

## “Old Vintage”

By Russell Archey

The heavy oak door moaned on its hinges. The inside of the centuries-old manor showed its age much as the outside had, but in a very different way. The courtyard, overgrown with creepers and rampant flowering bushes, still held a rustic beauty. The stone walls of the building hid behind a thick layer of green vines that reminded Edgar and Allie of a quaint bed-and-breakfast.

As they stood in the open doorway, light filtered behind them from the courtyard into an entry room much less rustic and beautiful and more decrepit and forgotten. Dust danced in what must have been the first breath of fresh air this room had experienced in decades.

“Jesus, do they really expect us to find anything here?” Edgar asked, coughing from an overpowering, musty odor.

“Just appraising what we can,” Allie said, covering her nose with her mouth, “who knows what we’ll find.” She pocketed the tarnished brass key that allowed them entry. “Had to do this for a family whose grandmother passed. She was a hoarder. Found a few comics worth over ten grand.”

“I don’t think old man Art was into comics.”

“No. His family goes back to old-school nobility in England. There’s probably a lot more than comics in here somewhere.”

They opened their binders and uncapped their pins. They also each took out a small flashlight. The late Arthur Mortevein passed without any family to speak of. His estate passed on to official hands, leaving Edgar and Allie as the two appraisers to find what the rest of his earthly possessions were worth.

They passed through multiple rooms, each as full of rotting vestiges of former wealth as the last. Silverware sat tarnished on crumbling mahogany tables. Fine China rested, chipped and cracked, on old shelves. Paintings and old clothes hung in moth-eaten tatters.

“So far, so nothing.” Edgar quipped. He opened another door and a shadow emerged, flailing and screaming. Edgar squealed and stumbled backwards.

Allie chuckled as the small black demon skittered past her, hissing.

“Damn strays,” Edgar said through heavy breaths.

He lifted his flashlight to see a hallway lined with doors. Between each set, multiple paintings hung on the wall; each one of a different person. They all wore elegant clothes and smug faces, at least those whose faces could be seen. Tears and holes marred each and every elegant work.

“Must be the different family members,” Edgar thought out loud. “I wonder why he left.”

“There’s a few guesses.” Allie replied.

“Maybe he got the creeps being here, too.” Edgar said, casting his thin ray of light around. “I mean, these don’t look like the friendliest of people, either.” His eyes fell on a painting at the end of the hall. This one was larger than the others. An imposing figure sat with his hands clasped in front of his stomach. A large ring, inlaid with red rubies and a golden ‘M’ insignia, encompassed one large finger.

“You can tell back in the day this place was anything but creepy.”

Edgar followed the painting up the where the face should be, but a large tear caused this portion to flap over, leaving one squinting eye staring fiercely back down the hall.

“Sure,” Edgar said under his breath. “I’ve heard the place is haunted, of course.”

“Well, he never returned after his family disappeared so...maybe ghosts got them.” Allie smirked. She didn’t personally believe that, but the story still circulated.

“His parents disappeared?”

“Family. All of them. They were having a party—a masquerade, I think—and all the Mortevis were invited. Arthur couldn’t make it, but the next he heard, they were all gone. He never came back. Just took what was left of the fortune and went to Europe.”

“Where was he?” Edgar asked.

“Business or something, or at least that’s what his alibi said.”

“Alibi?”

“Yeah. He was investigated for their disappearances since he was the last one left. But they didn’t find anything. No bodies, no ransom letters, no follow-up calls. Nothing. Arthur refused to speak of it except to say there was no love lost between any of them.”

“Ouch,” Edgar winced. “That’s harsh.”

They finished with all the rooms on both floors of the old manor. Nothing of value had been found. The stray cat was the only other living thing they’d come across.

“That leaves the cellar,” Allie said as she looked over her notes.

“This should be fun,” Edgar said sardonically.

They entered the cellar from the narrow stone stairs at the back of the house. Initially, there was little to be found in the first room, much like the rest of the building. When they opened the door in the back, however, their breaths simultaneously caught.

“Oh, wow,” Allie gasped.

“That’s a lot of wine.”

“How old do you think it is?” Allie asked. Barrel after barrel lined the walls. The smell of the casks was a stark difference to the rest of the Mortevis estate.

“It should be stamped—” Edgar began, but he tripped on the uneven flooring. Crashing into the rack of barrels, the old wood gave out.

A thunderous sound reverberated through the room as the barrels crashed into the floor, emptying their contents. Dark liquid and wood planks flooded the cellar, leaving Allie standing in a foot of wine, and Edgar soaked in red before he could stand.

When he managed to get to his feet, he saw Allie’s face grow pale. Her eyes widened in fear and her arm pointing at something. Edgar followed her eyes to see that many of the barrels, over a dozen, still had some of their contents remaining.

Bones, stained red, and scraps of what were once fine clothes still clinging to them, lay within some of the broken casks. Edgar noticed on one of the morbid fingers was a ring: inlaid with rubies with a golden ‘M.’

“What did he do...” Edgar gasped.

“I think we found the Mortevis,” Allie whispered.