

CHAPTER I: DESCENT INTO HELL

*Desire with loathing strangely mixed
On wild or hateful objects fixed.
Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!
And shame and terror over all!
Deeds to be hid which were not hid,
Which all confused I could not know,
Whether I suffered, or I did:
For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,
My own or others still the same,
Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame.*

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Pains of Sleep*

Quick footsteps echoed through the quiet, fog-obscured street. Not a soul was present to see the figure making the rapid *clack-clack* on the cobblestones, but even if there had been, no one could have recognized her in the night. The street lamps were suffocated by the November mist.

The dark shape paused at a cross-roads. Glossy black ringlets spilled from beneath her hat, and black gloves of delicate, tightly-fitted lace showed a hint of ivory skin where they abutted the sleeves of her gown. A high, close collar of deep heliotrope purple surmounted the throat, half obscured by the fastenings of the figure's mantle; a minutely embroidered bodice pulled in at the waist, and then threw generous folds of black out over an old-fashioned crinoline, so that the whole outline vaguely resembled a bell. The face was a little different: she wore a thick veil that hid the eyes, but it was drawn only halfway down, so that white skin and a vivid red mouth were exposed.

She moved her head to look down each road in turn. Her left hand drifted upwards of its own accord, the tips of her slender fingers massaging her throat—then, abruptly, the hand was jerked back, as if from a sudden sting. The young woman raised her chin and clenched her hands; then she took the left-hand way and cantered on through the darkness.

Spheres of lamplight hovered above her course, like living gold suspended in the swirling fog. Above the low-lying clouds, where no eye could pierce, a waxing crescent of silver hung in the heavens.

Number Four, Ramshead Place¹, was well-kept in spite of its venerable age, the wrought-iron railings free of rust, the dragon's-head knocker smartly polished. The woman darted up the steps, rapped the knocker sharply several times, and waited. A strange unease was coming over her. She wondered whether it was worry over her father's reaction to her lateness ... no, it was not that; he would coo and fuss and not be angry, because he was never angry. Yet a sensation of exposure was mounting in her brain. Too quickly, she reached up and knocked again.

Instantly the door opened. A man of fifty stood on the other side, in shirtsleeves and wire-rimmed reading glasses, with an untidy crown of grey-flecked brown hair. 'Marie!' he exclaimed.

'Papa!' she cried at the same moment, equally surprised. 'I should have expected that Harker—'

'I sent all the servants to bed at one. I don't mind waiting up for you, though I must say I was beginning to worry.'

'I am sorry, papa, truly,' Marie began.

'Oh, never mind that. Come inside. You are safe and sound, that is the vital thing.' He took her hand affectionately and lifted her over the doorstep into the house. Her sense of agoraphobia diminished immediately. She lifted the veil from her face, revealing a pair of striking violet eyes. Her father embraced her.

¹ Though unmarked on most contemporary maps, Ramshead Place ran between Belvedere Road and York Road just south of Vine Street, in the general neighborhood of Lambeth Palace. The street has since been razed and filled in.

'Your skin is like ice,' he tutted. 'And why on earth are you dressed like that? You look as if you were in deep mourning. Goodness sake, the blood has gone clean out of your face, child. Anybody would suppose that you ran across London to get here. Come and warm yourself by the fire.' He took her cloak from her and threw it over a chair just inside the drawing room. 'Ravenhurst Manor?'

'Yes,' she admitted. 'But Lady fitzUrse was there as chaperon.'

'I wish you would not stay there till all hours like this, Marie. Viscount Ravenhurst may be a charming man, but he has a reputation as a Spiritualist medium, and I am not, I confess, altogether certain I trust his morals. I have no wish to be a detractor or a slanderer. But people could talk about you too, and I should hate to see your reputation tarnished for the sake of someone else's.'

'I know, papa.' She twisted her hands uncomfortably in front of her; her father, leading the way, saw nothing.

'Your mother,' he went on, 'disapproved heartily. Such a pious woman, far more than I ever could be. I know I ought to be, as a Redglass: old recusant family and all that. I think I am overly Oxonian about it, too merely literary. She was always the devoted one. I loved her for that, among other things. Though you seem to have wedded the contrasting features quite successfully,' he added with pride.

They reached the door to the study at the back of the house, and he strode in. 'There, all things bright and beautiful.' He moved aside, so that she could get a view of the glowing hearth.

The room fell to pieces to all Marie's senses at once. The firelight overwhelmed and fractured her vision, and the merry crackling of the logs beneath her father's voice became a cacophonous roar. No discursive consciousness remained: only an overpowering urge to escape. Someone was shrieking. Strong band-like things were entangling her—she swiped at them savagely—there was a hideous cry, and a bizarre, liquid sensation on her fingers, together with a nauseating smell. A rhythmical thudding followed, and then a blast of icy air, and her vision was plunged back into soothing darkness, like a cold cloth placed over the forehead of one in delirium.

The front door of Number Four, Ramshead Place, yawned behind her as Marie's black gown billowed in her rushing wake. The veil fell from the brim of her hat back over her face as she ran, and the wind pulled it taut against her eyes. Meanwhile, on

the floor of the study, his arms and chest lacerated and a rib broken by his fall, her father, Baron James Redglass, was choking and coughing up blood.

When her wits returned, Marie found herself in a part of London she did not even recognize. Though she had run the whole way, there was no stitch in her side, nor perspiration on her forehead. She was not even panting for breath. Lord Ravenhurst's words tried to force themselves back into her mind, but she repulsed the notion with the vigor of hysteria. *It cannot be. There are no such things.*

A strange aroma, at once repugnant and intoxicating, wafted up to her nostrils. She looked down at her gloves: they were sticky and wet. Convulsively, she snatched them off, to find both hands and gloves damp with slowly gumming blood.

Awareness was swallowed up again. After an indistinguishable period of time, Marie recollected herself. Her hands were once again white, and dry as bone. But there was a foreign object in her mouth, something clingy and web-like. She reached up to remove it, and found that it was both her gloves; she was still eagerly sucking the last drops of blood from the black lace. A vague memory of her lips and tongue, sucking horribly at the skin of her hands, seemed to form in her mind.

She removed the gloves and lowered them from her lips. The faintness and nausea that she had expected and hoped to feel were stubbornly absent. The rising panic at being out in the open, however, had returned, and she knew why now; or rather, she was now admitting the explanation that she had refused hitherto. The sun would be rising soon. No such things as vampires?

She looked around; she did recognize where she was now. In her panic, she had run all the way to Cavendish Square—nearly halfway back to Ravenhurst Manor, the residence of the notorious Spiritualist, Augustus Fairfax, its lord. His figure rose in her imagination, and she snarled aloud with hatred: he had lied to her—could it be, really killed her? Perhaps even damned her. The notion of going back for revenge seemed for a moment to be extremely attractive, but she had no idea how she could exact it. And in any case, she had to hide from the sunlight, and where else could she go? She could hardly explain the situation to a friend, who would merely assume she had gone mad. Unless perhaps William—but that thought was immediately thrust away like white-hot iron. He could never, ever know of this. To return to Ravenhurst

for *haven* was infuriating and humiliating even to contemplate; the possibility of simply letting herself be caught by the sun appeared to her thoughts, but that was too frightening. The desperate, blind appetite of survival asserted itself. Between Lord Ravenhurst—though depraved and unearthly—and certain death, she would, with deep resent, take Lord Ravenhurst.

Somewhere not far off, Marie heard a bell tolling the first Mass of the day. The sound shot through her head like a railway spike, and she clapped her hands over her ears. She turned north up Chandos Street, away from the sound.

But it is not a choice between Augustus Fairfax and death at all, said a disturbing voice in her mind. *You are already dead.*

The manor and its grounds lay north of the city, east of Hampstead Ponds, with Primrose Hill looming to its south out of the greyness. It was, as Lord Ravenhurst had once explained to Marie over sherry and biscuits at one of the little literary salons he held at his house, the ancestral seat of the Fairfax family, of which he was the last surviving member. Not, he noted, to be confused with the Scottish Fairfaxes of Roxburgh: it was rather a curious corruption of the Norman *fer-face*, presumably in reference to a Mediæval helm. As for Mediævalism, Ravenhurst had as much of that as any Pre-Raphaëlite could have wished: the manor was more castle than house, with spires and embattled parapets thrown up against the sky like jagged stone teeth, a weird and gigantic tower looming out of the unseen center of the edifice, and an age-blackened *façade* that frowned out of a mass of ivy, pierced by thin, pointed windows heavily draped against the daylight.

Marie had only ever seen it by night before, when the curtains were drawn back and the light of lamps and candles and chandeliers made every window look like a magic lantern, the uglier features being concealed or softened by the dark. Now, as the forerunning light of dawn crept through the late autumnal fog, she wondered briefly whether she would ever have gone near the place, had she first seen it in better light. But this was no time for metaphysical speculations. Having left the road some time ago, she had to pick her path inconveniently over the railway line, and, once she had cleared it, she lifted her skirts and broke into a run.

It did not take her nearly as long as she had expected. It was a furlong or more from the railway to the front door of Ravenhurst Manor, yet she had traversed the distance in less than a minute. Ignoring this puzzle, she turned to the great front door, with its large brass knocker in the shape of a lion's head with bared fangs. She tapped it and waited, wishing miserably that she could be anywhere else in England. An owl hooted somewhere nearby, and was promptly contradicted by the chirrup of a sparrow.

The door was opened by the grey-mustached butler, Godalming. 'Good day to you, Mademoiselle Redglass,' he said colorlessly, as though he had not witnessed the volatile parting of a few hours before.

'Let me in,' she replied urgently, with no pretense at good manners.

'One moment, ma'm'selle. I shall ascertain whether his lordship is—'

'Please, Godalming, you know me, you know he knows me—'

'Forgive me,' he said, now becoming a little stiff in his manner. 'I have no power to invite you over the threshold. Excuse me.'

He left her on the doorstep. Marie tangled her fingers together nervously and untangled them again a few times, looking out at the grounds (where the fog was turning from grey to pearl at every moment) like a bird scanning the sky for predators.

'Ah, my dear,' interrupted a *basso cantante* voice. She turned quickly back. There stood the master of the house himself, Augustus Fairfax, wearing an indecently triumphant smile. 'This is a thoroughly expected pleasure. Though admittedly, I wondered, when last you left, whether you realized you would be imparting it; I believe you said you never wanted to see me again as long as you lived?—words to that effect.'

Marie lowered her eyes a little from his. 'Please, Lord Ravenhurst; I am sorry—'

'I dare say you are.'

'Please shelter me. I beg you.'

He tutted and stood back. 'Come in.'

She lifted her skirts and stepped over the threshold. 'Thank you,' she said to him quietly.

The aristocrat made no reply, but ordered her to follow with a gesture. Goldaming came over and shut and bolted the door; the sound was loud yet stifled, more like the

shutting of a box than of a door. They went to the library, whose windows, like all the others, were thickly curtained to keep out the lethal sun. Augustus' pale shirtsleeves flashed on either side of his emerald waistcoat in the semi-darkness as he turned up a few of the gas-lamps at the edges of the room, and then crossed to one of the chairs near its center, a finely carved ebony thing with cushions in Paris green. Standing behind it, resting his elbows on its back, gazing at Marie as she stood still near the door of the room, he was the very image of leonine, indolent contempt. He sniffed ostentatiously.

'Dead?' he asked.

She stared, uncomprehending. 'What?'

'Is he dead?' the vampire expanded; and then, with a touch of impatience, he clarified, 'The man whose blood you drank. You are positively reeking of him, there is no use prevaricating. Did you kill him? Most fledgling vampires are more reluctant than that at first—'

'I didn't! Man whose—how dare you!'

Augustus' eyes flashed. 'Manners, Mademoiselle Redglass. I speak to you thus because I am your sire. My authority over you henceforward is, as it were, *paternal*. Accustom yourself.'

Outrage choked her. Helpless to act, dependent and bewildered as she was, she took a few aimless steps about her corner of the room and was still again. Her host watched her, making no attempt to hide his malicious amusement. After a few moments, he turned his gaze to the small circular table beside the chair he was leaning upon. On it stood a jade-green glass vase, about two feet tall, minutely adorned with silver filigree.

'I purchased that in Venice, eighty-six years ago, on the centenary of the deposition of King James the Second,' said Augustus, a little dreamily. 'Such a dismal summer that was! But once or twice, when the weather did manage to get hot, then even at night the Adriatic was like a blue oriflamme, billowing out to the southeast. And outdoors or within, the fragrances of the wines, the perfumes, the scents of grapes and rosemary and pomegranate blossoms ... Have you ever been to Venice, my dear?'