Even though they were in central Scotland and far from any main road, tourists from Texas and even New Zealand were not uncommon.

There was a crunch of footsteps across the gravel followed by a loud rap on the door. Miriam pretended she hadn't heard it.

'Hello?'

Another rap. Louder.

'Hello?'

Miriam steeled herself for a polite but firm rebuttal and reached for the latch.

'Excellent. Then I'm not too late.' A long, dark silhouette slipped purposefully out of the gloom and into the hall. 'Last entry is four thirty, which by my watch is in three minutes, is it not?'

'I'm afraid we've already—

'I would hate to have missed it. I have come rather a long way, you see. All the way from Peru, as it happens.'

Peru? Already Miriam was in retreat. The man took off his gloves and looked around. He was extremely tall, high shouldered and narrow framed, and he wore an immaculate long grey coat. His forehead bulged a little beneath a dome of thickly oiled

hair, and Miriam could not help noticing that he seemed to be standing on tiptoes.

'I'm really very sorry but—'

'Don't worry, Miss Marchmont, I have no interest in your extensive collection of Scottish thimbles, fishing rods, stags heads, tartan teddy-bears, nor do I want to see the pathetic collection of wooden rakes that passes for Bygones in the shed.'

The man grinned and Miriam bristled visibly. She and her brother may have been down on their luck and forced against their will to open the crumbling castle to the public, on the promise of some rather gloomy staterooms, a homemade scone, and the remote possibility of seeing the family ghost walking through a wall (which in truth had last 'appeared' to a drunken servant over a hundred years ago), nevertheless, she was still the Lady of the House. Had anyone else dared to speak to her like that she would have turned them straight out the door . . . but there was something oddly commanding about the visitor. She could almost feel his yellowish eyes boring into her as he spoke.

'So what exactly *have* you come to see?' she snapped. 'Is it something specific?'

'As a matter of fact, it is,' he rumbled. 'The room of remarkable paintings made by your great aunt, Betilda Marchmont. She was an artist, I believe?'

Miriam Marchmont was rather caught off guard. This was a rare request, and one that she found hard to turn down. That Betilda's oeuvre had been overlooked by history was a wrong that she was determined to right.

'So you've heard about them?' she murmured, her frostiness melting by the second.

'Indeed I have,' smiled the man, sensing that he had pushed the right button. 'In fact, ever since I found out about all about her curious life seeing these pictures has become something of an obsession. I do hope that will be possible, Miss Marchmont?'

Miriam wavered.

'And that is really all you want to see?'

'More than anything else in the world.'

The man was smiling strangely in anticipation. He happened to be telling the truth.

'Very well. How can I refuse?'

The visitor bowed graciously, disguising his excitement. Miriam took the stranger's money and led the way up the great staircase to the top floor.

'I suppose you've read that Betilda was an eccentric recluse, a madwoman whose family kept her locked up in the attics?'

'Something like that.'

'Well it is true she occupied the North wing for many years, and she was eventually committed to an asylum by her own brother. But in my humble opinion Betilda was far from mad. She merely had an overheated imagination, which she found far more interesting than the real world. That was why she chose to spend every waking moment lost inside it.'

'But she never left this house?'

'Never. Barely even left her room. Which makes it all the more remarkable.' Miriam paused and caught the visitor by the sleeve. 'Would I had a tenth of her imagination. What things *I* would have done.' The tall stranger stared down at his host, wearing a heavy skirt and three separate jackets to keep out the cold. She seemed to be winking at him. 'Knot garden.'

He glanced through the low mullioned window into the small courtyard below, where a symmetrical pattern of low box hedges was cut into curiously spiky shapes.

'Insects?'

'Beetles. Betilda had a fascination with them. She planted and clipped them herself. She liked to go walking down there in the evenings.'

The visitor stared at the dark forms appreciatively. All of this was making a great deal of sense . . . but he must be patient. On they went through a warren of narrow corridors lined with gloomy portraits.

'And this is where she lived.' Miriam paused before a small panelled door. '*Nunquam minus sola—quam cum sola*.'

'What?'

Miriam pointed at the inscription painted in gold on the lintel.

'Never less a lonely lady—than when a lady alone.' Do you read Latin?'

The tall man shook his head vaguely.

'My daughter does. I don't have much use for it.'

'Shame. Betilda read it fluently of course.'

With a small smile Miriam led the way into a small square room that was panelled on all sides. In the corner stood a narrow bed, and next to it, a simple writing desk and chair. A few odd sketches lined the walls. There was nothing else here.

'It's like a prison.'

'Blank page,' corrected Miriam. 'Betilda hated contact with other people. She found it violently distracting. She even installed that.' Miriam pointed to a small panel on which there was a painting of a waiter riding a bicycle. He hadn't any mouth.

'What is it?'

'It's a dumb waiter.'

The visitor seemed bewildered.

'Perhaps you don't have them in Peru. It's a little lift—for food. She had her meals sent up from the kitchen, along with letters and quite a lot else I suspect. Dumb—waiter? It's a joke.'

'How amusing.'

'Yes. I suppose not everyone understands it.'

The tall man grunted impatiently. He was beginning to find this bossy little woman mildly irritating. He glanced out of the window at the remains of the day.

'So where are the paintings then?'

Miriam smiled and moved towards a small door in the panelling, turning the key in the lock.

'Mind your head,' she said, ushering him inside. The room was unexpectedly long and large, and as the tall man's eyes adjusted to the light he was surprised to find himself in the midst of a deep forest. On every surface were great trees, their branches snaking up onto the ceiling overhead.

'Light?'

Miriam drew a pair of torches from her pocket and handed him one. The visitor took it gratefully and switched it on. Through the endless forests he began to pick out castles, rivers, villages, and people—but of course, they weren't quite people, they were fantastical goblins, fairies, elves, dwarves, knights—

'All the usual flimflam.'

'Excuse me?'

'Aha.'

The visitor peered closer and saw he had been too quick to pass

judgement. Here and there among the trees were other, much more sinister creatures, insects that he recognized . . . flame-coloured spiders, vast brown centipedes, burnt-headed ghouls holding gangs of savage red beetles straining at the leash . . .

'Quite something, isn't it?'

The stranger coughed to disguise his excitement. He picked out a line of heavily-laden beetles with his torch beam. They were all roped together and herded by a hollow-eyed drover wearing a distinctive black beret.

'Even old Rainbird,' he murmured, inspecting that grinning, gargoyle-like face. 'Extraordinario.'

'Yes he's a funny little fellow isn't he?' said Miriam, somewhat puzzled by the strangers' reaction. 'The whole thing's a story, you know. A fantasy that took Betilda many years to imagine. This is where it all begins.'

Miriam walked across the room and flashed her torch at a dark column of rock rising up in the centre of a vast cave. Clinging to its upper reaches were roofs and balconies and slender stone causeways sprung from its sides. The whole edifice teemed with outlandish insects of every size and colour.

'It's called Scarazand,' she said confidently. 'Odd name, isn't it?'

The visitor nodded: he knew exactly where this was. It was his home.

Miriam flashed her torch at the Latin banner fluttering above.

'Out of the darkness of Scarazand there came a great light,' she translated. 'The kingdom of the devil is also the birth place of the hero.'

'The hero?'

'We assume that is what he is. You really can't miss him. He's everywhere.' Miriam darted her torchlight around the room, picking out a knight clad in a magnificent suit of black armour. 'There, there, there, over there . . .'

The visitor seemed genuinely surprised. Stalking forward, he fixed his beam on an image of the knight galloping through the forest.For a long moment he stood in silence, studying his armour—the swirling layers of gleaming chitin that formed the breastplate, the intricate tangle of dark spikes around the collar, and that extraordinary helmet, half-wolf, half-beetle.

'Scaramoor,' he muttered to himself, as if he had just remembered the name. 'Scaramoor.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Who is that knight?'

'Nobody knows precisely. But there is a family tradition that he was someone that she knew.'

'Oh?'

'The servants used to overhear Betilda talking to herself as she worked. They thought he might have been someone she was secretly in love with. Either that or a ghost.'

'A ghost?' The visitor snorted. 'How quaint.'

Miriam bristled. As the self-appointed keeper of Betilda Marchmont's flame, she took a very dim view of such mockery.

'Actually, I happen to believe that he was a real person.'

'And why is that?'

'Somewhere in this room Betilda secretly painted his portrait beneath the helmet. She recorded doing so in her diary.' The visitor turned to stare at her. 'And now I suppose you are going to ask me where it is. But I'm afraid I can't help you.'

'Why not?'

'Because I don't know,' Miriam said flatly. 'I would like to know, we all would. But Betilda disguised it very well. It could be anywhere. Anywhere at all.'

The tall man glowered at all the paintings of the knight in the endless forests. There were certainly a lot of them.

'A secret hero. How conveniently mysterious.'

Miriam Marchmont shrugged.

'Artists do things like that, don't they? Indulge their own private fantasies, make little jokes.'With her torch she picked out a small woman dancing arm in arm through the trees with a fat golden man. 'Who knows who any of these people are supposed to be, are they real, or not?'

The visitor had his suspicions. And there was something disconcertingly familiar about that golden man, even though he seemed to be covered in blue butterflies. Betilda Marchmont was plainly as mad as a snake.

'I read about some great battle with serpents?' he rumbled, disguising his curiosity. 'Is that here too?'

Miriam sighed.

'Ah yes. You would have done.'

Unfortunately, this was the most famous image Betilda had ever painted—but in Miriam's eyes for all the wrong reasons. An Austrian psychologist had once visited the house and described it as the finest vision of the future ever painted by a madwoman, and ever since a steady stream of local schoolchildren had come to snigger and gawp. She walked around the corner and flashed her torch at the large scene that dominated the entire wall.

'There you are. "The death of the colony."'