



The Cursed Library

By Elaine Cunningham

Today, on the very eve of battle, four comrades at arms will assemble for the first time. I would have preferred a longer acquaintance before we ventured into the cursed library, but of necessity, every waking moment since our induction into the Stygian Society has been spent in solitary study of each other's literary work. The success of our mission depends upon a thorough knowledge of the heroes and villains who leaked from our pens onto the page—and from there, it would seem, into this strange time and place.

This task found the two ladies in our party—Miss Jane Austen and me, Mary Shelley—at a disadvantage, for we had lived out our natural lives before the two gentlemen drew their first wailing breaths. How we all came to be here is a mystery. The temptation to set aside my studies and stratagems to ponder the nature of this inexplicable second life is my constant companion, but such matters will have to wait.

The rendezvous chosen by the Stygian Society was a pleasant tavern in one of Scotland's border towns. Mr. H.G. Wells and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle were already

present when I arrived. We exchanged greetings and a few word of mutual admiration before they returned to their conversation. Apparently they had known each other in life, and they spoke with great animation about their adventures with the Allahakbarries, a cricket team whose members were chosen for their literary accomplishments.

“*Allah akbar* means ‘God help us,’ which was most apt,” explained Mr. Wells in an aside to me. “With the exception of Sir Arthur here, a notable athlete, we were terrible at cricket!”

I noted, privately of course, that they seemed equally unskilled in Arabic.

Still, we each had other strengths. Sir Arthur was indeed an athlete and an experienced boxer, a good man to have in a fight. From his imagination came one of the most ingenious villains in all literature, and a hero to match him. Mr. Wells saw possibilities beyond the sight of most men, for he created futures as fantastical in their own way as the one we had suddenly, inexplicably come to inhabit. My strength lay in the resolve I brought to this task, more than enough to fill the void that might occur if any among us should waver.

A small brown wren of a woman approached the table. I recognized her from her few portraits, as well as the lace cap and simple dress of a bygone time. As her dark eyes met mine, I understood why our ranks included a woman whose life had, by all accounts, been sheltered and uneventful. Like her creation Lady Susan, Jane Austen would almost certainly possess the greatest intelligence and force of character in any company she kept.

The gentlemen rose to greet her. Now that our party was complete, the waiter came to take our orders. He seemed not at all surprised by our outmoded attire.

“Some sort of convention, is it?” he said in a cheery manner. “Steampunk, I suppose?”

We responded with non-committal murmurs.

“Quite a few of you in town the past few days. Good for business,” he went on. “The tourists love it, and most of you folk play right along. Except for this one fellow.”

His tone had darkened considerably toward the last, so I raised an inquiring eyebrow. The waiter needed no further encouragement.

“An Englishman, the sort who thinks himself better than the rest of the world. Too smart by half. Tried to ‘reason’ with me when I told him he couldn’t smoke a pipe at his table. He said it has a ‘salutary effect’ on his ‘powers of deduction.’ Who talks like that?” he said indignantly.

“Who indeed?” murmured Sir Arthur, whose face had become drawn and pale during this recitation. “Was he by chance wearing a tweed cap when he came in?”

“That he was! One of those old hunting caps. Can’t recall the word for it.”

“A deerstalker,” said Sir Arthur in a choked tone.

The waiter pointed a triumphant finger at Sherlock Holmes’ creator. “That’s the one.”

Mr. Wells came to Sir Arthur's rescue by ordering sandwiches and tea for us all. When the waiter hurried off, Sir Arthur groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"It's Reichenbach Falls all over again! Will that wretched man never consent to remain decently dead?"

Jane Austen placed a small, white hand on his shoulder, a gesture that was both consoling and bracing. "We are none of us in a position to cast aspersions in that regard, Sir Arthur. And I dare say we'll be glad of Mr. Holmes's assistance before the night is through."

We all fell silent, no doubt thinking, as I was, of the characters we'd created, and the prospect of confronting them in the flesh.

We'd nearly finished our repast when the village clock chimed the hour. Mr. Wells removed a small metal device from a waistcoat pocket and studied the brightly lit words upon it. He tapped busily at the glass for a few moments and smiled at the result. A man of science and a futurist in his own time, he'd taken to modern innovations like a duck to water.

"Our transport will arrive momentarily. Shall we?"

Sir Arthur settled the bill and we trooped out onto the street. A long black motorcar awaited us. I swallowed my fear and slid in to sit beside Miss Austen, who was handling this novelty with admirable aplomb.

We left the town behind with unnatural speed. Night had fallen, and the rising moon shone upon increasingly desolate scenery as we roared toward Gallimar tower.

It stood atop a rocky hill, tall and square and somber, the sole survivor of a medieval fortress and village. Other ruins were still discernible, particularly the outline of a chapel's stone foundation, and the ancient, leaning stones in the weed-choked churchyard.

The tower itself seemed in remarkably good repair. It had been recently purchased and restored, and was now in private hands. Whose, we could not be wholly certain.

We disembarked from the motorcar at the foot of the hill and readied our weapons: ink, pens, and imagination. The only light in the tower came from the uppermost floor, so Mr. Wells passed out small, ingenious mechanical torches to help us combat the darkness.

"I should like to bid you all farewell now, before we enter the library," said Jane Austen.

Sir Arthur huffed. "I must say, Miss Austen, that sentiment suggests a certain lack of optimism on your part."

Miss Austen's eyes met mine, and a moment of perfect understanding passed between us.

"To the contrary," I said. "We must defeat monsters and villains to gain control of the library, but true victory will come when we undo whatever sorcery—"

"Or science," interjected Mr. Wells.

"Or science," I allowed, "that brought *all* of us into being."

"Not just Frankenstein's monster, but also his creator," Miss Austen said softly.

“Just so,” I agreed. “My Dr. Frankenstein abandoned his creation and refused all responsibility for what he brought into being. We can do better, and we must.”

The gentlemen nodded, accepting the sacrifice that victory might bring. What was done must be undone, whatever the cost.

Sir Arthur surprised us all by laughing.

“If we’re destined to share our characters’ fate,” he explained, “and if Sherlock Holmes is any measure, we’ll almost certainly live forever. Whether we want to or not.”

Mr. Wells clapped him on the back. “Spoken like a true Alahakbarrian! Victory is the least of our concerns. We live to play the game, do we not?”

The low, creaking groan of ancient wood and unoiled hinges drew our attention to the tower. We watched the double doors swing open in unmistakable invitation. Lights flared on throughout the ground floor, revealing long rows of books and casting scuttling shadows as our foe readied for the attack.

“It would seem,” said Sir Arthur with a small, wry smile, “that the game is afoot.”