

PART ONE

The League of Heroes

Excerpt from A Young Child's Guide To History

by J. M. Barrie,

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We will probably never know how it happened. Some historians claim that it was the earthquake in Sanriku, others that it was the Fairy Folk themselves who, with their strange spells, opened the path between our universe and theirs. And others believe that the hole in the aether was created by Professor Cavor's early efforts to synthesize the prodigious substance now known as Cavorite in June 1896. Whatever the cause, the world has never been the same since that fateful day when the inhabitants of Neverland arrived in Kensington Gardens. Everyone knows the autobiographical story of symbolist sculptor George Frampton, the first man to have established contact with our "neighbors."

"I was trying to come up with an idea for my Lamia for the next Art Nouveau exhibition," declared Frampton. "It must have been about 5 p.m. when she appeared in front of me, wrapped in luminescent beauty. At first, I saw only her, until one of the 'children,' all grumbling and hairy, stole my hat. I tried to catch the cheeky boy, but then the fairy smiled at me, I couldn't say a word."

That same evening, the Gardens were surrounded by the Royal Army. Upon reflection, one might be surprised by such strong measures, but who could guess at the time that a new age would soon dawn for Albion and the rest of the world!

Around 11 p.m., reporters dispatched by The Times and The Daily Telegraph noticed the appearance of a galleon in the Gardens' great, circular pond—a genuine pirate ship, complete with sails, rigs and a Jolly Roger flag flying at the top of its main mast. The most adventurous of the journalists even ventured as far as the Indians' tent village, which had been pitched on the lawns, and watched the dance of Tiger Lily. To see this savage girl gesticulate wildly around the fire, while intoning prayers to her ancestors, was a terrifying and enchanted spectacle.

The next day, Her Majesty's Home Office took a census of the newcomers, then dispatched them to various camps, according to their ethnic origins. The Indians were sent to the Isle of Dogs—a proposal to relocate them to America having been rejected by the United States Government. The so-called "Lost Boys" were placed in various asylums. The spokesman for the pirates, a man later identified as James Hook, later Lord Hook of the Admiralty, negotiated permission for them to moor near the docks. As for the Fairy Folk, depending on whether they were sufficiently pleasant and of gentle disposition, they were either adopted by various families, or relegated to live amongst the prostitutes of Whitechapel.

These disconcerting events began an era of prosperity and abundance for the Empire, the full effects of which have not yet been assessed. The Royal Navy bore Albion's banner to the far ends of the world—and beyond. The Fairy Folk, in full cooperation with our scientists and engineers, opened wide the Gates of Progress.

What remained unsettled was the difficult case of the boy known as Peter Pan. The boy who would not grow up also refused to become part of society. He chose to remain in Neverland, displaying his spite and trying vainly to tarnish Albion's image. His repeated failures, far from calming his rage, only increased his resentment.

And that is why it is necessary that all of our Kingdom's children, before they go to bed, to be utterly convinced that Peter Pan is truly evil.

The Prisoner of Ingolstadt
(August 1900)

Half a moustache suited Lord Kraven perfectly. It had, nevertheless, been a close shave—Prince Spada’s blade having nearly run him through the throat.

The foremost hero of Albion fixed his tie, looked at himself in the mirror one last time and proceeded to shoot his attacker in the head. The bullet, which was powerful enough to stop a raging bull (according to the gun manufacturer who had, in all probability, never set foot outside Camden) continued through the wall, ricocheted against the Tower’s metal frame and went on to kill Ambrosio Terracota, the Prince’s henchman, splattering his brains across the floor.

Two-for-one is not so bad, thought Lord Kraven. After wiping some cerebral matter off his boots, he looked at his timepiece. He didn’t have much time left. Spada was an imbecile. Not only was the self-dubbed “Lord of Pain” a fraud (Lord Kraven knew all the genealogical trees of all the Great Families of Europe by heart and “Prince” Spada was nowhere in sight) but he had also made the mistake of trusting a Corsican shepherd boy—the simple-minded Matarese youth—to program a Cavorite Bomb.¹

One thing was certain: if English Bob didn’t arrive soon, there would no longer be an Heir to the Empire. Also, the map of a significant portion of the surrounding countryside would have to be redrawn. It was useless to try to flee. Kraven could clearly hear Spada’s mercenaries beyond the door, spouting insults as to his mother’s sexual preferences and his lack of manly prowesses. Better to take his chances outside.

Kraven tore down the magnificent Aubusson tapestry (not surprisingly, a fake), attached one of its ends to the barbican with his nail gun, grasped the fabric and jumped. *It was time to remember Lord Greystoke’s advice*, he thought, as he swung through the air. Moving like a pendulum, left to right, faster and faster, he felt as if he was a monkey dressed in the Royal Uniform of a Colonel of the Guard. At the precise moment, he leapt, feet forward, and crashed into the ground floor window.

The stained glass exploded into thousands of colorful shards, tearing the clothes of the operators of a Gatling machine gun who had been posted there as sentinels. Kraven ran straight into a gallery that went around the banquet hall. His mad dash was accompanied by the continuous rattling sound of the machine gun tearing holes into the plaster ceiling and the wooden beams. Kraven veered off towards the Prince’s apartments where he suspected the prisoner was being kept. He opened the door wide—and immediately fell into a deep pool of dark, freezing cold water.

The Savior of the Empire, as he had been dubbed by the Press, held his breath at once—an exercise he had practiced a thousand times in the Danger Room at the League’s Headquarters. He tore off his utility strap and pulled out a tiny oxygen mask. But already, a giant moray eel was rushing him, a single, terrifying creature with only one purpose: to tear through its victim’s flesh. Kraven stuffed the oxygen mask into the beast’s mouth, aimed his pistol and shot it at point-blank range. He barely had time to pull his head out of the water to avoid having his eardrums punctured by the resulting explosion. It almost blew him out of the pool. Slightly groggy, he managed to pull himself out and emptied his gun into the two powder-wigged servants who guarded Spada’s bedroom.

When Kraven got his breath back, he found himself facing three duelists. The first was Edward-Albert, Prince of Wales and Heir to the Imperial Crown of Albion. His second and third adversaries were also Edward-Alberts! Kraven managed to block a low feint by Edward-Albert I, grabbed Edward-Albert II’s sword and ran Edward-Albert III through with it. God help him if he had made a mistake in assessing the true identities of his opponents. Then, he succeeded in knocking out the other “fake” (Edward-Albert I) and loaded the surviving Prince of Wales on his shoulders.

He started to climb up the spiral staircase. Halfway to the dungeon, however, he knew that the fateful moment of this adventure had finally come. Prince Spada stood before him, completely dressed in black, a Toledo blade in his left hand, the priming mechanism of the Cavorite Bomb tied to the end of his right stump.

“You didn’t think that you could escape so easily, did you, Lord Kraven? Come, my dear enemy, it’s time for that duel that I’ve desired for so long.”

¹ The knowledgeable reader will recall that Prince Spada made the same mistake in *The Venice Affair*, and that it cost him his right hand. For this story and others, see the *Appendix*.

Spada had been quite brief. Normally, he would have declaimed some boring poem about the ravages of syphilis by Girolamo Fracastoro or showered his opponent with a barrage of caustic comments. But, this time, the Calabrese Crime Lord seemed in a hurry to finish up.

Lord Kraven deposited the Prince of Wales on the granite steps and pulled out his own sword. The two men were of equal skill. Both knew that, by the end of this duel, an era would come to an end. The winner, whoever he was, would probably miss their reckless chases throughout Europe, never knowing who would lose and who would win.

The two combatants' shadows danced on the walls by the light of the chandeliers, a fitting allegory of the eternal struggle between good and evil. Kraven was suddenly distracted by the buzzing of the alarm in his waistcoat. Spada used this advantage to pierce his foe's shoulder with his blade—but found that he was unable to pull it out. The Lord of Pain immediately realized his defeat. Smiling his last, cruel smile, he opened his arms and willingly offered his chest to his adversary. Kraven severed his head neatly. Then, he cut off Spada's right stump and threw the detonator into the castle's moat, praying that the water would short-circuit the device.

The buzzing alarm indicated the presence of English Bob just above the Tower. Kraven pulled the Heir to the Crown all the way up the stairs and stopped a brief moment to admire the magnificent *HMS Albion Ascendant*.

The airship was 416 feet long from its nose to its rear propeller. It had a diameter of 38 feet and could reach a cruising speed of 18 miles per hour, which would soon be sorely required.

Kraven handcuffed the Prince of Wales' wrists around his neck, grabbed the rope ladder that English Bob had thrown him and climbed the rungs four at a time. Spada's men were gathering around the battlements but could not aim accurately. However, one shot managed to cut off a tuft of Kraven's hair before ricocheting on the ship's hull. *Better not linger*, thought the Savior of the Empire.

The airship's envelope contained 15,000 cubic meters of hydrogen, which could easily turn it into a giant flying bomb. Once inside the gondola, Kraven took the gangway to his cabin and put Prince Edward-Albert down on his bed. The telephone light was blinking, indicating that English Bob was busy talking. Lord Kraven yelled the itinerary to follow into the acoustic pipe—and nearly fell over. He looked outside: English Bob had hit one of the watchtowers when redirecting the airship. At the rate things were going, there would be soon nothing left of Ingolstadt Castle, a daring architectural folly, combining Magyar rigor with Ottoman affectation. Kraven ordered English Bob to turn right; he made sure they were truly getting away before heading towards the bridge.

For someone who didn't have any pilot qualifications, English Bob was not doing too badly after all, he reflected. Prior to this mission, Holmes had taught the teenager a few basic facts about piloting. One of the wings was a bit crumpled and they had lost an accumulator, but the ship was basically operational. Kraven took the controls and headed towards Albion.

Now, Lord Kraven could only wait, hoping that he had made the right choice. When the ship was far enough away from danger, he switched on the automatic pilot and returned to his cabin. Prince Edward-Albert was turning in bed, sweating heavily, dreaming loudly of Parisian orgies spent drinking champagne from La Goulue's shoe. *So he was the right one after all*, thought Kraven. He lifted the Prince's eyelids, noted the unusual dilatation of the pupils and wrote down a preliminary diagnosis, which he then tied to a carrier pigeon's paw. The bird flew through the porthole and would soon reach Sir Phileas' medical team.

"Here you are, My Lord. This will buck you up," said English Bob.

The Savior of the Empire accepted the cigar and the glass of cognac gratefully. He then proceeded to get a few hours' sleep.

Lord Kraven was awakened by loud, creaking noises. The airship had come dangerously close to the mooring pylon, located on a bare plot of land near Customs House, secretly purchased by the Reform Club, a.k.a. the Empire's Intelligence Service. If English Bob crashed the *Albion Ascendant*, the two daring heroes and the Heir to the Kingdom would drown in the Thames—a shameful end. Bob took off his goggles. The Great Detective had been a good teacher. With great care, the youth managed to pull the airship up so that the ground crew could grab the mooring cables. When they did so, he sighed deeply. Mission accomplished again!

Sir Phileas Fogg was waiting for them in the warehouse. Their superior had been keen on being there in person to take reception of the "royal parcel." He insisted on accompanying his two agents on the rest of the night's expedition. The two men squeezed inside a cab, the Prince of Wales lying over their knees. English Bob took the wheel and the car drove towards Limehouse.

One could always count on the teenager to find his way through the fog, along the railway and through the maze of back alleys, which were deserted at this time of the night.

“We’ve arrived.”

Lord Kraven helped his superior get out of the car. Then, he knocked on the door—three short knocks, then two more. The woman who opened the door was less than five feet tall. In her time, she had been beautiful, with fine, white skin, like a miniature from Dresden, but now, she looked more like a crone. The immoderate use of white and black magic, undoubtedly.

“Vulpinia, the time has come for you to help me.”

The Enchantress watched Kraven. Since her defeat in Anvers, she owed him her life.² Today, he was offering her an opportunity to pay back her debt, and above all, to recover some of her past dignity. The woman opened her shawl, leaned over the Prince of Wales, who was dribbling as he slept, did a few magical passes and announced her verdict:

“A level-2 curse. A Continental rush job. I should be able to remove it easily. Come back tomorrow.”

Fogg sighed with relief. All he had to do now was to inform the Office of Information Management. He took a red handkerchief, nearly as large as the sail of a small ship, and wiped his forehead.

Later, home at last, Lord Kraven emptied his pockets; they held a few sleeping pills, a derringer, a Malaysian dagger and a wad of foreign currencies. He swallowed one of the pills and fell asleep.

Interlude at the League of Heroes

When Lord Kraven awoke, the bells of St. Pancras told him that it was 11:30. His mind felt addled—the after-effects of the sleeping pill.

He walked towards the gymnasium, located on the second floor, to devote himself to his daily hour of intensive exercise: a long series of abs, a few stretches at the bar, some weight-lifting and a sequence of katas. Then, he took a shower, put on a large collar shirt from Capper & Waters, chose Ralph & Norton suit from the wardrobe (original but without affectation), took ten minutes to knot his tie perfectly, put on a fine pair of Spanish leather boots, brushed his hair and went down to have breakfast.

Kraven lived in a majestic four-story house on Drummond Street. He had a small but very efficient staff, who had previously worked for Sir Phileas. Stilson, the butler, whose jaw had been broken by a mutated primate during a mission in Sudan, served him a kidney pie, then left the room quietly.

While wolfing down his breakfast—he felt famished every time he returned from a mission—Lord Kraven scanned the headlines of the morning papers. *The Times*, *The Daily News* and *The Standard* were all announcing that the Prince of Wales would not appear at the Crystal Palace ceremonies next month due to a case of acute appendicitis that had required the intervention of the Royal Surgeon himself, Doctor Frederick Treves. The Office of Information Management had done a good job. Kraven contemplated eating a couple of hard-boiled eggs sprinkled with paprika, but looked at his watch and decided that it was time he left.

His 1900 Dunhill was waiting in the garage. More than a masterpiece of Albion engineering—which it was to Kraven’s eyes—the vehicle symbolized the endless possibilities of the human mind. It was built around an x-shaped, tubular chassis, reinforced at the front, and sported a half-floating hypoid differential with hydraulic power steering, double action Delco shock absorbers, automatic transmission and, to top it all off, a powerful 283-horsepower engine that could do 6,000 revolutions per minute. Kraven got inside the car, wiped an imaginary stain from its ash-white interior trim, opened the automatic garage door that let out on Tottenham Court Road and drove out.

A jaded reader, knowing that Londoners were used to seeing Pirates and Indians walk their streets, would be justified in believing that they would remain equally indifferent to the wonderful spectacle of a 1900 Dunhill roaring at full speed along its busy thoroughfares. But he would be wrong. Reaching the corner of Whitcomb Street, Lord Kraven turned right without bothering to downshift and, by so doing, nearly collided with a pedestrian looking wistfully at a poster of the new *Eleanor Rigby* musical playing at the Alhambra. He stopped abruptly before the headquarters of the League of Heroes.

² See *The Return of Lord Kraven*.

The building was a 13-story glass and steel contraption that looked like a gigantic Archimedean mirror. It had been built near Piccadilly by the Krupp Company out of a special polymer so that it was impossible for anyone outside to see inside—and it was bulletproof to boot. There was a mooring pylon on the roof. The building was equipped with a surveillance system designed by Cavor himself. According to *The Inventor's Review*, a magazine generally well informed in such matters, the notorious scientist had requested the architect to include three underground levels capable of withstanding the full blast of a Cavorite Bomb.

Lord Kraven went inside the marble lounge that was open to the public, walked by the counter of the Thos. Cook & Son Agency and, without paying any attention to the lobby elevators, checked in at the security counter. As soon as the voice recognition system—an Afghani war veteran with devilishly sharp ears—identified him, he inserted a punch-card into a special elevator and pressed the only button inside. The cabin went up directly to the next-to-last floor.

As usual, Plunder was waiting for him with a cup of tea. The butler, who refused any assistance and generally ignored the advice of Her Majesty's Secret Service, managed the Council Rooms of the League of Heroes by himself, making sure that everyone felt at home. In fact, he was just like a father, proud of his children, even if he never forgot that they were more than ordinary children.

"The gentlemen have decided to hold their meeting in the Danger Room," he declared.

Kraven left his coat in Plunder's good care and stepped across the bronze threshold.

The Danger Room was a clever, if somewhat sadistic, but always useful, contraption. Resting on hydraulic jacks that enabled it to fully rotate on its own axis, it had been designed to simulate any perilous environment that had either been visited, or might someday be visited, by the League. It included hidden arrows, secret machine guns, numerous traps and even live black mamba snakes brought back from Africa by Lord Greystoke. Sherlock Holmes was usually in charge of programming new sequences to make sure that his associates were not becoming complacent. Because of the Detective's eagerness, Kraven still had an ugly scar made by a drill that had unexpectedly sprung from a wall just as he thought he could safely leave the Room to go and take a shower.

Right now, however, the Heroes were resting.

Lord Greystoke had just returned from a difficult mission in which he had made contact with a giant gorilla on an island near Sumatra. His body was covered in bandages. Lord Kraven had heard him mutter something about giant prehistoric rats as well, but had not inquired further.³ The Lord of the Trees seemed to be in a dark mood. The Great Detective, on the other hand, was half-sunken into his favorite armchair, his body wrapped in a ritual Indian blanket, quietly smoking his calumet. Neither took any notice of the technicians who were busily working in the center of the room.

"Gentlemen," said Lord Kraven, "this evening, we shall toast the passing of Prince Spada, Monarch of Thieves. He is no more. Now, could someone tell me what's going on here?" he asked.

Cavor's team—the only men with the authority to work inside the Council Room—were assembling the last bits of what looked like a armor suit suspended by a winch. One of the engineers opened its chest plate and connected two pipes coupled with a generator; another loaded some darts into a gauntlet. Then, they left without a word.

"I'm glad to see you're back alive, Lord Kraven," said Holmes, drumming his fingers on the sheath of his pipe. "But we don't know any more than you do. We've been asked merely to wait." The Great Detective gestured Kraven to sit. "Our friend who can't keep still," he then added, "believes that it's a new weapon."

"More like some kind of trickery," said Greystoke. The Lord of the Trees stopped swinging on his trapeze, let himself fall down to the ground from eight feet in the air, did a somersault mid-way, landed on a pommel horse, and finished off with a double-backward somersault, faultlessly landing on the tips of his toes. Then, he sniffed at the air. "They're coming. Cavor and a man who reeks of gin."

A few seconds later, two men walked into the room. One would have had to have Greystoke's keen sense of smell to detect the light fragrance of alcohol around the younger man.

Cavor, as usual, wore a cricket cap and cycling knickerbockers and stockings. He looked like he was having difficulties controlling a series of nervous twitches about his face. Everyone was familiar with his small, nearly rotund shape and skinny limbs. His famous portrait at the Wallace Collection made him look like a cannon ball. But his bright eyes burned with genius. An uncanny energy constantly ran through his body, giving him an appearance of being compulsively agitated.

³ See *The Giant Gorilla of Sumatra*.

To the great relief of his audience, who cared little about the niceties of etiquette, and frankly disliked the lies put out by the Office of Information Management, Cavor began his presentation at once.

"Gentlemen, in many significant ways, we here are all cut from the same cloth. Of course, I'm not referring to our, er, divergent backgrounds, or unique and varied skills; I'm talking about the bonds which unite us and our common desire to serve Albion to the utmost of our abilities. So it is in that spirit that I have the honor today of introducing you to my latest and greatest creation: MechaMan!"

Just like a stage magician, Cavor made a half-turn and stretched his left arm to point at the bizarre, man-shaped machine, the wheels of which were now being oiled by the younger man, his assistant.

"I know what you're thinking: it's not an android, nor is it merely an ordinary suit of armor, more a combination of both. Never mind the science. What you should know is that it will allow you to safely explore the fiery depths of a volcano, to safely stroll beneath an ice field. It comes equipped with stand-alone batteries and thermal regulators. In short, MechaMan will guarantee your comfort and your safety."

"You mean, one of us must get inside that thing?"

The scientist stared at Holmes before replying.

"Yes, of course, otherwise how do you expect to make it work? Did I mention that MechaMan man also comes with a prodigious range of ground-breaking weapons: nerve gas, curare darts, guns and, above all, a power-coupling system that greatly magnifies its wearer's physical strength. It guarantees total invincibility. And I can prove it!"

The assistant gave Cavor one of MechaMan's boots and gauntlets. Cavor took off his shoe, put his foot inside the heavy metal boot and put on the glove. Then, the man who was Newton's successor at the Royal Society limped towards the bronze panels of the Danger Room and, with barely a flick of his hand, smashed the wall.

One was almost reminded of a fairground attraction. For just a second, Kraven pictured the comical-looking inventor in his striped sweater using his new-found, mechanically-amplified strength to smash a pile of plates.

Meanwhile, Lord Greystoke sent Plunder away; the butler, alerted by the noise, had come to see what was going on. After that, the Lord of the Trees asked the question that was on everyone's mind.

"Is there any Cavorite in your metal suit?"

The great scientist looked as innocent as a village maiden. For several months now, responding to a request from some of the Empire's top-ranking Ministers, the Office of Information Management had launched a propaganda campaign stressing the spirit of cooperation that existed between all the various branches of its Administration. This was aimed at debunking a numbers of rumors spread by Peter Pan and his allies. Despite this, everybody, from the lowest clerk to the highest minister, knew that the celebrated League of Heroes detested having to serve as guinea pigs to test Cavor's inventions.

"Well, yes, but only in the engine."

Lord Greystoke leaned towards the Professor.

"If that is so, then try it yourself."

Looking like a dwarf in a Wagner opera, Cavor maneuvered the winch. The upper part of the armor rose about ten feet above the ground and revealed the inside of the suit: red velvet stretched over the steel frame. The scientist, purple from exhaustion, waved to his assistant to climb into MechaMan. The young man hesitated, looked at the Protectors of the Empire all watching him intently, and decided to do as he was told.

"Are you settled inside, Flanders? Ready?" asked Cavor. "I'm going to switch on the generator."

Immediately, a long, hissing burst of steam came whistling out of the suit, followed by several sparks that ran across the armor like will-o'-the-wisps. Through the porthole, they all saw Flanders screaming. His very body was boiled alive, his skin sticking to the glass like molasses, until the pressure caused his skull to explode like a melon.

Nobody could have done anything to save him.

Cavor took out a slide rule, whispered a few figures under his breath, probably to hide his emotions, then declared in a very serious tone:

"It's merely a small problem with the thermal insulation."