

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Pagan Heat

Monica Belle

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About the Book

For Sophie Page, the job of warden at Elmcote Hall is a dream come true. The beauty of the old house and the overgrown grounds speaks to her love of nature. As a venue for weddings, films and exotic parties the Hall draws curious and interesting people, including the handsome Richard Fox and his friends – who are equally alluring and more puzzling still.

Sophie suspects that Fox is responsible for the sexually charged events taking place by night in the woods around the Hall. However, he is only carrying on a tradition; Elmcote's Victorian owner – the eccentric occultist, Elgar Vaughan – used the grounds for Dionysian sex rituals, and now it's Sophie's turn to find out just how much fun can be had with the old ways of worship.

About the Author

Monica Belle is an Oxbridge graduate and the author of several successful Black Lace novels, including *Black Lipstick Kisses*, *Bound in Blue*, *Noble Vices*, *Office Perks*, *Pagan Heat*, *The Boss*, *The Choice*, *To Seek a Master*, *Valentina's Rules*, *Wild by Nature* and *Wild in the Country*.

By the same author:

Noble Vices
Valentina's Rules
Wild in the Country
Black Lipstick Kisses
Wild by Nature
Office Perks

Pagan Heat

Monica Belle

BLACK
LACE

1

THERE IS SOMETHING so deliciously naughty about Victorian underwear.

Having got into my combinations, I simply had to walk over to the mirror, turn my back, and pull the seam open to flash my bare bottom. I was chuckling to myself as I continued to dress, feeling just a little bit foolish and just a little bit aroused. It was fun to show off like that, and it was fun to dress completely in the style of the last years of the nineteenth century, even when the visitors were only going to see my dress, and perhaps a hint of ankle, if they were lucky.

That's the thing, you see, with Victorian clothing. How much more intriguing to be clad from neck to toe in garments that flatter and hint but do not reveal, than, say, to be in a bikini, with just about everything on show to all and sundry. I prefer it anyway, and considered myself extremely lucky to have found a job where I could indulge my predilections without being thought strange.

Hence the smile on my face as I dressed, because not only had I landed the ideal job, but also the most wonderful place to live, rent free. Most people will tell you that being a caretaker is about as low on the social scale as you can get, but I didn't care; not when I was caretaker for Elmcote Hall. I was also visitor guide, manager and chief-cook-and-bottle-washer, as the Trust didn't feel able to afford anyone else. That was just fine. In fact, it was perfect.

I did have a touch of first-day nerves, with the prospect of showing groups of visitors around and generally making an exhibition of myself. At the interview I'd assured the

Trustees what a great 'people person' I was. They'd swallowed it, although it was nicer to think that it was my PhD on Elgar Vaughan, notorious occultist and the last of his family to occupy the Hall, that had swung the decision. People person or not, I did at least know what I was talking about.

With my knee-length stockings, combinations and dainty square-heeled boots on, my corset came next. Note that the boots go on first because once your corset is laced up, getting at your feet involves advanced yoga. I'd had mine tailor-made, as a treat to myself for finishing my thesis on time. It was a classic S-curve full-length corset, from my bust to halfway over my bottom. The only way to get into it without a maid, or a helpful gentleman, was to fasten the laces first, breath in deep, and do up the catches on the front, one by one as I went slowly purple.

It was worth the effort for that lovely snug feeling, and the sense of my breasts and bottom being enhanced and yet concealed. I was now encased in cotton and satin and lace, nothing revealed, and yet so naughty. After all, I was in my underwear, and all the hypothetical gentleman would have had to do would be to take me in his arms, ease my combinations open behind as he kissed me, *et voilà!*

Unfortunately it was impractical as there was no man, and I was supposed to be ready to receive a coachload of American tourists in ten minutes flat. A shame, because what I really wanted to do was kneel down on the bed and bring myself to a slow and exquisite orgasm as I watched in the mirror, but there was no time for such misbehaviour.

That was the problem of taking on the job single-handedly. I could hire outside staff – in theory I could even sub-contract – but every penny had to be accounted for and justified in terms of profit. My knowledge of accounting was slim to say the least, but I could add up, and it had been made clear to me at the interview that I was expected to save money at every opportunity. They had at least asked if

I felt secure on my own, but I'd assured them I did. When it came down to it, being in sole charge of Elmcote Hall was what I wanted more than anything else.

Almost from the moment I'd heard about the place it had been a fantasy of mine to live there. As an intense, rather shy schoolgirl I'd gained far more knowledge than any of my contemporaries in an effort to impress the cool daring Goth girls. I had failed miserably, because what they were really interested in was music and make-up and jewellery, all image and no substance.

Most of them had never heard of Elgar Vaughan, or Mathers, or Crowley, or Beckett, some not even Shelley and Stoker. It was hopeless; our interests were just too divergent and I'd given up, losing touch with every single one after I'd gone to university. There I had found better company among academics and like-minded students, but somehow I'd never found the right person for me, and again had largely lost touch when I left.

Then had come my PhD, three years of intense intellectual study, with the occasional boyfriend and the occasional lover, but nobody special. Not that I was necessarily a loner by instinct; more by habit. Rather it was that I'd never managed to gather the right people around me. Now, living on my own with my parents in opulent retirement in Jersey, there was almost no connection with my early life, but that was never more than a faint regret. Now, I might not have found the company, but I had at least found my place.

I'd been lingering over every detail since stepping out of the shower, but I hurried into my petticoats and dress, cursing softly to myself as I struggled with the catches. Once I'd finally got it right all that remained were gloves, hat, scarf and parasol, and I was ready except for my hair and make-up, which I'd completely forgotten about while daydreaming about Elmcote Hall and the erotic possibilities of Victorian clothing.

No lady of the period above the age of sixteen would have dreamt of being seen with her hair down to her waist and without make-up. The parasol was dropped, scarf, hat and gloves removed, and after five frantic minutes in front of the mirror I was ready. Perhaps not quite five minutes, because by the time I'd made my way downstairs and out onto the carriage sweep there was a large red and blue coach parked there with at least fifty tourists milling around, one of whom appeared to be starting some of the others on a tour.

It should have been my big entrance – Sophie Page sweeps majestically from the door of Elmcote Hall, curtsies and addresses the assembly in a friendly yet dignified manner in keeping with the period and her surroundings. Instead I received a few curious stares as I walked up behind the unreasonably tall man who was explaining that the reason the carriage sweep was half covered in rubble was not because we had the builders in.

‘Excuse me.’

He turned, revealing craggy features under a mop of black hair, like a Roman emperor who couldn't quite decide whether to be debauched or imperious. There was also a resemblance to a face I knew very well indeed – Elgar Vaughan – but I put that down to my overactive imagination. Fortunately he realised that I was standing behind him in full Victorian gear for a reason and stepped aside, gesturing me forward with a friendly but distinctly condescending smile.

‘Our guide, I presume?’

‘Yes, thank you. Right, good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am Sophie Page, and I will be guiding you around Elmcote Hall today. As the gentleman –?’

‘Richard Fox.’

‘As Richard – Mr Fox, was just pointing out, very little has changed since the collapse of the tower in nineteen-sixteen. Elgar Vaughan, thirty-six at the time, had not expected to die, and left no will. Or at least, no will has ever been found. Elmcote Hall therefore passed to his nearest surviving

relative, a cousin involved with the diplomatic service in India. Knowing the reputation of Elmcote Hall, the cousin ...

I stopped, confused, already close to the end of my carefully prepared talk when I should have been just beginning. Richard Fox had thrown me completely, and the only thing I could do was start again from the top, or I was going to get inextricably muddled up.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Elmcote Hall, or rather, the ruins of Elmcote Hall for, as you can see, only one wing remains habitable. Elmcote Hall was built in eighteen thirty-two, on the site of the previous manor and was named by Henry Vaughan, a friend and disciple of William Beckford, leader of the Gothic revival, whose influence can plainly be seen in the architecture and the, er, collapsing tower.’

I smiled, hoping for a laugh or two, even a smile of recognition. All I got were looks of rather blank expectancy, except from Richard Fox. He gave a dry chuckle, so presumably he at least knew about Beckford and the collapse of Fonthill Abbey. He went up in my estimation as I continued, starting my walk across the carriage sweep.

‘If you would care to follow me this way,’ I went on. ‘Henry Vaughan might have aspired to the Gothic ideal, but otherwise his life was far from romantic. He had made his fortune in the cloth trade, although in the later years of his life he did his best to cover this up. His nephew, George Vaughan, who inherited the property, was a more down-to-earth individual who greatly expanded the family fortune, and whose major contribution to Elmcote was the formal gardens, his uncle having deliberately left the grounds a wilderness, much as they are now.’

‘I’m not sure that’s entirely accurate.’

I turned, smiling, to find the speaker, as if I didn’t know who it would be, and got in before he could make me apologise for my error.

‘I know what you’re going to say, Mr Fox. Yes, Henry Vaughan’s so-called wilderness was far from natural but carefully contrived to express a Gothic atmosphere. Nevertheless, he planted only native species, and they were untended, just as they are today. With the exception of the follies, and what remains of the walks . . .’

I was getting ahead of myself again, and stopped, still smiling, but cursing him in my mind.

‘George Vaughan laid out formal gardens, of which only the lime walk, the main lawn and arboretum remain apparent. He lived from eighteen-seven to eighteen-eighty-nine, surviving both his sons, Henry and William, and the grandson, Albert, who would have stood to inherit in due time. Thus we find a rather peculiar situation: an old man in his seventies, living alone in the house but for an elderly housekeeper and a nurse, with his great-grandson, Elgar Vaughan. To say that the child’s upbringing was eccentric would be an understatement. His great-grandfather had become senile, possibly in consequence of the maze of lead piping that supplies water to the house, and would walk the halls and gardens, a shuffling, muttering figure, yet still imposing, with his great height and bulky frame. What communication he had with the young Elgar Vaughan we do not know, but it can scarcely have been conventional.’

‘It’s said that old George used to pursue Elgar around the house wearing the skin of a grizzly bear, complete with head,’ Fox butted in.

‘It is?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, well, I wish I’d know that when I did my thesis. Thank you, Mr Fox.’

‘My pleasure, Miss Page.’

He gave a little bow, polite but somehow mocking, as I went on, now at the end of the house, where we could look down the full length of the lime walk to the Temple of Baphomet at the far end. I was completely out of sync.

‘As I said, scarcely conventional. The housekeeper, Mrs Rourke –’

‘Mrs O’Rourke.’

‘Mrs O’Rourke – thank you again, Mr Fox – appears to have been something of a *Gauleiter*, keeping whole sections of the house locked off at all times and generally wielding the rod, all too often literally. The nurse, whose name was Florence Zeals – although no doubt Mr Fox will correct me if I’m wrong?’

‘No, that’s right.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. Anyway, Florence doted on Elgar Vaughan and did her best to spoil him. Clearly she was an influence, and may be said to be the one person of whom Elgar was genuinely fond because when she died he had her buried in the grounds, beneath what became the temple of Gaia, the Earth Mother. By then, Elgar had been through ten years of school, at Quainton Hall in Buckinghamshire, and at Eton, neither of which appear to have had any major effect on his personality, but where he did make several influential friends.’

I was finally getting into my stride, and began to walk out between the limes.

‘Born in eighteen-eighty, Elgar had still been a minor when George Vaughan died. For the remainder of his childhood the estate was managed by trustees and largely neglected, while Mrs O’Rourke had a free hand with the house. On coming of age, Elgar’s first act was to dismiss the trustees. He then fired Mrs O’Rourke and, when Florence Zeals died some months later, the last restraint was removed, allowing him to fully express his personality.

‘This he did. Wealthy, independent and responsible to nobody, he set about making the influences of his early life flesh – mystery, locked doors and concealment, harsh discipline – or, more often, the antitheses of them. Also, the original Henry Vaughan’s library remained, barely touched in decades, and it included the classics, many works of an

occult or alchemical nature, stories of Gothic horror, and more. All this Elgar Vaughan had absorbed, and one merely need glance at the temples he built in the grounds to appreciate the peculiar fusion of ancient and medieval concepts. Here, for instance, set at the end of the lime walk, is one of his principal places of prayer, the Temple of Baphomet –'

'Baphomet-Lilith, thus expressing the sexual duality that forms an essential part of Elgar Vaughan's belief system.'

'You're right, of course, Mr Fox, although I hadn't planned to go into quite so much theological detail. The temple, as you see, is pentagonal in shape, made of black granite, and in an exaggerated Gothic style. The carvings you see are not mere decoration but significant, each representing an element of Vaughan's belief system. Directly facing us, for instance, is Baphomet himself, represented as the Sabbatic Goat, a winged figure with the head and lower body of a goat, after the style of Eliphas Levi, another important nineteenth-century occultist. To the right of Baphomet the, er, fleshy gentleman with grapes in his hair represents Dionysus, Greek God of Wine, while to the left we have Lilith –'

'The Green Man has to be seen,' Fox butted in. 'He's on the far side.'

I hadn't actually meant to show them the Green Man, but it was too late. Richard Fox was already moving towards the rear of the temple and a good half of the group were following. One middle-aged matron in turquoise and cerise spandex already had her mouth half open, and I knew they'd seen him. I had no choice but to join them.

Elgar Vaughan's Green Man had the conventional features: the harsh stare, the wide mouth spouting acanthus. Unlike most Green Men he also had a body, entwined in acanthus which concealed almost everything except the most enormous and grotesquely detailed set of genitals. He was also erect, very definitely erect, with the

great rounded head reaching to the level of his shoulder, the heavily veined shaft seeming to pulse with life and the gigantic testicles straining with sperm. All that was bad enough, but the combination of his expression and blatant arousal made him seem at once threatening and obscene. You knew exactly what he intended to do to you.

He had shocked me the first time I'd seen him, and my visitors were no different. I distinctly caught the word 'ungodly', but ignored it, simply waiting patiently until they'd all had a good stare before continuing the tour. After all, they presumably must have had some idea what they were letting themselves in for when they'd booked the tour.

I was sure Richard Fox would make some humorous remark at my expense, but for once he held his peace and I was able to continue. Most of the other temples and follies were so heavily overgrown they were inaccessible, some barely even visible. I was supposed to clear paths to them, but intended to be selective, and so far had only had a chance to start towards Henry Vaughan's tomb, a massive white marble sepulchre now locked within a cage of thick and twisted ivy boughs.

They behaved, by and large, even Richard Fox, asking only the occasional question and nothing I couldn't answer. I showed them what remained of George Vaughan's formal gardens, those temples visible in the thick woods, and the ruins of the east wing, with the rooms still open to the outside where the tower had crashed down through them, including the study.

'... where the best-known incident of Elgar Vaughan's life occurred, his meeting and subsequent argument with Aleister Crowley and Samuel Liddell Mathers. They, it seems, expected Vaughan to join the Golden Dawn as a novice and work his way up, and to use Elmcote Hall as their headquarters. Vaughan, both proud and arrogant, refused and finally threw both of them out. Had he not made this

decision, no doubt the entire history of twentieth-century occultism would have been different.

‘It was after the incident with Crowley and Mathers that Elgar Vaughan began to gather disciples around him. Many junior members of the Golden Dawn, disillusioned with hierarchy and infighting, appreciated Vaughan’s less rigid system, and in particular his devotion to pleasure as a form of worship. His argument, in essence, is that if we are created to take pleasure in our bodies, then what better way to worship our Creator than to indulge those senses he has given us to the full? Some of Vaughan’s actual behaviour may seem to sit a little uncomfortably with this philosophy, but now, a hundred years or so after the events, it is hard to separate fact from the accusations of his detractors and mere prurient speculation.’

We’d turned the corner of the east wing, coming on the remains of the tower itself with the huge winged gargoyle still standing drunkenly among the rubble. I gave them a few facts, a few accusations and a little of the prurient speculation, the milder stuff, which seemed to be what they’d come for to judge by their pleased tuts of shock and disapproval. Once more on the carriage sweep, I finally reached the point at which I’d started.

‘. . . an abrupt halt with the outbreak of the Great War. For all his beliefs, Elgar Vaughan was a patriot, and joined up with the first wave of volunteers, as did his male disciples in what was then his coven, Sabbat Aceras –’

‘Named for the Man Orchid, which George Vaughan had cultivated here, a pun, of course, on the Green Man.’

‘Thank you, Mr Fox. With two exceptions, who remained to look after the house, the female members of the cult had soon become involved with war work. Of the thirteen, all seven male members died in the war. Vaughan’s more imaginative commentators, and some of his detractors, have claimed that this was the result of a curse, even divine justice. The truth, I suspect, is more mundane. Vaughan at

least, and probably the others, believed that being enlightened, and having undergone certain rites, they were immortal. Certainly we know that they fought with reckless courage, the consequences of which were pretty well inevitable. Vaughan himself had joined the Royal Flying Corps and was shot down over the trenches of Ypres in May nineteen-sixteen.

‘One thing is less easily explained. On the day Elgar Vaughan died, perhaps at the very moment, the tower at Elmcote Hall collapsed. It stood here, rising above the central hall, to a height of one hundred and eighty feet, a monument to Gothic extravagance. Now, only the rubble remains.

‘The six female members all survived the war, but without Vaughan’s patronage, the cult quickly died out and they dispersed. Of the six, the last surviving member was Alice Scott, who died a few years ago at the ripe old age of one hundred and four, which I always feel disproves the curse theory. I had the privilege of interviewing Alice shortly before her death, and may say that she was entirely unrepentant.

‘Elgar Vaughan left no legitimate children, and the nearest surviving relative was a descendant of William Vaughan, one Hubert Sands, who therefore inherited, despite rumours and speculation about both a will and missing wealth. Aware of the reputation of the estate, Sands wished only to distance himself from it as far as possible, and probably never even visited. Towards the end of his life he gave the estate in trust, with the curious stipulation that no major renovation work be carried out, and so Elmcote Hall remains as you see it. Thank you.’

There were a few questions; one couple had to have it pointed out to them that it was a seriously bad move to climb on the rubble, and that was that. Richard Fox seemed content with the display he’d made of his knowledge and didn’t linger. I couldn’t help but feel a stab of

disappointment, as it would have been pleasant to discuss my pet topic with somebody who actually knew what they were talking about, but told myself firmly it had absolutely nothing to do with his being six foot plus with a look in his eyes that reminded me irresistibly of both Elgar Vaughan and a certain Green Man.

I had no more bookings for the rest of the day, but that did not mean I had nothing to do. There was the jungle clearance for a start, hours of hard sweaty labour with a machete, which I was not looking forward to. It was also completely impractical in Victorian costume, which gave me an excellent excuse to put it off. The lower part of the west wing also needed to be cleaned up a little so that the caterers for the wedding booked on the Saturday would be able to move in easily, and at some point I had to begin recataloguing the library, checking what was actually there against the original list made after Elgar Vaughan's death. It was too nice a day to be stuck inside.

After a while spent sitting on one of the huge blocks from the tower ruins, I decided to walk into the village as I was. It was a little unnerving, as I would undoubtedly get funny looks, but it was inevitable that they'd come to regard me as reclusive and eccentric anyway. People always do.

I refuse to conform in any case. Why should I? After all, if a modern woman, Madame Turquoise-and-cerise-spandex for instance, had walked into the village in Elgar Vaughan's time, she would have been given exactly the same sort of looks I would now get a hundred years later. The only difference would be that from an objective standpoint, she would deserve them. Victorian dress is so much more elegant, on any figure.

That didn't stop me feeling both excited and strangely guilty as I set off down the drive, rather as if I was in a minuscule bikini, or hadn't bothered to put my top back on to go and buy an ice-cream on the beach. My feelings aside,

I was comfortable, warm against the crisp spring day under my layers of cotton and satin, and with my parasol to shade me from the eye-watering sunlight.

In Elgar Vaughan's time, Elmcote had been a cluster of cottages set around a church; just big enough, and with just enough in the way of respectable residents to react with suitable outrage at his behaviour. It was now very different – purest gin belt, still pretty in a rustic but rather contrived way, but with even the little red-brick two-up-two-downs owned by highly salaried city types. Even the village shop was run by a couple called Antonia and Patrice, and survived by selling such things as cappuccino, organic goat's cheese and sun-dried tomato in ciabata.

Organic goat's cheese and sun-dried tomato in ciabata was fine for my lunch, at least in the absence of roast pheasant with a little fresh watercress and potatoes from the kitchen garden, or perhaps a slice of spit-roasted goat, which was how Elgar Vaughan had disposed of his sacrifices. Antonia even tried not to look surprised at the way I was dressed, contenting herself with a polite but ever so slightly condescending comment about it being expected in my job.

There was another woman in the shop too, very tall, with strong cheekbones and a lot of make-up, also a mid-blue skirt suit so sharp it verged on the kitsch. Her accent was pure East Coast USA, a confident low drawl as she had a pastrami on rye made up for her. Her scent was strong enough to cut through the tang of roast coffee beans and exotic cheeses. Her voice reminded me of Richard Fox, the same twang, but harsher, more strident. Having decided, only half in jest, that she was a high-class hooker, that was all the attention I gave her before walking across to the edge of the river.

A bench made the ideal place for lunch, where I went to watch the swans and the boats going by as I ate and thought about Elgar Vaughan and Richard Fox. I wasn't really in the mood for company, but when the American

woman came and sat down beside me it would have been impossible not to respond to her friendly greeting.

‘Hi, I’m Julie, Julie Voigtstein. You new around here?’

She’d extended a hand and I took it, surprised by the strength of her grip as we shook. Her face was one big painted smile as I answered.

‘Yes, I’m Sophie Page, the warden at Elmcote Hall, up the road. You?’

‘Yeah, mine’s the place two up from the store. Quaint.’

I turned to look, wondering how much a three-storey house facing the Thames cost to rent and telling myself that she probably wasn’t a high-class hooker at all, but a money broker or something equally mundane. Making conversation with strangers was never my strong point, and I didn’t really know what to say, but she had no such scruples.

‘This is great, ain’t it? So quiet. My old place on the East Side, it was just go, go, go, twenty-four/seven. When I came over I thought, I’ll take a place in the West End, but then, when I came out to eat with the boss, well there it was, half what I’d been paying, and right on the river. I had to have it.’

‘Do you work in the City then?’

‘Forty-seventh Securities. The London office needed a kick in the pants and believe me, I am the girl to give it to them.’

‘I can imagine. Sorry, I don’t mean to be rude –’

‘You English, always apologising. So what’s with the outfit? Is this a theme place you run?’

‘No . . . well, I suppose you could put it that way. Elmcote Hall was where Elgar Vaughan lived. I do tours and look after everything.’

‘You don’t say? Maybe I’ll look in on you one day. For now, got to run. They want me back on the floor by two. No peace for the wicked.’

She got up and made for the bridge, still eating her sandwich. I couldn’t help but smile. She was everything I’m not – brassy, super-confident, on the ball and, above all,

loud – but it was impossible not to like her. Just the way she walked, fast and straight, with her shiny black heels clicking on the cobbles of the river walk, radiated certainty. For one thing, I was sure she'd have dealt with Richard Fox with a great more skill than I had.

I finished my sandwich, bought a few things for dinner and a bottle of wine to celebrate my first day of work, then started back for the Hall. A crisp morning had blossomed into a warm afternoon, very warm considering there were still crocuses out in the tubs along the river. I walked slowly, thinking of how the area would have changed since Elgar Vaughan's day. The tarmac on the road, the cars, all the paraphernalia of electricity and phone lines, was new, but it was superficial. Otherwise, little had changed. There might have been more people working among the scatter of little fields and woods where the land rose from the river, but it would have looked much the same. So would the river itself, the distant downs in one direction and the tiny biscuit-coloured spires of Oxford in the other.

The double cluster of gigantic cooling towers might have come as a bit of a shock, but I could have explained them away as a temple to his new religion. He would have been immensely pleased, because for all his reputation as a charlatan I was convinced his intention had been to found a new religion, based on pleasure without guilt and seeing man as an element of the natural world rather than above it. Again, some of the things he'd actually done, or was supposed to have done, sat a little uneasily with his preaching, but I for one would have been able to come to terms with it.

I could have been one of the thirteen, I was sure, and coped as well as any, perhaps better. The thought sent a little excited shiver down my spine, as it always did, a mixture of pleasure and apprehension. Could I have coped with being naked in the company of twelve others, including Elgar Vaughan himself? The answer was yes, quite clearly.

There would have been no embarrassment because I'd have been part of it. I'd have revelled in my nudity. Could I have joined in an orgy, setting aside my personal choices to allow others to enjoy me as they wished, and to take the same privilege myself? Again the answer was yes, although just the thought made my tummy feel weak. I knew I'd have to have had a fair bit of wine too, but there had never been a shortage of that. In Elgar Vaughan's time the cellar had been lined with pipes of Port and bin upon bin of bottles. Could I have coped if I'd been selected as the celebrant for one of his notorious rituals? Again, it was an intriguing thought, enough to make me bite my lip, but I knew the answer was probably no.

They had been extreme, some very extreme, the sort of thing Aleister Crowley would have thought twice about. Or so it was supposed, but to judge from some of the prints he'd had made, inspired by the rituals, the most outrageous of the rumours were no more than plain unadorned description. I might not have coped, I had to admit it, but it would have been intriguing to watch, providing that blend of shock and arousal I like so much.

Still, there was no harm in thinking about it. When I got back to the Hall I made for the Temple of Baphomet, telling myself I was making a daily inspection of the grounds but knowing full well I just wanted to daydream. Unfortunately, having brought my visitors there had taken away a little of the magic of the place; not much, but enough to tarnish the atmosphere. I walked around it, admiring Baphomet, Dionysus, the Green Man, Gaia and Lilith, but it was impossible to get my mind clear, especially of the thought of Richard Fox, so smug.

The temple was also in full view of the house, down the length of the lime walk, and I was beginning to think I might need a little privacy. In among the tangle of overgrown rhododendrons and exotic trees that had once been George Vaughan's arboretum was a smaller temple, or possibly just