



Hot Pudding and Crystal

Delight turned to disappointment in the width of several volumes. On the shelves of the library the Anthologist found three of the manuscripts written by Josiah McDonald, the Enlightenment publisher and archivist. The fourth volume was missing.

"Well, have you looked?" said Queen Anteje on one of her frequent visits to the library, (or check-ups as he called them.)

"No, I haven't looked. In the three weeks I've been here I've sat in that chair there asleep."

"Don't be insolent. I was only asking."

"It was a rhetorical question."

"So, it was."

"Yes, I have looked." The Anthologist pulled one of the three volumes off the shelf. "See the spine, two centimetres, white paper. It would be easy to find the fourth on these shelves." The other books were bound in dark leather, dark paper, dark card.

Anteje studied the first volume. "Do you believe any of this?"

"Possibly." His hesitancy made Anteje look up from the pages. "It seems far fetched, but. . . ."

"But what?"

"Some aspects of the Dark Ages baffled historians in the 21st Century. Increased trade and wealth, engineering developments."

"What?" Anteje laughed. "You think people from the future helped the Anglo-Saxons. You're having me on." Studying the pages again she mumbled. "I thought all the men were dead. How did you survive?"

"Wit, my Queen. I survived on my wits."

His wits helped him to think of a contact in a nearby village. The man recorded births, deaths and marriages and knew who was who. The Anthologist had a distant memory of a Scottish man moving into the area, but was unsure which village he had settled in.

"Stuart McDonald," said the Registrar from behind a desk that was almost big enough to hide him. "Came here eight months ago. Antagonised people seven months ago. Fell out with his neighbour six months ago. Shot a poacher five months ago. Was stood up at the altar three months ago. Lost a wager two months ago. Filed for bankruptcy one month ago."

The Anthologist pursed his lips. "But apart from that he's doing all right?"

"He's a curmudgeon. I wouldn't wear that hat if you go to see him."

"Why not?"

"On a sunny day it'll cast a shadow across your eyes. He doesn't like people who hide their eyes. And he doesn't like sunshine."

The gods were on his side. When the Anthologist knocked on Stuart McDonald's door the rain started. Repeated knocking brought no one to the door and the mullioned windows gave nothing away; the curtains were drawn on the inside. He paced around the front and side of the house looking for signs of life, but invading brambles stopped him. A timber gate falling to bits prevented access to any other part of the overgrown garden.

He should have looked up, above the rickety gutters and beyond the off-white walls. Up to a small window opened by an elderly woman. "Who are you?" she said.

"Hello. I was wondering if Stuart McDonald was home."

"He's in town. He's gone to see Herr Troencker."

"Troencker? He's an antiques dealer, isn't he?"

"Yes. Stuart is negotiating the acquisition, the acquisition. . . ."

"The purchase?"

"The purchase of a dinner set."

"So, I'll find him there then?"

"Aye. That you will. And a word of advice. Get rid of that hat. He won't talk to you in that hat." And she slammed the window. Some of the roof tiles thought about slipping away, but changed their minds.

He kept his hat on in the rain shower, but remembered to remove it when he entered Herr Troencker's shop. Conscious of the carried hat swiping a delicate piece of china off its stand he held it close to his chest, but there was still the risk of a stray cuff, the nudge of a table, a subtle gust of wind when the door opened. The contents of Herr Troencker's shop were as delicate as egg shell.

Except for one display. A crystal dinner set that sparkled even in the gloomiest shadow when the shop was darkened by passing rain clouds. Next to it, Herr Troencker stood in deep thought, his index finger to his mouth, and a second man hunching his shoulders forward waiting for Herr Troencker to speak.

"No," said Herr Troencker.

"No!"

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I mean no. No means no, Herr McDonald."

It was him. Stuart McDonald. A Scotsman sharing the same surname as Josiah, author of the four Quarter Moon volumes. Stuart McDonald carried a large canvas bag which he held with both hands when he spoke. "But this is priceless."

"It's one of a volume, Herr McDonald. If you had the other three then maybe we would have a deal."

"The one on its own is priceless. People would kill for this volume."

He was right about that. The Anthologist's heart beat increased.

"Bring me the other three volumes, Herr McDonald, and I'll do the exchange."

Stuart McDonald blundered out of the shop, all gnashing teeth and bluster.

"Can I help you, sir?" said Herr Troencker.

"Er, no. It's him I want." The Anthologist rushed outside. "Stuart McDonald."

"Who wants to know?" McDonald spoke to the path in front of him.

"I'll buy the fourth volume off you. How much do you want?"

"It's not for sale." He stopped and spun around. "I would not sell it to a man who carries his hat in a rainstorm." And off he went again.

"What? How much do you want for it? I can afford any price."

"No, you cannot."

"How do you know?"

He stopped again. "One. You wear riding boots, but you have no horse. Two. The ends of your kerchief are frayed. And three, if you had any idea, any idea, how much this volume was worth you'd know better than to ask about buying it." And off he went again.

"I know how much you think it's worth."

"Aye. Do you now."

"A crystal dinner set."

That did it. McDonald stopped and turned at the same time almost pitching him backwards. "That dinner set is my way of stuffing it to them."

"Who?"

"Them. My critics. The ones who laughed when I was stood up and cheated out of a bet and had bits of my land stolen. Well, they'll laugh out of their rumps when I set the dinner table in the middle of the town square and eat hot pudding and custard off that very dinner set back there."

"You'll eat it in the town square?"

"Aye. Come rain or shine, I'll feed my face and if they're lucky I might let them lick the bowl when I'm done."

"I'll get you the dinner set. In exchange for the volume."

McDonald laughed. "If you can't afford the volume, you can't afford the dinner set. That set is crystal, it's the nearest thing to a dinner set made out of diamond. But I'll tell you what." He stood toe to toe. "When I sit down to eat I'll make sure you get an invite."

"You'll be wanting my address then."

"Which is?"

"Castle Obersee." McDonald's expression collapsed. The Anthologist stepped back. "I'll get you that dinner set." He didn't say how because he didn't know.

McDonald may have been standing on the spot several hours later when the Anthologist ran out of ideas and cash in a nearby inn called the Celestial Fish. He leaned on the bar, held up his empty glass and waited for an offer of charity, but the landlord's stony white face gazed down on the empty glass, the drink long gone, the Anthologist's mind a fog, and grinned. "Do you want ice in that?" he said.

"Very funny." But it wasn't funny, it was inspiring. Brilliant. Before returning home he went back to Herr Troencker's shop and asked for a sales catalogue. The crystal dinner set was included. On the way back to Obersee he walked at a pace that was almost a jog and he was out of breath when he reached Helga Voller's workshop.

The heat of the furnace hit him in the face when he approached the open doors. "Helga, are you in?"

"Yes." Her voice emerged from the steam. "You look worn out. Is someone chasing you?"

"No, no. I, er. . . ." the steam and the heat presented a problem. "It's a bit warm in here."

"It's for my metalwork. And it stops the place freezing over in this weather."

"Good. Good. No, that's very good. I want to commission a piece of work from you."

"Really. Bronze?"

"No."

"Brass?"

"No, not brass."

"Silver?" Helga looked puzzled."

"No."

"Not gold. You can't afford gold."

"No, not gold. How do you know I can't afford it? I might be here on behalf of Anteje. The Queen, I mean."

"Well what metal do you want?"

"Not metal. Ice."

Helga's face dripped beads of sweat. "Seriously?"

"Yes." The Anthologist opened the catalogue. "Ice. This dinner set. In ice. Switch off your furnace. Open all the windows and doors, get the place as cold as you can. I'll supply the ice from the castle, it's stored about a hundred metres from here. How much can you do it for?"

Helga counted the number of pieces in the set and offered a price.

"Done?" And off he went. And then came back. "I'll get the ice to you this afternoon. Cool the place down."

The workshop was cold as the grave when he returned with a cartload of ice and a bag of coins. Helga worked through the night and most of the day after, and by the time she made the finishing touches to the centrepiece she wondered if the Anthologist would return to collect it all.

Her hands were cold, but the rest of her froze even more when the Anthologist walked through the doors with a second person, a woman. She spoke. "Cold in here."

"Is this it?" The Anthologist approached the dinner set laid out on two tables and even in the light of a single candle flame it shone like crystal. He shivered when the woman stood by him to take a look for herself.

"How will you get it there without it melting?" Helga said presuming to know the answer.

The woman whose hands were like ice themselves, skin the pallor of a living corpse and the teeth of the most savage wolf, smiled.

"A favour for a favour," she said. The Anthologist grimaced.

Helga took him to one side.

"I can hear you," said the woman.

"It's okay, Helga," he said. "It'll melt if I try to get it to McDonald, but the cold touch of the vampire will keep it nice and fresh."

"Are you sure?"

"Trust me. We're . . . good friends."

The woman smiled again.

They placed the bowls in a wooden box and put the plates side by side in a bucket. The centrepiece was to be carried on its own. Wrapped in several layers of clothing, the Anthologist arrived outside McDonald's house and knocked on his door. McDonald was astonished when he answered.

"Your dinner set is waiting for you in the town square, Stuart."

And it was. On a large table next to the gallows fourteen pieces of exquisite crystal waited for the diner to arrive and the meal to be served. McDonald brought his housekeeper with him. She struggled with a large tub of steaming custard and a ceramic bowl of sponge pudding flavoured with cinnamon and blackberry. The townsfolk, drawn by curiosity and wonder, gathered around the table waiting for McDonald to take his seat.

"What about the volume?" said the Anthologist.

Without speaking, McDonald handed over his bag with the volume inside and sat at the head of the table. He stuffed a napkin in the collar of his shirt and addressed the townsfolk. "See this. See this dinner set that you thought I would never possess, well now I possess it. And just to make sure you have no doubts about my new status in life I will sit here and eat my hot pudding and custard in front of your very eyes."

Pudding served, McDonald's housekeeper poured the custard and stood back to let him eat. The Anthologist slipped away, partly to get the volume back to the library and partly to avoid the spectacle of seeing McDonald's crystal plate melt under the heat of his pudding. At first he didn't think anything was wrong, but as his custard became increasingly runny and the sponge sodden he realised his plate was shrinking and within a minute his hot pudding had cooled and sat in a small puddle of water.

The crowd watched the centrepiece of the set turn from a thick, heavily carved fruit bowl to a featureless blob and then a gelatinous saucer and finally, after McDonald had scuttled away shrieking into his napkin, a dark round stain on the table top.

In the library, the Anthologist placed the fourth volume with the other three and trembled in the chill that followed him into the room. "I've come for my payment," said the woman and prepared herself for a midnight meal of her own.