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Opening extract from

The Woebegone Twins

Written by

Christopher William Hill

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For Jo, who knows the hidden dangers of cloisonné peacocks.

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Chapter One

The Mortenberg twins stared out from the window of Aunt Gisela's kitchen. A man peered back at them, his piercing black eyes hooded by heavy grey lids. His head was unusually round and his skin had a wax-like pallor rarely seen on the face of a living creature.

'He's come to kill us,' whispered Feliks.

'Probably,' replied Greta. 'He looks the type that might.'

It was not unusual for the twins to expect the worst, nor was it entirely wrong for them to do so. From their earliest days they had been known as the Woebegone Twins, abandoned to their fate by disagreeable parents who preferred holidays in exotic climes and super-fast motor cars to spending time with their unfortunate offspring. Had it not been for Aunt Gisela, who had adopted the twins, they would have been brought up warped and peculiar within the foreboding walls of the Schwartzgarten Reformatory for Maladjusted Children. Sometimes it is kinder to lie than to tell the truth, and

Aunt Gisela had told the twins that their parents had died tragically in mysterious circumstances.

So the Woebegone Twins lived in Schwartzgarten with their aunt and her pet parrot, Karloff, in a warm and cheerful house in the grimmest, darkest part of the Old Town. When money was plentiful, Aunt Gisela would bake spiced gingerbread and her famous vanilla pudding. When times were hard, she would switch off the lights and sit inside her kitchen cupboard with the twins in her arms, hiding from the bailiffs.

The house always smelt of baking and beeswax and the aroma of oil of petunia, which Aunt Gisela dabbed liberally behind her ears every morning 'to keep away the moths'.

The twins had healthy appetites for the food that Aunt Gisela prepared for them. But there was one thing and one thing alone that they could not eat, and that thing was the humble almond nut. It was a discovery made early in their lives, when Aunt Gisela set to work baking the twins an almond marzipan torte on the occasion of their fifth birthdays. It was perhaps the most beautiful thing she had ever concocted; a towering confection of almond sponge

cake with layers of almond marzipan and cloudberry jam, topped with glittering shards of almond nougatine.

'Eat up,' urged Aunt Gisela. 'You can eat the whole cake if you want, my hungry little monsters.'

The effect was instantaneous and dramatic. As soon as the twins sank their teeth into the moist, plump slices of almond cake their tongues began to swell. And swell. And swell.

'Well, I wasn't expecting that,' said Aunt Gisela, telephoning for the doctor.

When Doctor Lempick arrived he examined the twins carefully. They were both deathly pale, and their tongues lolled from their mouths like deflated helium balloons.

'What I want to know is this,' said Aunt Gisela, 'what's happened to their tongues and will they be like it forever?'

Doctor Lempick smiled and shook his head. 'They are allergic to almond nuts,' he concluded. 'Their tongues will return to the normal size in due course. But please, never ever feed them another almond as long as they live.'

Apart from an allergy to almonds and the unfortunate disappearance of their parents, it would have seemed to the casual observer that the Mortenberg twins were

entirely unremarkable. The only point of note was the striking similarity between the two children, although Greta was a little shorter and slightly stronger than her brother Feliks. Their hair was deep red, the colour of burnt barley sugar, and their pale faces were liberally scattered with freckles, but this hardly marked them out as extraordinary. If anything, it was Aunt Gisela who attracted most attention as she bustled along the cobbled streets of the Old Town with the twins in tow. Passers-by would often stop and stare at the woman, smiling with admiration and nodding as if at a fondly recalled memory.

'What are you staring at?' Aunt Gisela would shout, shaking her fist. 'Nothing better to do than gawp at old women who've done you no wrong?'

And though the twins often asked their aunt why she bawled and screamed at strangers in the street, she seemed deliberately vague on the subject.

Aunt Gisela's behaviour was curious at times, but her love for the twins was beyond doubt. So Greta and Feliks were happy to let their beloved aunt scream at whomsoever she wanted and were grateful for a roof over their heads.

But as the twins reached their eleventh birthdays,

money was short and getting shorter and Aunt Gisela had no choice but to advertise for a boarder to rent a spare room in the house. And it was this boarder who now peered in through the window at the twins.

'That's him,' said Aunt Gisela. 'Our new houseguest! Mr Morbide!'

She ran to the door and opened it wide.

'Mr Morbide!' cried Karloff from his cage. 'Mr Morbide!'

Morbide entered. He was a tall and bulky man and had to stoop his head beneath the lintel. He was cloaked in a long black overcoat and carried a large suitcase and a small leather bag.

'Come in, come in!' cried Aunt Gisela, giving the man a sly wink as she led him into the kitchen.

'Good evening,' growled Morbide in a voice so low that the teacups trembled in the rack above the sink.

The Woebegone Twins gasped and took a step backwards.

Feliks was quite certain that he saw a beetle drop from inside the man's overcoat and scuttle off across the tiled floor.

'Pull up a chair and eat,' commanded Aunt Gisela, grabbing a pan from the stove. 'Eat.'

Morbide sat at the table but did not remove his coat. The twins stared hard at the man, who stared back at them and grunted. He reached into his pocket and retrieved a calling card, which he slid across the table to Greta. The name Morbide was embossed on the card, as if written in dripping blood.

'Well, sit down you two,' barked Aunt Gisela cheerfully. 'Duck eggs all round!'

The twins did as they were told and sat, hardly daring to breathe. They ate in silence.

One thing seemed certain to Greta; Morbide had murder on his mind.

Aunt Gisela stood in the kitchen after supper, washing dishes and puffing away on a stubby De Keyser cigar as Morbide nursed a glass of cherry schnapps. Karloff squawked in his cage, whistling and screaming intermittently.

'Stop that now,' said Aunt Gisela, pulling the cloth over the cage. 'I can't hear myself think.'

The twins carried out their chores in silence; Feliks wiped down the kitchen table as Greta swept the floor. One thought and one thought alone occupied their minds – why had Aunt Gisela allowed a murderous maniac to lodge with them?

As soon as Morbide had left the room the question bubbled up like soda water in a shaken bottle.

'Why did you let him in?' demanded Greta. 'Why did he have to come to live here with us?'

Aunt Gisela took a sip of apple brandy, which she swilled round her mouth, gargled and swallowed.

'Morbide's last landlady choked to death on a plum stone, leaving the poor man without a home,' she mumbled.

'At least that's what he says,' whispered Greta, who had formulated an entirely different explanation.

Aunt Gisela stared at her. 'What do you mean, child?'

'I mean,' said Greta, 'his landlady's probably lying dead in a pool of blood somewhere.'

Feliks nodded in agreement. His sister's conclusion chimed perfectly with his own assessment of the situation.

'Maybe he's come to kill us as well,' he added as they heard Morbide moving heavily in the room above.

'Then you'll be sorry, Aunt Gisela,' said Greta, 'sorry that you didn't believe us.'

'Oh, he won't kill you,' said Aunt Gisela, puffing hard on her cigar, her eyes burning brightly through the fog of smoke. 'Because he knows that if he does, I'll kill him right back.'

The next evening, Greta watched as Morbide adjusted his coat and top hat in front of the hall mirror. He nodded goodbye, opened the front door and set off along the darkened street. Greta waited until the lodger had disappeared from view, then ran back into the kitchen.

'Come on,' she said.

'Where?' asked Feliks, looking up from one of Aunt Gisela's recipe books.

'To look for clues,' said Greta, pulling her brother by the arm and almost dragging him up the stairs to Morbide's bedroom. She tried the handle but the door was locked.

'So, that's it,' said Feliks in relief, turning back towards the stairs. 'We can't investigate after all.'

'Not so fast,' said Greta, seizing Feliks by the sleeve of