**Secret of the Circe Noir**

The Doctor was wearing a late Victorian frock coat over a suit of clothes less absurd than usual. Beside him Leela tried not to fidget in the corset that fitted her shape to the green satin dress with hat, gloves and parasol accessories.

“These ‘undergarments’ are like a constrictor snake wrapped around me,” she complained.

“Be grateful you have enough experiences in your life to make such a comparison,” The Doctor told her. “Most young ladies of this time have scarcely travelled further than the Grand Tour’s safe destinations. I’m sure they would be excited at the prospect of encountering a constrictor.”

Leela said nothing in reply except a ‘huff’ of disdain. She had fought all sorts of dangerous creatures in her jungle home and she doubted the fragile women of London would last very long there.

“We are going to the Palace Theatre?” she asked. “The place where we encountered the bent-faced evil one?”

“Not quite,” The Doctor answered. “That Palace Theatre was a music hall in Limehouse. But in 1891, some ten years after that escapade, a much grander ‘Palace’ was opened on Shaftesbury Avenue, and at this time, another ten years after that, our old friend from the old Palace has attained the position of manager of the newer, bigger, grander Palace. We’re dropping in on him there."

Leela grasped enough of that explanation to be satisfied, though she did wonder how many ‘palaces’ one city needed.

To other eyes than hers, with her limited knowledge of urban life, it would be obvious that this was a good twenty years since their last eventful visit to London. Mechanisation had begun to be seen on the roads. An omnibus noisily imitated a Haggara beast that could devastate an entire camp if enraged or make good eating for a week for the tribe if brought down.

Leela momentarily held the parasol like a spear before noting that there was no meat on the carcass of an omnibus. The Doctor led her across the busy Shaftesbury Avenue at a point where one of the ‘blue guards’ of London waved his hands in a secret incantation that stopped the traffic, mechanical and horse drawn.

That brought them to the front of the theatre, where, in place of the usual play of the week or variety billing of a sort somewhat above the quality of the old music hall, something called the ‘Circe Noir’ was advertised in brightly coloured posters where black was the secret colour of night and red was clearly the colour of blood.

Leela understood that on her own terms, but why a night hunt should be the stuff of entertainment here in this London where there were no wild herds to stalk was another matter.

“Black Circus,” The Doctor translated, though that meant even less to her. “I don’t see any lions or elephants, though, so I don’t know if it is a particularly good circus.”

It must have been doing well, despite The Doctor’s criticisms. A banner pasted underneath each poster proclaimed the ‘fourth successful week’ at the Palace.

“I wonder what its really all about?” The Doctor mused briefly before moving into the foyer. The box office was open for pre-booking. A sign on the little window suggested that it was essential to do so to avoid disappointment.

The Doctor wasn’t looking for tickets. He lifted his hat to the young woman behind the glass and smiled in what he thought was a disarming way. It probably was if the word ‘disarming’ was taken literally. Many of Leela’s fellow Seveteem hunters had dropped their weapons nervously when The Doctor smiled at them.

The girl behind the box office window was similarly unnerved before The Doctor announced his intentions.

“I am an old friend of the manager, Mr Henry Gordon Jago,” he said. “Would you let him know we are here?”

“Um… who shall I say is calling?” the worried girl asked.

“Why, The Doctor of course,” he answered as if the question was patently obvious. “The Doctor and Miss Leela of the Seveteem.”

The girl nodded and reached for a wind up internal phone device.

“Mr Jago, sir, there’s a Doctor and a Miss Seventeen to see you. The gentleman says he’s a friend of yours.”

Her tone was doubtful, but Mr Jago’s reply was clearly a reassuring one. She put down the speaker and looked at The Doctor and Leela with new respect and a new confidence.

“He’s on his way down,” she said. “I’m sorry if I was a little… I thought you were more of this ‘New-ore’ lot. They’re a funny sort, even for theatricals. I mean…” She paused as if realising she had possibly insulted the gentleman in front of her. “I mean… these new ones. Are you an old theatrical, sir? Do you do a magic act or... or something… with the lady as your assistant?”

“We’ve been known to do a disappearing act when things get dicey,” The Doctor answered. “But no, neither of us are ‘theatricals’.”

Despite the potential sort social faux pas, the young woman continued to char away in the few minutes they were waiting. Her opinion of the ‘strange’ new-fangled theatrics this ‘Circe Noir’ performed was duly noted by The Doctor.

Finally, Mr Henry Jago appeared, his face the red of a ripe conker as usual, a smile splitting it almost in half as he greeted The Doctor and Leela effusively and with the slight deference of one who knew he wasn’t quite his old friend’s social equal.

He was twenty years older, of course, and manager of this up-market ‘Palace’ could well be the last phase of his working life. The fact that The Doctor and Leela had barely aged at all didn’t bother him at all. He accepted them as they were.

“But what are we doing chin-wagging in the common foyer?” he declared after a while. “Come along. There’s a dress rehearsal going on. We can watch from the royal box. I’ll have refreshments sent up.”

He gave the order to the girl at the box office who sighed the weary sigh of an underling with enough to do already and ‘phoned’ the refreshment request to another part of the theatre.

“Great technology, the telephone,” Jago said as he ushered his friends upstairs to the plush carpeted corridor behind the row of private boxes. including one designated 'royal' though it was really little different to the others. “I can call anyone in the building. Saves a lot of running about and shouting. But I’m sure you’re well ahead on these new-fangled ideas with your connections, eh, Doctor.”

“Oh, I try to keep up with new technology,” The Doctor admitted. Jago opened the box door and stood back to let his guests enter first. Leela was cautious about the dimly lit space and checked behind the velvet curtains for would-be assassins before sitting down.

The Doctor looked idly at the performance on the stage below. It looked half acrobatics with scantily clad women turning somersaults around a hoop suspended from the ‘gods’, half magic show with a lot of dry ice and cape swirling…

And half something else - even though that made an impossible three halves, The Doctor looked curiously at the far corner of the stage where something he couldn’t quite understand was going on. It involved dancing of a sort, though not exactly early Edwardian fare. More like the esoteric choreography of the nineteen-fifties and sixties.

But it wasn’t the choreography, either. Something struck him oddly about the whole troupe.

“This is popular with the punters?” he asked Jago.

“Sold out every night,” the old impresario assured him. “Advance booking right up to the end of next month. Even the boxes are bought out. All but this one. I’ve been advised to hold it for a royal patronage.”

“Your queen is interested in this mummery?” Leela asked.

“King,” Jago corrected her, recalling that The Doctor and his travelling companions were often behind on current affairs. “Edward VII was crowned a fortnight ago. I don’t know if it will be His Majesty himself or one of the Princes, or some other, or even when we should be so graced, but I have had notice from the Palace… the OTHER Palace, if you take my meaning.”

“A great honour upon you,” Leela summarised.

“A very great honour,” The Doctor added. “You are to be congratulated, Jago, my old friend. Yet… I confess I don’t quite see the great attraction of this show.”

“You’re only seeing a rehearsal, of course,” Jago pointed out. “When they’ve got all their new-fangled lights and smoke machines and the music swelling its quite another matter. The full performance is a spectacle.”

Jago looked animated as he praised the performance. Then he turned and caught The Doctor’s glance. Something changed in his expression and his tone.

“It’s… not quite my cup of tea,” he found himself admitting. “I don’t know… this modern stuff is beyond me. But I’ve always believed in giving the public what they want.”

“Quite right,” The Doctor agreed. The arrival of tea and a selection of daintily cut smoked salmon and cucumber sandwiches, the fare offered to the best quality of the patrons and to the honoured guests of Mr Henry Gordon Jago, cut off that line of conversation. Leela found the tiny, flimsy triangles bewildering. The Doctor’s efforts to civilise her didn’t quite reach so far, yet, but taking two together she ate far more delicately than she used to do and managed a china cup and saucer without any calamity.

The Doctor enjoyed smoked salmon sandwiches, regarding them as one of the great inventions of humanity, but he was too lost in puzzled thought to savour them fully.

He just couldn’t work out what it was about the Circe Noir that bothered him.

“Let me introduce you to them,” Jago suggested. The tea and sandwiches were finished about the same time as the rehearsal. The performers left the stage and the spotlights were turned off, leaving it shadowy and empty, the very opposite of what a stage ought to be.

The principal members of the Circe Noir were to be found in the well-appointed ‘green room’ where performers could rest on two large sofas and three easy chairs around a warm fireplace. There was a window that would have looked out onto Greek Street if it wasn’t covered by heavy blinds and a velvet curtain cutting out all natural light.

“This is my good friend, The Doctor,” Jago announced. “And Miss Leela. Doctor, Leela, this is Adam Carvery, and Madame Cassandra Elvery, directors and chief performers of the Circe Noir.”

“Delighted to meet an acquaintance of Mister Jago,” said Carvery in a perfectly rounded English accent though his stage costume hinted at something in that part of Eastern Europe that Mr Bram Stoker had described only a few years ago. Miss Elvery’s off stage costume was a wide skirt and low-necked blouse with jewellery of the sort that gipsies from the same part of the continent might wear. Her dark hair and dusky skin also pointed to a Romany ancestry, though again her accent wouldn’t have been out of place in the Royal Shakespearean Company.

“Charmed,” she added, shaking hands with Leela first and then The Doctor. “You must be fellow performers. A double act of some sort? Perhaps a magic act?”

“Oh, no,” Henry Jago said in answer to the same misunderstanding his box office girl had made. “The Doctor is no humble treader of the boards. He’s a special detective who investigates cases that baffle even Scotland Yard.”

“A… detective?” Both Carvery and Elvery looked worried for an instant lost on all but The Doctor, then they recovered themselves. “How interesting. Are you on a case right now?

“Not at all,” The Doctor answered. “Just a social call to Henry. My curiosity has been piqued by your rehearsal, but only in a non-professional capacity.”

“You liked what you saw, then?” Miss Elvery asked.

“Oh, indeed,” The Doctor enthused. “I found it excitingly Avant Garde with just a hint of Grand-Guignol.”

He smiled that not at all disarming smile. Miss Elvery looked puzzled. Possibly she didn’t speak French. Mr Carvery laughed, but a beat too late as if he didn’t understand, either but wanted to seem as if he did.

“I’ve an errand or two to run, yet,” The Doctor added after a few more ‘pleasantries’ had been exchanged. “But I’d be honoured if you could fit the two of us in for tonight’s performance, Jago.”

“The box is yours… unless the ‘other’ Palace calls at the last minute,” Jago assured him.

“Capital,” The Doctor enthused. “Come along, Leela. A bit of fresh air will do us good.”

Leela didn’t think the London air qualified as ‘fresh’ but she was happy to leave the Palace Theatre.

“It was strange,” she said. “The feeling I had in there. As if I was being lied to. Not by Mr Jago…. He is a good man. But something else….”

The Doctor nodded. Leela was a creature of instinct. He trusted her ‘feelings’. Besides, he had some sixth sense of his own that told him things weren’t right at the Palace Theatre.

He knew something was utterly wrong about Mr Carvery and Miss Elvery. Again, he wasn’t sure what it was. They weren’t vampires. One touch of their hands told him that. But there were other creatures that shunned daylight – some that could better emulate living and breathing humans than the common or garden undead.

And some of them were far more dangerous.

The Doctor knew that his other old friend from late nineteenth century London, Professor Litefoot, had retired to the country, but his former haunt, the morgue serving the seething mass of the East End, was run by a young man called Watkins who directed The Doctor back to the West End and a friend of his at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital.

He asked the same question he had asked at the morgue.

“Has there been a surge in patients with unusual symptoms in the past few weeks? Symptoms you can’t explain away as any usual inner-city epidemic.”

“Yes,” answered Doctor Angus Lang, a Scotsman with intelligent eyes that The Doctor trusted at once. “Yes, we have. I can show you. Err… would the young lady want to wait in my office? We’re a good modern hospital, but the wards are not a pretty sight, even so.”

“I have seen the wounded from many battles,” Leela remarked archly.

“You’re a battlefield nurse?” Doctor Lang responded. “That’s a different matter, of course. Come along, both of you.”

Leela didn’t bother to correct the good doctor about her role in the wars of the Seveteem. She followed him from his office to one of the big wards where people with many different ailments were being treated. The conversation between The Doctor and Doctor Lang was meaningless to her, but she could see with her own eyes that the Earth way of dealing with the sick and injured was very different to the way she had known. Here, people with broken bones that would make them useless as hunters or warriors were given care. Very old people were fed and their ailments tended even though their useful days were long gone.

She was still pondering the wisdom of extending the life of so many unproductive people when The Doctor and Doctor Lang stopped by a bed like all the others. The patient, aged about forty-five and the manager of a supper club in Soho, had been brought to the hospital a week ago, having been found unconscious outside his premises. Every attempt to revive him had failed. He was kept alive, like the others, by application of a feeding tube every four hours of the day.

“There is nothing obviously wrong except a mild anaemia,” Doctor Lang explained. “Even that has been treated. He is a normal colour now. When he came in he was as white as a sheet. But there was no sign of a stroke, no head injury to cause any brain damage. And there are three more patients on this ward just the same.”

The Doctor quietly moved to the other beds with comatose patients. One was a very old man who must have looked ‘wiry’ and ‘spry’ and all those words associated with vigour and animation in the elderly before he was struck down. Now he looked so fragile he might break if handled roughly. Doctor Lang said he was a news vendor, selling the morning and evening papers from a stand in Leicester Square.

The next was a middle-aged accountant, partner in a small firm with offices on Charing Cross Road. There were fresh flowers at his bedside, and a bowl of fruit, neither of which he was able to appreciate just now. Nor did his closed eyes fall upon the framed photograph of a woman who must have been his wife. They served merely as proof that somebody cared about him.

The Doctor touched the man’s forehead gently. He was out of practice with telepathy. He was too often among humans who had no such abilities and it was too much of a violation of the private world behind their eyes.

But he needed to know.

What he saw confirmed his suspicion.

The last of the four patients had a visitor. He was dressed as a church of England curate and was reading in a low voice from a psalter.

“I don’t know if he can hear me,” the curate said as The Doctor performed the same test of the comatose man’s brain functions. His actions didn’t worry the patient’s visitor, nor did the question The Doctor’s right to be there even though he obviously wasn’t any medic employed by St Bartholomew’s. There was that about the Time Lord’s demeanour that made him seem to be in charge of any place he happened to be.

“I pray at his side,” the Curate added. “I pray and hope… For now abideth faith, hope and….”

The Doctor smiled grimly. He was born on a planet millions of light years from Earth and its religions, but he knew there was a centuries old debate about the ending of that biblical verse. The curate’s bible written in the puritanical seventeenth century made the third of the virtues to be ‘charity’. But every other translation in history of the Greek word ‘agape’ said ‘love’. The curate was here at this bedside for ‘faith, hope and love’.

“All those are always worth a try,” The Doctor said, because this wasn’t the time or place for theological study. He looked at the patient. He was a young man of about twenty. The man at his side was a few years older. Not father and son, and they were not blood brothers if facial features were any indication.

“He is John Walker. I am James Aitkin. We are both curates under the chaplain of St. Clement Danes church… on the Strand.”

Love… unconditional love… of man to fellow man, The Doctor thought, still pondering biblical translations and their wider meanings.

“What happened to your friend?” he asked, getting back to the important point.

“Nobody knows,” the Reverend Aitkin answered with a worried sigh. “He was found in the church grounds early on Sunday morning last. All attempts to revive him failed.”

“And there was no reason to suspect he had taken too much drink or….”

Reverend Aitkin looked at The Doctor with scandalised eyes.

“John is a strict teetotaller and does not even partake of snuff, which even the archbishop in Lambeth considers a harmless pastime. He was away from the presbytery on Saturday visiting his mother and was expected back by ten o’clock. When he did not arrive, it was assumed he had stayed longer at his family home, and nobody was concerned. The next day... when we found him amongst the rose beds, cold and deathly white, we thought the worst. As it is….”

The Doctor nodded silently.

“I understand,” he said. “Keep on hoping… and all those other things.”

He left the bedside and looked for Leela and Doctor Lang. He found them on the landing outside the ward coming down the stairs.

“I brought Miss Leela to the female ward,” he said. “There are eight patents there presenting the same symptoms.”

“They all lie as if in death but breathing still,” Leela confirmed.

“What kind of women?” The Doctor asked. “Are they of respectable sort?”

He had good reason to ask the question. Twenty odd years ago when Magnus Greel was asserting his terrible influence over the hinterland of the old Limehouse Palace, the women who disappeared from the streets were the sort whose professions kept them out after dark, but he had a sense already that this was a different situation.

“Two of the ladies are churchwardens, one at the Soho Baptist Chapel, the other at St. Anne’s Anglican church,” Doctor Lang answered. “Another was a professor of antiquities at the British Museum. The others were… respectable women of good character… wives of local businessmen. The only one who wasn’t born of good family is an understudy to an actress at the Dukeof York's Theatre**.** But even she is a decent church-going girl. None of them were… for example… the sort of women Jack the Ripper sought out. In any case, the pathology of their illness... it does not appear as if any of them were attacked in a physical way.”

“No, indeed,” The Doctor observed. “And yet… nor does it look like an epidemic in the usual sense. None of them live together. None of them work together or share leisure interests.”

“I can’t understand it, either,” Doctor Lang replied. “And you should go to see my colleague, Doctor McKenzie Campbell at St. Thomas’s. Yes, another Scotsman. We’re in charge of the sick and injured of London. Doctor Campbell has patients with the same symptoms. He started making notes about their work, home, social status before I did. He will give you the information readily. We would both welcome anyone who might get to the bottom of it all.”

“I will do that,” The Doctor said. He had never actually said he planned to get to the bottom of the problem. His visit to St. Bartholomew’s was a casual inquiry to satisfy a suspicion. But what he had found there raised the casual inquiry to a serious investigation.

A hansom cab ride to St. Thomas’s hospital gave him fifteen more casualties of this epidemic that wasn’t an epidemic in the usual sense. A phone call from Doctor Campbell’s office saved him a journey but confirmed one other line of inquiry.

He and Leela returned to the Palace Theatre where The Doctor commandeered Henry Jago’s office and a street map of London. He spent some time marking places on the map with a box of drawing pins with coloured heads he fished out of his coat pocket. Jago and Leela looked on in puzzlement, and not just because they had never seen coloured drawing pins before.

“I’m sorry, old man,” he said when he was done. “But there’s a problem in the West End of London… one that might well rival the one you had in the East End twenty years ago. And I think your Circe Noir troupe have something to do with it”

Jago looked at The Doctor, then at the map. On it was marked the Palace Theatre in red and the two hospitals, St Bartholomew’s and St Thomas’s, that served the Borough of Westminster and environs in yellow. In blue and green he marked either the workplace or the home of each of the comatose patients in the two hospitals.

“I called Great Ormond Street, which also lies within this district. They have no victims, thank goodness. The entity that strikes these men and women does so after dark when most children are in bed. At least it does, yet. It isn’t strong enough to take victims from their homes. But it can only be a matter of time.”

Jago was appalled. His conker red face turned pale exposing a pattern of veins on his cheeks.

“Is there proof that any of the victims visited the Palace?” he asked.

“Not unless the curate lied about visiting his mum in Bloomsbury,” The Doctor answered. “But you can see that they were all within ten or fifteen minutes walk of here.”

“But there is nothing to bring the police to us?” Jago asked.

“No. There is no scandal for you to deal with,” The Doctor assured him. “But you are not so shallow a man as to care only for your own security.”

“No,” Jago admitted. “No, I’m not. Dash it all, though. If you’re right… and another of my star attractions is an inhuman fiend….”

He looked the very definition of disconsolate. His long years in the precarious entertainment business hung heavily on him and he must have contemplated a peaceful retirement.

The Doctor placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll get to the bottom of this,” he promised. “Without any scandal attaching to the Palace, or any other victim ending up in hospital. Don’t you worry, old man. Leela and I are good at this sort of thing, aren’t we Leela….”

The Doctor turned. Leela wasn’t there. The office door was ajar, but neither The Doctor nor Jago remembered her leaving.

But they both knew where she had gone.

“The green room. To confront Carvery?” Jago suggested.

“Where else?”

They both rushed to the door. At the threshold, Jago paused and turned back. The telephone was ringing. The Doctor saw his indecision and nodded reassuringly.

Jago answered the telephone.

It was a short call, but one in which he went through several facial expressions representing a flood of emotions.

“That was the Palace,” he said breathlessly. “THE Palace. They’re coming. King Edward himself and Queen Alexandra. They’re coming to tonight’s performance. I’ve got to… roll out the red carpet. I’ve got to FIND the red carpet. They’ll be here in two hours.”

Jago looked at The Doctor, then at the map pinned to his office wall.

“The King and Queen are coming and my star attractions might well be evil entities.”

“You get ready for your royal appointment. I’ll deal with the evil entities,” The Doctor said. As he ran from the office he heard Jago on his phone asking his stage manager where the red carpet was.

He made his way backstage. There were any number of people working there, getting everything ready for the evening performance. Most of them took no notice of The Doctor. For one thing they knew he was a friend of the manager. For another, they were too busy to make a fuss. Those who did look twice at him were met by a steely pair of eyes that discouraged any questions.

The green room was guarded by one of the Circe Noir troupe, a skinny, pale faced man with the same eastern European fashion but a cockney accent as he blocked The Doctor.

“Out of my way,” The Doctor replied imperiously. When imperious tone and steely eye contact didn’t work he shoulder-barged the skinny youth and pushed youth and door inwards.

“What have you done?” The Doctor demanded as he crashed into the green room and saw Carvery leaning over a female figure in a flurry of taffeta and silk under skirting lying across the sofa. “Get off her, you fiend.”

“I’m not….” Carvery stammered as he stood straight, clutching an opaque bottle that he quickly jammed a stopper into. “I didn’t… I’m not the fiend… she…."

He stepped aside to reveal that the woman on the sofa was Madame Cassandra Ellery. Her face wasn’t quite what it was the last time The Doctor visited the green room, though. Her eyes were tiny black pinpricks in her face, ears flattened, nose merged into an elongated mouth something like that of an anteater or aardvark.

She was gasping through the strange mouth as if struggling to breathe.

“Don’t get closer or she’ll take your breath away.”

“Literally?” The Doctor asked. Her face was turning more human again, but she was gasping, still, as if she still couldn’t breathe. The Doctor’s first instinct was to try to help, but Carvery’s warning kept him away.

“It is what she does. She takes all but the last breath of her victims, leaving them comatose, their minds barely functioning….”

“Yes… I saw that… in two hospitals.”

“And there….” Carvery pointed towards the window. The curtains had been pulled down, but it was getting dark outside and whatever effect daylight might have was negated. Beneath the velvet The Doctor spotted another female figure.

“Leela!” He ran to pull her from the heap. To his dismay she was limp in his arms, deep in a coma, hardly breathing. “Leela, you impetuous girl, why didn’t you wait.”

He turned to Carvery, his face incandescent with rage.

“You KNEW what she was. You let her attack people.”

“Only a few…. And never close to the theatre. The girl… she overheard us talking. I was telling her she had to stop, because of you… because I thought… I knew… you suspected something. I knew you weren’t just an ordinary detective…. Then Cassandra saw the girl behind the curtains and sprang at her. The girl fought well, but Cassandra is strong. She….”

“Not ‘the girl’. Leela. Her name is Leela, a noble warrior of the Seveteem. And that fiend….”

“Take this.” Carvery held out the bottle. The Doctor took it carefully. It was shaped exactly like the traditional ‘genie’ prison and The Doctor suspected its contents were far more precious. “She will only need a little. Save the rest.”

He took out the stopper and held it close to Leela’s mouth and nose. For a dreadful moment nothing happened, then she coughed and breathed in deeply. The Doctor stoppered the bottle and put it into his coat pocket before helping Leela to sit up.

“That woman…” she gasped, mixing breathing and talking before she was quite ready to do that. “She’s… not a woman.”

“She’s… dead,” Carvery said. He looked as if the fact grieved him. The Doctor lifted Leela to her feet and brought her to one of the easy chairs to recover, then he turned to the prone figure of Cassandra Elvery. Carvery’s statement was correct. The Doctor closed her staring eyes and drew a silk shawl over her before turning back to Carvery. He had a lot of questions to ask.

He didn’t need to ask. Carvery was disconsolate and perfectly willing to talk.

“At first I protected her because I was in love with her,” he admitted. “I let her take one or two everywhere we performed… old people whose lives were almost over… But she wanted more and more. And when I tried to stop her I realised I never could. I realised at the same time that I didn’t love her… but I was caught like a fly in a spider’s web. Tonight… I finally did what I should have done long ago. I took back all the breaths she had stolen since we came to London. I wasn’t sure if it would kill her…. I’m sorry… in a way… that it did. But… I’m also… relieved. I’m free of her.”

The Doctor said nothing. There were other questions. He waited for them to be answered.

“You can bring the others back the same way you saved her,” Carver assured him. “Their breaths are all in there.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” The Doctor said. “I’ll deal with that in a minute. As for you….”

“I’m her accomplice. I expect you’ll want to take me in. I expect it will mean jail. But the rest of the troupe…. It’s nothing to do with them. Have mercy on them.”

“You’re hardly in a position to ask favours from me,” The Doctor said coldly.

“I know. But I DO ask it. Please. We used to be a half decent travelling circus show, making a bit of a living. But like all travelling shows the new cinema was taking our audiences. Madame Cassandra introduced the whole ‘Circe Noir’ gimmick. It gave us something more… something special. We got the bookings again.”

*“*Is there any reason why you can’t be a half decent show without Madame Cassandra?” The Doctor asked.

“Young Elaine is nearly as good as she is on the trapeze. And we have an oriental fellow with a magic act I can fit into the show….”

“Oriental, eh?” The Doctor asked. “He doesn’t have a rather creepy puppet with him, does he?”

“Puppet? No… just a clever trick with a cabinet and fancy swords.”

“Then get your troupe together, oriental fellow and all, and get ready. Didn’t you hear? The King and Queen are coming tonight.”

“You aren’t going to take me in?”

“I’m not sure what the police could charge you with,” The Doctor answered. “Even Madame Cassandra… I have a few medical friends who could certify that she died of sudden respiratory failure. Happens all the time in London, the damp air and all. The rest of you… put on your best show and do my old friend Henry Gordon Jago proud.”

With that he turned away, beckoning to Leela to join her. He hurried through the corridors of the Palace Theatre where there was even more frenetic activity now it was known that the royals were coming. Outside he hailed a hansom and told the driver to make haste to St. Bartholomew’s.

He hadn’t decided which patient should get the treatment first by the time he reached the hospital. When he stepped into the ward he noticed that the accountant with offices on Charing Cross Road was being visited by the wife whose picture was at his bedside.

But he went, first, to the curate. His friend was still praying at his side.

“Do you believe in miracles?” The Doctor asked him.

“It… is the very core of my faith,” the Reverend Aitkin answered. “But…”

“Say a prayer quietly,” The Doctor told him. “For all those afflicted this way.”

The curate did so. The Doctor leaned over his unconscious friend and unstoppered the bottle. Moments later it had the same effect as it had on Leela. He leaned back quickly and dismissed the grateful thanks.

“Faith, hope, love,” he said before going to the accountant’s bedside. By the time he left him there was starting to be a murmur of voices around the ward.

Doctor Lang caught up with him as he came downstairs from the women’s ward.

“What did you do?” he asked.

“Nothing your medicine can explain,” The Doctor answered. “Just report that the patients all recovered spontaneously. I can assure you there will be no more with these symptoms. Now I must get to St. Thomas’s. There are other patients to see."

Doctor Lang called his fellow Scottish doctor at the other hospital. It made things easier. Again, there was no explanation for the recovery of the comatose patients that a competent doctor could put in his notes, but the fact that they were awake and recovering was all that mattered.

The Doctor and Leela returned to the Palace Theatre where the royal party had already arrived. The theatre was packed. Jago reported that he had saved two places in the upper circle for his friends.

“Capital,” The Doctor said with a wide smile. “Come along, Leela. I think we deserve a little entertainment after the day we’ve had.”