

# BARTHILIAEUS

PTOLEMY'S GATE



*When evil triumphs, who can you trust?*

**JONATHAN STROUD**

The demon saw Kitty the moment she moved. A wide mouth opened in the stubby, featureless head; double rows of teeth descended from above and rose from the lining of the jaw. It snapped its teeth together curiously, making a noise like a thousand scissors slicing in unison. Folds of grey-green flesh shifted on either side of the skull, revealing two golden eyes that glinted as they turned on her.

Kitty did not repeat her mistake. She stood stock-still, barely six feet from the bent and snuffling head, and held her breath.

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## About the Book

Two thousand years have gone by since the djinni Bartimaeus was at the height of his powers - invincible in battle and befriended by the great magician Ptolemy. Now he is trapped on Earth and treated with disdain by his master, Nathaniel.

Meanwhile, undercover in London, the fugitive Kitty Jones has been stealthily completing her research on magic and demons. She has a plan that could break the endless conflict between djinn and humans - but first she must uncover the secrets of Bartimaeus's past.

The Bartimaeus books are published in 35 languages and have sold 5 million copies worldwide.

The magic continues with:

THE AMULET OF SAMARKAND

THE GOLEM'S EYE

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THE RING OF SOLOMON

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GUARDIAN

# Bartimaeus: Ptolemy's Gate

Jonathan Stroud

CORGI BOOKS

*For Isabelle,  
with love*



## *The Main Characters*

### THE MAGICIANS

Mr Rupert Devereaux	<i>Prime Minister of Great Britain and the Empire, and acting Chief of Police</i>
Mr Carl Mortensen	<i>Minister for War</i>
Ms Helen Malbindi	<i>Foreign Minister</i>
Ms Jessica Whitwell	<i>Security Minister</i>
Mr Bruce Collins	<i>Home Secretary</i>
Mr John Mandrake	<i>Information Minister</i>
Ms Jane Farrar	<i>Deputy Police Chief</i>
Mr Quentin Makepeace	<i>A playwright; author of Petticoats and Rifles and other works</i>
Mr Harold Button	<i>Magician, scholar and book collector</i>
Mr Sholto Pinn	<i>A merchant; proprietor of Pinn's New Accoutrements of Piccadilly</i>
Mr Clive Jenkins	<i>Magician Second Level, Department of Internal Affairs</i>
Ms Rebecca Piper	<i>Assistant to Mr Mandrake, Information Ministry</i>

### THE COMMONERS

Ms Kitty Jones	<i>A student and barmaid</i>
Mr Clem Hopkins	<i>An itinerant scholar</i>
Mr Nicholas Drew	<i>A political agitator</i>
Mr George Fox	<i>Proprietor of the Frog Inn, Chiswick</i>
Ms Rosanna Lutyens	<i>A private tutor</i>

## THE SPIRITS

Bartimaeus

*A djinni - in service to Mr Mandrake*

Ascobol

Cormocodran

*Greater djinn - in service*

Mwamba

*to Mr Mandrake*

Hodge

Purip

*Lesser djinn - in service*

Fritang

*to Mr Mandrake*

### *A note on pronunciation:*

'Djinni' is pronounced 'jinnee', and

'djinn' is pronounced 'jinn'.

'Bartimaeus' is pronounced 'Bart-im-ay-us'.

'Golem' is pronounced 'Goal-em'.

'Ptolemy' is pronounced 'Toll-emy'.

# ***Part One***

# Alexandria

125 BC

THE ASSASSINS DROPPED into the palace grounds at midnight, four fleet shadows dark against the wall. The fall was high, the ground was hard; they made no more sound on impact than the pattering of rain. Three seconds they crouched there, low and motionless, sniffing at the air. Then away they stole, through the dark gardens, among the tamarisks and date palms, towards the quarters where the boy lay at rest. A cheetah on a chain stirred in its sleep; far away in the desert, jackals cried.

They went on pointed toe-tips, leaving no trace in the long wet grass. Their robes flittered at their backs, fragmenting their shadows into wisps and traces. What could be seen? Nothing but leaves shifting in the breeze. What could be heard? Nothing but the wind sighing among the palm fronds. No sight, no noise. A crocodile djinni, standing sentry at the sacred pool, was undisturbed though they passed within a scale's breadth of his tail. For humans, it wasn't badly done.

The heat of the day was a memory; the air was chill. Above the palace a cold round moon shone down, slathering silver across the roofs and courtyards.[fn1](#)

Away beyond the wall, the great city murmured in the night: wheels on dirt roads, distant laughter from the pleasure district along the quay, the tide lapping at its stones. Lamplight shone in windows, embers glowed on roof

hearths, and from the top of the tower beside the harbour gate the great watch fire burned its message out to sea. Its image danced like imp-light on the waves.

At their posts, the guards played games of chance. In the pillared halls, the servants slept on beds of rushes. The palace gates were locked by triple bolts, each thicker than a man. No eyes were turned to the western gardens, where death came calling, secret as a scorpion, on four pairs of silent feet.

The boy's window was on the first floor of the palace. Four black shadows hunched beneath the wall. The leader made a signal. One by one they pressed against the stonework; one by one they began to climb, suspended by their fingertips and the nails of their big toes.<sup>fn2</sup> In this manner they had scaled marble columns and waterfalls of ice from Massilia to Hadhramaut; the rough stone blocks were easy for them now. Up they went, like bats upon a cave wall. Moonlight glinted on bright things suspended in their mouths.

The first of the assassins reached the window ledge: he sprang tiger-like upon it and peered into the chamber.

Moonlight spilled across the room; the pallet was lit as if by day. The boy lay sleeping, motionless as one already dead. His dark hair fell loose upon the cushions, his pale lamb's throat shone against the silks.

The assassin took his dagger from between his teeth. With quiet deliberation, he surveyed the room, gauging its extent and the possibility of traps. It was large, shadowy, empty of ostentation. Three pillars supported the ceiling. In the distance stood a door of teak, barred on the inside. A chest, half filled with clothes, sat open against the wall. He saw a royal chair draped with a discarded cloak, sandals lying on the floor, an onyx basin filled with water. A faint trace of perfume hung on the air. The assassin, for whom such scents were decadent and corrupt, wrinkled his nose.<sup>fn3</sup>

His eyes narrowed; he reversed the dagger, holding it between finger and thumb by its shining, gleaming tip. It quivered once, twice. He was gauging the range here – he'd never missed a target yet, from Carthage to old Colchis. Every knife he'd thrown had found its throat.

His wrist flickered; the silver arc of the knife's flight cut the air in two. It landed with a soft noise, hilt-deep in the cushion, an inch from the child's neck.

The assassin paused in doubt, still crouched upon the sill. The back of his hands bore the crisscross scars that marked him as an adept of the dark academy. An adept never missed his target. The throw had been exact, precisely calibrated . . . Yet it had missed. Had the victim moved a crucial fraction? Impossible – the boy was fast asleep. From his person he pulled a second dagger.<sup>fn4</sup> Another careful aim (the assassin was conscious of his brothers behind and below him on the wall: he felt the grim weight of their impatience). A flick of the wrist, a momentary arc—

With a soft noise, the second dagger landed in the cushion, an inch to the *other* side of the prince's neck. As he slept, perhaps he dreamed – a smile twitched ghost-like at the corners of his mouth.

Behind the black gauze of the scarf that masked his face, the assassin frowned. From within his tunic he drew a strip of fabric, twined tightly into a cord. In seven years since the Hermit had ordered his first kill, his garrotte had never snapped, his hands had never failed him.<sup>fn5</sup> With leopard's stealth, he slid from the sill and stole across the moonlit floor.

In his bed the boy murmured something. He stirred beneath his sheet. The assassin froze rigid, a black statue in the centre of the room.

Behind, at the window, two of his companions insinuated themselves upon the sill. They waited, watching.

The boy gave a little sigh and fell silent once more. He lay face up amongst his cushions, a dagger's hilt protruding on

either side.

Seven seconds passed. The assassin moved again. He stole round behind the cushions, looping the ends of the cord around his hands. Now he was directly above the child; he bent swiftly, set the cord upon the sleeping throat—

The boy's eyes opened. He reached up a hand, grasped the assassin's left wrist and, without exertion, swung him head first into the nearest wall, snapping his neck like a reed stalk. He flung off his silken sheet and, with a bound, stood free, facing the window.

Up on the sill, silhouetted against the moon, two assassins hissed like rock-snakes. Their comrade's death was an affront to their collective pride. One plucked from his robe a pipe of bone; from a cavity between his teeth he sucked a pellet, eggshell thin, filled with poison. He set the pipe to his lips, blew once: the pellet shot across the room, directed at the child's heart.

The boy gave a skip; the pellet shattered against a pillar, spattering it with liquid. A plume of green vapour drizzled through the air.

The two assassins leaped into the room; one this way, the other that. Each now held a scimitar in his hand; they spun them in complex flourishes about their heads, dark eyes scanning the room.

The boy was gone. The room was still. Green poison nibbled at the pillar; the stones fizzed with it.

Never once in seven years, from Antioch to Pergamum, had these assassins lost a victim.[fn6](#) Their arms stopped moving; they slowed their pace, listening intently, tasting the air for the taint of fear.

From behind a pillar in the centre of the room came the faintest scuffling, like a mouse flinching in its bed of straw. The assassins glanced at each other; they inched forwards, toe-tip by toe-tip, scimitars raised. One went to the right, past the crumpled body of his fellow. One went to the left, beside the golden chair, draped with the cloak of kings.

They moved like ghosts around the margins of the room, circling in upon the pillar from both sides.

Behind the pillar, a furtive movement: a boy's shape hiding in the shadows. Both assassins saw it; both raised their scimitars and darted in, from left, from right. Both struck with mantis-speed.

A dual cry, gargling and ragged. From round the pillar came a stumbling, rolling mess of arms and legs: the two assassins, locked together in a tight embrace, each one skewered on the other's sword. They fell forwards into the pool of moonlight in the centre of the chamber, twitched gently and lay quiet.

Silence. The windowsill hung vacant, nothing in it but the moon. A cloud passed across the bright round disc, blacking out the bodies on the floor. The signal fire in the harbour tower cast faint redness on the sky. All was still. The cloud drifted out to sea, the light returned. From behind the pillar walked the boy, bare feet soundless on the floor, his body stiff and wary, as if he sensed a pressure in the room. With careful steps, he neared the window. Slowly, slowly, closer, closer . . . He saw the shrouded mass of gardens, the trees and sentry towers. He noticed the texture of the sill, the way the moonlight caught its contours. Closer . . . Now his hands rested on the stone itself. He leaned forwards to look down into the courtyard at the bottom of the wall. His thin white throat extended out . . .

Nothing. The courtyard was empty. The wall below was sheer and smooth, its stones picked out by moonlight. The boy listened to the quietness. He tapped his fingers on the sill, shrugged and turned inside.

Then the fourth assassin, clinging like a thin black spider to the stones *above* the window, dropped down behind him. His feet made the noise of feathers falling into snow. The boy heard; he twisted, turned. A knife flashed, swiped, was deflected by a desperate hand - its edge clinked against stone. Iron fingers grappled at the boy's neck; his legs were



knocked from under him. He fell, landing hard upon the floor. The assassin's weight was on him. His hands were pinioned. He could not move.

The knife descended. This time it met its mark.

So it had finished as it must. Crouching above the body of the boy, the assassin allowed himself a breath - his first since his colleagues had met their ends. He sat back on his sinewy haunches, loosed his grip upon the knife and let the boy's wrist drop free. He inclined his head in the traditional mark of respect to the fallen victim.

At which point the boy reached up and plucked the knife from the centre of his chest. The assassin blinked in consternation.

'Not silver, you see,' the boy said. 'Mistake.' He raised his hand.

An explosion in the room. Green sparks cascaded from the window.

The boy rose to his feet and tossed the knife upon the pallet. He adjusted his kilt and blew some flakes of ash from off his arms. Then he coughed loudly.

The faintest of scrapings. Across the room the golden chair shifted. The cloak draped over it was nudged aside. Out from between its legs scrambled another boy, identical to the first, though flushed and tousled from many hours of hiding.

He stood over the bodies of the assassins, breathing hard. Then he stared up at the ceiling. On it was the blackened outline of a man. It had a kind of startled look.

The boy lowered his gaze to the impassive doppelgänger watching him across the moonlit room. I gave a mock salute.

Ptolemy brushed the dark hair from his eyes and bowed.

'Thank you, Rekhyt,' he said.

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[fn1](#) This was one of the peculiarities of their sect: they acted only when the moon was full. It made their tasks more difficult, their challenge greater. And they had never failed. Aside from this, they wore only black, avoided meat, wine, women and the playing of wind instruments, and curiously ate no cheese save that made from the milk of goats bred on their distant desert mountain. Before each job they fasted for a day, meditated by staring unblinking at the ground, then ate small cakes of hashish and cumin seed, without water, until their throats glowed yellow. It's a wonder they ever killed anyone.

[fn2](#) All horrid and curved they were, filed sharp like eagles' talons. The assassins took good care of their feet, because of their importance in their work. They were washed frequently, rubbed with pumice and marinated in sesame oil until the skin was soft as eiderdown.

[fn3](#) The sect avoided perfumes for practical reasons, preferring to coat themselves with scents appropriate to the conditions of each job: pollen in the gardens, incense in the temples, sand-dust in the deserts, dung and offal in the towns. They were dedicated fellows.

[fn4](#) I won't say *where* he pulled it from. Let's just say that the knife had hygiene issues as well as being quite sharp.

[fn5](#) The Hermit of the Mountain trained his followers in numerous methods of foolproof murder. They could use garrotes, swords, knives, batons, ropes, poisons, discs, bolas, pellets and arrows inimitably, as well as being pretty handy with the evil eye. Death by fingertip and toe-flex was also taught, and the furtive nip was a speciality. Stomach-threads and tapeworms were available for advanced students. And the best of it was that it was all guilt-free: each assassination was justified and condoned by a powerful religious disregard for the sanctity of other people's lives.

[fn6](#) And they didn't intend to start now. The Hermit was known to be pretty sniffy about disciples who returned in failure. There was a wall of the institute layered with their skins - an ingenious display which encouraged vigour in his students, as well as nicely keeping out the draughts.

# 1

TIMES CHANGE.

Once, long ago, I was second to none. I could whirl through the air on a wisp of cloud and churn up dust storms with my passing. I could slice through mountains, raise castles on pillars of glass, fell forests with a single breath. I carved temples from the sinews of the earth and led armies against the legions of the dead, so that the harpers of a dozen lands played music in my memory and the chroniclers of a dozen centuries scribbled down my exploits. Yes! I was Bartimaeus - cheetah-quick, strong as a bull elephant, deadly as a striking krait!

But that was then.

And now . . . Well, *right* now I was lying in the middle of a midnight road, flat on my back and getting flatter. Why? Because on top of me was an upturned building. Its weight bore down. Muscles strained, tendons popped; try as I might, I could not push free.

In principle there's nothing shameful about struggling when a building falls upon you. I've had such problems before; it's part of the job description.[fn1](#) But it *does* help if the edifice in question is glamorous and large. And in this case the fearsome construction that had been ripped from its foundations and hurled upon me from a great height was neither big nor sumptuous. It wasn't a temple wall or a granite obelisk. It wasn't the marbled roof of an emperor's palace.

No. The object that was pinning me haplessly to the ground, like a butterfly on a collector's tray, was of twentieth-century origin and of very specific function.

Oh, all right, it was a public lavatory. Quite sizeable, mind, but even so. I was glad no harpers or chroniclers happened to be passing.

In mitigation I must report that the lavatory in question had concrete walls and a very thick iron roof, the cruel aura of which helped weaken my already feeble limbs. And there were doubtless various pipes and cisterns and desperately heavy taps inside, all adding to the total mass. But it was still a pretty poor show for a djinni of my stature to be squashed by it. In fact, the abject humiliation bothered me more than the crushing weight.

All around me the water from the snapped and broken pipework trickled away mournfully into the gutters. Only my head projected free of one of the concrete walls; my body was entirely trapped.[fn2](#)

So much for the negatives. The good side was that I was unable to rejoin the battle that was taking place up and down the suburban street.

It was a fairly low-key sort of battle, especially on the first plane. Nothing much could be seen. The house lights were all out, the electric streetlamps had been tied in knots; the road was dark as an inkstone, a solid slab of black. A few stars shone coldly overhead. Once or twice indistinct blue-green lights appeared and faded, like explosions far off underwater.

Things hotted up on the second plane, where two rival flocks of birds could be seen wheeling and swooping at each other, buffeting savagely with wings, beaks, claws and tails. Such loutish behaviour would have been reprehensible amongst seagulls or other downmarket fowl; the fact that these were eagles made it all the more shocking.

On the higher planes the bird guises were discarded altogether, and the true shapes of the fighting djinn came into focus.[fn3](#) Seen from this perspective, the night sky was veritably awash with rushing forms, contorted shapes and sinister activity.

Fair play was entirely disregarded. I saw one spiked knee go crunching into an opponent's belly, sending him spinning away behind a chimney to recover. Disgraceful! If I'd been up there I'd have had no truck with that.[fn4](#)

But I wasn't up there. I'd been put out of action.

Now, if it had been an afrit or marid who'd done the damage, I could have lived with it. But it wasn't. In fact my conqueror was none but a third-level djinni, the kind I could normally roll up in my pocket and smoke after dinner. I could still see her now from where I lay, her nimble feminine grace rather undermined by her pig's head and the long rake she clutched in her trotters. There she was, standing on a postbox, laying left and right with such brio that the government forces, of which I was nominally a part, backed off and left her well alone. She was a formidable customer, with experience in Japan if her kimono was anything to go by. In truth, I'd been misled by her rustic appearance and had ambled close without upping my Shields. Before I knew it, there was a piercing oink, a blur of movement and - *whump!* - she'd left me pinned in the road, too weary to break free.

Little by little, however, my side was gaining the upper hand. See! Here strode Cormocodran, snapping off a lamppost and swinging it like a twig; there raced Hodge, loosing off a volley of poison darts. The enemy dwindled and began to adopt ever more fatalistic guises. I saw several large insects buzzing and dodging, one or two wisps twisting frantically, a couple of rats heading for the hills. Only the she-pig stubbornly maintained her original appearance. My colleagues surged forward. One beetle went down in a corkscrew cloud of smoke; a wisp was blown apart by a double Detonation. The enemy fled; even the pig realized the game was up. She leaped gracefully onto a porch, somersaulted up onto a roof and vanished. The victorious djinn set off in hot pursuit.

It was quiet in the street. Water trickled past my ears. From topknot to toes, my essence was one long ache. I gave a heartfelt sigh.

‘Dear me,’ a voice chuckled. ‘A damsel in distress.’

I should have mentioned that in contrast to all the centaurs and ogres at my side, I’d been wearing a human guise that night. It happened to be that of a girl: slender, long dark hair, feisty expression. Not based on anybody in particular, of course.

The speaker appeared round the edge of the public convenience and paused to sharpen a nail against a snaggy bit of pipe. No delicate guise for him; as usual he was decked out as a one-eyed giant, with lumpy muscles and long blond hair braided in a complex and faintly girly way. He wore a shapeless blue-grey smock that would have been considered hideous in a medieval fishing village.

‘A poor sweet damsel, too frail to prise herself free.’ The cyclops considered one of his nails carefully; finding it a little long, he bit at it savagely with his small sharp teeth and rounded it off against the pebbledash wall of the lavatory.

‘Mind helping me up?’ I enquired.

The cyclops looked up and down the empty road. ‘Better watch out, love,’ he said, leaning casually on the building so that its downward pressure increased. ‘There’s dangerous characters abroad tonight. Djinn and foliots . . . and naughty imps, who might do you a mischief.’

‘Can it, Ascobol,’ I snarled. ‘You know full well it’s me.’

The cyclops’s single eye batted becomingly under its layer of mascara. ‘*Bartimaeus?*’ he said in wonder. ‘Can it possibly be . . . ? Surely the great Bartimaeus would not be so easily snared! You must be some imp or mouler cheekily adopting his voice and . . . But, no – I am wrong! It *is* you.’ He raised his eyebrow in an affectation of shock. ‘Incredible! To think the noble Bartimaeus has come to this! The master will be *sorely* disappointed.’

I summoned my last reserves of dignity. 'All masters are temporary,' I replied. 'All humiliations likewise. I bide my time.'

'Of course, of course.' Ascobol swung his ape-like arms and did a little pirouette. 'Well spoken, Bartimaeus! You do not let your decline depress you. No matter that your great days are over, that you are now as redundant as a will-o'-the-wisp!<sup>fn5</sup> No matter that your task tomorrow is as likely to be damp-dusting our master's bedroom as roaming free upon the air. You are an example to us all.'

I smiled, showing my white teeth. 'Ascobol,' I said, 'it is not / who have declined, but my adversaries. I have fought with Faquarl of Sparta, with Tlaloc of Tollan, with clever Tchue of the Kalahari - our conflicts split the earth, gouged rivers. I survived. Who is my enemy now? A knock-kneed cyclops in a skirt. When I get out from here, I don't see *this* new conflict lasting long.'

The cyclops started back, as if stung. 'Such cruel threats! You should be ashamed. We are on the same side, are we not? Doubtless you have good reasons for skulking out the fight under this water closet. Being polite, I will not trouble to enquire, though I may say that you lack your normal courtesy.'

'Two years' continual service has worn it all away,' I said. 'I am left irritable and jaded, with a perpetual itch in my essence that I cannot scratch. And that makes me dangerous, as you will shortly learn. Now, for the last time, Ascobol, get this off.'

Well, there were a few more tuts and pouts, but my posturing had its effect. With a single shrug of his hairy shoulders, the cyclops levered the lavatory up and off me, sending it clattering away onto the opposite pavement. A somewhat corrugated girl got unsteadily to her feet.

'At last,' I said. 'You took your own sweet time about it.'

The cyclops plucked a bit of debris from his smock. 'Sorry,' he said, 'but I was too busy winning the battle to

help you out before. Still, all's well. Our master will be pleased - by *my* efforts, anyhow.' He glanced at me sidelong.

Now that I was vertical I had no intention of squabbling further. I considered the damage to the houses all around. Not too bad. A few broken roofs, smashed windows . . . The skirmish had been successfully contained. 'A French lot?' I asked.

The cyclops shrugged, which was some feat given that he lacked a neck. 'Maybe. Possibly the Czechs or Spanish. Who can tell? They're all nibbling at us nowadays. Well, time presses and I must check on the pursuit. I leave you to nurse your aches and pains, Bartimaeus. Why not try peppermint tea or a camomile footbath, like other geriatrics? Adieu!'

The cyclops hitched up his skirts and, with a ponderous spring, launched himself into the air. Wings appeared on his back; with great ploughing strokes he drew away. He had all the grace of a filing cabinet, but at least he'd got the energy to fly. I hadn't. Not until I'd had a breather, anyhow.

The dark-haired girl crept across to a broken square of chimney in a nearby garden. Slowly, with the gasps and gingerly movements of an invalid, she slumped down into a sitting position and cupped her head in her hands. She closed her eyes.

Just a brief rest. Five minutes would do.

Time passed, dawn came. The cold stars faded in the sky.

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[fn1](#) There was the time when a small section of Khufu's Great Pyramid collapsed upon me one moonless night during the fifteenth year of its construction. I was guarding the zone that my group was working on when several limestone blocks tumbled down from the top, transfixing me painfully by one of my extremities. Exactly how it happened was never resolved, though my suspicions were directed at my old chum Faquarl, who was working with a rival group on the opposite side. I made no outward complaint, but bided my time while my essence healed. Later, when Faquarl was returning across the Western Desert with some Nubian gold, I invoked a mild sandstorm, causing him to lose the



treasure and incur the pharaoh's wrath. It took him a couple of years to sift all the pieces from the dunes.

[fn2](#) The obvious solution would have been to change form - into a wraith, say, or a swirl of smoke, and just drift clear. But there were two problems. One: I found it hard to change shape now, very hard, even at the best of times. Two: the considerable downward pressure would have blown my essence apart the moment I softened it to make the change.

[fn3](#) Truer, anyway. At bottom, we are all alike in our seeping formlessness, but every spirit has a 'look' that suits them, and which they use to represent themselves while on Earth. Our essences are moulded into these personal shapes on the higher planes, while, on the lower ones, we adopt guises that are appropriate to the given situation. Listen, I'm sure I've told you all this before.

[fn4](#) I'd have kneed him first, then stuck a wing-tip in his eye, while kicking his shin for good measure. Much more effective. The techniques of these young djinn were so inefficient, it pained me.

[fn5](#) *Will-o'-the-wisps*: small spirits who struggle to keep up with the times. Visible as flickering flames on the first plane (although revealed on others to be more like capering squid), wisps were once employed by magicians to lure trespassers off remote paths into pits or quags. Cities changed all that; urban wisps have now been forced into lurking over open manhole covers, to rather less effect.

## 2

AS HAD BECOME his custom in recent months, the great magician John Mandrake took his breakfast in his parlour, seated in the wicker chair beside the window. The heavy curtains had been carelessly drawn back; the sky beyond was grey and leaden and a sinewy mist threaded its way between the trees of the square.

The small circular table before him was carved from Lebanese cedar. When warmed by sunlight, it gave off a pleasant fragrance, but on this particular morning the wood was dark and cold. Mandrake poured coffee into his glass, removed the silver cover from his plate and set upon his curried eggs and bacon. In a rack behind the toast and the gooseberry conserve sat a crisply folded newspaper and an envelope with a blood-red seal. Mandrake took a swig of coffee with his left hand; with his right he flicked the newspaper open on the table. He glanced at the front page, grunted dismissively and reached for the envelope. An ivory paperknife hung from a peg upon the rack; flinging down his fork, Mandrake slit the envelope with one easy motion and drew out a folded parchment. He read this with care, brows puckering into a frown. Then he refolded it, stuffed it back into the envelope and with a sigh returned to his meal.

A knock at the door; with mouth half full of bacon, Mandrake gave a muffled command. The door opened silently and a young, slim woman stepped diffidently through, a briefcase in her hand.

She halted. 'I'm sorry, sir,' she began. 'Am I too early?'

'Not at all, Piper, not at all.' He waved her over, indicated a chair on the other side of his breakfast table. 'Have you

eaten?’

‘Yes, sir.’ She sat. She wore a dark blue skirt and jacket with a crisp white shirt. Her straight brown hair was scraped away from her forehead and clipped at the back of her head. She settled the briefcase on her lap.

Mandrake speared a forkful of curried egg. ‘Forgive me if I keep eating,’ he said. ‘I was up until three, responding to the latest disturbance. Kent this time.’

Ms Piper nodded. ‘I heard, sir. There was a memo at the ministry. Was it contained?’

‘Yes; as far as my globe could tell, at any rate. I sent a few demons down. Well, we shall see presently. What have you got for me today?’

She unclipped the briefcase and drew out some papers. ‘A number of proposals from the junior ministers, sir, regarding the propaganda campaigns in the outlying regions. For your approval. Some new poster ideas . . .’

‘Let’s see.’ He took a gulp of coffee, held out a hand. ‘Anything else?’

‘The minutes of the last Council meeting—’

‘I’ll read that later. Posters first.’ He scanned the topmost page. ‘*Sign up to serve your country and see the world . . .* What’s *that* supposed to mean? More like a holiday brochure than recruitment. Far too soft . . . Keep talking, Piper – I’m still listening.’

‘We’ve got the latest front-line reports from America, sir. I’ve ordered them a little. We should be able to make another story out of the Boston siege.’

‘Stressing the heroic attempt, not the abject failure, I trust . . .’ Balancing the papers on his knee, he smeared some gooseberry conserve upon a piece of toast. ‘Well, I’ll try writing something later . . . Now then, this one’s OK – *Defend the mother country and make your name . . .* Good. They’re suggesting a farm-boy type looking manly, which is fine, but how about putting his family group – say, parents

and little sister – in the background, looking vulnerable and admiring? Play the domestic card.'

Ms Piper nodded eagerly. 'Could show his wife too, sir.'

'No. We're after the single ones. It's the wives who are most troublesome when they don't come back.' He crunched on his toast. 'Any other messages?'

'One from Mr Makepeace, sir. Came by imp. Wonders if you'll drop by and see him this morning.'

'Can't. Too busy. There'll be time later.'

'His imp also dropped off this flyer . . .' With a rueful face, Ms Piper held up a lilac-coloured paper. 'It's advertising the première of his play later this week. *From Wapping to Westminster*, it's called. The story of our Prime Minister's rise to glory. An evening we will never forget, apparently.'

Mandrake gave a groan. 'Chance would be a fine thing. Put it in the bin. We've got better things to do than discuss theatre. What else?'

'Mr Devereaux has sent a memo round too. Owing to the "troublesome times", sir, he's placed the nation's most important treasures under special guard in the vaults of Whitehall. They will remain there until he says otherwise.'

Mandrake looked up then, frowning. 'Treasures? Such as what?'

'He doesn't say. I wonder if it'll be—'

'It'll be the Staff and the Amulet and the other grade-one items.' He hissed briefly through his teeth. 'That's not what he should be doing, Piper. We need them *used*.'

'Yes, sir. There's also this from Mr Devereaux.' She brought out a slender packet.

The magician eyed it grimly. 'Not another toga?'

'A mask, sir. For the party this evening.'

With a cry, he indicated the envelope in the rack. 'I've already got the invitation. It beggars belief: the war's going badly, the Empire's teetering on the brink, and all our Prime Minister can think about is plays and parties. All right. Keep it with the documents. I'll take it along. The posters seem

OK.' He handed back the papers. 'Maybe not snappy enough . . .' He thought for a moment, nodded. 'Got a pen? Try *Fight for Freedom and the British Way*. Doesn't mean anything, but it sounds good.'

Ms Piper considered it. 'I think it's rather profound, sir.'

'Excellent. Then the commoners'll snap it up.' He stood, dabbed his mouth with a napkin and tossed it down upon the tray. 'Well, we'd better see how the demons have been getting on. No, no, Piper, please - after you.'

If Ms Piper regarded her employer with more than a little wide-eyed admiration, she was by no means alone among the women of the elite. John Mandrake was an attractive young man, and the scent of power hung about him, sweet and intoxicating, like honeysuckle in the evening air. He was of medium height, slender of body, and swift and confident in action. His pale, slim face presented an intriguing paradox, combining extreme youth - he was still only seventeen years old - with experience and authority. His eyes were dark and quick and serious, his forehead prematurely lined.

His intellectual self-assurance, which had once perilously outstripped his other skills, had now been bolstered by a certain social poise. To peers and inferiors alike he was courteous and charming at all times, although also somewhat remote, as if distracted by an inner melancholy. Alongside the crude appetites and eccentricities of his fellow ministers, this subdued detachment attained an elegance that only added to his mystique.

Mandrake wore his dark hair close in a military crop - a conscious innovation to honour the men and women still at war. It had been a successful gesture: spies noted that, among commoners, he was the most popular magician. His haircut had thus been mimicked by many others, while his dark suits had likewise inspired a brief vogue. He no longer

bothered with a tie: the collar of his shirt was casually unbuttoned.

Mr Mandrake was considered by his rivals to be formidably, indeed dangerously, talented, and - following his promotion to Information Minister - they responded accordingly. But each attempted assassination had been cursorily rebuffed: djinn failed to return, booby traps rebounded on the sender, hexes snapped and withered. At last, tiring of this, Mandrake made a point of publicly challenging any hidden enemy to come forward and tackle him in magical combat. No one answered his call, and his standing rose higher than ever.

He lived in an elegant Georgian town house surrounded by other elegant Georgian town houses on a broad and pleasant square. It was half a mile from Whitehall, and sufficiently far from the river to escape its smell in summer. The square was a generous expanse of beech trees and shady walkways, with an open green in the centre. It was quiet and unfrequented, though never unobserved. Grey-uniformed police patrolled the perimeter by day; after dark, demons in the form of owls and nightjars flitted quietly from tree to tree.

This security was due to the inhabitants of the square. It was home to several of London's greatest magicians. On the south side Mr Collins, the recently appointed Home Secretary, dwelt in a cream-coloured house decorated with fake pillars and buxom caryatids. To the north-west sprawled the grandiose pile of the War Minister, Mr Mortensen, with a golden dome glinting upon the roof.

John Mandrake's residence was less ostentatious. A slender four-storey building, painted buttercup-yellow, it was reached by a row of white marble steps; white shutters bordered the tall windows. The rooms were soberly furnished, with delicately patterned wallpapers and Persian rugs upon the floors. The minister did not flaunt his status; he displayed few treasures in the reception rooms, and