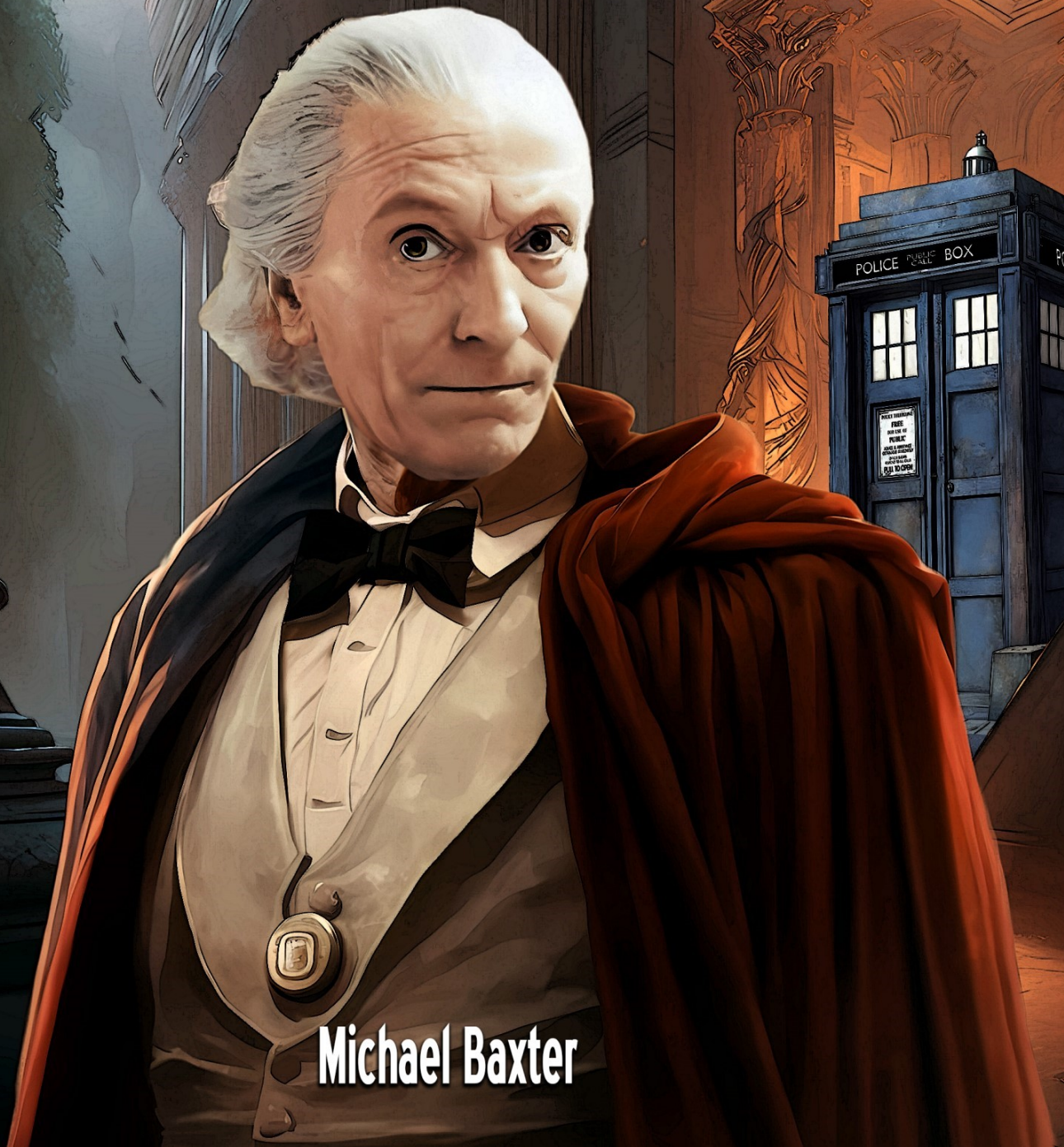


BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

The Secret of Arabelle



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Published by Jigsaw Publications
Vancouver, BC, Canada

First Published May 2023

Editors Bob Furnell, Richard Peevers, Hamish Crawford

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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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John came into the control room in his striped pyjamas and yawned. Gillian stared at him, aghast. “Why aren’t you dressed? Grandfather says we should be arriving soon.”

“He isn’t even here,” her brother pointed out.

“I’ve just come from his laboratory. He’s working on the netaphoric gauge.”

“It isn’t on the blink again? We need a new one, if you ask me.”

“Where would we find another?” Gillian asked reasonably. “Anyway, it’s only slipped out of alignment, according to Grandfather.”

“How many times has it done that, do you think?”

Gillian laughed. “I’ve no idea. Quite a few, certainly. Now go and get changed, or Grandfather and I will have to explore our next port of call without you.”

“Oh, will you? What if the Trods are waiting around a corner like they were last time? Or something even worse? You’ll wish I was there to spring into action then.”

“You have a point there, so *get dressed!*”

“All right, all right.”

He padded away. Gillian sat down on the Victorian sofa, picked up *Five Go Down to the Sea*, removed a Winnie the Pooh bookmark and read on.

Unexpectedly, a low whine came from the six-sided control panel. She had never heard it before and was about to fetch her grandfather when it ceased abruptly. After some hesitation, she shrugged and went on with her book.

When the old Doctor came in to refit the netaphoric gauge Gillian remembered the unusual noise and told him about it.

"Dear me, I wonder what happened there," he muttered, and looked uneasy for a moment before dismissing the occurrence with, "Never mind. It's stopped now" and applying himself to the unreliable gauge.

John reappeared, looking bright and shipshape, and leaned on the control panel. "Here I am, sis, all ready for duty."

The Doctor looked at his granddaughter. "What's he talking about, eh?"

"Nothing important, Grandfather. How is the gauge?"

"Well, I do believe I've identified the problem."

Yet again, John thought irreverently.

"Well done," praised Gillian, determined to keep the old man in a good mood.

"Thank you, child."

"I think we're coming in to land," inserted John.

"So we are," the Doctor concurred.

"I hope it's somewhere nice, like that lovely beach we arrived on," said Gillian.

John rolled his eyes. "You can live in hope, if you die in despair, as Aunt Sarah liked to tell us."

Surprisingly, the Doctor chuckled at that. "She's rather a prophet of doom, as I recall."

John snorted. "You're not kidding!"

The TARDIS materialised and the Doctor switched on the scanner-screen. The picture that swam into view showed a market square and a number of colourfully-robed people examining the goods displayed on the wooden stalls.

"They could be Romans," hazarded Gillian.

"Indeed they could, my child." The Doctor glanced over the controls. "The atmosphere is quite satisfactory, at any rate, so I suggest we step outside and endeavour to find out more."

"The stalls might be interesting," she enthused.

John's response was downbeat: "Fruit, vegetables, chipped ornaments and endless balls of wool, I expect."

The blue police box exterior of the TARDIS stood in a corner of the busy square, beside a fluted stone column with moss clinging to its base. The doors of the time and space machine opened and the three travellers emerged.

"I love the sprightly music," said Gillian.

The lively air in question was being played by four vividly clad musicians who stood on a raised, circular platform. They swayed and gyrated extravagantly to their own accompaniment. Every member of the group had a large, excessively curled moustache.

"Posers!" John commented.

"Just look at that castle, children," urged the Doctor.

"It's straight out of a Disney film," Gillian gasped. "How breathtaking!"

The massive grey edifice was so tall that its round tower and pointed turrets seemed to touch the bright blue sky. Flags, red and yellow, were fluttering atop the fairytale structure. A pair of huge trees, oddly curved, seemed to frame the castle in a protective way.

They wandered across to the market stalls. Gillian was drawn to a glittering display of necklaces, bracelets and brooches. She knew it was costume jewellery, like Aunt Sarah's small collection of trinkets, but the brightly-coloured artificial stones were still pleasing to the eye. A little turquoise butterfly won her heart the moment she noticed it.

"Lovely, isn't it, my sweeting?" said the friendly-looking woman behind the stall. "It's the only one left."

The seller crossed her fingers surreptitiously, for a box beneath the wooden table held at least another twenty of them.

Gillian was looking stricken. If someone else came along and took a fancy to the dear little thing, it would be lost to her for ever.

"Will you hold on to it for me while I find my grandfather?" she begged.

"Of course, lovey," the vendor assured her, and picked it up.

Gillian hurried away, belatedly remembering that she didn't know their location. Would the old man have found out where they were and have the right currency amongst that odd assortment of coins he kept in one pocket of his frock coat?

She found the Doctor and John admiring some model trains and urged them in the direction of the trinket stall, the position of which she had kept firmly in her mind.

It wasn't there.

"I don't understand!" she exclaimed, her dark eyes wide with shock.

A baker she had noticed on the left was still present, as were his loaves, buns and currant cakes, but what had been the jewellery stall was now occupied by bolts of cloth in various colours. A tight-faced woman was cutting a length of bottle-green material for a customer.

"It was here, Grandfather! I know it was!"

Before the Doctor could respond, he and the children were distracted by the sound of marching feet. They turned and saw that the huge wooden doorway of the castle now stood open and that a number of figures in fancy scarlet uniforms were emerging from the lofty building. On their heads were three-cornered hats with white plumes and each man carried a golden trumpet. The four musicians on the platform stopped performing as the newcomers formed two neat lines, a few feet apart.

A troupe of nimble maidens in swirling gold dresses appeared, danced in a sprightly fashion around the trumpeters and sang in lilting voices:

*"He's a hero, he's a hero;
So very wise too.
His valour is boundless,*

*His brave heart so true.
So matchless his knowledge,
So great is his mind,
He works for our good,
He's one of a kind.
How blessed we are,
That we thankfully can,
Thrive under the wing
Of this wonderful man."*

The girls lowered themselves to the paved ground and spread their bright skirts becomingly around them. There was a moment of silence before a grey-haired, white robed figure appeared, rapped a gold staff three times upon one of the heavy slabs and declaimed in a ringing tone:

"His Glorious, Most Revered and Ever-Gracious Majesty, King Salter the Seventy-First of this happy kingdom of Arabelle."

Applause broke out immediately and the time travellers hastily joined in.

"What a popular fellow this king must be," the Doctor commented, with a smile.

"I wonder if he'll be tall and terribly handsome, like Sean Connery," inserted Gillian.

The trumpeters played an extremely high-pitched fanfare and John's ears popped uncomfortably. King Salter strode from the castle and the applauding multiplied deafeningly.

Gillian, however, was disappointed. "He's nothing like a film star, is he?" was her reaction.

John laughed.

King Salter was a dumpy, jovial little man with flushed features and curly hair of a faded brown, atop which his shining gold crown was perched. He was clad in red velvet, overlaid with a flowing ermine cloak. The splendid chain across his broad chest glittered in the sun.

Somewhat to John and Gillian's alarm, the beaming sovereign headed straight for his newly-arrived visitors.

"Greetings, my friends, greetings! A thousand welcomes to Arabelle! No - two thousand, I think! This is indeed the most wonderful of days! I declare that I shall remember it for ever! It's the first time we have received visitors since I don't know when! I can barely contain my excitement! I believe I might burst! Wouldn't that be a rib-tickling sight, eh? Bits of me all over the place! I'd be everywhere in my kingdom at the same time!"

King Salter wheezed with laughter at his own exclamations until his face was redder than ever and tears of mirth cascaded from his rheumy eyes.

The Doctor bowed. "I am the Doctor, a traveller of no time or place. These are my grandchildren, John and Gillian."

John hastily bowed as well and Gillian curtsied.

“It’s so *super* to meet you! Come into my palace, do! You’ve turned up at exactly the right moment! We’re about to have an *enormous* feast! Then there’ll be such lively airs played that you’ll never want to stop dancing! Your feet will be even happier than the rest of you! Come along, come along!”

Overwhelmed, the Doctor and the children followed the effusive king. Gillian glanced back once and saw that the baker and his wares had vanished and that the stall was now offering colourful blooms for sale.

In a high-ceilinged banqueting hall decorated in white and gold, King Salter took his place on a beautifully crafted throne padded with rich blue velvet and crossed his chubby legs casually. He beckoned grandly and two little girls, one with brown hair and the other with wavy locks of bright yellow, hurried forward excitedly. They wore the very finest of silk dresses, becomingly set off with delicate gold and silver bows. Each wore a headdress of small flowers in pale but exquisite shades.

“My sweet daughters, Pepperina and Mustardine,” boomed the King. “Tell me, strangers, are they not the most gorgeous princesses you have ever laid eyes upon?”

“Indeed they are, great sire,” the Doctor wasted no time in agreeing. “Their comeliness is a delight to behold.”

John and Gillian nodded along with a suitable measure of enthusiasm, though Gillian considered that Pepperina’s hair suffered from being frizzy.

“What strange names,” John commented, and Gillian agreed.

The princesses settled into seats on their father’s right. King Salter invited the three visitors to sit next to them. On the other side of his throne was a slightly smaller one, as yet unoccupied.

The long tables before the seated multitude were weighed down with mouth-watering food and drink. There was beef, pork with crispy crackling, turkey and stuffing, breaded ham, several kinds of fish, big sausages, platters of piping-hot vegetables, jugs of steaming gravy, dishes of salad, great wedges of cheese - all different, bowls of sliced egg sprinkled with watercress, crusty bread thickly buttered, succulent-looking fruit, golden-brown pastries bursting with currants and raisins, and plates piled high with colourfully-iced cakes. Huge cut-class carafes were filled to the brim with a pale green refreshment that sparkled prettily.

“What a spread!” John exclaimed, approvingly, as he cast his eyes over it.

“Father loves eating,” said Mustardine.

“The wicked witch has arrived,” Gillian heard Pepperina whisper to her sister.

“Slimy Coz is sucking up to her, I see - as usual,” Mustardine whispered back.

Gillian followed their gaze and took in the sight of a tall, haughty-looking woman whose jet-black hair was adorned by a crown. Her yellow dress had a striking black design at the bosom and was overlaid with an ermine-lined robe.

“Look, John. She must be the Queen.”

“Her name is Vinegarella. She’s our stepmother,” inserted Mustardine, in confirmation.

Pepperina leaned sideways and, whispering again so that King Salter couldn't hear, "Also known as Madame Snooty."

The princesses tittered.

"Who's that with her?" asked John.

"Oh, that's our cousin, Prince Basil of Cruett," Mustardine answered, quietly once more. "We think he and the witch are plotting together against Father."

"Have you told him?" queried Gillian.

"Yes, but he won't listen to a word against Snooty Drawers or Basil the slyboots. It's really very aggravating."

Gillian studied the latter, who wore two large red plumes in his jaunty black cap. He looked very shifty, in her opinion - like the Knave of Hearts who stole the tarts. The King certainly ought to suspect him!

"When can we eat?" John muttered. "I'm desperate for some turkey."

"We must wait until the Queen is seated, boy," chided the Doctor.

John watched in irritation as Vinegarella and Basil vanished behind a folding screen decorated with silk flowers, presumably to talk treason in privacy.

At that moment the colourful, bustling scene before the time-travellers shifted out of focus temporarily, then clarified.

John turned to Gillian. "Did you...?"

"Yes, I saw it," she interrupted, round-eyed.

"Grandfather?" John prompted.

"Yes, yes. Very odd!" the old man responded. "What happened there, eh? No-one else has turned a hair."

They saw that this was true.

"Mamma has arrived," announced Pepperina.

"She looks very nice in her best robes," added Mustardine.

"Her name is Vinegarella," supplemented Pepperina, for the information of the guests.

"*Queen* Vinegarella," Mustardine corrected her, importantly.

John, Gillian and the Doctor regarded the little woman with homely-looking features in utter amazement. Her purple and blue robes, revealing just a hint of their red silk lining, were trimmed with ermine; her emerald necklace sparkled and her curly blonde hair was topped with a small golden crown.

"That odd blurring we witnessed has changed things - at least to some extent," stated the Doctor, thoughtfully.

"Where's Prince Basil?" John asked Mustardine.

The princess stared at him.

"Who?" she queried, looking bemused.

The Queen took her place. Two servants came into the big hall, carrying a plattered roast swan with all its feathers painstakingly replaced. It was surrounded by apples and pears. There was applause from the courtiers for this impressive spectacle. John, Gillian and the Doctor joined in politely.

The King and Queen began to eat, which was the signal for everyone else to do the same. But when John bit eagerly into a succulent-looking slice of turkey he was sadly disappointed.

“This food tastes of absolutely nothing,” he whispered to his sister.

Gillian tried the ham and agreed with him.

John looked completely mystified. “What’s going on here?”

“Everyone else seems to be enjoying it,” Gillian pointed out.

The two children waited impatiently as the banquet progressed. The Doctor’s mind was turning rapidly, trying to work out the answer to the vexing conundrum this surreal place represented.

An entertainment commenced: a nymph-like young woman in a diaphanous creation dancing with a partner who wore a donkey’s head. The Doctor and his grandchildren left their seats for a better view.

When the banqueting hall slipped out of focus again, the effect was much more drastic than previously. Faces were distorted grotesquely; vivid colours swirled together in a psychedelic confusion.

“Details changing... people who become someone else. What does that remind you of, eh?” the Doctor asked John and Gillian.

“Grandfather, it’s getting worse! It isn’t going to clear this time!” Gillian cried in alarm.

“A dream!” supplied the Doctor, answering his own question. “What was the name of this kingdom, eh? Arabelle! Could this perhaps be the dream of a young girl called Arabella?”

“She’s waking up, isn’t she?” John said suddenly. “The first time she nearly did, but fell asleep again and carried on with a changed version of the same dream.”

“Very good, my boy,” said the Doctor, “but now we must get back to the TARDIS before Arabelle disappears completely. Goodness knows what will happen to us if we don’t!”

“Oh, Grandfather!” exclaimed Gillian, who was terrified now.

There were no cries of fear from the distorting inhabitants of the vanishing dream city. They were the products of imagination and oblivious to their fate.

It was only just possible to determine the outlines of the banqueting room now, but the time-travellers dared not lose their concentration. It was with a collective gasp of sheer relief that they found themselves in the open air, though the market stalls could no longer be made out at all. They turned in the direction of the TARDIS and saw it without any difficulty, since it was the only thing that stood out distinctly, for unlike its surroundings the craft really existed.

As the Doctor unlocked the door, the temporary world they had experienced was fading to white. Hastily they hurried inside to safety...

When they were under way, the Doctor explained that they had journeyed into a dimension where dreams had something resembling substance - for as long as they lasted.

“I thought once before that I was in such a realm, when I encountered Frankenstein’s monster and Count Dracula in a haunted house. On that occasion, however, my theory was unconfirmed, but this time left little room for doubt.”

Gillian had remembered something. “Grandfather, when the controls made that strange noise I told you about...”

“Yes, that was when we slipped into the surreal dimension, my child. It was most remiss of me not to look into it. I’d better do so now, hadn’t I? We don’t want to experience anyone else’s dreams, do we, hmm?”



The TARDIS materialises in a crowded marketplace. The Doctor, John, and Gillian wander round the stalls. Gillian sees an item she likes on a jewellery stall and goes to find her grandfather, hoping he will buy it for her. When the travellers arrive at the stall a different vendor is selling lengths of cloth and there is no sign of any jewellery.

A fanfare sounds and a jolly-faced, portly man arrives on the scene. This is King Salter, ruler of the kingdom of Arabelle, who invites the TARDIS crew to a sumptuous feast in his castle.

Strangely, the food turns out to have no taste. The Queen is a proud, haughty woman who is plotting with the King's nephew, Basil of Cruelt. Then, alarmingly, the dining hall slips out of focus. When it clarifies, the Queen has become a pleasant, homely little woman and Basil no longer exists.

The Doctor suddenly realises where they are and what is inevitably going to happen. Can they reach the TARDIS before Arabelle ceases to exist.

ISBN 0-918894-28-X



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

