

# **The Hunchback**

## **Assignments**

by Arthur Slade

*To Tori,*  
*With all my love*

# Chapter 1

## Abomination

The large carriage rattled with grotesqueries--bones of dead cats and pigs strung up as wind chimes, bleached bear skulls dangling from wires, and several shrunken monkey heads. Their glass eyes stared out at the approaching winter. Bells that hung from reins tinkled, warning away the wandering spirits. Four horses pulled the carriage, hip bones protruding from their bedraggled flesh, hides scarred by thousands of whippings. Huddled behind them in thick, worn coat and muffler was a grizzled old man.

The gentleman watched the carriage approach down a rutted, moonlit road. A cold breath of wind tested his

knee-length greatcoat. He was tall and slim but didn't shiver. His close-cropped hair, white since birth, glowed in the moonlight. His sharp eyes scanned the carriage, from the shivering driver to the rattling bones, and finally rested on the words *Merveilles et Morte*, written in red across the carriage's side. They appeared and disappeared with the swinging of a lantern.

*Merveille et Morte. Wonders and Death.* He hoped there would be a wonder inside. He had spent his life and a good part of his fortune seeking out those with special talents. The reports about this particular sideshow traveling through Provence were extremely promising. He waited.

At one side of the carriage a flag snapped in the wind, its skull and crossbones flashing. Pirates? An almost imperceptible smile crossed the gentleman's lips. These weren't pirates. Charlatans and gypsy-souls, yes. But pirates? No. He had met real pirates on the open seas; had summarily put them to death.

The gentleman held up his hand and the driver pulled on the reins. The horses slowed to a stop and snorted out frosty air, stomping their feet.

"I would like to see your display," the gentleman said. His French was perfect. His accent Parisian.

“Oh, yes, yes, monsieur! I will be only too happy to show you.” The man set his whip into its holder and climbed down, babbling excitedly. “It is a marvelous collection! The greatest this side of the Nile. Balms to cure cholera. Elixirs to stave off death itself. I have a fine ruby necklace, straight from Cleopatra’s tomb, that will make any arthritic condition vanish. And it will soften the skin, strengthen the bones--”

“I’m not interested in trinkets or balms,” the gentleman cut in. “I want to see your prize attraction.”

A door behind the bench slid open and a hag stuck her head out into the air. Her eyes gleamed within a nest of wrinkles. She was a hundred years old if she was a day. “It is an expensive view,” she rasped. “An extremely rare specimen.”

The gentleman opened a gloved hand. Two golden coins caught the moonlight. “I assume this will cover it.”

The hag nodded and waved a hand at the driver.

“Yes. Yes, monsieur,” the driver said, palming the coins, “of course. Come right this way.”

He led the gentleman to the rear door of the carriage. More bones were strung across the back, charms against death. The gentleman smiled. Only savages relied on such charms and magic to defeat the unknown. Learned men

relied on logic.

The old man took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door with a brassy click. He swung it open and warm moist air belched out. The gentleman didn't turn his nose from the rotten smell. He had encountered much worse on the Crimean battlefields.

“Inside, that is where the prizes are!” The old driver tried to climb in, but the gentleman placed a gloved hand on his shoulder and pulled him out of the way.

“I will enter alone.”

“But, monsieur, only I can explain the origins. The magic! The mystery! The curing power of each item.”

“I don't need explanations.”

The driver nodded and the gentleman stepped up into the fetid compartment, stooping to keep from banging his head. The cramped space was poorly lit by one dangling lantern. In a moment his eyes had adjusted and the details became clear. There were canoptic jars, tiny coffins marked with hieroglyphics, shrunken heads dangling from wires, and the taxidermied body of a half-cat, half-rabbit. He had seen such stuffed things before, but this was a very good representation--it didn't even look as though it had been stitched together. He moved through the collection quickly, ducking under the lantern. He

squeezed between a stuffed snake and a giant bat with marbles for eyes.

At the far end of the carriage was a cage draped in black cloth. He leaned close; from behind the fabric he heard something like the wheezy rattling of breath. Without hesitation he pulled away the cover.

Two eyes, one larger than the other, goggled up at him in fright. Above them was a tinge of red hair set on a rough-hewn, pockmarked skull. The gentleman flinched; he had been expecting something ugly but this was beyond his imagining. A true wretch of a creature crouched in the cage, pressing its back against the sides. It wore a jackal fur vest, which was ill-fitting due to the enormous hump on its back. Pity wormed its way into the gentleman's heart.

The unfortunate monster had to be little more than a year old. It could stand upright, but its cage was so small it was forced to bend its neck, emphasizing its hump. On the bottom of the cage a plaque read *L'enfant du Monstre*.

The gentleman could not stop staring. The specimen's arms looked strong and the legs also were unnaturally muscled but they were bowed and crooked. Nature had been particularly cruel.

The thing was still shivering, but was growing

curious. It blinked, mewling softly. The gentleman squinted at it impassively. It had been a wasted journey; three days travel from London to Provence only to find a child imprisoned by its ugliness. His informant had spoken so highly of this prize, had said the creature was beyond description and value. Ah! That scoundrel would feel the lash of his anger. The gentleman had lost time, when he had none to lose. All the while England's enemies would be inching closer to their goals.

He turned away, but the creature mewed again and whispered, "*Puh-puh-ère?*"

*Father?* The gentleman stopped. The voice sounded so human, so mournful, and it struck a chord in the man's heart. Years ago he'd had a wife who'd died giving birth to their child. A boy, who'd only lived long enough for his father to hold him. The gentleman swallowed. It was all in the past and best forgotten.

Yet, he turned back to the creature. By its size and shape he decided it was a boy, too. A monstrous, malformed boy. The man wondered if he had any food in his pocket. Foolishness. It was time to leave.

The boy said, "*N-n-non p-partir,*" and gazed at him with such absolute sadness that the gentleman was transfixed. Then the boy let out a yelping cry, clenching

his fists as though he were feeling a sudden pain. His face contorted, becoming even uglier.

The gentleman couldn't look away. Was it possible? Was the child actually changing? His face shifting so that his look...softened. He let out another whimper. Where, moments ago, there was a crooked nose with splayed nostrils, now the nose appeared straighter. It was as if, seeing the horror in the gentleman's eyes, the toddler willed himself to change his appearance into something that would please. The boy's brow was no longer so protruding, the eyes were more even. Was it just the flickering of the gaslight? No, the boy's face was altered. Then the child gave a yelp like a wounded puppy and shook his massive head.

The gentleman lowered the cover over the cage and took a deep breath. This monster child was truly a wonder! Worth every moment spent away from England; worth his weight in gold. His talent could be a valuable asset. Its development would require years of investment, but the gentleman was good at playing the long game. He climbed out of the carriage.

The old man was stamping his feet on the ground, hugging himself for warmth.

"I wish to buy the item," the gentlemen said. "The

one in the cage.” He kept his voice even, hiding his excitement.

“Non! Non!” The driver waved his hands. “That is not possible.”

The hag lurched around the corner of the carriage. “He’s very precious. Very precious.”

The gentleman produced a pouch of coins. “This will compensate you for your losses.”

A boney arm shot out of the crone’s shawl and grasped the pouch. She pried open the top and peered inside. “Oui...that is a fair deal.”

“Where did you find him?”

“He comes from far, far away,” the old man said, “from the Steppes. In the ancient land of Moldova, near the spawning ground of demons and--”

“The truth,” the gentleman said in a soft, threatening tone. “I demand the truth.”

The hag moved a step closer. “He was abandoned near Notre Dame. We bought him from an orphanage.”

The gentleman nodded. He whistled and his carriage appeared out of the fog, pulled by four huge horses. Three men, clean cut and dressed in dark greatcoats, jumped to the ground. They marched over to the carriage and at the gentleman’s command they pulled the caged monster-

child from the gypsy carriage and transferred it to their own.

“Farewell,” the gentleman said as he mounted the steps. The child could be heard yelping and bumping up against the bars of his cage. There was a crack of a whip as the man stepped inside and the carriage lurched forward into the mist.

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