

Excerpt from *Dance of the Veils* by Sparf, in the anthology *Trick or Treat 2: Historical Halloween*, available NOW from RabbitValley.com

The knock at his door jarred him from slumber, nearly causing him to slide out of his chair. He shook his head, trying to clear the vague remnants of some dream or other from his head and the sleep from his vision. The copy of Browning lay discarded on the floor before him.

There was another knocking, louder this time. "Mr. Bartholomew?"

The fox scooped the book off the floor and returned it, bent pages and all, to the side table. "Yes? Come in."

The door opened, the hinges not making their accustomed creaking. Mrs. Piper had apparently oiled them. In stepped the lovely female ermine. He glanced at the clock and found, to his embarrassment, that he'd forgotten to wind it. It had stopped just before midnight, which meant that Mrs. Meriwether's visit was late indeed. The heat rushed to his ears and cheeks, but he kept his tone cheerful.

"Mrs. Meriwether," he said, greeting her with a carefully constructed smile and a cordial nod.

"Mr. Bartholomew, I must apologize for coming so late. I was unavoidably detained."

Typical, he thought. *No respect from the spouses.*

"Not at all, not at all. Would you care to have a seat?"

"No, thank you. I shan't take up much of your time. I've come to talk to you about my husband..."

Simon nodded, being careful to maintain a neutral expression, letting his body language give away nothing.

"First, let me tell you that I know exactly what sort of things go on at the Achilles Club." Simon opened his mouth to protest, but she continued, waving his obvious concern away. "I do not judge. I knew of Francis's proclivities when we began our courtship. He always possessed a love of occult learning and ancient texts, that sort of thing, and I suspected for a long time that he held more than a passing admiration for certain practices of the ancient Greeks and Romans. He told me, the night before we were to be married, in case I wanted to free myself of him. Naturally, a woman in my position could not abide scandal, either by exposure of his lusts or by a wedding called off at the eleventh hour. I'm sure a male of your discretion can understand that."

Simon nodded. The story was a familiar one. But this woman had had the courage to carry through with the marriage, rather than destroy someone's entire life just for the sin of being different. He felt a deep sympathy fill the space of his heart. It was a sympathy both for her, who had been brave enough to shield her husband from the cruelties of the world, and a sympathy for Meriwether, who had shackled himself to the bonds of a society that would have otherwise thrown him on the trash heap.

"We were happy, or as happy as we could be under such circumstances. We had the advantage of being friends before we were engaged, and that friendship deepened when we were married. We lived mostly in the country. He was so much happier out there, like a different male. I spent my time with books and social functions. He had his discreet affairs. It was there that we decided, distasteful as the act was to him, that it would be best for us to

have a child, to be heir to his family name. Truthfully, I wanted children for the sake of the joy of being a mother, and he, bless him, was kind enough to oblige me.”

Mrs. Meriwether turned to the fireplace then, head lowered and eyes closed. Her ears were pinned flat to her skull. She seemed to Simon to have shrunk. She held her paws out, feeling the warmth of the fire

“Unfortunately, Mr. Bartholomew, it ... was not to be. My children, for there were to be twins, died during birth.”

Simon smelled the scent of her tears, which set his own eyes watering. He felt as if his heart would tear itself in two. *No. Stop this*, he told himself. *You cannot be emotionally involved.*

It took her a long moment to recover, the words themselves seeming to have taken the very life from her.

“After that, he became distant, mournful. When his children died, the loving male who was my friend shriveled up. There was a perpetual gloom over the house. He no longer went out, no longer practiced his magical rituals or had his affairs. He stopped visiting the Achilles Club, vowing to be faithful only to me, which he has done, now, for the last ten years.”

“He seems truly remarkable, Mrs. Meriwether.”

“Lord Candlemere has been trying to get Francis to return to the club this entire decade past. Apparently he is gifted in a particular type of magic that the club wishes to perform.”

“Magic? Surely, Mrs. Meriwether, you don’t believe in the mumbo jumbo the club members claim to adhere to? They’re merely ritualizing a social club, no different than what those damnable Freemasons do, or the old Hellfire club. They’re taking old pagan beliefs and using them as a means to cement brotherhood and to allow themselves the chance to love as they will, rather than as the laws of sentient creatures allow them to.” Simon’s sharp tone took Mrs. Meriwether aback, but she recovered quickly.

“As Shakespeare said, ‘There are more things in heaven and earth...’ but Mr. Bartholomew, my concern is for my husband. He has such a great heart. I want him to feel the warmth and companionship that I cannot give and that the carnal tastes of the Club’s members alone will not provide,” she said, turning to him. Her eyes searched his. “I want to heal the hurt that I helped to inflict on him. And I want you to help me.”

No. You want me to be his special whore. Fine. I can pretend to care for a night.

“What can I do?”

She smiled brightly. “Oh, thank you Mr. Bartholomew, thank you! Francis will be attending tomorrow night’s All Saints’ Eve festivities at the Achilles Club. I will make sure you are handsomely compensated to provide him with companionship for the night, so long as he is kept in high spirits.”

Her answer was so bright, so earnest; she seemed to lose ten years of age. The weight of concern and the pain of loss of her children had melted from her in that instant, and Simon, tail wagging involuntarily, felt the strangest urge to hug her.

“I will do my utmost, madam. You have my word.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bartholomew,” she said, glancing at the door. “I must leave now. I am returning to our country house. I will be in the city again the day after tomorrow and will see to your payment then.”

She turned to go, looking back at him from the open door. "Thank you, Mr. Bartholomew. Thank you."

The door shut without a sound, leaving Simon alone with the faint scent of lilacs.

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