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Opening extract from

Shadows of the Silver Screen

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Published by

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I



The corridor was shrouded with shadows, its dark walls flickering with an almost-spectral impermanence. The only light cast on the scene came from a glowing candelabra gripped in the hand of a woman in white. With a shudder, she stepped towards the corridor's end, the silent swish of her long gown gliding noiselessly across the floor. There, a door stood slightly ajar; the open crack an invitation for the darkness to creep in.

A low murmur of music seeped through the frame, an organ thrum that filled the ominous silence. Black hair cascaded over the woman's shoulders, framing her deathly white features. With her free hand, she reached for the door handle, her fingers trembling as if in fear of what she would find within.

As the organ music swelled in warning, a dark shadow fell across the woman's back. She turned in horror, her mouth gaping wide in a

silent scream. This was echoed immediately by a shrill chorus of shrieks as the face of a man loomed large. His gnarled hands reached out with murderous intent and, as the candelabra fell to the floor, its last flash of light silhouetted the two figures locked in a deadly embrace before darkness finally fell across the scene. The music rose to a swirling crescendo and the words "FIN" filled the screen.

Leaping up on to the raised stage in front of the screen, a frock-coated showman brandished a bullhorn, his bushy whiskers almost as untamed as the riotous red of his coat-tails.

"That's your lot, ladies and gents," he called out, his voice booming through the tent. "Make your way to the exits, please!"

As the curtains across the exits were pulled back, letting the evening sunlight stream into the tent, the audience rose from their seats, the air of entrancement that had been cast by the cavalcade of moving pictures slowly fading into memory. An excited babble of voices battled to be heard as their owners shuffled towards the light, every set of eyes as wide as saucers at the marvels they had seen.

"Here, I leapt out of my seat when I saw that feller spring up. What a horror!"

"I know, I thought he was going to strangle me himself!"

"A most remarkable performance – one

could've almost believed it was real."

Near the rear of the tent, a young girl in a stylish tailor-made suit slowly rose to her feet. Her long dark hair brushed past the collar of her jacket, its light-green serge perfectly matched to the colour of her eyes. Next to the girl, the lanky figure of a boy was already standing, his own jacket of a decidedly more threadbare design.

"So what did you think, Penny?" The boy scratched his scruffy mop of blond hair in wonder, a broad grin of excitement spread across his face. "Wasn't that the most terrifying thing you ever have seen?"

Raising an eyebrow in surprise at her friend's enthusiasm, Penelope shook her head.

"I'd hardly call such a hackneyed collection of scenes terrifying, Alfie," she replied scornfully. "Haunted castles, witches' cauldrons, mad monks and swooning women – the makers of this moving picture show have just stolen ingredients from every gothic tale ever told and thrown them together on to the screen with no regard for the plot. If I printed a story like this in the pages of *The Penny Dreadful*, Montgomery Flinch's name would be mud."

As the orphan heiress of *The Penny Dreadful*, Penelope Tredwell had transformed the fortunes of this once fourth-rate literary magazine, turning it into a bestselling sensation. Writing in its pages behind the pseudonym Montgomery Flinch,

her tales of terror had entranced more than a million readers and made Montgomery Flinch into one of the most celebrated authors of the age. Only a few people knew the real identity of the renowned Master of the Macabre, and as the printer's assistant on the magazine and Penelope's very best friend, Alfie was one of them.

"All right, so maybe the story wasn't up to much," Alfie conceded as the two of them started to trail the tail-end of the crowd towards the exit. "But what does that matter when you feel as though you are really there? The picture's the thing! I heard that at a show over at Hampton Court Fair, half the crowd fainted when they saw a ghost train rushing towards them out of the screen. These filmmakers can make you believe that anything is real."

A crush of picture-goers still milled around the exit to the tent, seemingly reluctant to leave in case the wonders they had seen on screen sprang into life again. Their gleeful voices mingled with the cries of the fairground hawkers outside.

"Ladies and gentlemen, step this way please for the fright of your life. Don't be afraid to experience the phantasmagoria of fear!"

Digging his elbows into the jostling crowd, Alfie barged a path for them through the throng. Penny quickly followed behind him, rapping the knuckles of a scruffily-dressed boy as his fingers

snaked opportunistically towards her purse. Then the two of them emerged from the shadow of the tent, blinking in the sunshine that still warmed the sky even as evening slowly slipped towards night.

Before them the summer fair was in full swing, a state of perpetual bustle and noise spilling across the fields of High Barnet. Crowds of people surged between the attractions, all in search of the ultimate thrill. Nearby, a volley of shrieks erupted from the swirling gallopers, the riders whooping as their carved steeds rose and fell at dizzying speeds. With a clang, steam yachts swung back and forth, a gaggle of young urchins lurking nearby in case loose change fell from the pockets of those onboard. And beyond the Razzle Dazzle, helter-skelter and switchback rides, yet more novelties filled the fairground, all eager to separate the crowds from their money: circus booths, boxing shows, fortune-tellers and menageries of exotic beasts. The warm air hung heavy with the heady scent of spiced nuts and pickled whelks.

As Alfie tugged on Penny's arm to pull her into the heart of the fray, she glanced back at the fairground cinematograph show, its grand facade screening the interior of the tent from view. Carved angels twined around ornate golden columns, whilst a backdrop of luridly painted scenes hinted at what waited within. In

the centre of this elaborate frontage a towering organ pumped out a queasy tune of welcome as a new stream of visitors hurried up the steps, their eyes wide in anticipation. The sign above the entrance read:

THE ELECTRIC CINEMATOGRAPH
PICTURE COMPANY PRESENTS

A PHANTASMAGORIA OF FEAR

Penelope frowned. Was this all that people wanted from their stories nowadays – a second-hand fright in the dark? Turning, Alfie saw Penny still staring back at the ornate facade.

"We can queue up again if you want to see the show a second time," he told her. "I wouldn't half mind watching it again."

"I really don't want to sit through that nonsense again," Penny replied. "I'm just surprised that so many do."

"But all the fairs have got moving pictures now, they're ever so popular. I even heard that they're thinking of opening a cinematograph show on Shaftesbury Avenue itself."

Penny shuddered at the thought of such a shameless novelty springing up amongst the glittering theatres of London's West End. Her

thoughts crept back to the pages of *The Penny Dreadful*. She had to show that stories still mattered, much more than mere spectacle. The next issue of the magazine would have to cast this passing fancy into the shade. She would show her readers what fear really meant.

Penelope looked up at Alfie, her pretty green eyes sparkling with resolve.

"We need to catch the next train home."

Alfie's face fell.

"But we've only been here a couple of hours," he grumbled. "The fair stays open until late."

Penny shook her head firmly.

"I need to start work on the August edition of *The Penny Dreadful* right away. This new story I'm planning from the pen of Montgomery Flinch needs to be something big; an epic tale of terror that will have the nation scurrying beneath their bedclothes in fright."

Alfie sighed. He'd hoped that by bringing Penny along to the fair, they could both escape the long shadow of *The Penny Dreadful* for just one evening. But now a reminder of the printer's proofs piled up on his desk awaiting his return crept into his brain.

"Just one more ride on the velocipedes?" he ventured hopefully, knowing the answer even before he asked.

"We really need to be getting back," Penny replied, "else Mr Wigram will start to worry."

At the mention of Penelope's guardian, Alfie immediately nodded his agreement. He didn't want to get on the wrong side of the stern-faced lawyer, who was also his employer on *The Penny Dreadful*.

"You're right," he said. "Let's go."

The two of them set off through the fair, heading across the tramped-down field for the railway station that lay just beyond the far line of trees. Screams and shouts of excitement followed their every step as they weaved their way through the crowds. The noise of a dozen fairground organs competed for attention as they squeezed past a row of brightly painted booths, ignoring the hawkers' cajoles and ducking behind a wheezing generator.

Gradually leaving the hubbub behind, Penny and Alfie followed a ragged line of fairgoers traipsing down the path that led towards the station. Immediately in front of them, a swaying couple leaned against each other for support, their senses dulled by the day's entertainment.

Alfie glanced towards Penny.

"So what's this new story of yours going to be about, then?" he asked with a smile. "Are any mad monks or haunted castles going to make an appearance?"

Penelope grinned.

"I think I'll leave that kind of story to the

cinematograph show," she replied. "The power of the printed word can find more subtle ways to shock." Behind her smile, the beginnings of a story were already starting to take shape in her mind.