

A supernatural story with an unusual musical focus.

THE ELGAR ENIGMAS: A Musical Mystery

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[Taster **ONE**: Prologue to the novel]

# Enigma

A fragile, dark-haired girl on the verge of womanhood sits motionless at the piano. She is no longer playing, yet her hands remain poised over the keyboard. She leans forward as if listening to sounds that have already died away. A mass of ebony hair cascades from her inclined head, obscuring her face and brushing the backs of her hands. A minute passes. Her position is unchanged. She seems frozen in time, the victim or beneficiary of some fairy-tale spell.

The room in which she sits is large and airy. A well-worn, well-polished parquet floor stretches beneath two comfortably upholstered armchairs and a sofa to a pair of sashed bay windows on the opposite wall. Spring sunlight splashes in, filtered through the many seven-leaved hands of a horse chestnut tree that reaches out from the street beside the house. The tree is in flower, decked with white, rose-flecked, pagoda-like blossoms. Bees and other pollinating insects are in eager attendance.

Still the girl does not move.

From elsewhere in the house occasional sounds reach the room: light metallic clatterings, ceramic scrapings, high-pitched whirrings. Vague, muffled fragments of conversation float through the open windows.

And now the girl awakens from her trance. In ultraslow-motion her head begins to rise, her arms spread horizontally and her spine arches backwards. She is an opening flower. Delicate features are revealed as the dark hair falls away. A sigh escapes her barely parted lips. Brown eyes gaze at the ceiling... until, at last, she recoils her body and rises to step light-footed from the piano stool.

Moving across the room with the fluid, skittish grace of a somnambulist she comes to rest beside the right-hand bay window. Here she will stay for a while. In this room it is her other point of equilibrium, a point of vantage from where she surveys the well-kept lawn below her, the clustered rose bushes awaiting their cream and scarlet blooms, the clematis, pelargoniums, irises and now-fading tulips; and beyond the honeysuckle-covered red sandstone walls are other gardens, other houses, their roofs stepping to a horizon of gently sloping, interlocking hills.

She often stands here... and sometimes tears well into her eyes — though not today: a faint smile caresses her lips and there will be no tears — but sometimes she stands before this window gazing across the vastness outside her circumscribed world of reassuring familiarity, and she weeps soundlessly. Could this signify an awareness of her detachment, of her eternal loneliness? It seems unlikely. Has she then caught a glimpse of her own mortality? Presumably not... but who can tell? Her thoughts are an undisclosed secret.

Before long, she will return to the piano. She will set her hands above the keys and, when she is quite ready, will again begin to play.

[Taster **TWO**: Introducing Sir David Powys Hughes]

. . . He'd always had a thing about tall women, even if he was scarcely more than average height himself. And he sensed he might have a chance with Ms Pandora Bell. She seemed flattered by his attention. What's more he suspected there'd been a recent disappointment in her love life which could play in his favour. As they were entering her Totterdown living room the previous evening, Pandora had snatched a framed photograph off the coffee table and stowed it away in the top drawer of her writing desk — though not before David had glimpsed the portrayal of her standing close and amorous beside a dark, handsome young man with the Clifton Suspension Bridge as backdrop. Whether that relationship was ongoing or defunct David had no way of knowing, but he suspected the latter.

In any case, he'd thoroughly enjoyed his time with her yesterday. They'd listened to the autistic girl's piano pieces, which were amazing, and then talked seriously or sometimes a lot less seriously on a wide range of subjects. Yes, it had been fun. But he'd left her place by taxi not long after midnight, risking no more than a quick peck on the cheek. After all, there was a substantial age difference between them. He'd have to play the 'long game'...

Ah, here we go again! The usual symptoms. Of course, he'd known for some time he was going through another mid-wife crisis. Two divorces behind, and very likely the third on its way.

He'd once told his second wife: *If they invent a pill that makes me fancy one woman only, I'll take it religiously.* But the state of pharmaceutical science being what it was, the temptation to stray remained overwhelmingly real — not helped, of course, by his celebrity.

Praise for Sir David's interpretations of Elgar, Delius and Vaughan Williams, and his popularity with the Royal Albert Hall Promenade concert audiences were factors. And he'd often featured in the gossip columns. His choice of wives had guaranteed that: first, a Madonna look-a-like playing virtuoso

violin crossover concerts to packed halls and stadiums; then an up-and-coming Australian actress who earned herself an Oscar nomination and moved permanently to Hollywood; most recently, a tall dusky fashion model of African descent who graced the catwalks of every major city in the first and second worlds. For better or for worse, in sickness and in health, David had shared their publicity. Fortunately, it hadn't ever come to the point where he was personally plagued by paparazzi. He hoped things would stay that way.

Regardless of Sir David's lineup of spouses, that he was immensely talented in his own right was obvious to everyone; although he could still carry off a natural modesty in public and amongst colleagues and friends. As he often pointed out, it was only an accident of birth — a chance intersection of DNA spirals. He'd worked hard to get where he was, but millions of other people had strived as much as he to apply whatever advantages nature had given them. Mainly he considered himself lucky to be doing something in life that he enjoyed so much. Even so, he was perfectly capable of admitting to himself that he revelled in the attention his success had brought him... especially the attentions of women.

He'd always preferred 'women' to 'wine' — the 'song' component being an obvious given. His take-it-or-leave-it attitude to alcohol and total lack of interest in tobacco could be two reasons why he looked so good for his fifty-two years. And wherever he went, attractive women seemed to congregate.

His third and present wife was by no means stupid. She had an impressive street wisdom way beyond anything he laid claim to. But she lacked the intellectual viewpoint that spearheaded so much of his own interaction with the world. Pandora clearly had that extra component in spades. And, as he approached her table, once more admiring her long, willowy looks, he hoped to make that in hearts as well.

[**Taster THREE:** Two musicians discuss a musical enigma]

. . . The sequencer again ran its electronic version of a Steinway piano, but this time produced no cacophonous gibberish. Sir David heard a beautiful *adagio* opening of a movement in string quartet texture. He was captivated.

But it wasn't long before Ronald stopped the sequencer. David turned his head in protest.

"Don't worry, you'll hear it all," said Ronald, "but no need to settle for a piano version. I've rearranged the four instrumental lines for two sampled violins, a sampled viola and a sampled cello. Not as convincing as the Steinway imitation, of course. String sounds are way more complex and subtle than a piano's — a lot harder to match electronically. But, with a little aural imagination we can get the idea. Alice performed some places in her piano version as very dry staccato. I've interpreted those as *pizzicato*. And I think you'll find the result convincing."

They sat side by side and listened to the whole movement — an eight-and-a-half-minute *Adagio* of considerable beauty. David's excitement grew with every melody and countermelody, with every change of texture. He knew *exactly* what this was!

When the piece ended, they sat in silence.

It was Sir David who spoke first, and with studied reverence...

"Congratulations, Ronald. You've made an extraordinary discovery. I'm ready to swear this is a genuine Elgar work. A mature one at that. In fact, I'd say it carries his late style even further — tighter, more streamlined and straightforward, always beautifully expressive — reminiscent in some ways of the Third Symphony. But it's clearly a brand new piece. Presumably we're the first two ever to hear it. We should get four human players and try it out for real."

"Our department's got an excellent quartet," Ronald said. "Students, but they're brilliant sight-readers. I'm sure they'd be willing. Tomorrow perhaps?"

"The sooner the better, though the *really* big question is how on earth Alice came up with such a beautifully crafted piece. Is it from some long-lost Elgar manuscript? If so, how could Alice have found it? Anyway Pan said she can't read music. First she gives us the Symphony 3 movement... which is wonderful! Her second version's even better than the first. Then that charming little Serenade. But this quartet movement's even more astounding. Why on earth would Alice choose to present it in such a cryptic form? How could she even conceive of such a thing? What's your opinion, Ronald? Does she have enough knowledge of Elgar's works to improvise anything this weird and this convincing?"

Ronald shrugged. "It *is* hard to believe. She only has a handful of his most popular pieces on CD. Her father says she doesn't listen to the radio much and never watches TV."

"Extraordinary, isn't it? To create three brand new masterpieces in mature Elgar style... out of nowhere!"

"Musical savants are famous for doing amazing things," Ronald reminded him.

"Yes... yes, of course, they are..." Sir David gazed with unfocused eyes at the music notation spread across the computer screen. "But I'll be perfectly frank with you, Ron. I'm beginning to wonder if your flippant comment last week about supernatural intervention might not be the more credible of two unlikely explanations." He swivelled to face Ronald, his expression earnest. "I mean, what if Elgar really is in some way channelling his creativity through Alice's fingers? What if there *is* some genuine supernatural or spiritual force at work here?"

Ronald stared back, his face creasing into amused disbelief. "You can't be serious!" he said... and then he burst out laughing.

[Taster **FOUR**: A mysterious séance at Malvern Link]

. . . Ysobel's concentration seemed to waver. Her eyes opened momentarily. "Please, do not speak," she warned, though with the same calm. "You must allow the spirit to reach out — to communicate through me. I need silence, or the fragile link may break."

Ysobel closed her eyes again, and absolute quiet settled on the gathering.

A full minute elapsed before Ysobel resumed: "He is drawn..." she said... "drawn to... No, I am unsure... to a person, I think, but again I see only letters in my mind: the letters C and A... Are they initials? Help me spirit. Help me, Edward. Who is C and A?"

And now Freddie watched a disturbing change come over Ysobel. The medium's eyes opened wider, staring, though she seemed to see nothing near at hand — rather to be gazing into a distance far beyond the confines of the room, perhaps beyond the confines of this earth. Her body had become rigid, and a long guttural sound issued from her throat — not loud, but unnaturally deep and resonant from such a small woman. And from this sound a voice formed... barely audible at first, although the words were distinguishable:

"...*Caroline Alice*..." the voice said. At once Ysobel seemed to recover. Her eyes remained unfocused, but otherwise she appeared to be herself again.

"Caroline Alice?" Ysobel asked in her normal voice. "Who is Caroline Alice? Do you reach out to Caroline Alice?"

The military-looking gentleman, shuffled in his chair. "There may be a local connection," he whispered self-consciously, "I mean a connection with Malvern. Edward could be the composer, Edward Elgar. His wife's name was Caroline Alice."

Again the medium gave no sign of registering this interruption. But after some seconds, a strange dialogue began between Ysobel's normal voice and the quiet guttural whisper which each time seemed to invade her physically for a few seconds before and



after it spoke. The dialogue was slow. As much as half a minute could elapse between the questions, answers and questions again...

"Is Caroline Alice the name of your wife, Edward?"

...*My wife*... the guttural voice answered.

"And where is your wife?"

...*Beyond*...

"Beyond this room? Beyond this earth?"

...*Beyond this plane*...

"Is she not a spirit like yourself?"

...*Beyond this plane*...

"Is it her you reach out to?"

...*Not her. Another*...

"Not Caroline Alice?"

...*Yes, Caroline Alice*...

Ysobel hesitated longer this time, seeming to grapple with the contradiction.

"Do you mean another Caroline Alice?"

...*Another Caroline Alice*...

"And is this other Caroline Alice a spirit like yourself?"

...*Of your earth*...

"She lives still? She is still on our plane?"

...*Yes*...

"And why do you reach out to this other Caroline Alice?"

...*Amends*...

"You wish to make amends?"

...*Yes*...

"Make amends to Caroline Alice?"

...*No*...

"To whom do you wish to make amends?"

The spirit said nothing...

There was now an intense stillness in the room. Freddie realized she was holding her breath.

"Are you still with us, Edward?" Ysobel asked.

...*Forced us apart*...

"You were forced apart from Caroline Alice?"

*...Rejected...*

"Did she reject you?"

*...I must make amends...*

"Do you mean *you* rejected *her*?"

*...Lost...*

The last few replies had become fainter, harder to catch, as if the ghostly voice were fading into the distance.

Ysobel asked more questions: Have you lost someone? ...Whom did you lose? ...Why did you lose her? ...Is there someone in this room who can help? ...Who is the other Caroline Alice?

But the spirit's replies had become undecipherable mumblings. Now came an exhalation like a prolonged sigh, and Freddie sensed that Ysobel was alone again.

"Are you there, Edward?" Ysobel persisted... "I can no longer feel you... Will you still speak to us?..."

There was no response.

Ysobel sagged in her chair. Her head rolled onto her chest. She remained in this immobile state for more than a minute. The others around the table neither spoke nor moved a muscle, as if in deference to the ordeal their hostess had undergone for their sake.

Eventually Ysobel straightened in her chair and looked up, though at no one in particular.

"The link is broken," she said blankly. "I am weary. I shall retire." She stood from the table, and drifted from the room.

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