

A Danse Macabre **By David Silver**

You may be familiar with the symphonic poem *Danse Macabre* composed by Camille Saint-Saëns. His inspiration for the work was based on a poem by Henri Cazalis, which was in turn based on an old French superstition.

*Zig, zig, zig, Death in cadence,
Striking with his heel a tomb,
Death at midnight plays a dance-tune,
Zig, zig, zig, on his violin.
The winter wind blows and the night is dark;
Moans are heard in the linden-trees.
Through the gloom, white skeletons pass,
Running and leaping in their shrouds.
Zig, zig, zig, each one is frisking.
The bones of the dancers are heard to crack-
But hist! of a sudden they quit the round,
They push forward, they fly; the cock has crowed.*

Perhaps it was a dream provoked by listening to that symphony. Perhaps I had somehow been transported into a parallel universe for a short time.

I'll tell you about it.

At 4am on a first morning of May we were awoken by a devilish warbling. We tried to resume our slumbers but an inexplicable compulsion drove us from our bed. There, lying on the dresser, were two sets of strange, outlandish garb. We somehow realised that we were meant to don these costumes, which clearly dated from an earlier age. We obeyed the unseen force driving us, clothed ourselves, left our dwelling and ascended into our carriage. It seems that in this mysterious scenario I was expected to fulfil the role of Coachman. I duly started off at a gentle pace but as we progressed I became aware of a feeling of anxiety that we might be late for whatever and wherever we were destined. I drove the carriage faster and ever faster along the deserted roads. We tried to communicate, to ask each other 'why are we doing this?' Perhaps it was the lack of sleep or the bewitchment of our situation but we had no answers. I navigated our carriage instinctively along the unknown route, becoming ever more concerned as the dark sky showed faint signs of light on the horizon. We were going to be late weren't we? But late for what? I drove faster still until we seemed almost to be flying. Eventually though we had to slow our furious pace as the road was becoming narrower and potted and the way became increasingly bumpy.

I now had profoundly mixed feelings - relief that we were clearly approaching our destination, but apprehension and dread as to what we were going to behold.

And suddenly there it was! An ancient inn, with '1067' written in antique script above the door. In front of it, on a wide green, was a collection of the strangest, most awe-inspiring and alarming figures. Some were prancing around waving rattles and sticks. Some, with huge straggling beards and dressed in white smocks were supping from large tankards of foaming ale. It was a riot of colour, bizarre costumes, grotesque hats, ringing bells, men

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and women both. Our immediate instincts were to rotate the carriage and leave, or disembark and run, but the invisible force that had brought us here had us in its grip and our feet seemed to be bound in clay.

A voice said to us as we alighted from our carriage “You are almost late, you must take your places immediately for there is work to be done. Follow me”. We dutifully followed the tall figure who was clad in a slashed and tattered black and green jacket and whose face was painted in a ferocious green and black rictus. “You” he said to me “stand here”. “And you” he said to my companion “will stand there, for you shall be dancing in obeisance to our Lord, the Sun God”. A musical instrument of some sort was thrust into my hands. “Play” I was told. It seemed I had no choice. I began to produce some quavering tones and 12 female dancers, including my companion, started to gyrate to the music that seemed to emanate as if by magic from my instrument. I began to feel a sense of euphoria and played ever faster and more assuredly whilst the dancers began whirling like dervishes. We seemed to lose a sense of selves, becoming lost in a melange of rhythm and sound. This went on for some time until eventually there was a shout of “Stop” from our master. Silence. Then a strange wailing, a pipe of the East began playing and six ululating Belly Dancers appeared, one of them clearly very much with child. They insinuated across the green, rotating their midribs and provocatively swaying their hips.

Suddenly a cry went up: “The Sun”. Excitement ran through the crowd as tendrils of our Great Patron appeared at the edge of the sky. Tankards were replenished with ale and the festivities recommenced until eventually there was another cry: “Silence for our Host”. There appeared at the door to the inn a bearded, beaming jovial figure – the Landlord. “Well done to all of you” he boomed, “Do enter and break your fasts as my esteemed guests”.

We all filed into the inn, a murky and mysterious space festooned with strange Gothic décor – dusty and cobwebbed skulls, Viking helmets, foxes’ tails, ancient carvings of domestic and wild animals. But then the repast started to flow. Buxom waitresses brought out great sizzling platters of grilled bacon, fried hens eggs, sausage, blood pudding, boiled beans, breads fresh from the fire, mushrooms of the field and cheerful red love-apples, all accompanied by tankards of steaming thé and great flagons of ale. The dancing and music began once again, this time within the inn. The Belly Dancers snaked around the tables and as they did so everyone else joined their column whilst we who were musicians played our instruments and banged our drums as loudly and as cacophonously as we could.

After a time, replete with our Landlord’s hospitality and dazed with lack of sleep my companion and I staggered outside, blinking and dazzled in the bright Sun’s light. A cock crowed somewhere.

We awoke on the morning of 2nd May 2008 and recalled with amazement our experiences the previous day in that strange world where we had Danced In The Dawn with Whitethorn Morris at The Royal Standard of England pub in Beaconsfield.

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