

# Rule of the People

by Sean McMullen

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Herman Diactoros watched as the two men came staggering down lamplit Stephen Street, rolling drunk and only upright because they supported each other. Trailing after them were twelve dogs, bunched together in a disciplined pack.

"Spent it all," bawled the taller of the pair, who was dressed as a bushman.

"Aye, it's true Ben, but the beer were cold an' the pork pies were hot," his companion replied, taking his ancient top hat off and waving it.

A *hunchback*, Diactoros noted, nodding. They passed him, then the dogs passed. The leader of the pack gave him a sharp, nervous glance. *Clever dog*, thought Diactoros.

"Down here then, matey, there's a nymph o' the pave who owes me a little favour," cried the hunchback as he guided the bushman into a narrow lane.

Diactoros noted that the dogs were guarding the entrance to the lane. He had seen enough. Walking back down another laneway he sprang for a high ledge, caught it and pulled himself up, then inched along it until he reached a window ledge. Here he stood, reaching higher until his fingers closed on guttering. With a motion as fluid as if his body had been quicksilver he pulled himself up and rolled onto the roof, then crawled silently over the slates.

"Yer knockin' but there's nobody home," the bushman was complaining as Diactoros peered over the edge of the roof into the laneway.

"She's as real as I be meself," retorted the swaying hunchback. "Here's me hand on it."

The bushman spat on his own palm and rubbed it on the seat of his trousers. "Water," whispered Diactoros. As the bushman grasped the hunchback's hand he spasmed, as if shot in the back. There was a hissing sound like steam escaping from a boiler. "Air." The bushman man stiffened, and the hissing became a high-pitched squeal. It was coming from the bushman's mouth, his ears, the entire skin of his body. Agonised, he slowly sank to his knees. The hunchback still gripped him, and it was as if a tiny, bright lantern burned between their hands. "Fire." The light that leaked out brightened with every heartbeat, and the bushman's skin began to glow creamy white beneath his clothing. By now the hunchback was also blazing with light, but from his clothes as well as his skin. The lane was L-shaped, so that nothing but the glow was visible from Stephen Street where the dogs stood guard. The intensity of the light grew and grew, until the two men were nothing but brilliant lumps as bright as the sun. The light faded abruptly.

"'Ere, I seen the glow again," called a voice in the distance.

Down in the lane were now two dogs, a terrier struggling and floundering amid a pile of clothing and a nondescript little hound sitting back and watching. "Earth," Diactoros concluded. The terrier began to whine, then tried to turn upon itself and fell over. The other dogs dashed in, seized the boots and clothing then dashed out. A few remained to shepherd the confused, staggering terrier from the lane as the sound of footsteps in Stephen Street grew louder.

"'Tis Jack O'Lantern, all right, he's scared them dogs wi' his light," called a man who was entering the laneway with his cane held high.

"Yer talkin' broggers, Marty, there's nowt 'ere but barrels an' rats."

"But you saw the light too!" insisted the man with the cane.

"That I did, but now I sees nowt an' I'se afeard o' this place."

"If we caught Jack O'Lantern we'd be famous."

"If we caught Jack O'Lantern we might be dead. Come away, Marty, let's to the Stooker's Arms for a pint."

"Ach, be buggered if yer not right, Mus," the other conceded. "No fire, no lantern, nowt te show a constable."

Diactoros slowly withdrew his head as the men left and sat in the shadow of a chimney, contemplating what he had just seen.

"The mighty Shapemaster, reduced to this," he said to the stars of Orion that sparkled in the summer sky. "The *res publica*, Shapemaster, it's rotting you like a mortal's disease."

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Most of the promenaders on the beach had arrived by the Sandridge Railway, which had been running extra trains that afternoon. Although there was a deliciously cool sea breeze after the heat of the summer's day and there was a bright and beautiful comet in the sky to the northwest, most of the citizens of Melbourne were there to gaze upon something far more novel than a silvery streamer in the sky. It was the evening of January 26, 1865, and the Confederate raider Shenandoah was riding at anchor not far from the pier. A small flotilla of boats was gathered about the warship, all crowded with townsfolk from Melbourne.

The rider who came through the grass-topped sand dunes behind the littoral frowned to see the hundreds of onlookers crowding the beach. He was dressed in moleskin trousers, coat and cloth cap, and had several weeks of beard on his face. He reined in for a full minute, surveying the beach as if assessing it. Finally he made up his mind.

"Giya, Vikki," he said as he nudged his mount into motion again. "We'll have to go into the water this time."

The brown mare splashed into the shallows, then waded slowly out until the water came up to her belly. Several people on the shore pointed, perhaps wondering if the rider was intending to swim his horse as far as the Confederate warship. The water was over his boots when he reined in.

Almost at once something sleek and solid surfaced and brushed past the horse, then doubled back and glided beneath at her belly.

"We have a big audience tonight Jamie," said the rider in a soft baritone, leaning over in the saddle, "although they've really come to see that warship."

The seal gave a cough-like bark and made a splash with one flipper.

"Yes, It's a lot of fuss over very little," the rider agreed.

Reaching into the saddlebags he unbundled a package and began to feed dark, reeking lumps to the seal.

"All I have today is human hair from the barber shops mixed with mutton fat, fish oil and some of my own blood. My supplier at the undertakers has been taken ill, so the usual portions are not to be had."

He neatly folded the greasy pages of *The Argus* and put them back into the saddlebag. The seal yelped twice.

"Yes I know it's unpleasant, but it's enough to keep a human soul within a seal's body. I might be holding you by a thin thread, Jamie, but I've not let go for twenty two years."

On the shore there was a knot of people gathering who were showing distinct interest in the rider who was speaking with a seal.

"Time to go. In a fortnight I'll be on a boat on the Yarra. Now keep low in the water and swim away quickly. Someone may have a gun."

The seal vanished amid the dark wavelets. The rider turned his mare, ran a hairy hand over the stubble on his chin and rode for the shore. As he rode clear of the water one of the promenaders hailed him.

"I say there, sir, there was a seal out there in the water," he called as he hurried over with several other men. A few women minced after them, their hooped skirts bobbing and swaying.

"Yes, that there was," replied the rider in an overly silky, disturbing tone.

"But, ah, it was quite close, those things are dangerous," he spluttered. "They're known to bite."

The rider leaned forward in the saddle, staring the man directly in the eyes and smiling beneath the stubble on his face. "I too am dangerous, and I am known to bite," he replied.

The man took a pace back, bumped into his wife and trod on her foot. She squealed, and he tripped on the folds of her skirts and fell to the sand. A rather more corpulent man in a checked frock coat now arrived.

"What a pity you weren't armed, sir!" he declared in a breathless pant. "That seal would have yielded a fine skin and a good lot of oil."

The rider drew a patent Colt revolver from beneath his coat and displayed it on the palm of his hand.

"You, sir, would also yield a fine skin and a good lot of tallow, but I am as compassionate to seals as I am to people."

With that he put his gun away and urged Vikki into a trot before the astonished man could think to reply. Once across the sand dunes and out of sight he rode for a clump of scrub. He was weak and unsteady as he dismounted.

"I had to hold this form too bloody long, Vikki," he said as he dropped to his knees in the grass. "A pox take that crowd."

His face began to blur as if seen through an unfocussed telescope, and his hands became indistinct beside his body. The mare watched warily, but was by now used to the transformation. The rider's shirtfront swelled with growing breasts, and several buttons popped open. Now Julia Branchester again, the rider forced herself to her feet and began to pull skirts and more feminine riding boots from her saddlebags.

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The sky was quite dark by the time Julia reached the horse punt on the lower Yarra River. It was tied up on the southern bank and the puntman was sitting on the pier smoking his pipe as she dismounted and led Vikki aboard.

"Riding late tonight, Miss Julia," he remarked as he jumped aboard and pushed off from the bank. "Did you see the Shenandoah?"

"It's just a ship with guns, Ferryman. The Victoria is far more impressive."

"Ah, but the Victoria is no more than a guard ship for our quiet colony. The Shenandoah is a warrior with a tale to tell, and is midway through becoming a legend. Don't you want to be part of that legend?"

"You are a legend, Ferryman. *Metalsmith* is a legend, *Shapemaster* is a legend, but *I* am a raptor. My kind's place is in the shadows of history."

"There's nothing wrong with being a legend."

"Of course not, everyone knows Charon."

"Please!" the puntman gasped. "Not that name. *Res publica*, Miss Julia, *res publica*."

"Of course, Ferryman, but this is my point. *Res publica* binds you to discretion in this place and in this age, just as being a mortal raptor binds me to eternal discretion."

The puntman worked his drive oar in silence for a spell, puffing at his pipe as if he was a little steam engine.

"The Shenandoah is not that type of legend," he said eventually. "It's the romance of one little ship against a mighty armada."

"An armada of unarmed Union merchant vessels and whalers, more precisely. You show an unusual interest in the Shenandoah, Ferryman."

"Well, that could be because I'll be trialing my new steam ferry out and around Sandridge tomorrow," he finally confessed. "Would you have an interest in being there?"

"Merely because I'm American?" she replied, spotting his intent at once.

"Well, aren't you?"

"No."

"But, but the mortals say-- "

"The mortals think I come from California. I've let it be known I don't care much for either side in the Yankees' Civil War."

"Miss Julia, if you were to call out in your Yankee accent, why Captain Waddell might invite us all aboard the raider," the Ferryman said hopefully.

She watched the northern bank draw near, and the punt finally bumped against the low pier.

Julia shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Ferryman," she concluded, although favouring him with a smile. "Like you, I have a business to run, and I've already taken off my half-day for the week."

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Diactoros did not seek out the Shapemaster again until the morning of the 27th. The hunchback was not at his house in the lane off Stephen Street, so he asked a passing costermonger if he knew Pete Foreman. The man directed him to the cattle market. His quarry was instantly recognisable, a hunchback man in early middle age wearing a battered top hat. He was sitting on a small pushcart and surrounded by two or three dozen dogs. There was a clear hierarchy among the dogs, with some keeping order, others standing guard, and the rest sleeping in the morning sun, barking at passing carts or idly scratching.

"Dogs for sale, fine, bright dogs for sale," cried the Shapemaster as Diactoros approached. "Dogs for sheep, dogs for cattle, dogs for the track. Loyal, hale dogs."

Diactoros stopped and glared at the man on the cart. Some of the dogs began to sense that all was not well and closed around their master. At last the man on the cart turned his head.

"Buy a loyal and clever dog, sir?" he asked.

"I am a shepherd, and I have a need for a good dog," said Diactoros.

The Shapemaster gasped and twisted around so abruptly that he almost overturned his cart. The dogs were instantly alert and formed a half-circle in front of him, baring their teeth and growling at Diactoros.

"You're the Messenger, aren't you?" muttered the Shapemaster.

"Traveller, Messenger, Shepherd, I am all. At this moment I am Herman Diactoros, Messenger from the OverMaster."

The Shapemaster cringed against his cart. "Go away, I'm not bothering you or the OverMaster."

"You may not be bothering us, Shapemaster, but a pupil of yours is causing a great deal of bother," Diactoros replied, coming straight to the point.

"I never did harm, all I do is trade in doggies. There's a dearth of good dogs in the colony, Messenger. It's a seller's market and there's no dogs as like mine. Why yesterday I made two pounds fifteen shillings in eight hours. This is a fine, prosperous little city."

"I have never, never seen such squalor as is in this fleapit," began Diactoros.

"Maybe you should travel more," the Shapemaster replied before he could stop himself.

Diactoros stepped past the dogs and slammed his London cane against the side of the cart in a fury. Some of the dogs whined and backed away, others growled, but none dared to attack him.

"This place has a notoriety that is spreading. The *res publica* here changes us into caricatures of what we were in ancient Greece and Rome. That is why I dare not stay more than a month. Many are alarmed by what is going on in Australia, Shapemaster, its *res publica* is strong and nourishing, but it deforms and twists us."

"In my case it was too late when I arrived," the Shapemaster replied.

"You know what I mean!" shouted Diactoros. "Look at you all! Charon operates a horse punt on the Yarra, Thetis is mistress of a cake shop in Bourke Street, and Vulcan is worst of all! Instead of thunderbolts he builds steam engines in his smithy, he even has a portrait of some dead mortal named Brunel on his wall who he venerates as if *he* were the mortal and Brunel were the god. Who would have thought it? The mighty Proteus, shapeshifter and master of the sea's flocks: selling dogs to shepherds!"

"Drovers."

"Drovers, then. I've seen you at work, you change drovers into dogs then sell them to other drovers!" Diactoros squatted before a large terrier with one floppy ear. "Hullo Ben, how are you finding life as a

dog?"

The dog hung his head. Proteus cursed.

"You're living in the past, Hermes the Messenger. The prospects are good here, and there's belief for the taking. Strong, nourishing *res publica*."

"Only if you're a pig. The *res publica* here is corrupting you."

"Well *you* live in *Oxford!*" retorted the Shapemaster. "Is the *res publica* there the same as it was in ancient Greece?"

"The believers of Britain mean well! We can retain an idealised form there, and fact many of us teach the classics and so influence the local *res publica*. Here the belief is tainted with rebellion, reform and irreverent ideas. We are not just sustained by the people, we are turned into them! These people have no respect for authority."

There was a long, poisonous silence. The Shapemaster's dogs looked anxiously at the two beings in the shape of men that glared at each other, but the passing stockmen, drovers and merchants paid them no attention. A fly landed on Diactoros' cheek. There was a soft snap like a match breaking and the insect's burned-out body fell to the dust.

"I presume all these dogs were once human," Diactoros asked, now with a surprisingly reasonable tone.

"Aye, I choose with great care," the Shapemaster assured him. "Fine folk they were, men and women alike-- those as were down on their luck. Some like Tag here are bright as a button, although she's all dog now. Too squeamish to eat the flesh of humans, so she lost the mind within. Pacer's kept it, though. He rummages in the bins at the hospitals, they yield enough scraps of skin and bloody bandages to keep him human. Five years it's been, 'eh fella?"

The large, surly looking dog wagged its tail mechanically as the Shapemaster reached down to pat its head.

"I have a message from the OverMaster," Diactoros said coldly. "A message for you in particular."

"Hie, is he to come here? He won't be welcome, these colonial folk take badly to kings, even though they give loyal toasts. Strange, irreverent folk, they are."

"The OverMaster wouldn't even fart at this place. Shapemaster, there is a raptor living in Melbourne, her name is Julia Branchester."

"Aye, I know her. The one who feeds upon vampyres. There's not been any undead here for quite a while, though, so she's starting to age. Raptors aren't real immortals, they use the stored vitality of vampyres to stay young."

"You, Shapemaster, have had dealings with her."

The Shapemaster fiddled nervously with a button on his coat.

"Can't recall her ever having bought a dog," he mumbled, scratching the side of his head. "Why pick on me? I follow the way of the gods."

"Shapeshifting drovers and whores into dogs? Selling them to shepherds for a guinea or so? That's hardly the way of gods. I was told that Branchester trapped you the day you arrived, that she bound you at noon as you lay asleep. You taught her the practice of shapeshifting as the price of obligation."

"Bah, she was a poor pupil, she can barely hold a form for more than half an hour," whined the Shapemaster. "The only reason she can shapeshift at all is that she's fed on the vitality of the undead for hundreds of years. She don't go through Earth, Fire, Water and Air, she just moulds her form like clay. 'Tis shapeshifting in name only."

"How did she do it?" demanded Diactoros. "Did she seduce you?"

"Me? Don't jest."

"Then what?"

He removed his battered top hat and scratched his head.

"I'd just arrived here, I was off my guard. Old Melbourne Town was brimming with classic belief but there were no immortals to feed upon it."

"I know, I know. These people are British, they get taught Greek and Roman classics then get sent out to run the empire."

"Strange folk, the British."

"Get on with it!"

"I was off my guard, like who would expect to find a raptor running an inn at the ends of the earth? She knew my rule of obligation, though. She crept into my room at noon and bound me as I lay asleep at noon. Siderial noon, too. She demanded to know how to shapeshift. I had no option."

"Option you may not have had, obligation you now do have."

"I'm not her obligate."

"I mean an obligation to the rest of us! An obligation to kill her or take back the powers not meant for mortals. You arrived twenty three years ago, Shapemaster, and after all that time Branchester is still running her inn and you are lord of a pack of dogs."

"Messenger, Hermes," implored the Shapemaster, "You don't understand raptors. They're unequalled at surviving."

"I understand what they are, and I understand that *you* are the mighty Proteus, formed from the elemental matter of the world itself. Pah! How much for Ben, this terrier?"

"But he's not trained."

"I'm not surprised. Until two nights ago he was a drover, but as a human he looked to be a good companion."

"Mate."

"Mate, 'eh? I need a mate, someone who knows the way of sheep and, ah, drovers while I wait for the True Briton to sail. How much?"

"One pound four shillings."

Diactoros scratched the wary terrier under the chin, and the dog immediately closed his eyes and wagged his tail.

"Julia Branchester must die, Shapemaster, else the OverMaster will turn his attention to this squalid arcadia and you will all have to leave."

"What? Me kill her?" exclaimed the Shapemaster. "Just like that? Don't you think I haven't tried already?"

"Well try harder," replied Diactoros, checking the terrier's teeth. "She must be dead when I sail from here. I have arranged-- "

"Messenger, I've lost *thirty dogs* trying to kill her! I've even been injured myself."

"One pound, you say?" asked Diactoros, as if he had not heard.

"One pound three and-- But she's a raptor, dammit! Julia Branchester is *nine hundred years* old. Mortals who survive as long as that are not easily surprised, most especially by me. "

"If she merely flees, you must go after her, hunt her down and kill her. She *must* die. I'll give you a guinea for Ben: his eyes are a little bloodshot."

"He was drinking heavily before I changed him. How long have I got to kill her?"

"I was told to give you a lunar month. It took a few days to find you and the True Briton sails on February 22nd, so that is your date. If she is still alive by then, you *all* return with me." In the meantime I have arranged help for you. Pack up and come with me, you must talk with your little army."

"Pah, and I suppose you are in charge."

"Not so, Shapemaster. *You* are the leader. I shall be in the company of the Australian shepherds and their flocks, preserving my true form with pure *res publica*."

"Drovers and their mobs," snapped the Shapemaster. "And the terrier's one pound two shillings and sixpence. That's my final price."

"One pound one and six, and I shall sell him back for fifteen shillings when I return."

"Done!"

The Shapemaster shook his head as he watched Diactoros walking away with the terrier at his heels.

"He's in for a shock, girl," he said as he scratched Tag behind the ears. "He's been too long at Oxford, with all those Classics professors."

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Among the ancient entities who now made their home in Melbourne, several had befriended Julia. The newly arrived Thetis was a fellow shapeshifter, and as such was drawn to her in particular.

"You simply must come down to the Confederate ship," she insisted as they sat in the parlour of Julia's inn. "We're sure to get aboard."

"The Shenandoah is a warship," replied Julia, shaking her head. "They will not let us aboard."

"Ah, but they say an army marches on its stomach, and Mrs. Lidel, Miss Parkinson and Miss Wilsham all have picnic hampers filled with fruit and home made pastries, just the things that sailors simply could not resist after so many months of sea and fighting. I have cakes from my shop, I was baking them all yesterday evening."

"Well and good, but why do you need me?"

"Well, because you're American. The sound of a familiar accent will tug at their hearts, Miss Julia. Please come with us."

Reluctantly, and against her better judgement, Julia agreed to go with Thetis. As they rode in her pony trap through the streets of Melbourne the Nereid linked arms with Julia.

"I've often wondered, ah, well you know, about what you can do?" Thetis asked circuitously.

Julia glanced at her face, but there seemed to be no guile there.

"My limited shapeshifting?" asked Julia, as direct as ever.

"Well, one might say yes."

"The Shapemaster taught me the skill. I bound him at his obligation time and made my demand. That demand was to learn shapeshifting."

"But you are of base elements, and a mortal. No part of you is made fluid by human belief."

"I may be a mortal, Thetis, but I am a raptor too. My flesh is made malleable by vitality from the undead."

"I was at the beach yesterday," Thetis confessed. "I saw you feeding that seal. Was it another of us, Proteus perhaps?"

Julia laughed out aloud. "Oh no. The seal is a cabin boy named Jamie who murdered his captain almost a quarter century ago. I had befriended him a little before that and... educated him. He forced the Shapemaster to help him escape."

"A mortal take advantage of the Shapemaster?" Thetis giggled. "I thought he would have just turned him into another of his dog pack."

"Jamie is a clever lad. As a seal he vanished into the sea and escaped the constables."

"But surely he is not still Jamie," Thetis pointed out. "Seal flesh would smother what is human in him within a month."

"Not so. Ever since then I have fed him scraps of human flesh so that his humanity flickers on."

"Goodness! So you have done that since, ah, 1843?" exclaimed Thetis.

"That I have."

"You must be in love."

Julia blushed. "Ridiculous. He was fifteen when he changed! He's been a seal ever since, and well, look at me."

Julia was ageing. She was very pretty and had a figure that even Thetis admired, but she was still in middle age.

"The undead know I am here, Thetis. They don't come to Melbourne any more, yet I cannot leave Jamie to go hunting overseas. He has tried attacking fishermen and sealers for the taste of human flesh, but that is dangerous. He has been shot twice, and I fear for his safety."

"Ah, such a sweet romance," sighed Thetis, who had fancied herself as a romantic since arriving in Melbourne. "No, say what you will, Julia, yours is a romance such as the world has not seen since Troy fell to the allure of one woman's face."

\* \* \*

The new steam ferry Minotaur was tied up at the river piers, not far from the Sandridge Railway bridge. Smoke was pouring out of the funnel and the Ferryman was alternately welcoming passengers aboard and dashing amidships to check with Metalsmith about the engine.

"Welcome-- Oh Miss Branchester, welcome thrice over!" The Ferryman cried as Julia and Thetis came aboard. "Metalsmith is aboard, and Demellene has brought some of her, ah, gentlemen. They once crewed a steamship, did you know?"

A woman in her mid-forties swayed across the deck, a glass of white wine in her hand.

"Who, this swaying, I can hardly keep my legs beneath me!" exclaimed Miss Wilsham.

Julia glanced from the glass in her hand to the calm surface of the river. "Shouldn't we be taking the refreshments to the Confederate sailors instead of consuming them?" she asked.

"Oh, they want flash company as well as wine and cakes," Miss Wilsham retorted with a gesture that sent wine spilling onto the deck and into the river.

A quick tour of the ferry revealed that Julia and Miss Wilsham were the only two mortals on board. A little uneasy, Julia asked the Ferryman if her old enemy Proteus was in the party, but he assured her that the hunchback had no place aboard the Minotaur.

The crew cast off from the pier and the paddlewheels were engaged. The Minotaur navigated cautiously down the river, past the swampy lowlands, through the gaggle of ships in Hobson's Bay, and out to the open waters of Port Phillip Bay. There was a slight swell, but not so heavy as to upset the passengers. A good number of ships were at anchor at Sandridge, but everyone was straining to catch sight of the three masts and single funnel of the Confederate raider Shenandoah.

Melbourne's welcome for Captain James Waddell and the Shenandoah had been decidedly mixed. On the one hand he was showered with adulation by those who championed rebellion against heavy handed authority, while others condemned him as nothing short of a pirate.

Unknown to the Ferryman and his party, Waddell had decided to court the favour of the citizens of Melbourne. When they arrived at the raider they found that visitors were not only allowed aboard, they were positively welcomed. The party from the Minotaur boarded the Shenandoah with their baskets and gifts, and almost at once the Metalsmith went down to the engine room to view the machinery. The Ferryman got into a conversation with Captain Waddell about the damage to the bearing of the propeller shaft that had virtually stranded them in Melbourne, and the others went about talking to the crewmen, viewing the guns and handing out their presents.

An officer named Hunt explained to Julia, Thetis and Miss Wilsham that there were six cannons in all, but that not a single life had been lost to them so far.

"There's four 8-inch shell cannons for real fighting and two 32-pounder Whitworths," he explained. "They're rifled for accuracy. They can land a round right beside a ship, so close as to scare the whiskers off anyone aboard yet not rip so much as a splinter from the hull."

"But is this not meant to be a warship?" asked Julia.

"Miss, we want ships to surrender so we can take the crews off then scuttle them. We fight the Union by costing it dearly, not by slaughtering brave seamen."

Julia nodded, and Miss Wilsham cooed and batted her eyelashes at him. The Metalsmith emerged from below, his eyes shining with excitement. He went straight to the Ferryman.

"She has a 250 horsepower engine by Stephens and Sons of Glasgow," he began.

"Steel beams and frame, she has, with rock-elm below the waterline and teak above," the Ferryman babbled back.

"There's a lifting screw that can be hoisted from the water for faster sailing, I swear I could build one myself."

"She's rigged as a clipper, with cross-jacks, royal studding sails, jib-topsail-- why she can make 17 knots!"

"Her funnel's the telescope type-- "

"-- built in the Clyde."

The visit lasted an hour in all. Miss Wilsham drank a lot more wine, and spent much of the time clinging to Julia's arm for support. Then she broke her glass and began drinking straight from the bottle. At this



the Ferryman decided to go. He did not want to give the Americans a bad impression, and anyway the sun was nearly on the horizon. He signalled to his crew to bring the Minotaur back alongside. Julia was standing at the rail with Miss Wilsham as the others gathered around them.

Suddenly Miss Wilsham seized Julia beneath the arms and heaved her over the rail. The move was so sudden that Julia barely had time to shriek before hitting the water. Thetis gazed down into the dark water, noting that a distinct glow was lighting up the depths. Two separate forms were visible, one dark, the other glowing brightly. Julia's head broke the surface, but she could barely swim with her hooped, voluminous skirts.

"Help, help me!" she cried, "I'm in the water. Help me, please!"

Not one of those at the rail moved or spoke. All the while the glow blazed from beneath the surface, but as Julia began struggling for the ropes hanging at the side of the ship, the light faded. A seal broke the surface, seized Julia's collar and dragged her down.

"Say there, is anything the matter?"

Thetis recognised the voice of Midshipman Mason.

"Oh, no. One of the ladies thought she saw a seal. It's nothing."

"An Australian seal! Where?" he said eagerly, peering over the side, but there was nothing to be seen.

The Minotaur bumped against the side of the Confederate ship.

Suddenly Mason cried out. "There's the seal-- no, there's two of them and they're fighting, by God!"

Two large seals were indeed splashing and snapping at each other a little beyond the ferry. The Shapemaster's party began to descend the side of the Shenandoah.

"There's a woman in the water!" Mason now shouted with alarm to those on the ferry. "There, just before your bows."

To his horror he saw that nobody aboard the ferry was lifting so much as a boathook to help. With a single glance to the flat, cold expressions of the watchers at the rail of the Minotaur, Mason turned to the Shenandoah's crew.

"Captain, Lieutenant Grimball, help me!" he shouted, and with that he vaulted the rail and plunged into the waters of Port Phillip Bay. Julia was already sinking when Mason reached her, but he was able to pull her to the side of the ship where other crewmen were flinging down ropes. He tied a rope under her arms and climbed another as she was hauled up the side of the ship.

Mason looked north as soon as Julia was on deck and safe. The steam ferry was some hundreds of yards away and making for Hobson's Bay and the mouth of the Yarra River.

"Damn bastard colonials, they didn't lift a finger to help her," he shouted to the other crewmen. "Look at them, just running off."

"Are you all right, Miss?" Captain Waddell asked. "Did someone push you?"

"All... all my fault," Julia gasped. "Careless."

"She seems all right," said Lining, the ship's doctor. "Get her below, she needs dry clothes."

Julia sat wrapped in blankets while her clothing was dried out in the galley. By the time she was ready to go ashore it was over an hour past dusk. The trains had ceased to run, but some of the crewmen were interested in going ashore to Melbourne. The captain offered the use of his own gig to take Julia back. Some sailors volunteered to row, saying they would like to see the place. After a time they began to regret their charity, for it was seven miles from Sandridge to Melbourne and the night was hot and humid.

\* \* \*

Two hours after leaving the ship, the gig approached the river piers of Melbourne. The crewmen were by now cranky and tired, and Julia felt guilty about having imposed upon them.

"You must come back to the Branchester Inn," she said as they approached a low pier. "You've been very good to me and I can offer you refreshments."

"That's very kind of you, ma'am, but we'd rather be seein' the sights while they're still open," replied a sailor named Hogan.

"But I can help with that too. My stableman can take you to the Theatre Royal, the Haymarket, the Casino, and all the public houses and cafes of Bourke Street. There's a dancing room at the Bull and Bush, and the girls would love to be seen with genuine crewmen from the Shenandoah."

"If it's all the same, ma'am, we've been at sea awhile, and the girls that we-- "

"Hogan!" barked an officer who had earlier introduced himself as Powell. "Mind your tongue around ladies."

"That's mighty kind of you Mister Powell, but I'm an innkeeper and not easily offended," laughed Julia. "Try Mother Fraser's on Stephen Street, she loves having famous visitors-- Look! Is that a man in the water?"

Julia pointed to a figure swimming out from the pier to the gig. In spite of the dim light they could see that he was swimming very strongly and did not seem to be in trouble.

"I say, could you help me?" the swimmer called as he reached the side of the gig.

"Why sure, come aboard," Powell replied.

Julia's eyes widened as she recognised the face of a man she had not seen for twenty-two years.

"Why thank you-- Agh, a woman!" The man cowered down in to water, with just his eyes above the edge of the boat.

"Sir, I believe you are naked!" declared Powell.

The swimmer looked to him imploringly.

"Look here, just now I took off my clothes and hid them under the pier before having a swim to escape the night's heat. When I returned they were gone."

"Oh no, shame on all thieves," said Powell. "Now then Miss Julia, you just close your eyes while we get the gentleman aboard and decent."

Jamie was pulled into the boat and given a coat and some canvas to cover his nakedness. Once ashore a cab was hailed and Powell, the swimmer and Julia climbed aboard. The sailors ran alongside as they set off for the Branchester Inn.

"Where do you live, sir?" asked Powell.

"A long way out of town, on a farm."

"Come to my inn!" Julia exclaimed, as if her tongue was a caged bird that had suddenly been set free. "I have clothes left by some guests in the past, and I can lend you money. You must stay in one of the rooms, you can pay me back later. Mister Powell, all of you must come into the Branchester Inn. This has been such a terrible night, I must try to pay you all back."

Some time later Jamie was clothed again and was enjoying a pint of ale with the Shenandoah crewmen in the parlour of the Branchester Inn. He told a simple but plausible story.

"I jumped ship last year to go to the goldfields, but all the surface gold was gone by then and I was left with not a penny to my name. A farmer gave me work, but the sea is my real trade. Every week I come to Melbourne to search for a good ship, but so far I've had no luck."

"Now then, sir, the Shenandoah is short-handed, and we're on the lookout for men," declared Powell. "We're being discrete about it, what with our status here being uncertain and the need to get our propeller shaft bearing repaired and all. What do you think, Mister Hogan?"

"Never seen such fine muscles on a sailor, I'd welcome you aboard Mister, ah,...?"

"Smith. Sam Smith."

The Shenandoah's men smiled as one.

"The world is full of Smiths, sir," laughed Powell, "but you in particular are welcome aboard the Shenandoah. How can I get in contact with you?"

"Oh send word here," said Julia quickly. "I'll get a message to him."

The men from the Shenandoah soon left with Julia's stableman, and Julia and Jamie faced each other across the parlour table.

"After all this time, would you really go so soon?" she asked.

"After all this time I'm still wanted for the murder of Captain Peckford. If you could recognise me after twenty two years, any number of others will. On the Shenandoah I can leave Melbourne without questions being asked."

He looked at her very intently.

"Why are you staring at me?" asked Julia, sounding as if she was on the edge of tears.

He stood up and came around to her. Kneeling beside the table he took her hand in both of his.

"For twenty two years I've wished for hands to hold yours, my faithful love," he said. "Now, at last-- "

Julia whirled around so quickly she knocked her chair over and sent it skidding across the floor. She flung her arms around Jamie and squeezed him far more tightly than a normal woman would be able to.

\* \* \*

At around four in the morning Jamie awoke to find Julia looking at him across the pillow in the dim light seeping past the curtains of her bedroom. Somewhere in the distance a waggon was rumbling along a road, but all else was quiet.

"First I slept in a cot, then a little bunk, and when I outgrew that I went to sea," he whispered. "There I slept in a hammock until I became a seal, and then I slept on rocks and sand. Now, at last, I'm in a real bed."

"What will become of us?" she whispered. "I have you back, but soon I'll lose you again."

"Not for a few days, or perhaps weeks," he replied, stroking her hair.

"Oh Jamie, yes, yes, but after that-- Jamie, the Shenandoah is at war, you might be killed!"

"All of us gamble for our lives with the dice of fortune, love."

She drew closer to him and kissed his lips delicately.

"Then I must teach you to weight the dice."

She felt beneath the covers and drew out with a dagger of slim and plain design. Turning up the wick of the bedlamp she showed Jamie how to flick a small, sharp spike out of the side of the handle.

"This is known as an argentor, and it is very special. When you stab a vampyre with it, make sure that the spike pierces your flesh. The vitality of the undead will then flow into you."

Jamie took the knife and examined it.

"How will I know them?"

Julia held up the handle, which had what appeared to be a small, clear stone mounted within it. She peered at him through the stone.

"What do you see, Jamie?"

"Your eye."

"Were I a vampyre you would see nothing. See, the frame in the handle is slightly higher on one side. This clear stone is really two prisms. Light is reflected within prisms, and the reflections of vampyres are not visible. Take it, I have others."

Julia slid up onto Jamie and lay with her head on his chest. A cock began to crow in the distance, announcing Saturday morning.

"How came you to be nearby when Proteus tried to kill me?" she asked. "And why did he change you back?"

Jamie told his story. He had been under Sandridge Pier at the time: he spent a lot of time near piers, as they allowed him be near people yet remain unseen. Being a human in seal form, he constantly longed for human company. When he saw the light of Protean shapeshifting through the water he swam over and discovered Julia fighting with a seal. It could only have been Proteus, so he drove him away, biting and mauling him at every twist and turn. Jamie was a much bigger and stronger seal than the Shapemaster, and he paced him easily. When the Shapemaster fled up the Yarra, Jamie knew that he would soon transform into his human self to escape. He bit hard into a flipper and hung on as the Shapemaster swam under a pier. Light blazed out, and it felt as if Jamie's soul was being seared out of him with scalding steam. Pain or no pain, the Shapemaster took Jamie with him as he transformed back into a human.

A few fishermen had been on the pier, and they thought it was the light of Jack O'Lantern. They fled. The Shapemaster transformed himself clothes and all, but Jamie was changed from a naked seal to a naked man. He left Proteus crawling through the mud, covered in gashes and cuts. After perhaps a half-hour the constables came with lanterns, sent by the fishermen. They found the hunchback, and he

raved about a dangerous murderer being nearby. They concluded that he had been attacked by his own dogs and was raving. Jamie hid naked beneath another pier for hours, thinking to make for Julia's inn later in the night when the streets became deserted. Then he saw her being rowed up the river, in the gig from the Shenandoah.

Julia caressed his hair idly, her ear above his heart.

"They all conspired against me, Jamie. Metalsmith, Shapemaster, Ferryman, Thetis, Demellene, all of them. There was not a single human aboard that steam ferry aside from me. I did not realise that Proteus had two human shapes: a hunchback man and Miss Wilsham. They all stood watching as he tried to kill me. All of them, even those I've eaten with under this very roof! I must leave Melbourne, Jamie. I no longer have to stay here for you and I suddenly feel very lonely. Besides, I'm starving for the undead."

Her tongue flickered out to lick his skin, and a shiver ran through his body.

"You cannot come on the Shenandoah," Jamie pointed out.

"Then we shall meet at some place in the old country. London, perhaps. I'll give you addresses and names. The True Briton sails for England in a few weeks. I shall be on her."

"But where can I hide? The Shenandoah may not have sailed by then."

"Then I shall change my ticket to the Great Britain, it doesn't steam out until March. I've waited a quarter of a century, Jamie, and every day with you is a treasure."

\* \* \*

It was another three weeks before the Shenandoah's propeller shaft was repaired. In the meantime the officers and crew had been treated as both the toast of the colony of Victoria and as reviled pirates. Balls had been held in their honour, their status had been debated in the local parliament, and the ship had even been subjected to a short siege while in dry dock. At last the repairs were done, supplies were aboard and extra crewmen had been illicitly recruited. Early on the morning of Saturday, February 18th, the raider's cannons were fired to signal an intent to leave and the sleek vessel began steaming south down the bay.

Nearby, the Minotaur was leaving on its regular run to Geelong. The Ferryman stood at the wheel of his new vessel, with Diactoros beside him.

"So, the seal-man is on his way," said Diactoros as he gazed across at the Shenandoah.

"You're sure he is aboard?" asked the Ferryman.

"The Shapemaster's dogs see everything. He's there. In four days Branchester will sail too, aboard the True Briton."

"So the Shapemaster has four days to kill her."

Diactoros spat over the side. "Kill her? He's not even game to set foot outside his hovel, let alone fight."

"But the Overmaster will force us to leave this place," protested the Ferryman.

"The Overmaster doesn't even know Branchester exists, Ferryman. I made up that story to force you to return to Greece with me and rebuild Arcadia as we knew it."

"You lied?"

"I lied."

"Then why-- "

"I discovered something far better than the old ways."

Diactoros took out a concertina from the saddlebags on the deck and played a few bars of 'The Boys of Blue Hill.'

"This is a steel reed George Case, with a half-row of semitones," he said proudly. "Just the thing for a drover, 'eh Ben?"

The terrier beside the saddlebags raised its head and thumped its tail a few times, then went back to sleep.

"So, the *res publica* of Australia has got to you as well?" the Ferryman laughed.

Diactoros closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Three weeks among the drovers was all it took. They remade me into the god of mateship, freedom, hard work and good times. Damper and tea around campfires, Irish jigs in country dance halls, barmaid's blush-- that's rum and raspberry. Ah, these are free, earthy people. Their beliefs rule us because we are only gods, but I love what they've made me."

"If only mortals knew what republic originally meant, and who they really rule," laughed the Ferryman.

"Let Mercury carry the OverMaster's messages. From now on I'm Drover and Stockman."

\* \* \*

A half mile away Jamie was staring at the Minotaur from the railing of the Shenandoah.

"What did he tell you?" Jamie whispered to the distant Ferryman. "Was it the same as he told that toff raptor he met on the pier last night?"

Jamie smiled as the sleek, powerful Shenandoah left the Minotaur behind.

"One day Julia and I will return, Ferryman," he said with a smile, "and by then you will all welcome us back, believe me."

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