

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

The Garden of Enigma



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Published by Jigsaw Publications
Vancouver, BC, Canada

First Published December 2022

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A TDWP/Jigsaw Publications E-Book

Cover designed by Robert Carpenter
Interior Design by Bob Furnell

Brief Encounters logo © 2009 Brian Taylor
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Typeset in Corbel

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At the edge of creation, almost beyond the impassable barrier called the Black Curtain, the slender sentinel tower stood beside the colossal ornamental gates. The sombre, sad-eyed Bell Man, huddled before an ever-glowing brazier in his tiny room below the bell chamber, was suddenly alert. It was not yet the moment for him to ascend the spiral steps and announce the next measure of time with the toll of that mournful, echoing bell, but still he laid aside the ancient parchment he had been perusing, rose from the simple rough-hewn seat and drew a threadbare grey robe more closely about his bent and twisted frame. Rare was the occasion, he thought, when he was called upon to descend, but this was one such, for he knew with an instinctive certainty that strangers were soon to present themselves, that they meant no harm and could be admitted. The great gates were to be opened for the first time since... since... well, now that he thought about it, had they not always barred the way? His old mind went searching, back through the dim corridors of a long lifetime's memories. Thus he remembered that he had never descended before.

These visitors were unique...

"So this *is* a time machine," Steven conceded, determinedly ignoring the smirk his words brought to Vicki's features.

"Good gracious, so our little visit to 1066 has convinced him, has it?" called the Doctor, from the six-sided control panel of the TARDIS, his voice by no means devoid of sarcasm.

"It seems to have done, Doctor," Vicki responded, immediately joining in the game.

"All right, I was wrong," admitted the young astronaut, who had only recently joined the other two on their travels. "Happy now?"

The Doctor smiled rather irritatingly at him. "The *Tardis* is slowing down," he announced. "We are about to arrive."

"Any idea where?" Steven enquired innocently.

With dignity, the Doctor returned his attention to the controls without replying. Vicki sidled closer to Steven. "You're going to have to be more tactful with him," she whispered.

"But he..."

"That's just the Doctor. You accept the situation and go along with it."

The high-pitched grinding sound of the ship's engines filled the control room and then died away. The Doctor studied the readings relating to the environment outside the TARDIS, then turned on the scanner-screen that was mounted on one of the gleaming pale green walls.

When the picture resolved all they could see was drifting, pale blue mist.

"Well, that is most intriguing. Yes, indeed." The Doctor reached for the little black switch that operated the great doors. "Shall we venture out, hmm?"

The three of them stepped through the open doorway, Steven and Vicki with some reluctance, for both of them had felt apprehensive at the sight of the unearthly-looking mist.

"Strange," commented the Doctor. "There is no tangible surface."

But despite the fact that they felt no trace of firmness beneath their feet they were able to walk quite normally.

"This is a real limbo of a place," declared Steven.

Vicki shivered. "I don't like it."

As they progressed the mist became thinner, revealing a white void, the only feature of which was a pair of huge gates. A shadowy figure approached them from the other side.

Steven's eyes widened. "Who's this? The ferryman?"

The Doctor shushed him.

As they reached the gates the Bell Man, with the hood of his robe pulled up and his face averted from the newcomers, unlocked them with a large key of elaborate design, very rusty, and dragged them open to the accompaniment of much agonised grinding and creaking.

"Thank you," said the Doctor, before beckoning to his less than enthusiastic fellow travellers. After a quick glance at each other, Steven and Vicki followed him into the unknown domain beyond, passing the spar-like tower, which they had been unable to see from the misty void, and the uncommunicative gatekeeper, who had turned his back on them and was shuffling towards it.

A garden surrounded them now. The greenery was of a multiplicity of shades. Blue roses were a delight to the eye. Climbing plants with small star-shaped flowers in pastel shades wove their way through wooden trellis. Lichen clung to stone urns and time-weathered crystalline statues.

As they drew closer to a group of the latter all three of the time travellers were taken aback by the sight of the faces.

"Dear me," the Doctor said, as mildly as he could in an effort to make light of the tortured expressions, "the features are rather disturbing, are they not, hmm?"

Steven couldn't repress a shiver as he looked from statue to statue. "They look like... forsaken souls."

The Doctor regarded him with some surprise. "That's very deep, young man."

Steven averted his eyes, embarrassed by the intensity of his own remark.

Vicki, uneasy, noticed a wrought iron bench in a secluded arbour and gestured towards it. "Let's have a rest," she urged the two men.

Around them, colourful blooms swayed gently. This was a beautiful place, she thought. A veritable Eden. What was that little verse her old aunt had been fond of?

*'The kiss of the sun for pardon,
The song of the birds for mirth.*

*One is nearer to God in a garden
Than anywhere else on earth.'*

But, like Eden, this paradise definitely possessed a sinister aspect as well.

'I seek redemption in my verse, but find it not!'

The words, spoken in a tone of utter dejection, drew their attention to the newly-arrived figure in a ruffled shirt, a red waistcoat patterned with tiny white flowers and a flamboyant black cloak lined with purple silk. His hair, of a rich chestnut colour, fell to his shoulders in a riot of curls. His pale face was that of a young man, except for the eyes, which indicated a lifetime of ultimately unrewarding experiences and were buried in darkened craters of despair.

*'For my sins I suffer eternal pain.
I turn to the Muse but seek solace in vain.'*

The haunted rhymester said no more and didn't seem to expect a response. He wandered off in a vague, purposeless way, lifted a delicate hand to move aside a frond of the abundant foliage and vanished from sight.

Steven looked totally bemused. "Who on earth was that?"

"A tragic poet," Vicki told him dreamily. "Doomed to wander forever through eternity's back garden."

The Doctor gave a little chuckle. "That's very profound, child. Just like Steven's forsaken souls. You both scintillate today."

Steven got to his feet. "Let's walk on," he urged, preferring normality to fanciful talk on six days out of seven.

Vicki gave him a look. "Philistine!"

They crossed soft, velvety green lawn, upon which supple, slightly swaying trees trailed long branches abundantly laden with tiny, delicate leaves. A worn sundial standing in the centre of a circular flower bed was surrounded by a riot of exquisite but fragile deep purple and pale lilac blossoms. A couple of long-legged, ornamental birds were positioned side by side as if standing sentinel over their delightful surroundings.

Bearing randomly some degrees to their left, the Doctor, Steven and Vicki casually encountered the most disturbingly beautiful woman they had ever seen.

Effortlessly graceful, she was seated at one end of another iron bench, a vision of golden hair and dark eyes in a frilled pink and white dress plus a matching confection of a hat that were reminiscent of the Victorian period on Earth. She had looked up from her book and was giving them a heart-stopping smile that made Steven's legs feel as though they had turned to jelly.

"I hope you're enjoying the garden," she said softly, her voice perfectly modulated and unmistakeably refined.

"Indeed we are, my dear," the Doctor responded politely, if not entirely accurately.

"We've interrupted your reading," Vicki put in, apologetically.

A glance down at the slim little volume. "I know all these poems by heart, but I still like to leaf through the book."

Steven felt he ought to say something. He gestured towards the seated crystalline figure of an old man with his head sunk upon his chest that occupied the other end of the bench.

"That old fellow looks content," he remarked, in an attempt at a joke. It immediately sounded weak to his own ears. Why couldn't he sound natural like Vicki and the Doctor?

The dark eyes rested on the statue for a moment with more than a touch of sadness, then met Steven's directly.

"I knew him a little. He'd done some terrible things in his time, but he was truly remorseful, I believe, and that counts for something, don't you think?"

Steven nodded wordlessly. He hadn't thought of the effigy, or the others he had seen, as being representative of real life.

"Do you spend a lot of your time here?" asked the Doctor, in the manner of one who throws a stone into a pool and waits for the ripples to widen. His puzzlement, not to mention his curiosity, was burgeoning considerably.

A look of definite surprise on that beautiful countenance now.

"All of it," she returned, and it was obvious from the note of confusion in her tone that she considered his question completely superfluous.

"How could it be otherwise?" she added, after a moment or two of silence.

The Doctor tried a different tack. "May I ask how you came to be here?"

He received a look that conveyed resignation and even a trace of amusement.

"I'm afraid I impinged," she revealed, with mock gravity.

Steven and Vicki were bewildered. The Doctor waited patiently for further enlightenment.

"My presence had a disturbing effect on the established order of things. A number of vested interests were seriously undermined." She arched her fine eyebrows derisively. "That was quite unforgiveable, of course."

The Doctor nodded sympathetically. "Many, I fear, would see it as such."

"There's also the official account, but I won't decry your intelligence by repeating that."

She glanced quickly at each of them in turn, as if suddenly dismayed. Obviously she regretted confiding even so little. Calmly, however, she recovered her poise and resumed her perusal of the poetry book.

The Doctor rightly interpreted this as marking the end of the conversation.

"Good day," he said courteously.

She inclined her head graciously.

He led Steven and Vicki away.

Ahead, the ground sloped gradually upwards. The lawn gave way to longer grass. The breeze that skirmished through the trees was a more noticeable one.

Steven stopped for a moment. He looked rather wistful.

"What wouldn't a man do for such a woman?" he enquired, of no-one in particular.

"Well, she's certainly made a conquest of you, hasn't she?" responded Vicki.

The Doctor regarded her with a measure of amusement. Were those really flecks of green he discerned in her eyes?

Steven, having decided not to dignify her unusually catty remark with an answer, said nothing and resolutely pressed on. The ascent was growing ever steeper now.

They heard the sound of crashing waters some time before they reached the majestic falls that cascaded from high above over time-worn rocks into the seething, boulder-strewn natural basin far below, the green walls of which glistened.

"Most impressive," the Doctor commented, appreciatively.

"The water's like flowing crystal. It's beautiful," breathed Vicki, then added after a pause: "Even Venus of the Dawn back there couldn't compete with it."

Steven looked down into the swirling cauldron below and smiled to himself. "There is that awful green stuff, though," he said, ambiguously.

The Doctor lightly touched the blooms that he and Steven were standing amongst.

"These wild flowers really are a pleasure to behold," he said firmly.

Wandering off a little way, he paused several times to enjoy the sight of the falls from different angles.

It was then that Vicki noticed the figure. Her sharp intake of breath alerted the two men. She pointed upwards.

Some way above, from a grassy vantage point, a man, seated with his back against a small boulder, his legs stretched out, appeared to be staring down, either at them or at the foaming water in the rocky basin.

The Doctor took a small pair of binoculars from a pocket of his frock coat and stared through them at this new sight.

"It's another statue," he proclaimed, after a couple of minutes.

"An odd place to put it, surely?" Steven commented. "It's easily missed, unless you're really looking."

"Or a noticing sort of person, like me," added Vicki.

"I wonder," mused the Doctor.

Steven's attention drifted. He squinted up at the summit of the falls.

The Doctor, still pondering, absently followed his gaze, then suddenly chuckled.

"What are you hoping to see up there, young man? Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty struggling together?"

Vicki laughed.

"Let's go on just a little further," the old man urged.

They approached a row of bushes, positioned close together and effectively screening whatever was beyond, and pushed through the exuberant foliage.

On the other side, they collectively gasped.

"This just isn't possible," Steven insisted. "No way can we have doubled back."

But in front of them was the area of garden they had seen first, with the top of the slender tower visible above the lush greenery.

Wonderingly, they took a different path away from it this time and had not gone very far before the Doctor spotted, through the trees, a small gazebo. In his eagerness for a closer look he left Steven and Vicki somewhat behind.

The quaint little structure was, he now saw clearly, a faintly greenish blue in colour and topped by a golden ball. Patches of moss clung to the wooden walls and roof. The several windows, which were without glass, weren't much more than slits. It stood on the grass-

covered bank of a small pond, the cool-looking water of which sparkled. A profusion of trees, bushes and vividly-hued blooms bordered the pleasing little scene.

"The doorway must be at the other side, facing the water," chirped Vicki, as she and Steven caught up.

This proved to be the case. Just before they passed through the simple, unadorned archway, the Doctor was assailed by a strong wave of apprehension...

The interior of the gazebo was shadowy and dominated by a great chair carved with the tortured grimaces of the damned amidst incongruously frivolous swirls and curlicues. Its occupant sat stiffly upright, her ageing countenance cast in pride yet stamped with a haunting awareness. A grey coiffure of tight curls and waves swept upwards, above black eyes and a stare unwavering yet weary. Her coal-black raiment was stiffened with black gems, hard and glittering.

It was only for a few fleeting moments that Steven and Vicki were able to witness the Doctor's shocked expression, for he quickly assumed a nonchalant look as he faced the formidable-looking old woman.

A mirthless smile etched itself on her features. When she spoke, her voice was harsh and strident, holding more than a hint of mockery.

"So, Doctor, we meet again. How delightful."

The Doctor inclined his head only very slightly. "Lady Regina," he murmured, in understated greeting.

Steven glanced at Vicki as he recalled their recent encounter, in eleventh century Northumbria, with that mischievous monk, who had possessed some connection to the Doctor. Now, so soon afterwards, another aspect of the old-time traveller's past had resurfaced in the person of this flint-eyed old biddy. He sensed the antagonism between the two that lay beneath the thin veneer of their polite greetings. It made the Doctor's clash with the conniving monk seem like a reunion between old friends.

Lady Regina continued to address the Doctor only, as if he were unaccompanied:

"A goblet of wine? I have no taste for it myself, despite appearances," she claimed mendaciously, nodding towards the long-stemmed glass she held, which was half-filled with a blood-red vintage. "The sad fact is, when my glass is empty I see darkness at the bottom of it. I can't tempt you? Perhaps a cut of My Lady's Cake, then? I find the merest sliver a light indulgence while observing encroaching shadows."

"Thank you, no."

"Does the garden appeal to you?" she enquired.

The Doctor smiled thinly. "I hope whatever pleasure it affords you far exceeds any I may have felt," he countered, evasively.

Lady Regina shrugged. "My gratification is but trifling," she admitted, casting a brief look towards the arch and the sun-dappled water beyond.

"I'm sorry to hear that, though hardly surprised."

"Sorry?" Her eyes hardened. "When it was you who..."

"Nevertheless, I wish you a measure of contentment," he interrupted.

The black eyes narrowed. "If ever I obtain my freedom, you could be sorry indeed."

"That day will never dawn, as I think we both know."

There was a pause.

"Where is Larn?" she snapped abruptly.

"Safe and happy, I promise you."

"What about the other girl? The boy?"

"Also safe."

"From me?" Her tone was bitter.

The Doctor bowed his head.

"I was fond of them. You know I was."

"As instruments of ambition," he reminded her.

"So here I am in exile," she flared. "Imprisoned in a pretty void, listening to that cankered poet spouting his pathetic drivel and taking walks that lead me back here whatever direction I take." She leaned back in her chair, hopelessness suddenly extinguishing spirit.

The Doctor's regarded her with sadness in his eyes, but turned away then and didn't look back. Steven and Vicki hastily followed him out of the gazebo.

The Doctor was setting the TARDIS controls for departure. He had said little since the uncomfortable scene with the mysterious Lady Regina.

Unexpectedly, he directed a sharp look at his two young friends.

"I suspected after we saw the young poet that the garden was a prison. I was further convinced by the recursive element that, quite impossibly as it seemed, brought us back to the entrance area from the significantly higher ground by the falls. Those who dwell in such a place have no hope whatever of leaving. None."

"You were certain when you saw Lady Regina, weren't you?" Vicki put in.

"Yes, child, I was. A dangerous woman, whose schemes I helped to frustrate some time ago. If she was there, it had to be in exile."

"Of course, she did confirm that herself, didn't she?" Steven inserted, his expression one of contrived innocence.

Vicki shot him a reproving look.

"Quite," the Doctor acknowledged, huffily.

"Why were statues made of dead prisoners, I wonder?" mused Vicki. "Like the one on the bench next to Steven's golden-haired goddess."

Steven regarded her with narrowed eyes and she ignored him.

"That would have been odd, had it actually been done," responded the Doctor.

"But it was done," objected Steven.

"Those 'statues' were the deceased prisoners themselves, crystallised into rock," the Doctor revealed.

Steven opened his mouth to voice a question, but he was forestalled.

"Something introduced into the air, I suspect, that dead bodies react to. I suppose we should acknowledge the sheer efficiency of that enigmatic little garden. Yes, indeed."

So saying, the Doctor pulled the lever that would thankfully propel the TARDIS far away from it.



The Bell Man sits by a flickering brazier, awaiting the moment to mark the passing of another uneventful hour with his wearisome tolling. His only other task is the admittance of visitors to the disquieting garden, which lies on the very edge of Creation. But when had anyone ever presented themselves at its forbidding gates?

Then the Doctor, Steven and Vicki arrive quite inadvertently. The purpose of the ostensibly delightful paradise is unknown to them as yet, but they soon register disturbing hints. Who is the dissolute-looking poet? Why is a statue positioned where it can barely be seen?

The topography of the place is impossible to discern. Gradually the time travellers realise that the beauty of the garden is an attempt to soften the punishment meted out to the occupants of this apparent haven.

But the greatest surprise for the Doctor awaits in a lakeside gazebo, where a black-garbed old woman from his past is consumed with hatred for him...

This is another in a series of original fan authored
Doctor Who fiction published by The Doctor Who Project

ISBN 0-918894-28-X

