

*The Chronicles
of
Cadaver College:*

The Book of Ornithology

by

Olive Mooney

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To: The Finder of This Notebook

If you are *already* dead, you will find little of interest in this Notebook. For at least some of my story you will have experienced first-hand. If, however, you are still living then prepare yourself for what you will find within these pages.

For this is an experience beyond the power of imagination...

Simon de Bruin

This book is dedicated to my mum, Violet
And my sisters, Hazel & Helen

Chapter 1

The Black Iron Gates

The double wrought-iron gates loomed tall and menacing; old ivy had trailed and trained itself around the age-eaten and crumbling bars, which were barely visible in the greyish, vaporous night mist. A deep and penetrating stillness pervaded the air, as if no living thing existed in this place.

From far below, I stared up at the unfamiliar scene. *Where was I?* Glancing round, I noticed a long, high wall attached to the gates, stretching out on either side of them. The enveloping mist didn't allow me to see how far the walls ran or indeed what lay behind them. I shivered, and pulled my jacket closer to my shaking body. It was only then I noticed the rips in it and a hole in the knee of my trousers. *What had happened?* I was normally *very* tidy and never fell over. My mother had taught me to look after my clothes, as there was little money to buy more after my father died.

Returning my gaze to the gate, I now noticed a long, rusting chain, hanging at the side and partially covered by the ivy; attached to it was a handle – a very old, ornate handle which seemed to invite me to pull it.

As I couldn't see a single, breathing person, I tentatively took hold of it (by standing on my toes), held my breath and then pulled on the chain. It made a disappointingly low clanging noise, which echoed far beyond the gates.

I waited. Nothing happened.

I was trying to make up my mind if it would be rude to ring again, when I heard a noise. Very faint at first, but drawing closer; a type of scuffling and what sounded like someone forcing their way through tangled undergrowth. Soon, I saw a faint glow, which steadily grew brighter until, finally, the bent figure of an old man appeared out of the mist behind the gates. Although his face was cast in shadow, I could see he didn't look pleased. I also noticed he was somehow insubstantial, as if he might float away at any moment.

Holding a cane lamp higher to get a better look, he exclaimed in a loud, irritable voice: 'What time o' night do ye think this is, boy? Couldn't thee hav waited 'til morn?'

'I...I couldn't...I mean I didn't...'

'Couldn't, didn't, make up yer mind, can't ye? Furst Timers, they're alwus the same...no consideration fer ma rest...no idee...'

I took a step backwards.

The man squared his shoulders.

'Name?' he snapped.

'Simon...Simon de Bruin.'

The man grunted, consulted a lengthy, egg-yolk coloured scroll he was clutching, finally found what he wanted, and grunted again.

'D.O.D.?' he barked, his voice ricocheting across the still night. A grey quill had materialized from somewhere, perhaps from underneath his moth-eaten black gown.

I looked around but I was still alone. 'Are you talking to *me*?' I asked, my voice quivering.

‘Who else?’ came the angry reply. ‘See anyone else daft enough to be out at this time o’ night, not with so many hell-hounds abroad anyways...’

‘Hell-hounds?’ I asked nervously. ‘What are they? Are they...are they...dangerous?’

‘They may well be, if ye don’t stop yer bladderin’ and answer ma question. Noo, fer the second time, D.O.D.?’ he bellowed.

My knees began to knock together. I was certain of this because I could hear them. A distant sound quivered in the night air; was it a horn of some kind?

‘Fer the third time, Date Of Death? I need yer answer *now*, boy ’cause the hell-hounds are comin’ fer sure; that’s their soundin’ horn.’

Suddenly, I felt a burning pain in my lower right leg, and heard loud snarling and yelping; I screamed with pain and kicked out frantically – but I could see nothing. My attackers were invisible and then I was falling, falling...