

The streets were not as empty as Rex would have liked, given the hour. Though the mist hid his fellow nocturnal wanderers from view, he could not escape the sound of their laughter. He quickened his pace, hoping to avoid them entirely, but luck was not with him. He ran headlong into the happy couple; their dress suggested an evening of culture, perhaps the opera, though Rex found the notion difficult to credit given the amount of rouge the woman wore. The couple cackled out an apology, and Rex gritted his teeth until they had passed back into the haze.

The wind howled down the narrow street, swirling abandoned newspapers about Rex's feet. He always left these company dinners with a tremendous headache, not that work was to blame. Wives' tales swirled around his brain. Try as he might, he couldn't dislodge those piercing voices from his mind. Better to have foresworn the company of women than to be trapped with a shrew for the rest of one's life. He had repeated this philosophy to himself all through the night, but no belief, no matter how staunch, could protect against the sting of being the only man at dinner without a companion.

Rex slowed to a stop. He had lost himself in his thoughts, missing his turn in the process. With a grumble, he hurried back to Spruce Street, but what he saw pushed all thoughts of home out of his mind.

Standing in a storefront window was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Even at a distance he could see the shades of blue in her eyes, her perfect pink lips, and the chestnut ringlets that fell like a waterfall down her back. His attraction reeked of weakness, but his lonely heart was no match for such a face. Rex wandered over as casually as he could manage, and his spirit leapt when she did not flee at his approach. He hurried to the window, but as he placed his hands on the glass and stared up into the face that had captured his heart so quickly, his dream shattered. Here was no woman at all but a porcelain doll made in the size and shape of a young

lady. Despite his initial disappointment, Rex's fascination held. This creature was no less beautiful for being porcelain. On the contrary, freed from all the flaws of flesh, she was the picture of perfection.

The sign hanging over the shop read *Le Fanu's Host of Curiosities – Est. 1792*. Rex rubbed his eyes, but this was no trick of the brandy he had consumed with dinner. The bookshop stood where it had for the last ten years, as did the milliners; somehow Rex had never noticed the squat little shop nestled between them, the one claiming to be one hundred years old. Of course, had it not been for that exquisite face in the window, who could say if he would have noticed it now?

Doubt crept into Rex's mind even as he reached for the door. The shop was certainly closed, but all of his desires mounted as he looked at that beautiful creature. He was not usually a man to suffer frivolities, much less entertain the notion of buying playthings at his age, but he pushed those thoughts aside as his fingers closed around the doorknob. Much to his surprise, it turned, and he soon found himself standing inside Le Fanu's Host of Curiosities.

Dark, heavy carpets overlapped on the stone floor, swallowing the thin light of the lamps. Wooden cabinets lined the walls, and in a glance, Rex caught sight of candles, powders, and utensils that looked very much like human bone. He took a trepidatious step forward, ducking instinctively though the dream catchers hung far above his head. He bent towards the front table, where a skull in a jeweled masquerade mask glittered above a stuffed armadillo with a miniature stone castle on its back; splayed around them were silver, embossed cards. The scent of incense wafted through the air, muddling Rex's thoughts.

With a sudden remembrance of the purpose of his visit, Rex turned to the window only to find his way blocked by a man. Rex started, and the man let out a chilling laugh.

“My apologies,” the man said. “You would think that, given the nature of my gallery, I would take care not to startle my patrons, but I don't seem able to resist when the opportunity beckons. Please forgive me. Mister Jacques Le Fanu, at your service,” he said, bowing slightly.

There was nothing remarkable about Le Fanu upon first glance, but the longer Rex stared, the stranger the shopkeeper appeared. He was tall and slender with long fingers he now tented, resting them on his sternum. He wore his thin, gray hair to his shoulders, yet it begged for a barber to shear it off, and his clothes, though stately, had been in fashion no less than fifty years ago. Rex could think of no other recourse than to stare dumbly, even when Le Fanu snapped his fingers under Rex's nose.

“Come now,” Le Fanu said. “What brings you into my shop?”

“The door was open,” stammered Rex.

“Which you'll find is quite common for a business. Why did you walk inside?”

Rex stopped his gaze from traveling over to the window. He couldn't explain to the strangest of strangers that he was interested in a doll.

“I've just come to look around.”

“And so you shall.”

Le Fanu bowed low and withdrew to his stool behind the counter. His retreat did little to comfort Rex, who could feel the proprietor's eyes following him with every step he took. He circled the shop, hoping Le Fanu would leave him be long enough that he might steal a glance at the window, but the man was a vulture. No more than five minutes had passed before he was once again at Rex's side, leading him to the bookshelves.

“If you're in for a bit of a thrill, perhaps you would be interested in my extensive library. I've a very interesting book about a young artist who returns to London after his education in Europe left him penniless.”

“I'm afraid I'm not after a book,” Rex said.

Rex's eyes flickered to the window despite himself. He had hoped Le Fanu wouldn't notice, but without following the line of Rex's gaze, Le Fanu smiled, revealing his small, pointy teeth.

“Ah, Bianca,” he whispered.

With a wink and a smirk, he glided towards the window and waited. Rex lingered by the table for a moment, until at last his longing defeated his embarrassment and he joined Le Fanu.

“I came in on a whim,” said Rex. “I don't even know why I bothered really.”

“Come now Mr. Cypress, no need to feel ashamed. Bianca is one of the finest pieces in the store.”

Before Rex could ask how he had known his name, Le Fanu stepped into the window display, scooped the doll into his arms as a groom would carry his bride, and positioned her in the armchair next to Rex. She was even more beautiful up close. Her glass eyes were the softest blue, and her complexion, so pale that in certain light she almost looked white, had been painted without a single flaw. A shudder ran down Rex's back as his finger brushed one of Bianca's perfect curls.

“Tell me Mr. Cypress, are you married?” Le Fanu asked.

“No,” said Rex sharply, drawing his hand away from the doll.

Le Fanu said nothing, but his lips curled with some private musing he was not good enough to share.

“Your interest in Bianca is understandable. What better cure for heartache than a companion who cannot leave you? Unless it was more than loneliness that brought you to my shop.”

There was no judgment in Le Fanu's tone, and Rex allowed his mind to unpack the possibility of this transaction. He pictured Bianca sitting beside the fire, smiling at him when he returned from a grueling day at the bank. Then he pictured himself sitting beside a lifeless doll, and he looked the part of the fool. He was about to say as much, but Le Fanu was barking towards the back room.

One of the tapestries on the back wall moved aside, and out walked a young woman. She had a plain, sad sort of face, and the colorful skirts and headscarf she wore, rather than give her an air of mystery, made her face look all the more artless in comparison. She hurried forward with a large piece of parchment, which Le Fanu tore from her hand. She shuffled back to the tapestry, but one sharp word from Le Fanu stopped her in her tracks.

“My daughter Esmeralda,” said Le Fanu. He adjusted his scowl and presented the paper to Rex. “I have here a bill of sale should your intentions go further than mere curiosity.”

“And what use would I have for a doll? I have my reputation to think of.”

“And who could begrudge you a companion? They all take one for themselves, sooner or later. Bianca could be yours.” Rex shook his head and took an unsteady step towards the door. Le Fanu merely shrugged. “Of course, if you don't want her, you don't want her. Silly me. I must have misread your interest. Let's put you back my dear.”

Le Fanu hoisted Bianca over his shoulder and carried her to the window. Rex hurried to the door, but he couldn't resist one last look over his shoulder.

"Will you be wanting me to take the bill back Father?" asked Esmeralda, emerging from the shadows.

"No, leave it with me. It won't be long before we find another buyer."

Rex withdrew his hand from the knob and whipped around.

"You still mean to sell her?" Rex asked.

"This isn't a museum, Mr. Cypress," said Le Fanu. He continued to arrange Bianca's curls without a glance in Rex's direction. "This is a shop, and as such, I mean to make a living. Now if you'll excuse us, my daughter and I would like to close for the night."

"I'll buy the doll," Rex declared.

In an instant, Le Fanu was at his side, leading him over to the counter where Esmeralda had the bill prepared. Rex realized too late that he should have inquired after the price. He couldn't imagine Le Fanu's reaction if he backed out of the sale once more. The proprietor reached behind the counter, and he produced a small knife and a vial.

"I can guarantee that Bianca will be a cure for your loneliness, but the price is steep," said Le Fanu. "Five dollars for the doll. Five drops of blood for the wish."

Rex's mouth went dry. The wish he had been harboring resided deep in his most secret soul, but there seemed to be nothing Le Fanu couldn't deduce. Rex managed a nod. He held out his hand, shaking with anticipation. Le Fanu gently pricked Rex's index finger with the tip of the knife. He pressed the vial to the cut, counting out five drops of blood. He secured a lid on the vial, which Esmeralda collected and hid in the folds of her skirts.

"What are you going to do with it?" Rex asked.

"That, I'm afraid, was not part of our arrangement," Le Fanu said with a smile.

The contract included a bill of sale. Rex's eyes swam over the text, catching only snatches such as "binding" and "irrevocably." Le Fanu's long finger pointed to the very bottom, where he waited for Rex to make his mark.

"You haven't a pen?" asked Rex.

"All in good time," said Le Fanu. "I find that sealing in blood makes for a much better bind. Just a dab will do."

It was a terrifying notion, but as Le Fanu had already collected his blood, what was to stop him from sealing it himself when Rex left? With his heart trembling beneath his Adam's apple, Rex laid his bloody finger on the parchment. In one swift movement, Le Fanu seized Esmeralda's wrist and pricked her finger, which she proceeded to place on the parchment.

"You're not signing it?" Rex asked.

"You'll find Esmeralda's blood is fresher than mine. But never you mind. My blood runs in her veins. Through her I am bound to the contract, same as you."

Le Fanu took a potion down from the cabinet and placed one drop on Rex's cut finger. Slowly, the blood flowed back into the wound, which closed until there was no mark left. Rex gasped, but there was no evidence of a cut. Even the pain was gone. With a curt reminder from Le Fanu, Rex paid his five dollars until all that remained of the bargain was Rex's signature on the bill of sale. Much to his surprise, Le Fanu held out a quill. Rex did his best to look incredulous, but as Le Fanu did not show so much as a wrinkle of embarrassment, Rex sighed and signed his name. His signature was sloppier than he would have liked, but he had no time to blame the pen. Le Fanu sprinted to the window, once more shouldering Bianca's weight. Esmeralda left for the back of the shop, quickly returning with a parcel that she forced into Rex's hands.

"The door, if you would, Mr. Cypress," she said.

Rex wrenched open the door, and Le Fanu maneuvered gracefully through. Rex followed to find a hansom waiting for them.

"Now this will be much more convenient than carrying her the rest of the way home, don't you think?" said Le Fanu. "Don't mind the price. It's already been settled."

The driver showed no interest while Le Fanu arranged Bianca inside the carriage as though she were a young lady. Le Fanu bowed to her; then, shaking Rex's hand, he disappeared into the shop. The lights extinguished almost at once, leaving Rex alone and baffled next to the carriage.

It was the strangest ride Rex could remember, sitting with a lifeless companion. More awkward still was carrying her up the stairs to his townhouse. Le Fanu had made it look so easy, but Rex quickly learned that though Bianca was not as heavy as flesh and blood, her body was less forgiving. He abandoned his attempt to bring her upstairs and instead set her down on the sofa in the parlor. He wiped his brow with his handkerchief, but no matter how long he dawdled, Bianca remained no more than a doll. With a sigh, he tore into the parcel from Esmeralda.

Had the doll come to life, Rex might have appreciated the extra dresses, the veiled hat, and the white dressing gown, but all they offered him now was more clutter. Rex tossed them aside and held his head in his hands. He had felt so much surer of his purchase in the shop, where magic and fantasy were woven into the very fabric of the room, but now that he sat in his comfortable and practical parlor, he lost all hope of anything fantastical happening. He enjoyed the look of the doll, but if he had wanted a piece of art, he could have easily bought a portrait and been spared the aggravation.



Rex clutched the doll by the shoulders and shook with all his might, but none of his efforts roused her. She grinned unseeing at him, causing the knot of embarrassment in his chest to twist. What a fool he had been to think she could ever be more than what lay before him. He reached for the parcel of clothes, ready to run to Le Fanu and demand his money back, when he remembered that the shop would be closed. Rex let out a howl. He should have known better than to trust that charlatan. He seized of the doll's neck with the intention of flinging her out onto the street, but as he gazed at her sweet face, he forgot his rage. He whispered her name and found he didn't feel remarkably silly doing so. A shiver shook his spine as he leaned in towards her. Before he could press his lips against hers, Bianca's eyelashes fluttered. Rex scrambled to the far side of the room, but this was no trick of his imagination. Bianca had blinked. She had come alive.

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