

*Micah Harris already featured the mysterious religious Order of the Barbusquins, created by Raymond De Kremer (1887-1964), better known as Jean Ray, in the classic horror novel Malpertuis (1943), in his short story “The Goat of Saint Elster” published in our last volume. This tale, also featuring Brom Cromwell of the Barbusquins, takes place well over a century before “Goat”...*

**Micah S. Harris: *Beneath the Mount of Divination***

*Rome, December 1642*

1.

“At least, the woman’s voluptuousness will make this prodigious inconvenience somewhat less than a total loss.”

A rather inappropriate thought, to be sure, to be had by a priest. But this was the Abbot d’Herblay, as he was now known, and the Abbot d’Herblay had never allowed religious pursuits to interfere with his pursuit of a lovely lady.

The lady in question had no reason to suspect his calling from his appearance. He wore not a priest’s cassock, but his old musketeer’s uniform, to which he had added a cape. And it was under his old assumed name of Aramis that he had answered the summons to the Vatican hill, which, long ago, had itself had another identity: *Vaticanus Collis*—the mountain of divination.

His business did not bring him to the Vatican palace itself, and certainly not to the Pope, but rather to an old, concealed hunting lodge that the Borgia family once had used for their trysts. Here he had come to rendezvous with Cardinal Mazarin, Italian-born but lately of France, where he had performed a service in the affairs of Christine of Savoy, King Louis XIII’s sister. Aramis’ presence here was in payment of that particular debt of the Crown.

It was old and dying Cardinal de Richelieu who had recommended him to the king for this task. “For I know of a certainty,” Richelieu had said with a grin that could only be described, in Aramis’ mind, as “dung-eating,” “that there is no man more dedicated to the interests of the throne.” The throne Richelieu spoke of was not Louis XIII’s, but that of his queen, Anne, who once had an interest in the Duke of Buckingham. Of this affair, Richelieu had known very well, but Aramis and his friends had seen to it that the king would never have knowledge of it—at least, no knowledge that could be proven.

A reuniting with his former companions who had joined him to save Queen Anne from compromise would have been ideal for this current adventure. Alas, at the moment, they were either too far dispersed or retired into a seclusion from which it would be less than timely to extricate them. Thus, his new cohorts in arms.

Of course, it was the woman who had captured his attention first upon entering the lodge. She was blonde, statuesque and superbly proportioned. Even her man’s blouse and britches could not conceal the *rondeurs* of her body. She wore leather boots to the knee and on one thigh was strapped a *poignard*. On her other side, her sword was sheathed. Dressed as a man she may have been, but her perfume—orange flowers and vanilla, if he knew his scents—and he did—was a welcome whiff of femininity.

The woman’s companion, who had accompanied her from England, was a man who appeared to be approaching middle-age, but still radiated youthful vigor. He retained the trace of a once-Irish accent to judge by such small talk between the two that Aramis had overheard from outside, just before he interrupted the conversation with his entrance.

The man wore a waist-length hooded cloak, the shirt a plowman might wear, tight pants of humble but sturdy material, and tight-fitting boots as well. He was clean-shaven, with a pale face, high forehead, sunken cheeks, and eyes that were a vivid blue.

Before Aramis or either of the couple could initiate an introduction, a fourth man had entered the room from within the lodge and motioned that they should be seated around a long wooden table where the Borgias once had supped with their mistresses. While the Irishman sat close to the lady—to Aramis' great envy—there was great space in the seating between them and Aramis and the man at the head of the table. This was none other than Cardinal Mazarin himself. He had shed his cardinal splendor for rustic clothing to move incognito to and from this meeting.

"Now that we have convened," Mazarin began, "introductions are in order, though whether the names used are truly your own or pseudonyms, it matters not. But you must call yourselves something other than 'hey, you,' must you not? Quick and clear communication will be necessary in the success of this endeavor. It may, in fact, be necessary for you to survive it. So, if we may begin with our latest arrival?"

"I am Aramis," the Abbot d'Herblay said, pushing his chair back to stretch his legs out, leaning back and clasping his hands to his breast. "Formerly a black musketeer serving the throne; currently serving the church as an abbot. I have been recalled by the throne into active service. For this mission only," he said, eyeing Mazarin, "I departed my current situation most reluctantly. But, for king and country, one must be willing to make certain sacrifices I suppose."

"Not only for your country, but for all of Europe," the woman injected.

"Ah, the lady speaks," Mazarin said, templeing his fingers and smiling over them. "And when you hear her tale, you will understand her urgency. But first, we have another agent, her traveling escort."

The pale faced man smiled. "I am Brom Cromwell, a monk of the Barbusquin order. I go by Brom."

Aramis suddenly drew himself up to the table and leaned toward Cromwell, his thoughts turned momentarily from the young woman. He felt as though he were looking at a unicorn come to life from a medieval tapestry. "I have heard of your order, but thought it only a legend. Do you truly seek out pagan horrors yet lingering in Christendom and eradicate them?"

"'Tis the express mission of a Barbusquin monk."

"Yet, that one of your order lingers on in the world in the age of the Enlightenment is no less astonishing to me than if you were to produce a basilisk."

"I'm sure you will find my stare much more agreeable," Cromwell said and there was a gleam in his blue eyes and the touch of mirth at the corners of his mouth.

"And, finally, the lady whom Brother Cromwell has escorted from England, who alerted us to this potential catastrophic danger of which there is yet a chance of aborting. This is Mademoiselle Françoise de Bretigny, of the Scurvhamite Puritan sect."

"A puritan? And I, a priest." Aramis said, tweaking his moustache, then resting his chin on his hand and smiling at the young woman. "Strange bedfellows indeed."

Françoise raised her chin and cast a haughty gaze upon Aramis as she spoke. "I am of the court of Charles I, sir, a lady in waiting to *your* king's sister."

"I do not think that Charles would be glad to know the royal bosom harbors a puritan in it," Aramis said and looked her up and down, ostensibly as if he were reconsidering his new partner with respect to her loyalties, but in truth, to review her figure, which he was pleased to find in accord with his initial estimation.

"We are not all followers of Oliver Cromwell, sir," Françoise sniffed. "I love my mistress and would never do her harm. My loyalties to God are not in conflict to with my loyalty to the crown. I am come as a royalist first; a Christian second. I have much inconvenienced myself if I am in a plot to bring hurt to the British throne. I might have worked mischief more effectively at court and kept the comfort of my own bed."

"A much better bed into which to be cast with you than our present one, I am sure," Aramis said and grinned.

Françoise flushed and Cromwell narrowed his eyes at the musketeer.

"And now it seems that I have drawn the ire of her watchdog," Aramis said and resumed his grin.

"Her guardian," Cromwell said. "And well adept at it as there are men on both sides of the channel with at least *one* member no longer to call their own who will tell you. In falsetto."

“Let us not be quick to take offense, Brom,” Françoise said and laid her hand on Cromwell’s arm. “Perhaps...,” she said, “...I am but a maid overly sensitive to sincere but uncouth expressions of admiration, being accustomed to courtly behavior.”

Aramis colored. “Mademoiselle, I assure you, my manners would be at home in the highest courts of France.”

“But we are not in France, are we?” Françoise said. “And by your Roman air of superiority regarding my own faith, I do not think you believe you owe me no more than the courtesy you would give a scullery maid.”

“Aramis?” Mazarin said and raised an eyebrow.

He did not acknowledge Mazarin but locked eyes with Cromwell’s. “I can see that I have seriously compromised the *esprit de corps* needed here. Know, sir...,” and here he turned to Françoise, “...and mademoiselle, that I have never touched a lady who did not first wish me to do so.” He looked back at Cromwell. “And, as you, Frère Brom, are beyond fleshly desires, we should all get along famously. ‘All for one and one for all.’ That’s what I say. My apologies to you both.”

“Accepted,” Cromwell said, “on my part. Mademoiselle de Bretagne?”

“My dear Brom,” she said. “You have, due to your calling, spent so much time among men lately that you have forgotten women do not forgive so readily as your own sex. Monsieur Aramis must henceforth earn *my* regard.”

“Ah,” Cromwell said and smiled at his charge. “I am not as much a stranger to women as you think, milady. Nor their capacity to harbor resentment once insulted.”

“I shall strive to raise your estimation of me, milady,” Aramis said with a bow of the head.

“Well, then, now that we are all friends again for the first time,” Mazarin said, “let the lady pass on her intelligence.”

Françoise began: “The Scurvhamite sect of Protestantism was founded by our leader Robert Scurvham. We hold to predestination...”

“Calvinism,” Aramis hissed and studied a splash of mud on his boot.

“Not quite, if monsieur will let me finish before dismissing me. Thank you. Our belief is a merger of Persian dualism, with its coeval powers that oppose each other eternally, and the emerging mechanistic conception of the universe. One half of that machine has been set in motion by God, who governs everything in it, cosmic and microcosmic. That is the Scurvhamite Universe which we committed to Christ inhabit. But the Other... the *Other*...,” she closed her eyes and shivered, then began again.

“The *Other* of that anti-Scurvhamite Universe that coexists with ours, visible from our place as paradise was from Hades, but... but... there is no chasm which cannot be crossed, as there was between Dives and Lazarus. That anti-universe is accessible. And mesmerizing in the fatal implications of its horror which hypnotizes as surely as the serpent does the bird. Thus enthralled, many of our numbers have crossed to the other side and have been lost in the maze of cogs and springs of that machine of the abyss.

“But this opportunity for penetration between the dual cosmoses works both ways. And that nameless horror which has set in motion the anti-Universe has now manifested in our own. This being has many names...” She met eyes with Cromwell: “Chief among them since ancient times is ‘Baal.’ We know him as ‘Trystero’...” and then she turned and looked at Aramis, “...and sometimes by a more obscure variant, ‘Simara.’ But I will tell you now with all levity: Oliver Cromwell has become a secret follower of Baal.”

“What?” Aramis said, slamming his palms down on the table. Only he appeared thus shocked and appalled. Brom apparently had already been privy to this intelligence, as had been, to judge by his demeanor, the silent Mazarin who regarded Aramis coolly.

“Do you see how wrong you were to judge me guilty by association, monsieur?” Françoise said to Aramis. “I am opposed to Oliver Cromwell more than you could have believed possible. He awaits the signal now to overthrow the English monarchy, and from there spread this pernicious belief throughout Europe, where all thrones will be cast down and their people become but mechanisms assimilated into the

engine of Baal's anti-universe. They will become simple extensions of his will; their personalities annihilated."

"And what shall this signal be?" asked Aramis.

"*Baal shall be seen on the mount of divination and then shall the end begin.*"

"The Vatican hill!" said Aramis. "That explains our current location. But what are we to do against such a cosmic horror?"

"Where is your faith?" Brom asked calmly. "Jesus Christ is Lord of all, above all principalities and powers, whatever they might be. Angels, demons, creatures of deep time, or a demiurge from someplace other—it is no great matter to Him."

"This power," said Mazarin, "is yet vulnerable in its present form and, if it cannot be destroyed, it may yet be contained."

"Do I understand that it is already here?" Aramis asked.

"Yes."

"And how did it come to be?"

"I brought it here," a new voice announced.

The speaker was a man in shadow who stood behind the seated Mazarin. No one knew how long he had been there. He stepped forward into the light and Aramis gasped.

"The Grey Eminence?" he said. "But... he is dead!"

The old man with bald pate and fringe of a white beard still wore his grey robes of office. Despite the rumors of his death, and his age, there was still much strength apparent in that body. He stood tall and straight, not bent, and whatever reversals he may have suffered of late had done naught to quench his haughtiness. On the left hand of the left finger was his black signet ring, which had been missing when his "body" had been discovered. Unless... was this man an impostor? Or had the real Grey Eminence transferred his support from Richelieu to Mazarin, and faked his death to better facilitate this new alliance? It would fit with his *modus operandi* of operating from the shadows.

"I live, Monsieur d'Herblay," the Grey Eminence said and smiled as though he was something, a were-creature, which had never smiled before and was merely imitating what it had seen. Aramis shivered at hearing his name spoken by the one who had also been known as "Father Joseph" in past days. The man had been deadly then, and best that you were of no importance to him. Now Aramis was important to him.

Father Joseph extended his ring hand. Brom and Françoise made no move. Catholic authority had no claim on her and Brom, though ignorant of the Grey Eminence's past reputation, nevertheless discerned that something wasn't right about this "priest." He noted the sign of the signet, a loop of stars. Why stars? He wondered. And why that formation? He bent forward. He had seen this esoteric sign before in performing his holy tasks. And it was not good.

*Mazarin must be completely ignorant of its significance to ally himself thusly,* he thought.

He was relieved to see that Aramis refrained from approaching the offered ring. "How do I know it is you?" he asked the old man. "That you are not some impostor? Few are those who ever got a good look at Father Joseph. Fewer still that wished to. You could be anyone to whom I am swearing fidelity in your cause."

The ring was withdrawn, and the old man looked on, impassive, as though his were the face of a stone cliff or some other soulless and indifferent form out of nature.

Seeing that Aramis was having second thoughts about this alliance, Mazarin said, "Do I need to remind you that your service is to your king?"

"No, Monseigneur," Aramis said. "I always keep my vows... to the living."

"It's necromancy then!" Françoise said. "And in league with Baal by his own admission!" Her hand was on the pommel of her sword as she shoved her chair back from the table and stood up. "We are betrayed, Cromwell!" she shouted.

She drew her sword and turned her gaze on Mazarin. "And we have been delivered into his hand by this agent of the Papacy! Well, we shall not sell our lives cheaply, nor hand ourselves over to them for torture."

Brom was already on his feet and his sword out. Aramis had also risen and was backing away from the table. But instead of drawing his sword, he held his palms up. "Please, milady. Do not act hastily and do that which cannot be undone."

Mazarin and Father Joseph had not moved, the former regarding the girl calmly but with obvious annoyance. "I do not practice 'necromancy,' young woman. The Grey Eminence 'died' as a result of a failed assassination attempt by Richelieu. And his bringing of Baal to the Vatican mountain was not with the intention you presume.

"Be seated," the cardinal continued. "Keep your swords drawn—both of you—should it gives you comfort. But give me time for an explanation before you commence hacking."

Françoise looked at Brom who nodded. They sat down again, as did Aramis.

"Thank you," Mazarin said. "Your Eminence?"

The Grey Eminence did not move, but remained standing straight, hands clasped behind his back. "I am not responsible for this being's manifestation in our realm of time and space," he said. "That was the astrologer and mighty wizard Orazio Morandi, whose study of the stars and forbidden astronomical charts gave him knowledge to bring this living horror here. Fortunately, in that day, there was a man named Maciste, who confronted Baal. In their struggle, his mighty thews and massive trunk became bound by Baal's tentacles. He strained with all his considerable power to dislodge it from wherever it was anchored, but failed. It was an impossible task, even for Maciste—and that was a rare event indeed!"

"Wait—*wherever* it was anchored?" Brom said.

"This is a higher dimension entity of which I speak: its full body lies outside human perception."

"Ah, Natvilcius has written of a similar phenomenon in his analysis of angels," Brom said.

"And how did this strong man remedy this dilemma?" Aramis asked.

The Grey Eminence smiled again, as though his mind did not understand how to operate his facial muscles to appear natural. "Amidst his struggle against the ropy, writhing tentacles that grappled with him unceasingly, he was nevertheless able to draw forth his sword. His wrists were bound together by tentacles trying to shake his weapon from his hand, but with only a fumbling grip on his sword, he yet managed to slice the tip off of one tentacle.

"To this creature, so small a wound apparently felt like a hornet's sting. Or perhaps, the creature had never felt pain before? Any pain. Regardless, it immediately withdrew completely into whatever other dimension it inhabited, and has not been seen since, apparently uneager to repeat the experience."

"After such a minor wound?" Aramis asked.

The Grey Eminence turned his head and looked down at Aramis. "Would you return to a hornet's nest and plunge your hand in it after having done it once, musketeer?"

"But if it is gone and has not returned, why do you fear it shall do so now?" Brom asked.

"We fear not its return, but what it left behind, something of itself: that tip of a tentacle that Maciste cut off.

"I was not there that night," the Grey Eminence said, "but passing through the village where the battle occurred, much later, I learned that the locals proudly displayed it as a relic they called the *Devil's foreskin*. They told me the tale of how Satan's circumcision came about. I, of course, could not leave such an artifact behind. You see, it still lived, curling upon itself and writhing in the glass globe that displayed it, a fragile prison that could be shattered at any time and 'twas only a wonder it had not been up to then.

"I was traveling up the Vatican mount to deliver it for a proper exorcism when my horse stumbled. At last, the glass did break. And that still living sliver of Baal escaped into the tall grass."

Mazarin spoke: "Recently, there was rediscovered beneath Mount Vaticanus a lost archive of ancient scrolls from the first century. Based on inscriptions in this library, we learned that among them are stored all the writings of the New Testament in the *original autographs*."

Brom's eyes brightened. "You mean, one might read them in the apostles' own handwriting?"

"One might... except this is where this blasphemy called Baal has been pleased to come to dwell," Mazarin said.

"It is the nature of Evil," the Grey Eminence said, "that it is a parasite of what is holy, and here are the original inspired texts, only one step removed from the hand of God Himself. So, there Baal feeds.

And grows. Preparing to rising on the mount and signaling the fall of England, and hence all of Europe. But the last report from one who survived a venture into that crypt was that it was but the size of a large dog. Nevertheless, the creature is lethal. But it is physical; it can be hurt; it can be contained; perhaps it can even be destroyed. In any event, it can, and must, be stopped.”

“Amen,” said Françoise the Scurvhamite, bowing her head.

“You have my sword,” Aramis said.

“And mine,” said Brom.

“Then, go,” said Mazarin. “On the south slope, among a forest full of sycamores, you will find an area that has been cleared. There is a door in the ground. Steps descend within the earth. Enter, and you will find a door at the end of a corridor in a wall behind which is a massive vaulted crypt. Within dwells this horror. And you must find a way to remove it hence. Go, now. And God go with you.” The three agents rose. Only then did they notice the Grey Eminence had departed as he had arrived: without witnesses.

*TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK*