

# SAVAGE MAGIC

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SIMON &  
SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

A CBS COMPANY

First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2014  
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd  
1st Floor  
222 Gray's Inn Road  
London WC1X 8HB

[www.simonandschuster.co.uk](http://www.simonandschuster.co.uk)

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney  
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-47113-606-1  
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-47113-607-8  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-47113-609-2

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Typeset by M Rules  
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

*I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.*

*In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.*

*How the Chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every black'ning Church appalls;  
And the hapless Soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls.*

*But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born Infants tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.*

William Blake, *London*

## DEAL



The ship is resting at anchor out on the Downs. She is easy to spot, having none of the splendour of the dozen naval vessels that surround her. She is fat and ungainly, her plain lines evidence of her ugly purpose. A convict ship, just returned from the southern seas, her cargo of abandoned humanity swapped for sacks of tea and a handful of passengers.

In his room at the top of the tallest hotel in Deal, Henry Lodge watches her through an eyeglass stolen from an inebriated officer of the Rum Corps more than a decade ago. There is no doubt. She is the *Indefatigable*. But is she carrying the cargo he has been watching for these past years?

The April air is clean, just washed by spring rain, and there is no sea mist. The vessels clustered between the Goodwin Sands and Deal beach look calm and settled. Local boatmen row from beach to ship to beach again, busy water ants with oars and strong arms.

Henry supposes he will have to go out into one of those boats, and as always the thought fills him with fearful memories. He hates these boats, for they remind him of the worst

weeks of his life, shivering inside the sinking wreck of a listing frigate, icebergs hidden in the mist, ice spurs slicing through the cold depths, including the one which had torn into the hull of the ship and removed its rudder with apparently diabolic intent. He was not yet twenty, a convict-gardener, sent to New South Wales to try and scratch a harvest from the thin, rocky soil. Between him and Cape Town, unknown hundreds or thousands of miles of empty, ice-cold sea.

Since his own return from New South Wales, Henry Lodge has performed his little pilgrimage to Deal a dozen times. He pays a man a retaining fee to watch the ships coming and going to the Downs, and to alert him when one of those new arrivals is a returning convict transport. The money required for this undertaking is not insubstantial, but it is also affordable. He is, after all, by now a man of some means, grown rich on hops and natural cunning. But when it comes to boats, he is still a scared convict-gardener clutching on to life in a little pinnace suspended above freezing canyons.

He had survived that disaster, the rescue coming from, of all things, a whaler. With war billowing out from Paris and Europe shivering, it had seemed another petty miracle, as ordinary and as wonderful as an ice mountain trying to snatch away a rudder.

The operation runs like this: his fellow in Deal learns of a new arrival. He then despatches a messenger, post-haste, to the hop gardens owned by Henry Lodge around Canterbury. The system has become so efficient that Henry can be in Deal within a day-and-a-half of a new transport arriving. This is fast enough; the vessels out on the water are still moving to oceanic rhythms at this point, where a day is an hour and a hurried tack into the wind would look to the landlocked observer like a massive animal changing direction.

On this occasion, however, the system has not run quite so

smoothly. His man in Deal was away on business in Ramsgate when the *Indefatigable* arrived, such that Henry did not learn of the ship's arrival until three days after she dropped anchor. He is not particularly worried by this. For these vessels, three days is still barely a heartbeat after so many months at sea.

All the transports he has seen at Deal have looked like the *Indefatigable* looks now. An exhausted woman, is what she is. A silent, disregarded female approaching the end of her disappointed road.

He closes his eyeglass and takes it with him downstairs and onto the beach, where a boatman is waiting to take him over to the convict ship. The man is unpleasant and crude, and shouts at Henry as he struggles to get into the boat, reluctance biting into his bones like the gout which has, in recent months, slowly been making its jagged presence felt.

*How many more times will I do this?* he asks himself as they make their way across the glassy water of the Downs. *How much longer will I care to watch for this woman?* It is an old question; one to which he has no answer.

He keeps an eye on the *Indefatigable* as they row towards her. Slowly the other vessels move away from his perspective, as the transport rises from the water, becoming bigger and altogether more impressive the closer they get to her. He imagines the three decks within, the bulwarks between male, female and sailor quarters, the tiny cots in which the convicts are chained. He imagines furtive wanderings beneath tropical skies, as female prisoners are called to the hammocks of sailors and marines, pressed into service as journeying whores, each sailor given individual permission by God and the King to take his pick of the women on board.

These are childish pictures. The decks of the *Indefatigable* will have been cleared of bulwarks and chains while she was in New South Wales. The instruments of imprisonment take up

valuable space which will have been cleared for cargo on the return voyage; tea instead of desperate girls. He pictures the piles of unwanted ironware on the quays of Sydney Cove growing higher with the visit of every transport that discards its chains just as it discards its human freight.

He asks himself, as he has done times beyond counting, how a man with such a runaway fancy can possibly have become rich. He remembers why he makes these pilgrimages. To see the woman again, to speak to her. This nonsensical compulsion which he cannot deny.

Now they are alongside the *Indefatigable*. The boatman calls up to the deck, and a head pops over the gunwale.

‘Visitor from town!’ the boatman calls in his oaky Kentish accent.

‘What kind of visitor?’ replies the seaman, in a West Country voice.

‘One who visits all the transports.’

‘What’s his business?’

The boatman looks at him. It is a well-worn routine, this. Henry shouts up to the gunwale himself.

‘I am a representative of James Atty and Company, the firm which built this vessel. I am to come aboard to ascertain her seaworthiness, and the expected period before she will be ready to voyage once more.’

It is a practised lie, and one day it will fail. One day, another seaman’s face will stare down at him and inform him that the owner’s agent has already been aboard.

Not today, though. The sailor disappears for a moment, and reappears with instructions that they may climb aboard. With goutish difficulty and no small amount of self-disgust, the man of means makes his way up onto the deck.

He is introduced to the master, who has as much common humanity as a bleached piece of driftwood on Deal beach, but

he listens to Henry's second story, which he produces only once he is on board and only in the hearing of the master. He is a representative of the Home Department in London, charged with keeping an eye out for ex-convicts returning from the penal colonies of New South Wales, tracking their arrival back in England for purposes related to the maintenance of the peace. The master half-believes it, and agrees to provide some additional information (for a small fee, as always with such men) about his passengers. Five men returned to England, two of whom were former convicts. The master gives the names, and Henry pretends to note them down.

'Any women?'

The master frowns. Why would he be interested in women? But yes, there were three women among the passengers. Two were wives, and one is abroad.

'Their names?'

'Simpson, Gardener, Broad.'

The Gardener woman is still on the ship, with her sick husband and her three children. But Henry barely hears this. The name *Broad* clatters like an anchor dropped on a quayside.

'The Broad woman. She is no longer on the ship?'

'It's Broad who is abroad,' smirks the master. 'She was in a great hurry to leave.'

'Did she converse with any of the other passengers?'

The master frowns. Something about the Broad woman has discomfited him, and seeing this only excites Henry Lodge further. She'd been a quiet passenger, says the master, though she'd spent as much time on deck as she could. She'd had little to do with the crew or with the other passengers. The crew avoided her. She'd taken a bit of a shine to two children travelling with their parents.

'Did she bring anything with her?'

She'd had some goods shipped with her from New South

Wales, at considerable expense. The goods had already been unloaded, onto a vessel bound for the Thames.

‘What was the nature of these goods?’

The master has no idea. They were boxed. He suspected something botanical or herbal.

‘You did not investigate further?’

Again, that uncomfortable frown. No, the master had not investigated the goods. The woman had made it quite clear that they were not to be touched, and she had a way of making sure people obeyed her wishes.

‘What do you mean by that?’

The master did not mean anything by that. Mrs Broad was just very forceful, is all. Henry asks if he can speak to the children who’d conversed with this mysterious passenger. The master, who appears relieved at the focus of the interrogation turning away from him, shows him below-decks.

The small number of passengers who have returned from New South Wales are accommodated alongside the officers’ quarters below the quarterdeck, but the family to which he is directed have moved away from these rooms and taken up their own space between the cargo and the cabins. Henry sees why, instantly. There are two boys and a girl, watched over by a haunted-looking mother. The father lies in a hammock, the stench of illness coming off him. A doomed family, shunned by the crew lest the father’s disease carry beyond his own body.

Seeing the family accommodated like this, in a space which a year before would have been filled with chained convicts, men or women or perhaps both, revolts him. It is as if the ship will not let them go.

He asks them about the woman, and the mother says yes, such a woman was on board, her name had been Maggie Broad, and the boys said something of her: how she worried

the crew, who thought her a witch. And so the master's discomfort is explained.

And now Henry Lodge must sit down, for his heart is racing. He collapses onto a sack of Canton tea. The children look at him, curious but patient. The mother looks at her sick husband. Henry tries to imagine the woman he seeks waiting here below-decks, gazing at her cargo, cursing anyone who came near it, alarming the crew with her hostile presence.

His waiting is over. Maggie Broad has returned to England. After all these years, his watching is done, and yet he has missed her. That damned three-day delay.

He has failed in his task, and feels suddenly afraid. She was here, and now she is gone.

## PART ONE

### Madhouses

*For you shall understand, that the force which melancholie hath, and the effects that it worketh in the bodie of a man, or rather of a woman, are almost incredible. For as some of these melancholike persons imagine, they are witches and by witchcraft can worke wonders, and do what they list: so do others, troubled with this disease, imagine manie strange, incredible and impossible things.*

Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*

## WAPPING



She feels a prodigious and fearful sorrow when she closes the door on the little apartment in Lower Gun Alley, though Abigail Horton has of late become so suspicious of her own feelings that she is wary of this clenching sadness. For much of this past year she has been aware of two Abigails in attendance behind her eyes: one acting, the other watching and judging. She feels, and another part of her observes her feeling, and draws its conclusions, as if a mad-doctor were in residence between her temples. Increasingly, the conclusions of this watching Abigail are ominous.

She barely sleeps, and when she does her dreams are so terrible that most nights she wakes with a cry of fear which startles her husband Charles awake, and she must once again face that morbid expression of guilt which descends on him. The one she has come to loathe.

She walks down the stairs and out into the street, peeking round the corner of the door like some cowardly lurking footpad. Her husband must not see her leave, for he will stop her and she will not be able to resist the weight of his crushing

obligation. She knows that he has a veritable invisible army of small boys watching the streets of Wapping, reporting back anything interesting or odd. He is a constable, after all – one with responsibilities for the peace. Perhaps the peace of this street has been bought with the peace of her own marriage bed. She wonders if Charles pays the boys for watching the comings-and-goings so assiduously, or if they feel they are taking part in some kind of game.

The street is clear, at least of any faces she recognises. She closes the outside door and locks it, little remembered activities for the hands as her mind scurries through its two-headed dance of dismay and observation. With her heavy canvas bag she walks down Lower Gun Alley, for all the world like some seaman headed down to the London Dock to catch a ship to Leghorn or Guinea or Arabia.

Lower Gun Alley gives out onto Wapping Street, and if she were to turn right here she would find herself at the River Police Office, her husband's place of work. The street is crowded with people this morning, and the thick early morning fog has lifted. She looks left and right again, but the gesture is futile. She would not notice Charles, or one of his small boys or even the other constables of the Police Office, out here on this crowded street. She must hope that she blends into the crowd as easily as they would. She turns left and walks away from the Police Office, away from Lower Gun Alley. Away from Charles Horton.

There is a good deal of panic in her head as she goes. She has barely left their rooms for six weeks now, ever since her anxiety had suddenly deepened, like dark-blue seawater off a reef. Charles has taken to buying the food and drink necessary for their meals. When necessity has forced her out into the street she has found the crowds oppressive. The brick walls which lace their way through Wapping, holding in the spaces

of the London Dock, have become to her like the walls of a prison, holding her and all those on the streets in a state of isolation from the metropolis, squeezed in against the river, unable to flee. A madhouse on the water, with its own streets, its own watching eyes, its own stench and mysteries.

This feeling of imprisonment has been acute, because it is flight she dreams of. Not flight from Wapping, or even from Charles, but from the woman in the forest, the one who pursues her and fills her head with unclean thoughts as she comes. A savage woman promising violence and revenge and despair for those who oppose her.

She catches the glance of a small boy who is staring at her. He is standing in the door of a shop, chewing on something indescribable, wearing a man's hat which looks like an upturned bucket, his clothes scruffy and dirty as his face. But his eyes are sharp and watchful, and she sees in them that something about her – her scurrying walk, her bag of clothes, maybe even her frantic expression – has caught his attention.

She hurries on, the urgency in her as great as it is in the dreams. If the boy finds Charles and tells him what he has seen, Charles will know, immediately, what she has decided to do, for she has spoken of it before. He will chase after her, perhaps with a carriage. He may even guess at her destination; Charles is mystifyingly good at such guesses.

Things start to change as she nears the top of Old Gravel Lane, the Ratcliffe Highway in front of her. She turns around to look back down the hill towards the river, to look for attentive small boys or even pursuing constables, and the flow of people running up and down the lane seems to blur into a single stream, with only one person left distinct and clear, standing down by the wall of the Dock, staring at Abigail with those dark Pacific eyes.

The woman from her dreams is standing on Old Gravel Lane.

Abigail does not quite scream, but the noise she makes in her vice-tight throat is loud enough to draw the attention of several bystanders. She turns, and the chase begins.

The two Abigails behind her eyes squabble over this new development. The woman has never appeared to her while awake before. But what if, asks that calm doctoring voice, what if she isn't awake at all? What if this is all just another dream? Abigail has enough of herself left to vanquish this thought, to push it back into the mists for future consideration. But it doesn't quite disappear.

*The woman is not real,* says her mind.

*The woman is chasing me through London,* her mind replies.

Her body takes no view on the question. It just propels her, half-running, half-walking, across the Highway and north towards her destination. She has no money for a carriage, and it is perhaps four miles from Wapping to Hackney. The only currency she possesses is a letter, and that can only be used for admission when she reaches the end of her journey. It cannot help her fly from whatever it is that pursues her.

*There is nothing pursuing me,* says her mind.

*She will destroy me if she catches me,* her mind replies.

She looks back every few minutes, and every time she does the woman is there, standing out clear and prominent in the blurry street scenes, always still and staring, never apparently moving. But always there.

North of the Commercial Road, open fields and wasteland present themselves as options for flight, but she avoids them, not wishing to be caught out on open ground by her pursuer. So she follows a more zigzag route than she would otherwise have chosen, keeping to the streets, to the blurry crowds, which slow her down and shout angrily at her as she barges her

way north, her heavy bag knocking into stomachs and shoulders, her own body tiring with every hurried step.

But as she nears Bethnal Green, the roads begin to open out on both sides, as the metropolis starts to loosen its grip on the landscape. Rope walks and tenter grounds give way to open fields and farms. The Hackney turnpike stands at a crossroads, facing three or four clusters of houses which developers have built in anticipation of the inevitable encroachment of London.

She looks back as she passes the turnpike. The woman is closer now, and she is running, her arms rising up in front of her. Twigs and branches and leaves poke out from her clothes and her hair and even her skin, as if she were part-woman and part-tree, an echo of the most awful flavour of her nightly dreams.

Despite her exhaustion, Abigail runs now, her husband forgotten. Luckily for her, the building she seeks is obvious, the largest building in the neighbourhood, its crowded lines rising up above the fields to her left, its elegant front facing eastwards across the road. She bangs on the porter's gate and screams for entry, desperately waving the letter she has carried from Wapping, the one which guarantees her security.

A huge man with a simple face opens the gate and with a final desperate lunge Abigail Horton enters Brooke House, a private madhouse for the deranged.