

The Adventure
of the Dux Bellorum

Conversation Pieces



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About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, *Conversation Pieces*, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The *Conversation Pieces* series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually-created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what *Conversation Pieces* is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Praise for *The Adventure of the Incognita Countess*

On the Recommended Reading Lists of *Locus* and *Tangent Online*

“[G]rand and smashing recursive steampunk in the manner of Alan Moore’s League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, and a splendid romp indeed.”

—Paul Di Filippo, *Asimov’s*

“Ward deftly incorporates details that heighten the realism of Harker’s bizarre cross-genre world, from Harker’s dismissal of classism, to the clean energy of the Martian-inspired Titanic engines. Lucy’s philosophical musings and delectable vocabulary recall the style of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle while delving into questions of emotion and personhood, responsibility and morality, in a way that emphasizes the dehumanization of the other—the other species, the other class, the other gender.”

—Michelle Ristuccia, *Tangent Online*

“Amid the steampunkish thrill of weaponized gloves and a stolen set of blueprints for Jules Verne’s proto-submarine Nautilus, Ward’s heroine experiences the throes of vampiric lesbian love and finds herself questioning her terribly problematic views on souls. Though short, this book throngs with action and its characters’ piercing emotional reactions to its tight plot.”

—Nisi Shawl, *The Seattle Review of Books*

“[A] brisk novella...it draws deeply from the well of 19th and early 20th century speculative literature.... [I]t reminds me no small part of Penny Dreadful. It has the same gleeful delight in its own references, the same playfully gothic geekery.”

—Liz Bourke, *Tor.com*

“The book’s ending is wide open for a sequel, with plenty of potential for more figures of legend to meet. Ms. Ward has done a wonderful job setting up her world, and the future challenges her characters will have to face.”

—Katie Magnusson, *I Hear of Sherlock Everywhere*

Conversation Pieces
Volume 62

The Adventure
of the Dux Bellorum

by
Cynthia Ward





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All mistakes are mine.

For Rebecca McFarland Kyle, who wanted another adventure

What is the use of fighting for a vote if we
have not got a country to vote in?

—Emmeline Pankhurst, in an address to the
Women's Social and Political Union

I think a curse should rest on me—because I
love this war. I know it's smashing and shat-
tering the lives of thousands every moment—
and yet—I can't help it—I enjoy every second
of it.

—Winston Churchill, at the Western Front,
in a letter to a friend

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

—William Ernest Henley, "Invictus"

London, 17 November 1915

AS I enter M's office, I say, "What mission would be critical enough to recall me across the Channel?"

"If you're going to argue, Miss Harker, wouldn't you rather be comfortable?" Raising an immense hand, M gestures at the pair of empty chairs before his desk. I take a seat and he produces a Manila folder. "You're to protect this man until he's back in England."

I glance inside the folder and laugh. "Protect the bloody architect of Black Friday?" I say. "I'd rather lash his face with a dog-whip."

M is learning not to rise like a trout to my bait. Mildly, he says, "You'll keep your suffragist sympathies to yourself."

"My views are irrelevant. The man who set the peelers on a peaceful women's demonstration won't want a woman bodyguard."

"It won't matter what he wants," responds the head of the Empire's Secret Intelligence Service.

"Why does Churchill suddenly need my protection, anyway?"

"He's resigned his post to rejoin his old regiment on the Western Front."

"What!"

Memory fills my mind with sensations. Mud and blood and rot, screams and gunfire and explosions, men wounded or dead in field and trench and hospital. I recover from wounds that kill mortals and can only watch as they die by the thousands.

“Has Churchill gone mad?”

“He says he’ll do King and Country more good on the front than anywhere else,” M says. “Which is absurd, but he carries the blame for Gallipoli and no longer has a place in Prime Minister Asquith’s government.” He studies me with deceptively watery grey eyes. “Churchill craves power the way others crave air. Without it, he behaves self-destructively. A commission would counter that.”

I marvel at a melancholia so profound as to render the Western Front a mortal’s safest location.

M says, “Churchill’s got the new design of submarine implemented and the Royal Navy ships converted to the heat-ray technology. Now he’s out, and our government has ceased further development of the Martian technologies. You understand why I’d like to keep him alive long enough to see him back in favor.”

“I daresay. Without the Martian technologies, Britain remains evenly matched with the Central Powers on the ground and has nothing to match German Zeppelins in the air.”

“As Dr Cavor’s anti-gravity formula remains lost,” M says, “you are correct.”

“I’ll do my best to keep Churchill alive,” I say. “But if an artillery shell has his name on it—”

“Your mission is more concerned with supernatural threats.”

“Of course.” Slowly, I say, “My powers are not unlimited. Given Clarimal Stein also has unusual abilities, you might send her to assist me in protecting your favourite politician.”

M scowls. “I appreciate you haven’t seen your par-amour since summer, but she’s much too valuable to our Central European operations to reassign.”

“More valuable than preserving Churchill?” I laugh. “Your disapproval—”

“—is irrelevant,” M says. “As you’re not mortals vulnerable to blackmail, your intimacy plays no role in determining how either of you serves the Empire. And it’s a foolish romantic weakness to think, oh, if only I can see Miss Stein, all will remain well between us—”

“Of course I want to see her, but my concern is for the success of the mission. And whether or not we’re together, all will remain well between Miss Stein and me.”

“You’re more foolish than I thought,” M says. “A war like this inevitably affects the relations between lovers—”

“Is that how you justify sending my mother on months-long espionage missions?”

“Preserving the Empire justifies everything.” M’s voice is sharp. “But did my wife sit in the parlour and knit socks for Tommies every day, the war would affect our marriage. Think, Lucy. Miss Stein has proven a loyal and valuable agent for Britain, but her role must be reassessed if you and she part.”

“Part?” I say. “Spirits above and below! You have nothing to worry about—”

The telephone on the desk rings. M lifts the earpiece. His secretary-bodyguard’s voice comes softly across the wire, but a whisper is no protection from my ears. The woman code-named Money Penny might as well be shouting beside me.

“Winston Churchill, sir.”

“Send him in.” M replaces the earpiece on the switch hook.

When he looks up, I say, “Are you concerned about the supernatural in general, or is there a specific credible threat to Mr Churchill’s safety?”

“Your paramour has reported—”

The door opens and we stand as a strong-looking, well tailored man of about forty enters M’s office.

“—rumours of a German wolfman squadron,” M finishes.

Churchill smiles. “Rumours are all they will prove.”

His smile is warm, his eyes alert. He brings us the scent of fresh tobacco smoke. It doesn’t obscure the aromas of cut grass and saddle leather from the cigars in his breast pocket.

“Supernatural creatures are rare,” he continues. “And a wolfman’s as solitary and mindless as a mad dog.”

A wolfman occasionally survives the transitional mindless phase, as the redoubtable Money Penny demonstrates, but wolfmen, unlike werewolves, never form packs.

M speaks. “Mr Churchill, permit me to present my daughter, Miss Lucy Harker, a volunteer with the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry.”

I am, in fact, M’s stepdaughter, as Churchill would know.

He raises his top hat as we exchange slight bows and shows no discomfort at my several inches’ advantage of height. “Pleased to meet you, Miss Harker.”

I’m wearing the khaki tunic, tie, ankle-length riding skirt, and soft cap of my uniform, and he’s famously rude, but he offers no comment on my appearance. He betrays no curiosity at finding a war nurse and ambu-

lance driver in M's office. As the former First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill would know many women in F.A.N.Y. perform intelligence work.

It's even possible he knows what I am.

When M indicates we should be seated, Churchill takes the adjacent chair, leaning his walking stick against one knee and holding his hat on the other.

M tells him, "We're taking the report of the wolfman squadron seriously."

"Controlling wolfmen would require a form of mind control considerably more powerful than hypnosis," Churchill says. "Even the Martians didn't possess that."

"Dracula did," M says. "But he was destroyed years ago."

From the stiff way in which neither man glances at me, I understand Churchill knows the identity of my true father.

Inconveniently for Britain, I didn't inherit his ability to seize another's will by meeting his gaze.

"It's unlikely the Germans have mind control," M continues. "But we didn't think they could devise automated monoplanes, did we?" He looks at me. "It's classified, but Dr Krüger produced hundreds of those bat-shaped aeroplanes before G-8 destroyed the factory last week."

My lover and I crossed Krüger's path on the *Titanic*, some years ago, but failed to finish the German science hero.

"How on earth could the Germans afford to produce hundreds of automated monoplanes?" I say.

“Not ‘on earth,’ perhaps,” M says. “My younger brother and Professor Challenger think the Germans are getting gold from the centre of the earth.”

“Through the rumoured natural entrance in the mountains between Gotha and Eisenach?” I laugh. “I thought the hollow earth was so much tommyrot.”

Churchill raises his eyebrows. Perhaps he thinks I speak too freely for a woman. Perhaps my cheek will brace him for the shock of a woman bodyguard.

M says, “Our intelligence indicates a pair of Americans have tunneled to the centre of the earth inside an unrecovered ‘mechanical mole.’”

“Dear God,” I say. “If the Germans have access to nearly unlimited wealth, they might win the war.”

“They would win the war,” Churchill says. “Let us hope the earth’s as solid as Asquith’s head.” He returns his attention to M. “I carry silver bullets, of course, and army chaplains have wolfsbane, stakes, and holy water. If your department can keep my presence at the Western Front a secret, Mr Holmes, I’ll be at no more risk of death than any other fighting man.”

M says, “The more serious risk would be German mind control, given you’re intimate with British discoveries from our ‘reverse engineering’ of the Martian technology. Miss Harker will act as your secretary on the front, but her true responsibility will be to serve as your bodyguard.”

“Preposterous,” Churchill says. “I write my own letters.”

I regard him. “You oppose the women’s vote, but don’t mind a woman’s protection?”

“You’re not a woman,” he says.

I smile at him, letting my fangs extend, but he shows no more reaction than if I were a statue.

M gives me a warning glance and turns back to Churchill. “How should we explain Miss Harker’s presence at your side?”

I’m tempted to offer to masquerade as Churchill’s mistress. His parents’ infidelities were the subject of much gossip. Still, there’s never been a suggestion that he’s unfaithful to his wife, and I like what I know of her. I keep silent.

“I’ll request a motor-car,” Churchill tells M. “It’s a waste of a good fighting man to put him behind the wheel. Miss Harker has been driving ambulances through mud and craters and artillery fire. She’ll raise little comment as my chauffeuse.”

Ploegsteert, southern end of the
Ypres Salient, West Flanders,
Unoccupied Belgium, the Western
Front, 3 February 1916

HE expected a generalship in cavalry, but was granted a rather less glamorous post in infantry. So it was that I delivered Lieutenant-Colonel Winston Churchill to the 6th Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers, on 5 January 1916.

Almost a month later, I'm walking back from the casualty clearing station past Laurence Farm, where Churchill has his Advanced Headquarters, when he steps outside and strides to the road. "There's a letter for you, Miss Harker."

As he gives me the envelope, I recognise the singularly wretched handwriting of a friend in England.

My pulse accelerates.

The envelope is bare of Churchill's censor's stamp. He'd know the letter was read by British intelligence before it crossed the Channel. Its author is a radical suffragist and a daughter of the late Maharajah of the Punjab.

Sometimes she has news of Clarimal.

"Thank you, sir." I fold the envelope into a side pocket of my F.A.N.Y. tunic. "Is there anything else?"

"Would you care to join us for luncheon in half an hour?"

"I'd be pleased to, sir."

Once I've read the letter, I wash and put on a clean uniform, then return to Churchill's headquarters at Laurence Farm. The officers live in the partially destroyed

house. I've rented a room in a peasant cottage half a mile away. Though the entire world dissolves in war, we English must observe the proprieties.

Churchill's cook, a gray-haired Walloon woman, has provided his senior staff with an excellent luncheon. A ginger tom-cat eats from a mess tin near Churchill's ankle. The rest of us dine on china at a scarred table. Churchill brought the china from England, along with a full-length portable tin bath and many other improbable items. He receives deliveries of wine and Scotch and dainty foods from his wife. He shares the victuals and spirits and access to the tub with his officers and me.

I suppose the Fusiliers think me another of the delicacies provided Churchill from Blighty, but they're too well-mannered to suggest this by word or deed.

We've just been served port and coffee when Churchill says, "I've received word young women are disappearing in Germany."

"That's hundreds of miles away," his adjutant says. "Why care about it out here?"

"It's peculiar." Extinguishing his cigar, Churchill begins toying with his battery-powered lamp. "The peculiar may prove dangerous, especially in war."

His adjutant starts to speak, then glances at me.

"I've treated men with uniforms or faces torn away," I say. "I've held their bedpans. I've staunched the flow of blood from their mutilated genitals. Gentlemen, I won't faint at the mention of brothels."

I expect a reprimand, but Churchill says, "It's not brothels." He switches off the Orilux lamp. "Over a hundred girls have disappeared from Hesse and Saxony in the last two weeks."

“Over a hundred in the last two weeks?” I say.

“It’s a significant number.” Churchill switches his lamp on again. “The Germans already have access to thousands of young women in occupied France and Belgium. I cannot think why they’d abduct so many of their own girls—”

A whistling sound rises.

“Whizz-bang,” Churchill observes unnecessarily.

The cat’s already fled, but the men haven’t time to stand before the high-speed German artillery shell strikes the roof.

The whizz-bang detonates. Debris fills the adjoining bedroom, which Churchill and his adjutant share, and flies into the room where we’re sitting. China shatters. The lamp goes out. I smell blood.

“Is everyone all right?” Churchill says, pitching his voice to be heard over the sudden ringing in our ears.

“A splinter’s gone straight through your lamp,” I say.

His adjutant, McDavid, squints at the damage. “Any nearer, sir, and it would have taken off your wrist.”

I tell McDavid, “You’ve damage to your hand from broken china.”

Churchill smiles. “The men will say it serves you right, McDavid, not eating on a mess tin.” He surveys the destruction. His good humour increases. “War is a game that is played with a smile,” he tells us. “If you can’t smile, grin. If you can’t grin, stay out of the way until you can.”

No one is hurt save McDavid. Churchill departs with Captain Gibb to join his men. I disinfect and dress the cut to McDavid’s thumb, which is serious enough that

he may be sent home for recovery. I'm grateful there are no graver injuries.

A quantity of my blood will heal a mortal, even on the brink of death, but my abilities and nature are a state secret. I heal the dying discreetly, when I can. However, I shouldn't care to explain how my nursing skills granted an inhumanly quick and complete recovery to Churchill, were his chest burst open, or his legs blown away. Neither am I eager to explain how I might have recovered so quickly myself.

I make my way to the front line and check on Churchill's Fusiliers. I can't serve as chauffeuse where the unpaved roads are a chaos of mud and craters, impassible by motor-car, so I've been acting as nurse and ambulance-waggon driver since our arrival at "Plug Street." When the predicted eclipse begins, late in the day, some of Churchill's men name it an ill omen; but none are injured by the whizz-bangs that fly until dusk.

Retiring to the peasant cottage, I find my elderly hosts have gone to bed. I place the food I've brought for them in their larder and proceed to my room. I light the candle in the mouth of an empty wine bottle, then shut the door and unlock my steamer trunk.

Among other items, my trunk holds a steel Brodie helmet, a Webley Mk VI revolver, conventional and silver ammunition, and uniforms of the British Expeditionary Force, tailored for my figure. I change into one of my men's uniforms. I wear my black hair in a twist low on my neck, so the "tin hat" presents no difficulties. I put the letter in a waist pocket of the tunic and strap

on my silver-loaded Webley, then extinguish the candle with a pinch. I slip away to make my covert patrol under the stars.

I see only ghosts. As always, they ignore me. A phantom peasant steers his plow. Spirit-soldiers march along the road. An ethereal child searches for family or dog. Before the war, ghosts were uncommon.

On the *Titanic*, I disputed the nature of ghosts with a fellow passenger, but she was right: we don't know if they are souls. Still, we know the soul exists, and that I possess one, though I'm a blood-drinker born. I am unharmed by prayer or holy place or object.

Whispers of conversation come to me from the front line. Far away, big guns boom. The sky is clear, save for dark clouds to the west. Frost gleams on the rims of craters, but a damp wind promises rain. The moon and occluded sun set an hour ago, and midnight is a few hours ahead.

I conclude my patrol at Laurence Farm. The buildings are dark and silent. Evidently, the midday excitement sent everyone to sleep early except the ginger tom. Like most beasts, he's not heard the folk-tale which says all animals scream or growl or flee at the presence of blood-drinkers. He trots up to me where I lean against a barren beech, looking east, as though I might glimpse my lover across hundreds of miles.

I remove the envelope from my pocket and the cat's ears prick. "This letter's from the Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, a friend of mine and Clarimal's," I inform him quietly. "Sophia's a volunteer nurse on the home front and can't exchange letters with her sister in Germany, but she gets news of her sister from their uncle

in Switzerland. Sometimes Sophia's sister has news of Clarimal, and Sophia passes the news on to me."

The cat rubs my puttees with the sides of his head as I read him a bit of Sophia's letter.

"My sister's heard from your friend. Miss Stein's traveling with her lady's maid and enjoying Vienna."

Scant, misleading words, and not a one from Clarimal's pen—yet how I treasure them!

The cat paws my ankle.

"That's right." I scratch him about the ears. "The Duleep Singhs don't know Clarimal and I are spies. Or blood-drinkers."

I hear a man stirring in the farmhouse and slip the letter into the envelope and the envelope into my pocket. I remain where I am. I know all the officers' footsteps.

Stepping outdoors, Churchill observes my men's uniform and service revolver without reaction. He's seen me in trousers before; and I'm not the only woman nurse or ambulance driver who's worn them. Though they end at the ankle, skirts wick up rainwater that weighs heavily on the wool, and mud that rubs your calves raw, and worse. At times my skirts and stockings have been bloody to the knees.

Heedful of the German lines, which lie only five hundred yards to the east, Churchill keeps his gravelly voice low. "Mind if I join you, Miss Harker?"

My reply is equally quiet. "Not at all."

He's eschewed his walking stick, but doesn't limp. He carries a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label and a pair of glasses. He's bare-headed but wears his trench coat, buttoned against the chill, and his Sam Browne belt over it, with his British Service Model Colt snapped in

its custom holster. He doesn't have a cigar, but there's a cigarette case in his breast pocket.

I've never told anyone about the patrols I make, on the nights I'm not engaged elsewhere, but Churchill says, "You've kept me safe again tonight, I see."

"Oh, yes," I reply. "Slaughtered every one of the thousands of wolfmen sent against us."

"The eclipse brings good fortune, then." Smiling, he extends a glass. "Care for a drink?"

Spirits are no more intoxicating to blood-drinkers than water, but I enjoy the taste. I accept the glass, and he pours three fingers. He tips the same amount into his own glass.

As we sip our whisky, the tom ceases striking his brow against Churchill's shin and departs on his own mission.

"Miss Harker," Churchill says, "you must have noticed I've no interest in your correspondence."

He observed me reading the letter, and I betrayed my inordinate interest in its contents by reflexively hiding it.

When I hold silent, he opens his cigarette case and extends it to me. The Turkish blend smells excellent, but smoking deadens my nose for hours, and scent may provide my only chance of detecting an immediate threat. I decline the offer. He shows no surprise. Few women who smoke do so in front of men.

We're not out of range of German sniper fire, and a glowing cigarette may be seen over a great distance at night. We move to the far side of the farmhouse. The walls have holes, but they're filled with straw. The windows are covered by sacking.

As he lights his cigarette, Churchill regards me. "It's difficult to be away from one's woman, isn't it."

He's not asking a question. My heart-beat becomes rapid. How did he think of such a thing? Even if he read my full dossier at Whitehall Court, M has ensured it contains no mention of the true nature of my relationship with Clarimal Stein. I know this because Money Penny, who flirts with me outrageously when no one's about, gave me access on my last leave.

"I wouldn't know." I answer Churchill calmly. "Why on earth would you ask me such a thing? Do you think women ambulance drivers a pack of inverters because we do 'men's work'?"

"I wouldn't know," he says. "But I know you and another British agent, Miss Clarimal Stein, used to socialise with Princess Catherine Duleep Singh and her German lady friend. They've always been discreet, but Miss Duleep Singh stayed with the woman in Germany when the war broke out, though that marks her as a traitor to England. One needn't be Sherlock Holmes to deduce the two live together as man and wife would."

"Miss Duleep Singh is part German. If you establish guilt by association," I tell Churchill, "you must think me a German sympathiser and Indian radical."

He smiles. "What *do* you think of Germany?"

"Their unprovoked invasion of France and neutral Belgium, and their maltreatment and slaughter of civilian men, women, and children, place Germany outside the bounds of civilisation."

"Doesn't their invasion resemble the British takeover of India?"

"Of course not," I say. "We brought peace, unity, and civilisation to the warring fiefdoms of the subcontinent."

“Your understanding reassures me.” Churchill tastes his whisky. “I miss my wife and children, Miss Harker. I merely thought you might miss someone, as well.”

“I can’t imagine why you’d care what a female feels, when you oppose the women’s vote.”

He laughs softly. “I voted in favour of female suffrage.”

“Once, in ’04.” I cannot keep the fury from my tone. “In ’10, you let the police assault peaceful protestors—”

He speaks placidly, as though I cannot see the anger in his eyes. “Their orders were only to keep the suffragettes from entering the House of Commons.”

“You prevented a government inquiry—”

I take a step back and draw a calming breath. The suffragist leader Emmeline Pankhurst urges women to serve England in the war and demonstrate we deserve the franchise. I only hurt our cause by arguing about the women’s vote when Germany threatens every English liberty.

With a sip of whisky, Churchill extinguishes the spark in his gaze.

“It’s when I fail to heed my wife’s advice that I do myself the most harm,” he says mildly. “I don’t oppose the women’s vote, merely the violent extremism of radical suffragettes. Women have as much right to the vote as any man—and rather more sense than the men running the British Expeditionary Force. We’re more than a year into the conflict, and they still think nineteenth century tactics can defeat twentieth century technology.”

“You’ve observed it’s foolish to send men charging straight at machine guns so they’re all mowed down as helplessly as wheat before the scythe?”

“How could I not?”

I hold my voice low with effort. “Then why have you never bloody stopped it!”

“I couldn’t have stopped it if they’d made me a general.” His voice is harsh. “Both sides consider it brave and glorious, when men die like that.” He drains his glass. “I couldn’t even get a Martian-style tripod produced when I was part of Asquith’s government, though we know how the tripods operate now.”

We look at Mars, near the zenith of the sky.

“The Martians—if they *are* natives of Mars—have launched no cylinders at Earth since their invasion failed in ’02,” he observes. “Only a fool would think they might never try again, yet M is nearly the only official in government who shares my opinion.”

Churchill returns his attention to me.

“Our earthly conflict is dreadful enough,” he murmurs. “Rejoice if you’ve no sweetheart, Miss Harker. The war bereaves lovers by the millions, and changes all the rest.”

As I suppress annoyance for his boorish familiarity, he extinguishes his cigarette.

A light kindles in his eyes. “Care to join me for a tour of the trenches?”

When his men occupy the trenches, he visits them every night and every day, in marked contrast to many commanding officers. He’s always accompanied by one of his officers. He’s never asked anyone else.

His question sets my heart-beat to swelling till I wonder if it fills his mortal ears. “Of course, sir. Do you want me to change uniforms?”

“If you wish.” Churchill smiles. “Perhaps it’s best the men realise women can wear trousers.”

He brings the whisky and empty glasses indoors. When he returns, his receding red hair is covered by a blue steel Adrian helmet. It's a gift from a French general, and he rarely goes without it. Rumour blames this on his vanity. I've noticed it leaves outsiders remarking they've seen someone who looks like Churchill.

As we start for the line, I observe his alert gaze and eager step. "You love this, don't you?"

"I do enjoy a beautiful night."

Now who's dissembling, I think.

"You love the war," I say. "It's destroyed lives by the millions, and seems like it shall never stop, and you don't want it to stop."

"I would end it now were it within my power," Churchill says. "But I love every second of it. And so do you."

I catch my breath.

After the sinking of the *Titanic*, I swore not to kill, save where there's no reasonable alternative. I've kept my vow. I despise war. Yet adrenalin courses pleasurably through me as we approach the front line. A thrill suffuses me with every night patrol I make around Churchill's headquarters. With every scent and sound and sight of battle.

A star-shell ignites silently above No Man's Land. Its light is red, not the eerie magnesium white of an observation star-shell. The coloured *fusée* is a German signal.

As the light fades, I say, "What's red mean?"

"I don't know," Churchill mutters. "The Huns have changed the meanings of the colours again."

I stop, reaching for my weapon. "Look at the ghosts."

"Ghosts?" Churchill halts and looks about. "I see no ghosts."

Most mortals see few of the lingering spirits, or none.

Opening the flap of his holster, he turns to me. “What do you see?”

I’ve drawn my Webley. “The ghosts have ignored everything save their own concerns. Now they all look to the north.”

Facing north, Churchill draws his Colt. “That’s not the direction of the front—”

Twenty man-sized figures burst from the darkness of Ploegsteert Wood. With no sound save the impact of heavy footfalls on frozen earth, they race towards us, extending clawed hands. Snarling muzzles expose white fangs and exhale a carnivorous stink. They are naked, but fur hides their skin, shimmering in shades of grey and silver. The fur gives off a musky odour, laced with mould and earth. The smells and colours might suggest ghosts to a mortal, but these beings aren’t ghosts.

Rumours are all they will prove, Churchill assured us, in Whitehall. *Supernatural creatures are rare. And a wolfman’s as solitary and mindless as a mad dog.*

Starlight glints on metal and glass where electrodes jut from every wolfman’s head.

Churchill and I fire.

The old lore says it takes a silver bullet to kill a werewolf or wolfman. That’s true, but not sufficient. The silver bullet must strike a vital organ.

Every one of our shots drops a wolfman, but my revolver has six rounds and Churchill’s semi-automatic seven, and that leaves seven wolfmen alive.

Flinging my empty Webley in the closest survivor’s face, I step in front of Churchill.

“Leave, sir!”

The horses in the barn have begun snorting and stamping. In the farmhouse, Churchill's officers are stirring. He might be safe if he can reach his men. If they have silver loaded in their firearms. If I delay the surviving wolfmen sufficiently.

I leap to meet the wolfmen, tumbling the foremost with a bartitsu throw. I don't use my fangs. No one knows what might result if a blood-drinker tastes the blood of wolfman or werewolf.

Churchill strikes a furred skull with the butt of his Colt.

The weight of wolfmen bears me down. The back of my head strikes a tree root. I fancy I see a great winged lizard against the stars.

My last sensation is fury that M deemed Clarimal Stein more useful elsewhere.