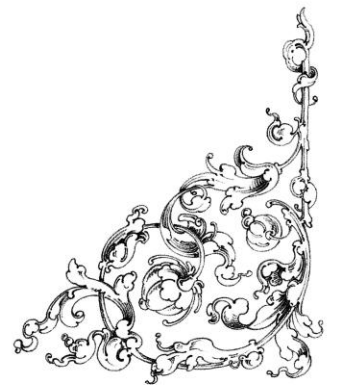
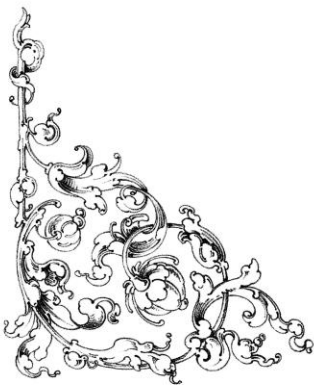


THE RED LADY'S

wedding



IN THE MOVIES, it always rains at a funeral. But here I am, watching his casket hover over the endless pit on a flimsy-looking lowering device, and there's not a drop to be found.

When I woke up this morning, I had an idea of what I was getting into. I knew I'd put on my black dress, a hat with a little fascinator on it, and I'd slide on those lacy, tiny gloves that served utterly no purpose other than to make me look like an *elegant* mourning lady. I'd top off my look with a keen pair of stilettos, which would highlight my struggle to hobble through the soft, freshly-groomed grass while wearing them. I figure even if they puncture the ground and I have to ball my hands into fists and swing my arms in a most unladylike, inappropriately boisterous fashion to dig myself out, at least I'm aerating the lawn.

Anyway, I didn't understand what my attire had to do with the veracity of my grief, but I didn't want anyone to question my relationship to the corpse in front of me. However, it hadn't started off well, and it had only snowballed from there.

I wasn't just attending his funeral, after all. I was also *getting married*. Was rather inconvenient that I didn't get to wear my fluffy, long white gown that I'd had custom made just for this day, but it was frowned upon when I'd suggested it to the priest. Alright, his mouth hung agape and he shook his hands wildly, jingling his rosaries in his objection, and he made me feel extremely rude for opening my mouth.

"Why on Earth would you even suggest such an outrageous thing? What a spectacle you would be! What will your guests think when you show up dressed like that? They'll—they'll think you're completely daft!"

I pulled out my cigarette case—sterling, engraved with a name that was very special to me—and lit a cigarette. I got the hint. Thanks, priest. I thought he was finished with his chastising, but now he frowned at me again.

"That's not good for you," he said, wrinkling his nose.

"Oh! Really? No one has ever told me that before. I'll quit immediately," I said, taking a drag. I paused as I blew out the smoke. "Right after this one."

The priest pressed his mouth into a line and cleared his throat.

"I'd suggest you wear black, like most widows do. It is the traditional color, and it shows you're grieving. Plus, it's very flattering on most women."

This priest. This priest and his weird ideas. I decided to play along, because there was clearly going to be no winning with this one.

“Fine,” I said, making sure my voice had a simper to it. “I will box up my gown forever and wear a black dress to my own wedding.” I took another drag and stuck out my bottom lip while holding the delicious, unhealthy, toxic but tantalizing smoke in my lungs before blowing it out with a dramatic sigh. “But at least I’ll *look pretty for him.*” I could tell I was irritating him. Good. He was grating on my nerves. And my patience.

“Well,” the priest said, steering the dead-end conversation elsewhere, “let’s do the paperwork, shall we? It’s rare I must perform these two ceremonies on the same day. A wedding and a funeral...”

“Well, do you?”

That same droll voice pulled me from my recollections and back into the present. The sun was still shining. It was dreadfully hot in that black dress. A few sprinklers shuttered to life, spewing water on patches of grass nearby.

“Do I what?”

The priest puckered his lips, closed his eyes, and sighed. He opened them again and gave me a look of sheer aggravation.

“Do you take him to be your lawfully-wedded husband?”

“Oh!” I exclaimed, and looked around at the spare crowd. People hadn’t exactly flocked to this simultaneously joyous and somber occasion. My beau didn’t have much in the way of family, but in the way of money? Well, that was a different case. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

The priest looked down at the mahogany casket. It had gold trim and brass bars, rather handsome actually. Two rings were neatly placed on a white, lacy pillow in its center. He placed his hand over the bands and closed his eyes.

“Although Buford is unable to say his vows today, he is with us in spirit. His declaration of unending love for Vertiline is not rendered untrue by the touch of death; it is stronger, it is a testament to the unbreakable bond that can connect two people, even after life in this world has ceased.”

I stifled a snort as I imagined myself saying “Until death do us part.” Of course, we were going to just gloss over that line.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the priest said, lifting his arms as if he were trying to summon Jesus from the sky. I openly laughed as I thought of him telling Buford—God, I was married to a *Buford* now—that he could kiss his bride. The priest raised an eyebrow at my giggling, and I shook my head and feigned wiping a tear from my eye.

“I’m—I’m just so happy,” I said, sniffing. “This is what I’ve always wanted.” The priest handed me the marriage license and momentarily squeezed my hands in his. I craned my neck to gawk at the rings. Why wouldn’t he let me at them already?

I shot a look at the large, almost gray-skinned man to the left of the priest. He stood staunchly still, hands folded in front of him, dressed in a wonderfully-tailored tuxedo and a dapper red bow tie. His almost perfectly square jaw was set forward, his bottom lip protruding, giving him an introspective look. At roughly 6’8”, he had to duck to enter our stupid, flimsy striped rental tent that inefficiently shaded us from the sun. He returned my look and slid his hand through his messy, shaggy black hair that fell in slight curls around his face and tugged on one elephantine ear. The signal. I pulled my hands from the priest’s and tucked the paper into my brassiere, eyeballing him the whole time. He looked flustered and cast his gaze back at the heavens.

I neatly reached into my sequined clutch, pulled out a derringer, and pointed it skyward. A few people screamed and ducked, while others just backed away slowly. The priest wrung his hands and looked about. I guess he wanted to run, but a cemetery isn’t exactly the best place to outrun a bullet. I pulled the trigger, sending a fuchsia streak of smoke screaming through the top of the tent and into the sky. It zipped up and up and up until it exploded into weeping willow-like plume that slowly rained down powder, not unlike blushers for a lady’s cheeks. A few frightened guests took off running on the slick grass, their noodly legs unreliably carrying them to the gravel road leading to the exit.

“What in heavens’ name?” The priest yelled, backing away from the casket, eyes wide as saucers.

“Oh, hush, old man. I’m not here to hurt *you*,” I said, yanking down my skirt that

had hiked up to my thighs when I'd reached above my head. "But you haven't exactly gotten yourself on my good side, either." The priest clutched his rosary and shook his head.

"I just needed fifty more dollars to meet my parish's payment this month. Fifty. And of course—*of course* I'd have to choose the likes of you for my services, you... chimney-imitating harlot!"

Did he just...?

"Chimney-imitating harlot?" I asked, my lip curling into a grimace of disbelief. "I guess you get points for creativity, but, come on, vicar. Cleanliness is Godliness or something, and your mouth is dirrrrrty."

Before he could say anything else, the grass flattened with a hurricane-strength onslaught of wind. The tent crumpled up and fluttered away, and my ridiculous tiny hat pursued it. All the red curls I'd piled up under it came tumbling down, whipping in the wind like angry little octopus arms. I lunged forward and snatched the rings from the pillow, still pointing my gun at the priest. I mean, he had to know I just had one flare inside the derringer. But I guess the presence of a gun, no matter how tiny or how innocuous the pink smoke it shot, was still sort of intimidating.

"Kind thanks for your assistance, priest!" I called over the howling wind. I knew it was my baby. My airship. I wrestled with my clutch, somehow managing to open it with only one hand, and whipped out my cigarette case engraved with Her name. The Bacchante.

"Undertaker!" I called over my shoulder.

"Yes, Red?" my comrade asked, stalwart against the wind, the tails of his tux flapping furiously in front of him as if they were catfighting with the air. That man was a goddamn fancy tank.

"Hold this!" I called, tossing the tiny derringer at him. He caught it and fumbled around until he could hold it up. His finger didn't even fit in the trigger guard. I caught a flush creeping across my cheeks as I watched him. So adorable with that tiny gun covered in fuchsia residue. Shooing those thoughts away, I plucked a cigarette from the case and put it in my mouth, then put the ring on my finger.

“Keep this as payment,” I yelled to the priest through my pursed lips, and tossed him a few coins from my clutch. I saluted him as they bounced off his shiny head and tumbled into the grass. As he scrambled to pick them up, I turned on my heels, running awkwardly as they punched the ground in their fury, and headed out to where Bacchante hovered.

I waved up, cigarette still dangling from my lips, and Undertaker sauntered up beside me.

“Here,” I said, digging in my clutch once more, trying to keep my curls from lashing me in the eyes. I handed him the matching ring. He laughed and barely managed to slide it on one long pinky finger. “Till death do us part?” I asked, grinning.

He nodded, his hair whipping wildly over his broad forehead.

“Till death do us part.”

The ladder unfurled, tumbling down thirty feet or so, and twisted around in front of us. I saw the familiar, bespectacled face of Squelch, our smuggler, at the top of it.

“Welcome back, Captain!” He hollered, as I gestured for Undertaker to climb up. He shook his head and offered for me to go ahead of him.

“Undertaker,” I said, pointing to my dress. “No.” I looked up at Squelch and saluted him.

As I watched Undertaker untwist the ladder and clamber up, I took a moment to thank Buford for his contribution he had just made to my retirement fund. He hadn’t even suspected I’d loosened the rails on the balcony. He had tumbled to his death before we even had a chance to say our vows! Such a passionate romance we’d had! We’d wanted to elope eventually—and “eventually” is far too long for me to wait—but alas, his untimely death prevented that. Thankfully, I had it all in writing—that he wanted to leave all to me, his, er, *faithful* fiancé. And here I was, married to a dead man and making off with his money before he was even in the ground.

But I didn’t linger too long on my thanks. He was a miserable drunk, an easy target, and there was a reason he had no family here at his wake.

I got a foothold on the ladder and climbed up after my comrade, tossing my

clutch onto the deck as I climbed aboard.

“The strangest bounty I’ve ever collected!” I announced, spreading my arms out wide in triumph.

My crew began clapping and whooping, their beaming faces telling me all I needed to know. I belonged here. And every second of that mission was worth it, to see them join me in the strange life we’d chosen for ourselves. I cast a glance at Undertaker, who was high-fiving everyone and whooping right along with them. I turned the ring on my finger and smiled to myself.

So worth it.

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