

Mr Shansmuir

“So, what sort of mess has Gervaise got himself into this time?” My host asked wearily. I rummaged around in my briefcase and brought out the frayed Manila envelope.

“Mr Pryker wants to ask you about this.”

I held it out to him and he peered down at the faded writing. Then he saw the ancient and cracked wax seal and I heard a sudden intake of breath. He was staring at it as if I was handing him a poisonous reptile.

“The Montagnon Deed,” he gasped. “My God, take the cursed thing away!”

I was shocked at his sudden discomfiture. Fearing he might be ill I offered to fetch water but he gestured me instead to a bottle of cheap whisky on the sideboard. I poured him a hefty belt which he gulped down whole. He seemed to recover somewhat.

“You know what it is then?” I demanded.

His reply was brief and unexpected.

“Shansmuir!”

I recognised the name at once. Shansmuir was the surname of the founder of my firm. Now called Pryker & Co it still lurked in Thavies Inn, London where Richard Shansmuir had arrived, seemingly from nowhere, to open an office in 1740. From the outset, he acted only for the richest, most notorious and dissolute villains of the age. He was able, by exploiting his clients’ great wealth and power, to save them from the gallows and the gaol. However, fate always seemed to mete out to them their just deserts in other, often more horrible ways.

Since then a descendant, eccentrically also called Richard, had continued to run the firm in the same way. The black joke was that it was the same person, that he was some sort of ghoul who could not die. However, in 1975 the last Richard Shansmuir had vanished as mysteriously as his predecessor had appeared leaving my present host, George Harker, in charge along with my principal Gervaise Pryker, who was then just a lowly Clerk like me.

Harker’s eyes strayed back to the envelope and then to me, questioningly.

“Where did you find it?” He croaked.

“In the deed room,” I explained. “Beneath the Montagnon cabinet; seems to have been hidden there. Mr Pryker is most alarmed at its contents.” I paused. “What has Mr Shansmuir to do with it?”

He motioned me back to my chair.

“Sit and listen.”

He poured himself a further generous whisky, took a large swallow and began to speak.

“It is so easy for you people today. Back in 1947, just after the War, it was impossible to become a solicitor without the capital to buy Articles. I had begun to despair of ever succeeding but then I was lucky, if you can call it that. One winter’s evening I saved someone from a street thief. His name was Mr Kastor and he wanted to reward me but I refused. However I did tell him of my predicament.”

Harker paused as if the recollection was painful.

“Next day I received a note telling me to attend on a Mr Shansmuir in the Vaults, Holborn.”

I gave a nod of recognition. The Vaults was a wine bar near Chancery Lane; the haunt of paunchy, pin striped barristers trying to seduce their pupils with expensive claret. Not my style but Gervaise Pryker was a frequent patron. George sniffed.

“In my day it was where the most exclusive and discrete lawyers could meet their rich and privileged clients in complete secrecy. Mr Shansmuir always took the last booth on the left which assured him total privacy. I never saw him anywhere else.”

“Not at the office?” I asked, incredulous. He shook his head.

“No, that was the domain of his Managing Clerk, the man I had saved, Mr Kastor.”

It seemed extraordinary but I had a more pressing question

“What did he look like?”

“Just like his portrait,” was his rather disturbing reply. There was a picture of the original Shansmuir painted by Romney hanging in the Partners’ dining room back in Thavies Inn. But that was over two hundred years old. I was about to try and clarify but he pressed on.

“He offered me Articles at a salary, unheard of in those days. I gratefully accepted and was immediately instructed to act for his favourite client, Sir Jaspar Montagnon.”

I leaned forward eagerly.

“Setting up the Montagnon Trust?”

Harker gave me an odd look.

“No, drafting the Montagnon Deed. That document that you have brought me.”

I sat back in shock. This was not what my principal wanted to hear. The Montagnon Trust was a well known and loved charity that provided much needed facilities for injured servicemen. It had been set up out of the vast estates of Sir Jaspar Montagnon under the terms of his Will.

The deed in my briefcase, on the other hand, gifted these same estates to his wife Lady Madelain and was dated some months before his death in 1948. His death was something of a mystery. There had been a car crash; his wife had escaped but he had been burnt alive. His body apparently totally consumed. The Will had always been challenged by Lady Madelain’s son by a second marriage that had taken place indecently soon after the accident. If this Deed proved to be genuine Pryker & Co faced potential ruin.

“So the Deed is valid?” I gasped.

Harker gave a grim snigger.

“Perhaps.”

“So what happened?” I entreated. “How did you and Shansmuir cheat Lady Madelain out of her gift?”

Harker gave me a contemptuous glance.

“Shansmuir never cheated anybody. Lady Madelain had a straight choice. Either the Deed was put into effect or the Will. It was her decision. She chose the Will.”

“Why?” I asked, baffled.

A far away look came into his eyes.

“All I know is that when Sir Jaspar died Lady Madelain came to see Shansmuir to demand that he put the Deed into effect. She had heard about a Will and wanted to ensure that it would not take precedence over her gift. He met her in his booth, I was there. She demanded to see the Deed. She thought he had destroyed it. I remember he had shown it to her; holding it up so that the light from the table lamp shone through the delicate goatskin pages to colour her features deathly white as she sat opposite.”

He paused and sipped more whisky before continuing.

“I saw her expression change from anger to fear. She seemed struck dumb but finally hissed out the words: ‘bury it!’ Then she was gone, I never saw her again.”

Harker stopped speaking and sat gazing into space. Then he casually rolled himself a mean cigarette which he lit and drew on greedily. Exasperation swept through me.

“Why did Lady Madelain pass up a legal gift?” I asked.

“How do you know it was legal?” He shot back.

I pointed at my briefcase.

“You witnessed Sir Jaspar’s signature.”

He shook his head.

“No, I witnessed *a* signature.” I noted the emphasis, what was he trying to suggest? Before I could press him he blew out some smoke then grinned and sat back in his chair.

“Do you like crosswords?” He asked lightly.

“What?” I demanded.

“Personally I love them,” he continued. “Particularly anagrams; I love finding words in people’s names. Yours: Marko Rapinet; I can make: ‘a top rank mire’.” He started to laugh. I began to wonder whether he might be suffering from dementia. However he suddenly stopped and stared at me intently.

“Do you know what you can make from Shansmuir?”

I shook my head.

“Rhamnysis.” He replied.

“I see.” I said at length. I had had enough of these riddles. I got up. Pryker would have to sort this all out himself.

“Thanks for all your help.” I said shortly with no attempt at sincerity.

He clambered to his feet as well and turned to the book case behind his chair and pulled out a volume.

“Take this. It may have the answer you are looking for.”

I took it from him and inspected the cover. It was an old, well thumbed volume describing the setting up of the Montagnon Trust. I looked back at him. I felt like yelling out: ‘If you have something to say, say it!’ However I dropped the book into my brief case and he showed me out.

I stopped in a café to take stock. Pryker would want an explanation. I pulled out the book and started to read. It explained that Sir Jaspar had been captured in Singapore by the Japanese in 1941. He had suffered very badly and was a wheel chair bound invalid when he returned home.

Pryker had earlier explained to me that Lady Madelain was an ex showgirl Sir Jaspar had married in his lurid pre-war past. However the book explained how the privations Sir Jaspar had suffered had changed him from a wastrel into a saint. Scorning his gaolers’ brutality he had cared for his fellow captives and many owed him their lives. On his return, sick and enfeebled, his wife had quickly tired of him to take up with an actor and gigolo who she married after his death. Sir Jaspar had spent the remainder of his life alleviating the suffering of those who, like him, had been broken by the War.

One passage fascinated me. It described how he had nursed a sick Burmese child back to health and in gratitude the parents had tattooed him with a motif that would ensure him assistance from the native tribesmen if he ever escaped. In early 1945 he did get away and the tattoo proved invaluable. There was a colour photograph showing the extraordinary motif that crawled across his back like a brilliantly coloured serpent.

I do not know why but something made me pull out the packet and extract the Deed. I recalled how Shansmuir had showed it to Lady Madelain. I opened the soft white parchment skin pages and held it up to the light streaming through the window of the coffee shop.

How long it lay on the floor at my feet I do not know. A waitress bent down to pick it up.

“Leave it!” I shouted. She coloured and fled. With trembling hands I managed to replace it in the packet. I went straight back to the office and confronted Pryker.

“The Deed is not genuine. Sir Jaspar was already dead when it was signed.”

Pryker scowled suspiciously at me.

“Harker tell you this?”

I shook my head. He gave me a further long hard stare.

“Can you prove it is not genuine?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“How?”

“I would rather not say,” I responded. He glowered at me, his eyes narrowed. He was in a hole and we both knew it. Finally he gave a mirthless smile.

“So I am in your debt Marko?”

I gave him an equally jaundiced smirk. Yet again Shansmuir had done an Artitled Clerk a favour.

“So what do we do now?” He asked.

“We put it back where we found it.”

He nodded then got up and walked to the window. A panel of stained glass threw a kaleidoscope of colours across his face. I had to fight down a sudden urge to vomit but I was not finished yet.

“Does the name Rhamnysis mean anything to you?” I asked him. He gave me a glare.

“Yes, it’s another name for the Greek deity *Nemisis*. Why?”

“That figures,” I gasped.

I had to flee the room to the sanctuary of the street and the fresh air. Those colours playing over Pryker’s face; it came to me again. The book was right. It was a beautiful tattoo and, despite being hidden in the dark all those years, when held to the light the colours were still as clear as when first pricked into that soft white skin.