

THE WATCHER IN THE SHADOWS

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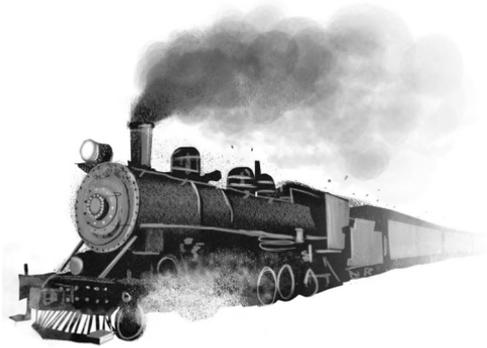
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THE SKY OVER PARIS

Paris, 1936

Those who remember the night Armand Sauvelle passed away would swear that a purple light flashed across the sky, leaving in its wake a trail of blazing ashes that faded away over the horizon; a light that his daughter Irene never saw but which would haunt her dreams for years to come.

It was a cold winter's dawn and the windowpanes in Ward 14 of Saint George's Hospital were covered in a film of ice.

Armand Sauvelle's flame went out silently, without so much as a sigh. His wife Simone and his daughter Irene

looked up as the first glimmer of day cast needles of light across the hospital ward. His youngest child, Dorian, was asleep on one of the chairs. A heart-rending stillness filled the room. No words were necessary to explain what had happened. After six months of suffering, an illness whose name he was never able to pronounce had snatched away Armand Sauvelle's life.

It was the beginning of the worst year the Sauvelle family would ever experience.



Armand Sauvelle took his charm and his infectious laughter with him to the grave, but his numerous debts did not accompany him on his final journey. Soon a whole horde of creditors and vultures wearing elegant frock coats began to drop by the Sauvelles' home in boulevard Haussmann. After the legal niceties of those first visits came the veiled threats. And these soon gave way to the seizure of the family's assets.

Prestigious schools and beautifully tailored clothes were replaced by part-time jobs and simpler outfits for Irene and Dorian. This was the beginning of the Sauvelles' spectacular fall into the real world. The one who came off the worst, however, was Simone. Returning to her job as a teacher did not provide enough income to stem the torrent of debt that consumed their limited resources. New documents signed by Armand seemed to crop up everywhere: a seemingly bottomless

rabbit hole of unpaid loans and letters of credit.

By this point young Dorian had begun to suspect that half the population of Paris was made up of lawyers and accountants, a special breed of ravenous rodent that lived above ground. Also by then, and without telling her mother, Irene had taken a job in a dance hall. For just a few coins (which, in the early hours, she would slip into the box Simone kept hidden under the kitchen sink), she would dance with clumsy young soldiers with sweaty hands who were really no more than frightened children themselves.

At the same time, the Sauvelles discovered that the list of people who used to call themselves friends was evaporating like dew in the morning sun. That summer, however, Henri Laffont, an old friend of Armand Sauvelle, offered the family a small apartment above the art shop he managed in Montparnasse. He waved aside the rent – to be repaid in better times. All he asked in exchange was Dorian's assistance as an errand boy, because his knees were no longer what they had once been. Simone could never find enough words with which to thank old Monsieur Laffont for his kindness. But the shopkeeper didn't expect any thanks. In a world of rats they'd happened on an angel.

As the first days of winter sent a chill through the streets, Irene turned fourteen years of age, although they felt more like twenty-four. For once, she spent the coins she earned in the dance hall on herself and bought a

cake with which to celebrate her birthday with Simone and Dorian. Armand's absence still weighed on them like an oppressive shadow. They blew out the candles together in the narrow sitting room of their apartment on the rue de Rennes, making a wish that the bad luck that had been hounding them for months would be extinguished along with the flames. For once, their wish was not ignored. Although they were still unaware of it, the year of darkness was coming to an end.



Some weeks later, a ray of hope unexpectedly burst into the lives of the Sauvelle family. Thanks to the influence of Monsieur Laffont and his network of acquaintances, Simone was offered a good job in Blue Bay, a small village on the coast far from the dreary greyness of Paris and from the sad memories of Armand Sauvelle's last days. Apparently, a wealthy inventor and toy manufacturer named Lazarus Jann needed a housekeeper to take care of his palatial residence amid the forest of Cravenmoore.

The inventor lived in a huge mansion next to his old toy factory, which was now closed, with his wife Alexandra, who was seriously ill and had been bedridden for twenty years. The pay was generous and besides, Lazarus Jann was offering them the possibility of moving into Seaview, a modest house that stood on the edge of the cliffs on the other side of Cravenmoore forest.

In the middle of June 1937, Monsieur Laffont bid goodbye to the Sauvelle family on Platform 6 of the Gare du Nord. Simone and her two children boarded the train that was to take them to the Normandy coast. As Monsieur Laffont watched the carriages disappear into the distance, he smiled to himself for a moment – he had the feeling that the story of the Sauvelles, their real story, had only just begun.

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GEOGRAPHY AND ANATOMY

Normandy, summer of 1937

On their first day at Seaview, Irene and her mother tried to instil some sort of order into what was to be their new home. Meanwhile, Dorian discovered a new passion: geography or, to be precise, map making. Equipped with the pencils and drawing book Henri Laffont had given him as a parting gift, Simone Sauvelle's younger child retreated to a spot on the cliffs, a vantage point from which he could enjoy the spectacular view.

The village with its small fishing dock occupied the centre of the large bay. To the east, an endless expanse of white sand, known as the Englishman's Beach, stretched

along the water's edge. Further on, the narrow point of the headland jutted out into the sea like a giant claw, separating Blue Bay from the wide gulf the locals called Black Bay, because of its dark, deep waters. The Sauvelles' new home was perched on the very tip of the headland.

Half a mile out to sea, Dorian detected a small island with a lighthouse. The lighthouse tower stood dark and mysterious, its edges blurred by the shimmering haze. Turning his head back towards land, he could see his sister Irene and his mother standing on the porch of the house.

Seaview was a two-storey building of white timber perched on the cliff-top. Behind it grew a thick forest and, just above the treetops, he could see the majestic residence of Lazarus Jann: Cravenmoore.

Cravenmoore looked more like a castle than a home, the product of an extravagant and twisted imagination. A cathedral-like construction of arches, flying buttresses, towers and domes adorned its angular roof. The building itself was shaped like a cross, with various wings sprouting from it. An army of gargoyles and stone angels guarded the façade like a flock of petrified spectres. As Dorian closed his drawing book and prepared to return to Seaview, he wondered what kind of person would choose to live in a place like that. He would soon find out: that night they had been invited to dine at Cravenmoore, courtesy of their new benefactor.



Irene's new bedroom faced north-west. Gazing out of her window she could see the lighthouse and the patches of light cast by the sun over the ocean. After months of being imprisoned in the tiny Paris flat, the luxury of having a room to herself and being able to close the door and enjoy her own private space felt sinfully good.

As she watched the sea turn to copper in the setting sun, Irene faced the dilemma of what to wear for her first dinner with Lazarus Jann. She had only a few items left from what had once been a huge wardrobe, and the idea of being received at Cravenmoore mansion made all her dresses seem like embarrassing old rags. After trying on the only two outfits that might do, Irene noticed another problem she hadn't counted on.

Ever since she had turned thirteen, her body had insisted on adding volume in some places and losing it in others. Now, close to her fifteenth birthday, Irene was more aware than ever of the influence of nature as she looked in the mirror. The severe cut of her drab clothes did not match her new curvaceous shape.

Shortly before nightfall, Simone Sauvelle rapped gently on Irene's door.

'Come in.'

Her mother closed the door behind her and quickly scanned the situation. All of Irene's dresses were laid out

on the bed. Wearing only a plain white vest, her daughter was kneeling by the window, staring out at the distant lights of the ships in the Channel. Simone observed Irene's slender body and smiled to herself.

'Time flies and we don't even notice, do we?'

'None of them fits me. I'm sorry,' Irene replied. 'I've tried.'

Simone went over to the window and knelt down next to her daughter. In the middle of the bay the lights of the village spread ripples of colour over the water. For a moment, they both gazed at the spectacle. Simone stroked her daughter's face and smiled.

'I think we're going to like this place. What do you think?' she asked.

'But what about us? Is he going to like *us*?'

'Mr Jann?'

Irene nodded.

'We're a charming family. He'll love us,' replied Simone.

'Are you sure?'

'I certainly hope so.'

Irene pointed to her clothes.

'Wear something of mine.' Simone smiled. 'I think my dresses will look better on you than they do on me.'

Irene blushed. 'Don't exaggerate.'

'Just you wait and see.'



Dorian's expression was priceless when he saw his sister arrive at the foot of the stairs draped in one of Simone's dresses. Irene fixed her green eyes on her brother and raised a threatening finger.

'Not one word,' she warned.

Dorian nodded mutely, unable to take his eyes off this stranger who spoke with the same voice as his sister Irene. Simone noticed this and tried not to smile. She placed a hand on the boy's shoulder and knelt down to straighten the purple bow tie he had inherited from his father.

'You'll spend your life surrounded by women, son. You'd better start getting used to it.'

By the time the clock on the wall struck eight they were all ready for the great event, dressed in their smartest clothes. They were also terrified.



A light breeze blowing in from the sea stirred the thick forest surrounding Cravenmoore. The rustling of invisible leaves accompanied their footsteps as Simone and her two children walked along the path through the wood. A pale moon struggled to break through the canopy of shadows and hidden birds nesting in the crowns of the century-old giants called out to each other in an unnerving chorus.

'This place gives me the creeps,' said Irene.

'Nonsense,' her mother snapped. 'It's only a wood. On you go.'

From his position at the rear Dorian glanced around at the twisted forms of the vegetation. In the darkness his imagination transformed the sinister shapes into dozens of evil creatures lying in wait.

‘In the daylight you’ll see there’s nothing out there but bushes and trees,’ said Simone Sauvelle, not sounding entirely sure herself.

A few minutes later, after a trek that Irene thought was never going to end, the imposing profile of Cravenmoore stood before them. Golden beams of light shone from the large windows beneath a jagged forest of gargoyles. Beyond the house they could make out the toy factory, an annex to the main building.

Once they were out of the woodland, Simone and her children stopped to contemplate the immensity of the toymaker’s residence. Suddenly a bird that looked like a crow emerged from the undergrowth, flapped its wings and took off, taking a curious route over the gardens that surrounded Cravenmoore. When circling one of the stone fountains it alighted at Dorian’s feet. After it had stopped flapping its wings, the crow lay on its side and began to rock gently to and fro until it came to rest. Dorian knelt down and cautiously stretched out his right hand.

‘Be careful,’ warned Irene.

Ignoring her advice, Dorian stroked the crow’s feathers. The bird showed no signs of life. He lifted it up and unfolded its wings. Dorian looked puzzled, then

dismayed. He turned to Irene and Simone.

‘It’s made of wood,’ he murmured.

They all looked at one another. Simone sighed.

‘Let’s just make a good impression, all right?’ she begged her children.

They both nodded in agreement. Dorian placed the bird back on the ground. Simone Sauvelle gave a hint of a smile and then all three climbed the white marble staircase that snaked towards the large bronze entrance.

The doors of Cravenmoore opened automatically, before they’d even had time to use the brass knocker, which was shaped like an angel’s face. A figure stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the aura of light that poured from the house. The figure suddenly came alive, tilting its head with a soft mechanical click. As it did so, they could see its face for the first time. It stared at them with lifeless eyes, simple glass beads encased by a mask that was frozen in a spine-chilling grin.

Dorian gulped. Irene and her mother took a step back. The figure stretched out one hand and then stood still again.

‘I hope Christian didn’t frighten you. He’s a rather clumsy old creation of mine.’

The Sauvelles turned towards the voice that came from the foot of the marble stairs. A kind face which was aging gracefully was smiling up at them mischievously. Blue eyes sparkled beneath a thick, silvery mop of well-groomed hair. The man, who was elegantly dressed

and held an ebony walking stick with coloured inlays, climbed the steps towards them, then bowed politely.

‘My name is Lazarus Jann, and I think I owe you an apology.’

His voice was warm and comforting. His large blue eyes scrutinised each member of the family until finally they came to rest on Simone’s face.

‘I was taking my usual evening walk through the forest and was delayed. Madame Sauvelle, I believe . . . ?’

‘It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.’

‘Please call me Lazarus.’

Simone nodded. ‘This is my daughter Irene,’ she said. ‘And this is Dorian, the youngest in the family.’

Lazarus Jann shook their hands courteously. His grasp was firm and pleasant, his smile infectious.

‘Right. As for Christian, don’t let him frighten you. I keep him as a souvenir of my first period. He’s awkward and doesn’t look very friendly, I know.’

‘Is he a machine?’ asked Dorian quickly. He was fascinated.

Simone’s scolding look came too late. Lazarus smiled at Dorian.

‘You could call him that. Technically, Christian is what is known as an automaton.’

‘Did you build him, sir?’

‘Dorian,’ his mother reproached him.

Lazarus smiled again. The boy’s curiosity didn’t seem to bother him in the least.

‘Yes. I built him and many more besides. That is, or rather was, my profession. But I think dinner is ready. Shall we discuss this, and get to know each other better, over a nice plate of food?’

The smell of a delicious roast wafted towards them.



Neither the alarming reception by the automaton nor the impressive exterior of Cravenmoore could have prepared the Sauvelles for the interior of Lazarus Jann’s mansion. No sooner had they stepped through the front door than they were submerged in a world of fantasy far beyond anything they could have imagined.

A sumptuous staircase seemed to spiral towards infinity. Looking up, the Sauvelles could see it vanishing into the central tower of Cravenmoore, which was crowned by a small turret with windows all around, infusing the house with an other-worldly light. Beneath this spectral glow lay an immense gallery of mechanical creations. On one of the walls, a large clock with cartoon eyes smiled at the visitors. A ballerina, wrapped in a transparent veil, pirouetted in the centre of an oval hall in which every object, every detail, formed part of the world of fantastical creatures brought to life by Lazarus Jann. The doorknobs were smiling faces that winked as you turned them. A large owl with magnificent plumage slowly dilated its glass pupils as it flapped its wings. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of miniature figures and toys

filled an endless array of display cabinets it would have taken a whole lifetime to explore. A small mechanical puppy wagged its tail and barked playfully as a tiny metal mouse scurried by. Hanging from the ceiling, a merry-go-round of dragons and stars danced in mid-air to the distant notes of a music box.

Wherever they looked, the Sauvelles discovered new marvels, impossible new creations that defied anything they had ever seen before. For a few minutes all three of them just stood there, completely bewitched.

‘It’s . . . it’s amazing!’ said Irene, unable to believe her eyes.

‘Well, this is only the entrance hall. But I’m glad you like it,’ said Lazarus, leading them towards Cravenmoore’s grand dining room.

Dorian’s eyes were as big as saucers. He was speechless. Simone and Irene, who were equally stunned, tried hard not to fall under the spell cast by the house.

The room where dinner was served was no less impressive. From the glassware to the cutlery, from the crockery to the rich carpets covering the floor, everything bore the mark of Lazarus Jann. Not one object in the house seemed to belong to the real world, to the drab, horribly mundane world they had left behind the moment they’d stepped inside the mansion. But Irene’s eyes were glued to a large painting that hung above the fireplace, which was shaped like the flaming jaws of a dragon. It was the portrait of a lady wearing a

white dress. She was stunningly beautiful. The power of her gaze seemed to transcend the painter's brush and became almost real. For a few seconds, Irene was mesmerised by her strange captivating eyes.

'My wife, Alexandra . . . When she was still in good health. Marvellous days those were,' said Lazarus behind her, his voice tinged with sadness.



The dinner passed pleasantly in the glow of the flames. Lazarus Jann proved to be an excellent host who quickly charmed Dorian and Irene with his jokes and astonishing stories. As the evening wore on, he told them that the delicious food had been prepared by Hannah, a girl of Irene's age who worked for him as a cook and a maid. After the first few minutes, the initial tension lifted and the Sauvelles began to join in the toymaker's relaxed conversation.

By the time they started on the second course (roast turkey, Hannah's speciality) the Sauvelles felt as if they were in the presence of an old friend. Simone was relieved to see that the affection flowing between her children and Lazarus was mutual. Even she was falling for his charm.

Between one anecdote and the next, Lazarus also gave them polite explanations about the house and the nature of the duties Simone's new job entailed. Friday night was Hannah's night off and she spent it with her family

in Blue Bay. But they would get the chance to meet her as soon as she returned to work, Lazarus said. Hannah was the only other person, apart from Lazarus and his wife, who lived at Cravenmoore. She would help the Sauvelles settle in and deal with any queries that might arise concerning the house.

When the dessert arrived – an irresistible raspberry tart – Lazarus began to sketch out what he expected of them. Although he had retired, he still worked occasionally in his workshop, which occupied an adjacent building. Both the factory and the rooms on all floors above ground level were forbidden to them. They must never, under any circumstances, set foot in any of them. Especially in the west wing, as this was where his wife lived.

For over twenty years, Alexandra Jann had been suffering from a strange and incurable disease that confined her to her bed. Lazarus's wife lived on the second floor of the west wing, in a room which only her husband entered in order to look after her and provide her with the care her condition required. The toymaker told them that his wife, then a beautiful young woman, full of life, had caught the mysterious illness while they were travelling around central Europe.

The deadly virus slowly took hold of her and very soon she could barely walk. Within six months her health had deteriorated further, turning her into a complete invalid, a sad reminder of the person he had married only a

few years earlier. Twelve months after she'd caught the disease, her memory began to fail and in a matter of weeks she could scarcely recognise her own husband. From that point on she stopped speaking, and looking into her eyes was like gazing into a bottomless well. Alexandra Jann was twenty-six at the time. She had never again left Cravenmoore.

The Sauvelles listened in silence to Lazarus's sad account. Obviously distressed by his memories and the two decades of solitude, he nonetheless tried to play down the matter by shifting the conversation to Hannah's mouth-watering tart. But the sorrow in his eyes did not go unnoticed by Irene.

It wasn't hard for her to imagine why Lazarus Jann had escaped into a place of his own making. Deprived of what he most loved, he had taken refuge in a fantasy world, creating hundreds of creatures with which to fill the deep loneliness surrounding him.

As she listened to the toymaker's words, Irene realised she would no longer be able to view Cravenmoore as the magnificent product of a boundless imagination, the ultimate expression of the genius that had created it. Having learned to recognise the emptiness of her own loss, she knew this place to be little more than the dark reflection of the solitude that had overwhelmed Lazarus during the past twenty years. Every piece of that marvellous world was a silent tear.

By the time they had finished dinner, Simone

Sauvelle was quite clear about her obligations and responsibilities. Her duties would be rather like those of a housekeeper, a job that had little to do with her original profession as a teacher. Nevertheless, she was prepared to do her best in order to guarantee a good future for her children. Simone would supervise Hannah's chores and those of the occasional servants; she would be in charge of all administrative work and the maintenance of Lazarus Jann's property; deal with suppliers and shopkeepers; take care of the post; and guarantee that nothing and nobody would intrude on the toymaker's withdrawal from the outside world. Her job also included buying books for Lazarus's library. Her employer had made it clear that her past work as a teacher had been one of the reasons he'd chosen her over other candidates with far greater experience in housekeeping. Lazarus insisted that this was one of her most important responsibilities.

In exchange for her work, Simone and her children would be allowed to live at Seaview and she would receive a more than reasonable salary. Lazarus would take care of Irene and Dorian's school expenses for the following year, at the end of the summer. He also promised to cover the costs of university degrees for both children if they showed the ability and the interest. For their part, Irene and Dorian could help their mother with whatever tasks she assigned them in the mansion, as long as they respected the golden rule: never to exceed

the boundaries the owner had laid down for them.

To Simone, considering all the misery of the previous months, Lazarus's offer seemed like a blessing from heaven. Blue Bay was an idyllic place to start a new life with her children. The job was very desirable and Lazarus was evidently a kind and generous employer. Sooner or later, luck had to come their way. Fate had sent them to this remote location, and for the first time in a long while Simone was prepared to accept what it was offering her. In fact, if her instincts were correct, and they usually were, she perceived a genuine warmth flowing towards her and her family. It wasn't difficult to imagine that their company and their presence at Cravenmoore could help soothe the immense solitude in which its owner seemed to live.

Dinner ended with a cup of coffee and Lazarus's promise to a stunned Dorian that, if he wished, one day he would initiate him into the mysteries of the construction of automata. The boy's eyes lit up, and for a brief moment Simone and Lazarus's gaze met. Simone recognised in his look a trace of loneliness, a shadow she knew only too well. The toymaker half-closed his eyes and stood up quietly, indicating that the evening was at an end.

He led them towards the front door, stopping every now and then to tell them about some of the amazing objects they saw along the way. Dorian and Irene listened glassy-eyed to his explanations. Shortly before they came

to the entrance hall, Lazarus halted in front of what looked like a complex construction made of mirrors and lenses. Without saying a word, he put his arm into a gap between two mirrors. Slowly, the reflection of his hand grew smaller until it vanished. Lazarus smiled.

‘You mustn’t believe everything you see. The image of reality we perceive with our eyes is only an illusion, an optical effect,’ he said. ‘Light is a great liar. Here, give me your hand.’

Dorian did as he was told and let the toymaker guide his hand through the passage between the mirrors. The image faded before his very eyes. Dorian turned to Lazarus and gave him a puzzled look.

‘Do you know anything about the laws of optics?’ the man asked him.

Dorian shook his head.

‘Magic is only an extension of physics. Are you good at maths?’

‘Not bad, except when it comes to trigonometry . . .’

Lazarus smiled.

‘We’ll start there then. Fantasy is derived from numbers. That’s the trick.’

The boy nodded, although he wasn’t quite sure what Lazarus was talking about. Finally, Lazarus showed them the way to the door. It was then that, almost by chance, Dorian thought he witnessed something impossible. As they walked past one of the flickering lamps, their bodies cast shadows against the wall. All of them but one:

Lazarus's body left no trace of a shadow, as if his presence were only a mirage.

When Dorian turned round, Lazarus was observing him intently. The boy swallowed hard. The toymaker nipped his cheek in a friendly manner.

'Don't believe everything you see . . .'

Dorian followed his mother and sister out of the house.

'Thanks for everything. Goodnight,' said Simone.

'It's been a pleasure, and I'm not just saying that to be polite,' said Lazarus. He gave them a warm smile and raised a hand in farewell.



The Sauvelles entered the forest shortly before midnight, on their way back to Seaview.

Dorian was quiet, still entranced by memories of Lazarus Jann's house of marvels. Irene also seemed to be in some other world, lost in her thoughts. Simone sighed with relief and thanked God for their good luck.

Just before Cravenmoore's outline disappeared behind them, Simone turned to take a last look. The only light came from a window on the second floor of the west wing. A figure stood, unmoving, behind the curtains. At that precise moment, the light went out and the window was plunged into darkness.



Back in her room, Irene took off the dress her mother had lent her and folded it carefully over the chair. She could hear Simone and Dorian talking in the next room. She turned off the light and lay down on the bed. Blue shadows danced across the ceiling and the murmur of waves breaking against the cliffs caressed the silence; Irene closed her eyes and tried in vain to fall asleep.

It was hard to believe that from that night on she would never have to see their old Paris apartment again, nor would she have to return to the dance hall to relieve those soldiers of a few coins. She knew that the shadows of the big city couldn't reach her here. She got up and went over to the window.

The lighthouse rose up against the dark night. Irene focused on the small island enveloped in a luminous mist. A sudden light seemed to shine, like the blink of a faraway mirror. Seconds later, the light shone again, then went out. Irene frowned, then noticed that her mother was standing on the porch below. Wrapped in a thick jumper, Simone was quietly gazing out to sea. Irene didn't have to see her face to know that she was crying. They would both take a long time to fall asleep. On their first night at Seaview, after that first step towards what seemed to be a new and happy life, Armand Sauvelle's absence was more painful than ever.