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Opening extract from

Lockwood & Co: the Hollow Boy

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I think it was only at the very end of the Lavender Lodge job, when we were fighting for our lives in that unholy guesthouse, that I glimpsed Lockwood & Co. working together perfectly for the first time. It was just the briefest flash, but every detail remains etched into my memory: those moments of sweet precision when we truly acted as a team.

Yes, every detail. Anthony Lockwood, coat aflame, arms flapping madly as he staggered back towards the open window. George Cubbins, dangling from the ladder one-handed, like an oversized, windblown pear. And me – Lucy Carlyle – bruised, bloody and covered in cobwebs, sprinting, jumping, rolling desperately to avoid the ghostly coils . . .

Sure, I know none of that *sounds* so great. And to be fair, we could have done without George's squeaking. But this was the thing about Lockwood & Co.: we made the most of unpromising situations and turned them to our advantage.

Want to know how? I'll show you.

Six hours earlier. There we were, on the doorstep, ringing the bell. It was a dreary, storm-soaked November afternoon, with the shadows deepening and the rooftops of old Whitechapel showing sharp and black against the clouds. Rain spotted our coats and glistened on the blades of our rapiers. The clocks had just struck four.

'Everyone ready?' Lockwood asked. 'Remember, we ask them some questions, we keep careful psychic watch. If we get any clues to the murder room or the location of the bodies, we don't let on. We just say goodbye politely, and head off to fetch the police.'

'That's fine,' I said. George, busily adjusting his work-belt, nodded.

'*It's a useless plan!*' The hoarse whisper came from somewhere close behind my ear. '*I say stab them first, ask questions later! That's your only sensible option.*'

I nudged my rucksack with an elbow. 'Shut up.'

'*I thought you wanted my advice!*'

'Your job is to keep lookout, not distract us with stupid theories. Now, hush.'

We waited on the step. The Lavender Lodge boarding house was a narrow terrace building of three floors. Like most of this part of London's East End, it had a weary, ground-down air. Soot crusted the pebbledash render, thin curtains dangled at the windows. No lights showed in the upper storeys, but the hall light was on and there was a yellowed VACANCIES sign propped behind the panel of cracked glass in the centre of the door.

Lockwood squinted through the glass, shielding his eyes with his gloved hand. 'Well, *somebody*'s at home,' he said. 'I can see two people standing at the far end of the hall.'

He pressed the buzzer again. It was an ugly sound, a razor to the ear. He rapped the knocker too. No one came.

'Hope they put their skates on,' George said. 'I don't want to worry you or anything, but there's something white creeping towards us up the street.'

He was right. Far off in the dusk, a pale form could just be seen. It drifted slowly above the pavement in the shadows of the houses, coming in our direction.

Lockwood shrugged; he didn't even bother looking. 'Oh, it's probably just a shirt flapping on someone's line. It's still early. Won't be anything nasty yet.'

George and I glanced at one another. It was that time of year when the days were scarcely lighter than the nights, and the dead began walking during the darkest afternoons. On the way over from the tube, in fact, we'd seen a Shade on Whitechapel High Road, a faint twist of darkness standing brokenly in the gutter, being spun and buffeted by the tailwinds of the last cars hurrying home. So nasty things were out already – as Lockwood well knew.

'Since when has a flapping shirt had a head and spindly legs attached?' George asked. He took off his glasses, rubbed them dry, and returned them to his nose. 'Lucy, *you* tell him. He never listens to me.'

'Yes, come on, Lockwood,' I said. 'We can't just stand here all night. If we're not careful we'll get picked off by that ghost.'

Lockwood smiled. 'We won't. Our friends in the hall *have* to answer us. Not to do so would be an admission of guilt. Any second now they'll come to the door, and we'll be invited inside. Trust me. There's no need to worry.'

And the point about Lockwood was that you believed him, even when he said far-fetched stuff like that. Right then he was waiting quite casually on the step, one hand resting on his sword-hilt, as crisply dressed as ever in his long coat and slim dark suit. His dark hair flopped forward over his brow. The light from the hallway shone on his lean, pale face and sparkled in his dark eyes as he grinned across at me. He was a picture of poise and unconcern. It's how I want to remember him, the way he was that night: with horrors up ahead and horrors at our back, and Lockwood standing in between them, calm and unafraid.

George and I weren't *quite* so stylish in comparison, but we looked the business even so. Dark clothes, dark boots; George had even tucked his shirt in. All three of us carried rucksacks and heavy leather duffel bags – old, worn and spotted with ectoplasm burns.

An onlooker, recognizing us as psychic investigation agents, would have assumed that the bags were filled with the equipment of our trade: salt bombs, lavender, iron filings, silver seals and chains. This was in fact quite true, but I also carried a skull in a jar, so we weren't entirely predictable.

We waited. The wind blew in dirty gusts between the houses. Iron spirit-wards swung on ropes high above us, clicking and clattering like witches' teeth. The white shape flitted stealthily towards us down the street. I zipped up my parka, and edged closer to the wall.

'*Yep, it's a Phantasm approaching*,' the voice from my rucksack said, in whispers only I could hear. '*It's seen you and it's hungry. Personally I reckon it's got its eye on George.*'

'Lockwood,' I began. 'We *really* have to move.'

But Lockwood was already stepping back from the door. 'No need,' he said. 'What did I tell you? Here they are.'

Shadows rose behind the glass. Chains rattled, the door swung wide.

A man and a woman stood there.

They were probably murderers, but we didn't want to startle them. We put on our best smiles.

The Lavender Lodge Guesthouse had come to our attention two weeks earlier. The local police in Whitechapel had been investigating the cases of several people – some salesmen, but mostly labourers working in the nearby London docks – who'd gone missing in the area. It had been noticed that several of these men had been staying at an obscure boarding house – Lavender Lodge, on Cannon Lane, Whitechapel – shortly before they disappeared. The police had visited; they'd spoken to the proprietors, a Mr and Mrs Evans, and even searched the premises. They'd found nothing.

But they were adults, of course. They couldn't see into the past. They couldn't detect the psychic residue of crimes that might have been committed there. For that they needed an agency to help out. It so happened that Lockwood & Co. had been doing a lot of work in the East End, our success with the so-called Shrieking Ghost of Spitalfields having made us popular in the district. We agreed to pay Mr and Mrs Evans a little call.

And here we were.

Given the suspicions about them, I'd half expected the owners of Lavender Lodge to look pretty sinister, but that wasn't the case at all. If they resembled anything, it was a pair of elderly owls roosting on a branch. They were short, roundish and grey-haired, with soft, blank, sleepy faces blinking at us behind large spectacles. Their clothes were heavy and somehow old-fashioned. They pressed close to each other, filling the doorway. Beyond them I could see a tasselled ceiling light and dingy wallpaper. The rest was hidden.

'Mr and Mrs Evans?' Lockwood gave a slight bow. 'Hello. Anthony Lockwood, of Lockwood and Co. I rang you earlier. These are my associates, Lucy Carlyle and George Cubbins.'

They gazed at us. For a moment, as if conscious that the fate of five people had reached a tipping point, no one spoke.

'What's it regarding, please?' I don't know how old the man was – when I see someone older than thirty, time sort of concertinas for me – but he was definitely closer to coffin than crib. He had wisps of hair oiled back across his scalp, and nets of wrinkles stapled around his eyes. He blinked at us, all absent-minded and benign.

'As I said on the phone, we wanted to talk with you about one of your past residents, a Mr Benton,' Lockwood said. 'Part of an official Missing Persons enquiry. Perhaps we could come in?'

'It'll be dark soon,' the woman said.

'Oh, it won't take long.' Lockwood used his best smile. I contributed a reassuring grin. George was too busy staring at the white shape drifting up the street to do anything other than look nervous.

Mr Evans nodded; he stepped slowly back and to the side. 'Yes, of course, but best to do it quickly,' he said. 'It's late. Not long before *they'll* be coming out.'

He was far too old to see the Phantasm now crossing the road towards us. We didn't like to mention it either. We just smiled and nodded, and (as swiftly as we decently could without pushing) followed Mrs Evans into the house. Mr Evans let us go past, then shut the door softly, blocking out the night, the ghost and the rain.

They took us down a long hallway into the public lounge, where a fire flickered in a tiled grate. The decor was the usual: cream woodchip wallpaper, worn brown carpet; ranks of decorated plates, and prints in ugly golden frames. A few armchairs were scattered about, angular and comfortless, and there was a radio, a drinks cabinet and a small TV. A big wooden dresser on the back wall carried cups, glasses, sauce bottles and other breakfast things; and two sets of folding chairs and plastic-topped tables confirmed that this single room was where guests ate as well as socialized.

Right now we were the only ones there.

We put our bags down. George wiped the rain off his glasses again; Lockwood ran a hand through damp hair. Mr and Mrs Evans stood facing us in the centre of the room. Close up, their owl-like qualities had intensified. They were stoop-necked, round-shouldered, he in a shapeless cardigan, she in a dark woollen dress. They remained standing close together: elderly, but not, I thought, under all their heavy clothes, particularly frail.

They did not offer us seats; clearly they hoped for a short conversation.

'Benson, you said his name was?' Mr Evans asked.

'Benton.'

'He stayed here recently,' I said. 'Three weeks ago. You confirmed that on the phone. He's one of several missing people who—'

'Yes, yes. We've talked to the police about him. But I can show you the guest book, if you like.' Humming gently, the old man went to the dresser. His wife remained motionless, watching us. He returned with the book, opened it, and handed it to Lockwood. 'You can see his name there.'

'Thank you.' While Lockwood made a show of studying the pages, I did the real work. I listened to the house. It was quiet, psychically speaking. I detected nothing. OK, there was a muffled voice coming from my rucksack on the floor, but that didn't count.

'*Now's your chance!*' it whispered. '*Kill them both and it's job done!*'

I gave the pack a subtle kick with the heel of my boot and the voice fell silent.

'Can you remember much about Mr Benton?' In the firelight, George's doughy face and sandy hair gleamed palely; the swell of his stomach pressed tight beneath his sweater. He hitched up his belt, subtly checking the gauge on his thermometer. 'Or any of your missing residents, for that matter? Chat with them much at all?'

'Not really,' the old man said. 'What about you, Nora?'

Mrs Evans had nicotine-yellow hair – thin up top, and fixed in position like a helmet. Like her husband's, her skin was

wrinkled, though *her* lines radiated from the corners of her mouth, as if you might draw her lips tight like the top of a string bag. 'No,' she said. 'But it's not surprising. Few of our guests stay long.'

'We cater to the trade,' Mr Evans added. 'Salesmen, you know. Always moving on.'

There was a silence. The room was heavy with the scent of lavender, which keeps unwanted Visitors away. Fresh bunches sat in silver tankards on the mantelpiece and windows. There were other defences too: ornamental house-guards, made of twisted iron and shaped like flowers, animals and birds.

It was a safe room, almost ostentatiously so.

'Anyone staying here now?' I asked.

'Not at present.'

'How many bedrooms do you have?'

'Six. Four on the first floor, two at the top.'

'And which of them do *you* sleep in?'

'What a lot of questions,' Mr Evans said, 'from such a very young lady. I am of the generation that remembers when children *were* children. Not psychic investigation agents with swords and an over-inquisitive manner. We sleep on the ground floor, in a room behind the kitchen. Now – I think we have told the police all this. I am not entirely sure why you are here.'

'We'll be going soon,' Lockwood said. 'If we could just have a look at the room Mr Benton stayed in, we'll be on our way.'

How still they were suddenly, like gravestones rising in the centre of the lounge. Over by the dresser, George ran his finger down the side of the ketchup bottle. It had a thin layer of dust upon it.

'I'm afraid that's impossible,' Mr Evans said. 'The room is made up for new guests. We don't want it disturbed. All trace of Mr Benton – and the other residents – will be long gone. Now . . . I must ask you to leave.'

He moved towards Lockwood. Despite the carpet slippers, the cardigan on the rounded shoulders, there was decisiveness in the action, an impression of suddenly flexing strength.

Lockwood had many pockets in his coat. Some contained weapons and lock-picking wires; one, to my certain knowledge, had an emergency store of tea bags. From another he took a small plastic card. 'This is a warrant,' he said. 'It empowers Lockwood and Co., as DEPRAC-appointed investigation agents, to search any premises that may be implicated in a serious crime or haunting. If you wish to check, ring Scotland Yard. Inspector Montagu Barnes would be happy to talk to you.'

'Crime?' The old man shrank back, biting his lip. 'Haunting?'

Lockwood's smile was wolf-like. 'As I say, we just wish to take a look upstairs.'

'There's nothing supernatural here,' Mrs Evans said, scowling. 'Look around. See the defences.'

Her husband patted her arm. 'It's all right, Nora. They're agents. It's our duty to help them. Mr Benton, if I recall, stayed in room two, on the top floor. Straight up the stairs – two flights and you're there. You won't miss it.'

'Thanks.' Lockwood picked up his duffel bag.

'Why not leave your things?' Mr Evans suggested. 'The stairs are narrow, and it's a long way up.'

We just looked at him. George and I shrugged our bags onto our backs.

'Well, take your time up there,' Mr Evans said.

There was no light on upstairs. From the semi-darkness of the stairswell, filing after the others, I looked back through the door at the little couple. Mr and Mrs Evans stood in the middle of the lounge, pressed side by side, ruby-red and flickering in the firelight. They were watching us as we climbed, their heads tilted at identical angles, their spectacles four circles of reflected flame.

'What do you think?' George whispered from above.

Lockwood had paused, and was inspecting a heavy fire door halfway up the flight. It was bolted open, flush against the wall. 'I don't know *how*, but they're guilty. Guilty as sin.'

George nodded. 'Did you see the ketchup? No one's had breakfast here in a *long* time.'

‘They must know it’s all over for them,’ I said as we went on. ‘If something bad happened to their guests up here, we’re going to sense it. They know what Talents we have. What do they expect us to do when we find out?’

Lockwood’s reply was interrupted by a stealthy tread on the stair behind. Looking back, we caught a glimpse of Mr Evans’s gleaming face, his hair disarranged, eyes wild and staring. He reached for the fire door, began swinging it shut . . .

In a flash Lockwood’s rapier was in his hand. He sprang back down, coat flying—

The fire door slammed, slicing off the light from downstairs. The rapier cracked against wood.

As we stood in the dark, we heard bolts being forced into place. Then we heard our captor laughing through the door.

‘Mr Evans,’ Lockwood said. ‘Open this now.’

The old man’s voice was muffled, but distinct. ‘You should’ve left when you had the chance! Look around all you like. Make yourselves at home! The ghost will have found you by midnight. I’ll sweep up what’s left in the morning.’

After that it was just the *clump, clump, clump* of carpet slippers fading downstairs.

‘*Brilliant*,’ said the voice from my rucksack. ‘*Outwitted by an old-age pensioner. Outstanding. What a team.*’

I didn’t tell it to shut up this time. It kind of had a point.