

THE RISE OF THE  
AUTOMATED  
ARISTOCRATS

## ALSO BY MARK HODDER

*The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack*

*The Curious Case of the Clockwork Man*

*Expedition to the Mountains of the Moon*

*The Secret of Abdu El Yezdi*

*The Return of the Discontinued Man*

*A Red Sun Also Rises*

❧ A BURTON ❧ SWINBURNE ADVENTURE ❧

**MARK HODDER**

❧ THE RISE OF THE ❧  
**AUTOMATED  
ARISTOCRATS**



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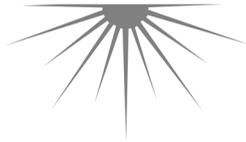
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This one is for my brother

**MIKE SHANNON**







## AUTHOR'S NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



As has been the case with the previous Burton and Swinburne novels, this is a tale of an alternate reality in which famous historical characters are featured. Though their names are recognisable and their biographies have been consulted for information about their personalities, beliefs, and politics, they are not portrayed in a manner that should be regarded as reflective of the real people. The members of my cast are approximations whose motives and actions relate only to the events of the fictional world I have created. Moreover, there are occurrences in this novel that are heavily exaggerated accounts of real happenings. As always, I have sought redemption for my audacious hijacking of history and its personages by including an appendix in which information concerning the real people and events can be found. Hopefully, this will encourage my readers to explore the remarkable truths that have inspired my tall tales.

My thanks, as ever, to my partner, Yolanda, who has once again endured me being shackled to a keyboard for weeks on end—a show of patience made all the more remarkable considering that this novel was begun at the same time our twins, Iris and Luca, were born.

Thanks, too, to Rene Sears of Pyr and Michael Rowley of Del Rey (UK), who put up with my excuses (“The babies were sick on the manuscript. I’ll retype it and send it next week. No, *really!* Yes, I *do* use a typewriter! What’s so weird about that?”)



THE FIRST PART

## A NEW PAST

You cannot fight against the future. Time is on our side.  
—William E. Gladstone



# THE EXCEEDINGLY STRANGE DEMISE OF SIR RICHARD FRANCIS BURTON

Personally I ignore the existence of soul and spirit,  
feeling no want of a self within a self, an I within an I.  
—Sir Richard Francis Burton

Death was everywhere. Burton felt it burrowing through the marrow of his bones, saw it in the evening light that oozed across the forested peaks overlooking Trieste, heard it in the autumn leaves crunching beneath his feet, and discovered it busily at work in the water barrel at the side of the house. He looked over his shoulder and called to Doctor Grenfell Baker. “Help me, will you, old fellow? There’s a robin in here.”

Baker, who was examining the thinning rose bushes, turned and strode over. “Drowned?”

“It will be if we’re not quick. I can’t lean in far enough. My back is stiff as a board.”

The doctor looked into the barrel, stretched down his long arms, and scooped out the little bird. He gave a snort of amusement. “You and your feathered friends! Are you adding ornithology to your already bloated list of interests? Here.” He placed the struggling creature into Burton’s waiting hands. “What was it yesterday? A swallow?”

“Yes, tapping at a window.” Burton cradled the twitching robin in his palms. “That’s a bad omen.”

“Nonsense. It’s because you put breadcrumbs on the sill every morning.”

“Ah, it was not that window, but another.”

Burton gently blew onto the robin’s wet feathers and, when the bird was sufficiently dried, slipped it into the inner pocket of his fur coat. “I’ll warm it a while then put it into a cage until it’s regained sufficient strength.” He took up his cane, which he’d leaned against the barrel, and gestured with it. “Walk with me around to the veranda, will you? I’ll join Isabel to watch the sun set.”

They set off, moving slowly, Baker adjusting his stride to Burton’s hobbling gait.

The aged explorer sighed and frowned. “Funny, that swallow.”

“Why so?”

“All its fellows have departed for the winter.”

“There are always stragglers.”

“You know the alchemists held that birds symbolise the migration of the soul?”

“Yes, I did know that. Are you having morbid thoughts again?”

“I’m almost seventy years old. What else is left to me?”

“Plenty. You have your holiday in Constantinople to look forward to. Your move back to England. The end of your governmental duties. No doubt, you’ll have the reaction to your translation to cope with, too, though I wish you could be spared that. How much of it remains to be written?”

*Of my existence? Precious little I fear, Doctor.*

“Nothing at all. I completed it this morning. By God, I’ve put my life’s blood into *The Scented Garden*. It is the crown of my life. Whatever the outcry, I’ll not regret writing it.”

“It will ruin your reputation.”

Burton gave a throaty chuckle. He slipped his hand through the crook of Baker’s elbow. “I had no reputation at all when I discovered the original Persian manuscript. That was in Sindh, in India. I was a stripling of twenty years, but I immediately recognised that its translation would ‘make’ me. It documented every transgression a man could imagine, and in doing so demonstrated that the morals under which we labour are

nothing but a human contrivance. When it was destroyed in the Grindlays Warehouse fire of 'sixty-one, I felt I'd lost a part of myself. I've spent my life searching for another copy to no avail. What I have written is a reconstruction based upon what I can remember of it, and perhaps that makes it even more the truth of me. Aye, you are right. In the short term, my reputation will likely be wrecked, but it matters not, for I shall be dead. And farther into the future, when minds are less hidebound by convention and religious constraints, then the significance of my translation will be acknowledged. Future generations will know me through its pages, and that, I rather suppose, is the closest thing to immortality I can hope for."

He jerked to a halt and gazed bemusedly at a flowerbed. Amid the withered blooms and ossifying stalks, there had grown a single bright-red poppy, entirely out of season. The sight of it made him feel inexplicably empty and sad.

"What outré music," he murmured.

"Music, Sir Richard?"

"It's stopped now. Did you not hear it? I suppose it drifted up from the town. Maybe a choir practicing. Rather a haunting sound, I should say."

"I heard nothing."

Burton gave a little grunt, tore his eyes away from the poppy, and resumed his walk.

They rounded a corner of the house and the Gulf of Trieste came into view. The Mediterranean was a deep, glittering turquoise beneath the sinking sun.

Baker shook his head despairingly. "The truth of you, you say? No, sir, I don't believe so. I take your good lady wife's view that, no matter your intention, you'll be remembered as a pornographer if the book sees the light of day. It will eclipse all your other achievements. The pilgrimage to Mecca. The hunt for the source of the Nile. The translating of the *Arabian Nights*."

"What you two regard as pornography," Burton responded, "I intend as anthropology. The customs of our race, including those associated with the act of procreation, must be studied and recorded if we are to under-

stand the motives at the heart of us. We are creatures of the natural world and are thus subject to its laws, such as those so eloquently described by Mr. Darwin. Yet we overlay our existence with stratum upon stratum of ritual and storytelling until little authenticity remains. Why? That question has ever been my subject.”

“I’m not sure society is ready to accept such an unequivocal analysis of its complexion.”

“Not now, maybe, but Time makes everything possible.”

A tremor ran through Burton’s body. He halted, suddenly breathless, immobilised by a curious conception of history as multiplying ribbons of light that split and intertwined in a convoluted dance, their movement following the labyrinthine melodies of a throbbing, exotic refrain.

Pulling his right hand from Baker’s elbow, he examined it, utterly baffled by the notion that it should be a mechanical thing of engraved brass and tiny cogwheels and pistons. Of course, it wasn’t. He saw only knobbled joints, bluish fingernails, nearly transparent liver-spotted skin, and raised veins and sinews. The hand of an old, old man.

The moment passed.

Burton swayed and leaned heavily on his stick.

Baker gripped him. “Steady! Is it your heart?”

“No. No. Just a—a—just my mind playing tricks. I heard that music again.”

“There was nothing. Do you need to stop for a moment?”

“I’m all right. Go inside and fetch a cage for the bird, will you, old fellow? I can walk the rest of the way unassisted.”

“I really don’t think—”

“I’m perfectly fine.”

The doctor hesitated for a moment, then nodded and hurried into the house, entering through a side door.

Burton looked again at his hand and shook his head in bewilderment. He gazed around at the garden, at the orchard beyond it, at the low, dark mountains and the coruscating sea. A nightingale started to sing, and its strain drew out again the deep sadness that had touched him a few moments ago. Everything felt achingly beautiful yet oddly illusory. A warm breeze—it was extremely mild for the time of year—brushed his

face, and he was shocked to feel a tear trickling down his cheek. Impatiently, he swiped the droplet away with his coat cuff. "Sentimental fool!"

He stood silently for a couple of minutes then resumed his walk, rounded to the front of the house, and saw his wife, Isabel, sitting at a table on the veranda. She greeted him as he stepped up and sat beside her. "Hallo! Where's Grenfell?"

"He's gone inside to fetch a birdcage. We rescued a robin from drowning. It's in my pocket."

"Oh! The poor little mite! Was it much distressed?"

"It's young. I think it'll recover."

"Thank goodness. Do you want coffee?"

"Please."

Isabel took up a steaming pot and poured while Burton lit a Manila cheroot and started to smoke. He stared at the handle of his cane. "Nearly time to go."

"Yes. We should sort through our luggage. Do you think your old Saratoga trunk can withstand another voyage?"

"I expect so." He gave a small smile. She'd misunderstood his meaning.

"By the by," he said. "Have you seen my favourite cane? I can't remember where I left it."

"Isn't that it? You've been using it for long enough. Which is the other?"

"The sword stick. The one with the silver handle shaped to resemble a panther's head."

Isabel pushed a cup and saucer in front of him and looked puzzled. "I don't recall ever seeing such. Not in all the years I've known you."

Doctor Baker stepped out, placed a cage on the table, and quipped, "For your patient, Doctor Burton."

"Thank you," Burton replied. "Do you happen to remember a silver-topped walking cane? Handle like a panther's head?"

"Not at all. Is it lost?"

"Apparently."

"Perhaps it'll turn up when you pack for England. I'm going up to read. I'll see you at dinner." He went back inside.

Burton sipped his coffee then retrieved the robin from his pocket and put it into the cage. Isabel cooed over it. He watched her and remembered when she'd been tall and slim and beautiful. How time ravaged the body. How merciless. How cruel and implacable.

*To be young again. To have another chance. To correct the mistakes I made. To turn right when I wrongly turned left. To better value those people I never recognised as the finest I would ever know.*

He grinned at an unbidden recollection of his now seldom-seen friend, the poet Algernon Swinburne, falling dead-drunk out of a hansom cab into the gutter before reeling to his feet and engaging in a furious argument with the driver who'd dared to charge him half a crown when Swinburne knew—*knew!*—that all cab rides, no matter the distance, cost a shilling.

*How long ago was that? Thirty years?*

"What are you chuckling about?" Isabel asked.

"Algy."

"Was the cane a gift from him?"

"No. He just popped into my head. I've no idea why."

They sat and watched the sun setting, their conversation sporadic and their silences comfortable.

At a quarter past eight, they went inside and up to their chambers to prepare for dinner. Burton found himself dawdling. Their meal would be served at nine as usual—they had long ago adopted the Mediterranean habit of dining late—but he delayed changing his clothes and instead pottered about his rooms, needlessly shifting things from one place to another, putting some away and lingering over others—such as his collection of swords, mounted in brackets on a wall—to brood on the memories they generated.

"This is a *khopesb*," he told Isabel, pointing at an oddly shaped blade, one of a pair. "I brought it back from Mecca."

"You've told me before."

"Egyptian, thought to have evolved from battle axes. Often, they are ceremonial and not even sharpened, but given an edge and swung with force, one of these could cut through bone like a hot knife through butter."

“Charming. Is the lecture finished? We should go down.”

“You go. I’ll come in a few minutes.”

“No, darling. I’ll wait for you.”

Fifteen minutes late, they joined Grenfell Baker at the table. While they ate, they chatted about their future life in London and other matters. All appeared normal, but Burton detected a peculiar light in his wife’s eyes and realised she suspected the truth and was scared.

There was nothing he could do about it.

Time will have its way.

At eleven, they went back upstairs, and Isabel and Baker helped him to prepare for bed. As usual, he endured their assistance with bad grace, grumbling at his immobility, feeling humiliated that he’d become such a burden, such a confounded invalid.

Baker bid them good-night. Burton got into bed. Isabel, with difficulty, lowered herself to her knees and said her prayers, repeatedly mentioning her husband in her long litany of requested blessings. For her sake, he tolerated it without comment.

*You appeal to nothingness, my wife. You plea into a void for mercy and for forgiveness for actions and thoughts that no one judges but you. There is no God. There is no succour. There is no afterlife. There is only Time.*

Outside, a dog howled.

Isabel rose. “What a horrible noise.”

“The poor thing knows the unseasonal heat doesn’t long survive after the sun goes down,” Burton said. “It’s predicting a chilly night.”

“I’ll fetch an extra blanket.”

“No, don’t. I hate to feel swaddled.”

She joined him in bed. “Shall we read?”

He nodded. She passed him his Robert Buchanan. He opened it at random, but his eyes immediately drifted away from it to the window. He gazed out at the splattering of stars. For three hours, his mind wandered. He remembered, from his childhood, stories about Spring Heeled Jack, a supernatural creature that assaulted women before leaping away; he thought about Mrs. Angell, his housekeeper in the old days; he kicked himself for not including his friend Richard Monckton Milnes among the many people to whom he’d written these few days past; he mourned

over the death of his colleague, friend, and spiteful enemy, John Hanning Speke, though the man's demise had occurred more than a quarter of a century ago.

At half past two, he said to Isabel, "When we are back in England, I have it in mind to purchase a clockwork servant. They are expensive to buy but cost nothing to run, so money is saved eventually."

"A what?"

"A clockwork servant. One of Babbage's creations."

She put down her book and placed her fingers over his. "The mathematician fellow? I've not heard of them. Clockwork? Are you sure?"

"Edward has one. He named it Grumbles. Very efficient."

"Edward who?"

"My brother."

Her hand went to her mouth. Her eyes widened. "Dick, your brother is in an asylum. He has been since 'fifty-nine. You remember the head injury he received in India? He was never the same after that."

He knew she was right. He knew she was wrong. He felt confused.

Burton tried to draw a breath, but it wouldn't come. He croaked, "Open a window. There's no air in the room." Suddenly, pains were shooting through his limbs. He thrashed helplessly. A moan was torn out of him.

Isabel held him and cried out, "What ails you so, Dick?"

With tremendous willpower, he forced himself to lie still, dropping his resistance and allowing the throbs and stabs to flow through him unchecked. "It's all right. It's all right. I'm recovered now." He was unable to keep the hoarseness from his voice. "It's just a gouty pain in my left foot. The usual thing but it took me by surprise. When did I have my last attack?"

"Three months ago. Shall I call the doctor?"

"No, don't disturb him. He'll be asleep. Besides, he can't do anything for it."

She hastened from the bed to a chest of drawers and returned with a horseshoe magnet in her hand. Pulling back the sheets, she held it to his foot. "Does it help?"

"A bit," he lied.

Unfamiliar names ran through his mind. Trounce. Honesty. Lawless. Raghavendra. Krishnamurthy. Bhatti. Who were they? And Mrs. Angell? He'd never had a housekeeper!

"Do you remember Stoker?" he asked.

"The theatre man? Irving's manager? Yes, of course I do. We've dined with him on a number of occasions."

"I have the unaccountable belief that I knew him as a child."

"He never mentioned it. Surely he would have. And you've never spoken of it before. I think your mind is playing tricks."

"Perhaps it is. I imagine I knew Wilde, too."

"Oscar? Great heavens above! I sincerely hope not!"

"What is wrong with me, Isabel? I feel oddly divided, as though there's more than one of me."

"I fear you're having one of your old fevers. They always had that symptom. Remember when you returned from Africa stricken with malaria? For weeks you were convinced that you were two people in one body, forever at war with yourself. You used to—"

Her voice faded away. Oblivion enveloped him. From it, a vision emerged. He was in a featureless desert, squatting beside a tent, fascinated by a scarab beetle pushing a ball of camel dung alongside the fringe of the canvas. "The sun across the heavens," he murmured. "Day and night. Light and dark. Presence and absence. Life and death. One and zero."

When he was next aware, it was half past three and Isabel was distraught.

"I couldn't rouse you. You were gasping for breath."

He told another falsehood in order to comfort her. "Just a deep sleep. I was dreaming. I saw the little flat we'll buy in London, and it had quite a nice large room in it."

"Then we'll make that your study," she replied. "You can hang your swords on its wall and put your—"

She vanished into blazing whiteness as his chest tightened viciously. A thousand tortures. Agony beyond comprehension. He couldn't even scream.

There eventually came further cognisance of time passed. Grenfell

Baker's voice sounded from afar. "Try to keep your respiration steady, Sir Richard. Here, drink this. It will offer some relief."

Swallow. Bad taste. Pain.

"Your wife has gone for the priest."

*Priest? Priest? Bismillah! Am I dying? Help me! Save me!*

He squeezed his eyes shut and when he opened them again she was there, weeping. Knives twisted between his ribs. It was unendurable. He reached for her, weakly clawing at her arm. "Chloroform! Ether! Or I'm a dead man!"

"The doctor says it will kill you!" she wailed. "He's doing all he knows!"  
Life. Death.

One. Zero.

Music. An intricate rhythm. Curious melodies. Peculiar harmonies. The sound gripped him and dragged him through a whiteness that was everything and nothing. He fragmented. Every decision he'd ever made unravelled. All his successes and failures frayed away. He lost cohesion until nothing of him remained.

Zero. Zero. Zero.

Gathering weight.

The pressure of her arms beneath him.

No, not her arms. The ground.

Burton opened his eyes and saw a flickering orange light. Flames reflected on a canvas roof. He was in a tent.

He sat up.

El Balyuz, the chief abban, burst in. "They are attacking!" He handed Burton a revolver. "Your gun, Effendi!"

*What is this? What is happening?*

Pushing back his bed sheets, moving like an automaton, with no control over himself, Burton stood, put the pistol on the map table, and pulled on his trousers. Astonishingly, his body was that of a young man. He took up the gun again, looked over to Lieutenant George Herne, and grinned. Words spilled unbidden from his mouth. "More bloody posturing! It's all for show, but we shouldn't let them get too cocky. Go out the back of the tent, away from the campfire, and ascertain their strength. Let off a few rounds over their heads if necessary. They'll soon bugger off."

Recognition.

*This is Berbera! My God! 1855! My first African expedition. We were attacked. I received a spear through my face. Why am I here again?*

“Right you are,” Herne said. The lieutenant moved to the rear of the tent and ducked under the canvas.

Burton, occupying his own flesh like a passenger, able to observe but not influence, checked his gun. “For Pete’s sake, Balyuz, why have you handed me an unloaded pistol? Get me my sabre.”

He shoved the Colt into the waistband of his trousers and snatched his sword from the Arab.

“Speke!” he bellowed. “Stroyan!”

Almost immediately, the tent flap was pushed aside and John Hanning Speke stumbled in. His eyes were wild. “They knocked my tent down around my ears. I almost took a beating. Is there shooting to be done?”

“I rather suppose there is,” Burton responded. “Be sharp, and arm to defend the camp.”

He felt the urge to rush forward and grip his old comrade.

*I forgive you! I forgive you! Let us forget it all and start anew. It is good to see you again. So good! I never meant any of it, John. I don't know how such enmity came between us.*

He was unable to do it. His body wouldn’t accept his commands. Helplessly, he waited with the others. They checked their gear and listened to the rush of men outside.

Herne returned from his recce. “There’s a lot of the blighters, and our confounded guards have taken to their heels. I took a couple of pot-shots at the mob but then got tangled in the tent ropes. A big Somali swiped at me with a bloody great club. I put a bullet into the bastard. Stroyan’s either out cold or done for. I couldn’t get near him.”

Something thumped against the side of the tent. Suddenly a barrage of blows pounded the canvas while war cries were raised all around. The attackers were swarming like hornets. Javelins were thrust through the opening. Daggers ripped at the material.

“Bismillah!” Burton cursed. “We’re going to have to fight our way to the supplies and get ourselves more guns. Herne, there are spears tied to the tent pole at the back. Get ’em.”

“Yes, sir.” Herne went off but almost immediately ran back. “They’re breaking through!”

Burton swore vociferously. “If this blasted thing comes down on us we’ll be caught up good and proper. Get out! Come on! Now!”

He plunged out into the night. Somali natives were milling about, brandishing their weapons. Jostled and thumped, Burton looked over his shoulder to check the others had followed. He saw Speke emerging from the tent, saw him struck on the knee by a thrown stone, saw him flinch and stumble back.

*Don’t say it! Don’t utter those damnable words!*

They came anyway. Burton yelled, “Don’t step back! They’ll think that we’re retiring!”

Two short sentences—uttered without thought—that Speke would fixate upon and twist into an accusation of cowardice, inciting in him a fierce resentment, leading to betrayal and ultimately, to his death.

Despairingly, Burton turned to defend himself. He was shoved this way and that, hacking with his blade, caught up in a crush of bodies. Amid the chaos, the campfire, swollen out of all proportion, caught his eye and held it.

Suddenly, everything else dwindled from awareness and, as a javelin slid into his cheek, knocked out two molars, sliced across his tongue, and transfixed his face, he lost all physical sensation.

Flames. Only flames. There was nothing else.

Grindlays Warehouse.

In 1861, when the depth of Speke’s perfidy had become apparent, and Burton was at his lowest ebb, Grindlays burned to the ground, taking with it all the documents, costumes, artefacts, and mementoes Burton had stored there after returning from his many years of travel and exploration, depriving him of every material thing he’d ever valued. At this juncture of his life, he’d married Isabel Arundell, the only remaining constant.

He saw her now, a blazing bonfire illuminating her face, reflecting in the tears on her cheeks, making them look like rivulets of blood.

Snapping out of his trance, he walked toward her. It was a winter evening. He was back in his garden in Trieste.

“What a ghastly time I’ve had of it!” he exclaimed as he approached. “I’m sorry to have caused such a fuss. By God, I thought I was done for. Was it another heart attack? I feel perfectly healthy now. Even my rheumatism has let up.”

She didn’t respond.

“I dreamed I was back in Berbera with John Speke. A nightmare. It was extraordinarily vivid. Isabel?”

Sparks and glowing scraps of paper spiralled up through the smoke. The bonfire crackled and snapped. He watched as she reached into a carpetbag at her side, pulled a handful of letters from it, and threw them into the conflagration.

“What are you doing?”

Still no answer.

“Isabel?”

Something felt wrong.

She took a thick sheaf of paper from the bag.

His translation of *The Scented Garden*.

“Wait!” he cried out. “No! Don’t do that!”

Lady Isabel Burton consigned her husband’s *magnum opus* to the flames.

Burton shrieked as he felt it—and himself—consumed.

It was Grindlays all over again, reducing him to nothing.

White. White. White.

Zero.

Hands took form, easing out of the featureless glare, shapes congealing around them. He didn’t immediately recognise them as his own, for rather than being gnarled, liver-spotted, and transparent, they were tough and healthy and young.

A note was pushed into one of them. Raising his eyes, he saw Arthur Findlay of the Royal Geographical Society, an expression of utmost sympathy upon his face. Burton read the note, already aware of the news it bore, and reacted to it without any volition of his own.

“By God! He’s killed himself!”

John Hanning Speke—who, two years after the Berbera incident, had accompanied him into central Africa in search of the source of the

Nile and who subsequently claimed to have discovered it without Burton's help—was dead.

*The Bath Assembly Rooms. 1864. This is where I was supposed to confront Speke and condemn him, humiliate him. Where I'd make him pay the price for his disloyalty. Instead, just prior to the conference, he shot himself while out hunting. An accident, perhaps. Or suicide.*

Burton put the note onto the table and rose from his chair.

*This is the day I was forever broken.*

He heard himself say all the things he'd said on that occasion: to Findlay; to Sir Roderick Murchison, president of the RGS; and to the other members of the committee. Then he stumbled out of the room and into Isabel's waiting arms.

She was young again. Beautiful.

Contorting emotions that made no sense at all mauled at him. How could he love and, at the same time, fear her?

"What ails you so, Dick?"

*Don't be concerned. It's just a gouty pain in my left foot. The usual thing. When did I have my last attack?*

He said, "John has shot himself."

She fussed but he couldn't bear to be near her. Burton needed to flee; he required space in which to think. He tore himself away, spoke to Sir Roderick, told him he'd address the waiting audience, and watched from within himself as the familiar events unfolded, as the same sentences were uttered and the turning point of his life was played out once again.

*Is this my reckoning? Am I being judged?*

The outer Burton escaped to a quiet room and there wept for Speke. The inner Burton wept too, the memories and replaying emotions overwhelming him. When both regained control of themselves, the one sat and wrote out a makeshift presentation concerning the valley of the Indus while the other watched through his host's eyes and waited for the astonishing dream to end.

It kept going.

Thirty minutes later, Burton was standing at a podium in front of an audience. He saw eager faces, hungry for sensation and scandal. He began his presentation. Words spilled from his mouth and trailed away until, in the faintest of whispers, he said, "I'm sorry. I can't continue."

Burton fled from the stage, grabbed his coat, hat, and cane, exited the Assembly Rooms, and stumbled down the steps to the street. There, he paused, breathed deeply, and suddenly had full control of himself. Utterly amazed, he looked down at his strong 43-year-old body and whispered, "I'm alive." He put a hand to his chest. His heart was racing but not failing. He laughed, moaned, stifled a sob, clapped a palm over his mouth, and clenched his teeth to prevent himself from hollering like a maniac. Pedestrians, dressed in the styles of three decades past, walked by and glanced curiously at him. A horse-drawn hansom clattered over the cobbles.

He looked up. Dark clouds were drifting across a blue sky, threatening to obscure it. He guessed, from the sun's position, that it was half one in the afternoon or thereabouts.

His senses felt amplified. Everything he observed, he saw in exaggerated detail. Every sound possessed startling clarity. Odours filled his nostrils and touched the back of his tongue—burning coal, cooking food, animal waste, vegetation. Each scent brought with it a scintillating memory of days long since passed.

"It can't be real. It can't be!"

Leaning with both hands on his cane, he fought to quell the fit of shaking that suddenly gripped him. Then it occurred to him that the building at his back was filled with newspaper journalists, all clamouring for further news of Speke's death, all eager to question him, all bound to follow when they realised he'd exited the premises.

He hurried away.

*Isabel. What about Isabel?*

"We were staying at the Royal Hotel," he mumbled. "I'll meet her there later."

Shock. She'd burned *The Scented Garden*.

How many betrayals can a man endure?

No, he wouldn't consider that now.

*Besides, if this is 1864, then I haven't even written the bloody thing yet.*

He passed a street singer who was warbling about a "four pence ha'penny cap," turned left at a junction, and hastened along with no idea of his destination. It was enough just to walk. His muscles, joints, and

bones were entirely free of arthritis, rheumatism, gout, and the myriad of other ailments that had accompanied him for so long. He felt clean and powerful. Temperament, he realised, was as much a function of the body as it was of the mind. This younger physique made him feel like a sharp blade, in contrast to the blunted edge of old age.

He gave a bark of exuberance. Passers-by stepped out of his path.

Oh! The brutal countenance of Sir—no, *Captain!*—Richard Francis Burton in his prime. The blazing eyes! The savage jaw! The swarthy skin and pronounced cheekbones! The scar and long Oriental moustache!

“Hah!” he bellowed at a studs-and-laces vendor.

The man threw up his hands and staggered back.

*Bismillah! Control yourself!*

“My dear fellow,” Burton said. “I’m so sorry. Forgive me. I’m a little overexcited.”

“Holy Moses! Excited is it? Blimmin’ well barmy, more like!” the vendor exclaimed. “Shoutin’ at them what’s a-mindin’ their own blimmin’ business. There ain’t no call for it.”

“Barmy? Yes, perhaps so, perhaps so. My sincere apologies. Is this 1864?”

“Is it 1864, he asks now! Of course it blimmin’ well is! What are you, escaped from the loony bin or summick?”

“In a manner of speaking, my man, that might well be the case. Good day to you.”

Burton moved on. His eyes flicked back and forth, eating up every inch of the environment. Worn paving. An overgrown hollyhock. A cracked windowpane. A fat pigeon. A blind beggar. A discarded beer bottle. The flaking paint on the side of a passing carriage.

The world felt astonishingly lucid and profoundly tangible, more so than Trieste had ever done.

An urge to run gripped him, to escape, to plunge out into the world and lose himself before Death realised its oversight and reclaimed him. He removed his top hat and held it by its brim, flung up his stick and caught it by its middle, and set off. Pedestrians scattered. Men protested, “I say! Steady on!” Women gave little squeals of alarm. His legs pumped. The air streamed across his face. His lungs embraced the exercise without complaint.

Down the road, around a corner into a less populated one, past houses and stores and workshops.

“Free!” he yelled. “Free! Free!”

Finally, he stopped, bent with his shoulder against a wall, roared with laughter, whimpered in shock, and panted until his respiration settled. When he straightened, he saw a policeman glaring at him. Burton replaced his hat and gave a sheepish smile. He nodded an apology, knuckled his brim, and moved on.

A few minutes later, as he was passing a carpenter’s yard, a weight dropped onto his right shoulder. He yelped, jerked up his hands, and swatted at it. There was a flash of bright colour and an indignant squawk. Burton stumbled to one side and instinctively fell into a fencing pose, stretching out his cane like an épée.

Its end was pointed at a parakeet.

The bird had jumped from his shoulder onto the railing in front of the yard. It peered at him side-on, head cocked, and gave a click of its beak and a little cackle.

Burton lowered his stick. “Just an escaped pet.”

“Bollocks and filthy gut stench,” the bird responded.

“Good Lord! A fugitive from a foul-mouthed owner, it appears.”

“Message for Sir Richard Francis fornicating flop-bellied Burton.”

He gawped. He’d encountered taking birds of course—as a matter of fact, Isabel kept a rather-too-vocal mynah—but he’d never heard of one that could do more than mimic. And *Sir*? He’d not been knighted until 1886. If this was really ’sixty-four, how did it know to call him Sir?

“You are invited to meet the reborn,” the parakeet continued, “at the stinking Slug and Lettuce. Message bloody well ends, and up your claggy tubes, toilet breath.”

The feathered herald poked its tongue out of its beak, blew a raspberry, and took wing. Burton watched as it fluttered away over the rooftops. He opened his mouth as if to speak, closed it, checked again that his hat was straight, turned, took two steps, stopped, and muttered, “Ah. Now I have it. It’s the only explanation.”

Plainly, he was still on his deathbed in Trieste. His heart was on the

outs, and his brain, starved of oxygen, was, in its distress, generating this deeply compelling hallucination.

He sighed, disappointed, and looked around. "It feels so completely real. What an incredible organ the human brain is. How marvellous that it should ease my passing with this simulacrum of youth."

Burton walked on and frowned. "But why reconstruct this day of all days? Surely a happier one would have been more appropriate. Unless—"

Might it be that a man is defined by the incidents in his life that he can't let go of, the ones that haunt him into his dotage? Are they experienced again at the moment of death in order to be cleansed from the soul, so each individual is purified before passing through the gates of paradise?

Was he here that he might forgive himself?

Except, of course, he didn't believe in sin or the soul or the afterlife.

*Did I get it all wrong? Was my atheism a mistake?*

Rounding another corner, he found himself back on the busy thoroughfare, though farther along it. Market stalls lined either side of the street and a flock of sheep was being driven between them, causing much chaos. From amid the shouted objections, good-natured insults, and shrill bleating, the voice of a newsboy hollered, "Read the latest! War in America! Come buy, come buy, come buy a paper! Latest from America!"

Burton picked out the source of the declamation, a tiny ragamuffin, and walked toward him.

"And the parrot," he said to himself. "Why would I fantasise such a capricious ingredient as that? 'Meet the reborn,' it said. The reborn."

Pushing past an old gypsy woman who shoved a sprig of heather into his face and advised him to "be lucky, me deario," he approached the newsboy.

"Paper, sir?"

"No thank you. Can you direct me to the Stinking Slug and Lettuce, lad? A public house, is it?"

The boy grinned, exposing a mouthful of green and gappy teeth. "Ha ha! It is, sir, but 'tain't so bad as all that."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's the Cat an' Fiddle what's the stinkiest drinkin' 'stablishment in

the city, far as I know. The Slug 'n' Lettuce is perfectly 'spectible. Yus, I can tell you 'ow to find it." The boy paused and rubbed the grubby fingers of his right hand together.

Taking the hint, Burton fished in his trouser pocket, found a few coins, and dropped them into the waiting palm.

"Crikey!" the urchin exclaimed, and quickly pocketed the payment before the amount could be reconsidered. He pointed along the road. "Thataway 'n' turn left into Quiet Street. You'll see it. 'Tain't far to walk."

"Much obliged."

Burton moved forward, navigating the crowd while experiencing an oddly disjointed mix of familiarity and alienation. He felt engulfed by distant memories come alive. After the relative silence of his secluded home in Trieste, the cacophony of this English thoroughfare battered his already overloaded senses. He suddenly found it impossible to string any thoughts together. His eyes were too full, his ears too encumbered, and his olfactory faculties—more chained to memory than any other sense—were working overtime.

He felt his guilt at abandoning Isabel during this moment of crisis jumbling with a multitude of other irreconcilable emotions concerning her. It was as if he'd known her hundreds of times over, each relationship founded on a slightly different basis. He loved her. He hated her. He depended on her. He resented her. He wanted her. He feared her. She was his other half, his wife, his friend, his acquaintance, his supporter, a stranger, his opponent, his enemy, his nemesis.

He shook his head, trying to clear it, then shoved through the crowd, causing indignant oaths to be uttered, and stumbled to the junction with Quiet Street. Mercifully, the road lived up to its name, and he emerged from the throng and entered it, gulping at the air like a drowning man.

He stopped and steadied himself, one hand on his cane, the other on a garden fence.

*This is it. My old heart has stopped. I'm about to expire.*

His breathing gradually settled. He didn't die. The illusion held.

He saw the Slug and Lettuce just ahead, a small ivy-clad building with walls that bulged outward as if on the point of collapse.

"Brandy. That's what I need. Heaven or hell, if they exist, whichever

I enter, I'll arrive there drunk." He gave a bark of laughter. "Yes, by God, that's the Burton of old!"

A warrior on a mission, he strode toward the drinking den, pushing all other considerations aside and dwelling only on the euphoria of his restored physique.

As he neared the public house, he heard the patrons within talking, shouting, singing, and laughing. When he opened the door, it was to reveal a crowd of lunchtime drinkers, mostly of the working class, all breathing an atmosphere thick with blue tobacco smoke. Entering, he shouldered through to the bar and, being identified as a gentleman by his attire and bearing, was immediately served. The men to his right and left, who'd been waiting before him, made no complaint. They knew their place.

Burton turned and surveyed the mob while his drink was being poured. He smelled sour beer and body odour, bad breath and unwashed clothes, stale urine and rancid lard. He saw good-humoured labourers, clerks, stallholders, and dolly-mops. He heard gossip and jokes and ribaldry. He didn't spot anyone who appeared to be "reborn."

He swallowed his brandy in a single gulp and marvelled at the taste, which he now realised had been terribly dulled by old age. After requesting and receiving a refill, he slid payment across the bar, turned, and pushed his way through to the ill-lit back of the room. There, he stopped, staring awestruck at a small man seated at a table.

The little fellow looked up, his eyes widening, and gave a piercing shriek of recognition.

A face from the distant past.

An old friend restored to youth.

Algernon Charles Swinburne.