

# THE QUARRY

**Elise Robertson**

**Paris The Incurrible**

Paris crouched cautiously in his dust bath, tossing clawfuls of the dusky earth onto his brilliant scaled back. An orange sliver of radiant sunshine dazzled the usual smut blackness of the Dragon's Cave.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The clamour bludgeoned Paris' head like a meat-axe.

King Marchello, bless his beard, had commissioned an enormous beaten gold archway on the dragon's neighbouring Midas Mountain Range.

At bath time, Paris liked to rollick about, the grainy dust removing troublesome Sprites who delighted in pinching and nipping him. And Paris had certain ideas about modesty. Not that you could see anything, of course. But it was the principle of the thing. Paris hadn't heard any catcalls from the chainmail clad dwarf-women but it was only a matter of time.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

‘Think they can hide behind their beards,’ Paris lowered his voice darkly, ‘But I know what they’re about.’ In serious danger of a hag-ridden visage, Paris applied the Fountain-Of-Youth Face-Mask; the lilac-scented paper-strips making him resemble a tallow-faced mummy.

‘Let them laugh,’ Paris thought, clicking his teardrop talons together. ‘When they have a turkey décolleté, sandpaper skin, and bruised eye-shadows from withering in the sun and candlelight, then they’ll sit up and take notice.’

He liked to look his best before going on a raid, the better to beguile his enemies.

With bewitching bumblebee yellow eyes that could lull to sleep a gossip-mongering Cyclops, his tongue dripping with venomous words and a capacious pouch, furnished with downy feathers, perfect for poaching. Paris had earned his reputation as the Incurable Dragon.

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Paris soared like an iridescent satin ribbon past Uno, a town of terraced houses with arched blue doors and iron balconies.

A prominent round peephole permitted the townsfolk to press their single golden-yellow eyes to the glass and observe their neighbours. In amongst the incessantly pruned box-hedges obtruded a stricken scarecrow Cyclops, red velvet mouth stifling a scream and an egg-yolk yellow eye glinting with shock. In his youth, Paris would mistake these decoys for flesh-and-blood, belatedly receiving an unfortunate mouthful of sawdust stuffing. The dragon licked his artful lips and fantasized about what he would eat for pudding, his favourite dish, Someone-and-Kidney Pie.

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Paris glided over Highwayman's Lane, phalanxed by a bank of twisted she-oak. Often on this beat, Paris would glint an heiress in her dove-white brougham carriage, embellished with gilded vines.

Twirling his glossy whiskers, the dragon would bind the maiden to the mining tracks by her lustrous tassels. If her father were of a sensible mind, a plump dowry would feed Paris' emaciated purse.

Presently, the gravel road was mostly deserted, apart from a lone traveller.

Definitely an ogre. You could tell from the bulging, pug-like eyes, black curly chest hair and calloused bare feet. Dressed minimally in technicolour suspenders and pale rompers, he was not a figure you could easily miss.

The dragon prowled round and round the ogre, affording a panoramic view of the creature's delectably solid flesh and vivid green veins.

He had the Mark on his forehead, of one unspeakably alone. No strings to anything or anyone. Except for a mildewed rucksack sagging with a swagman's hoard.

'Turn out your pockets, *Veslingr!*'

Sometimes the venomous words were fatal outright. Other times the barbs seeped into the bloodstream of the compelled, paralyzing the prey slow – slow – slowly.

'Shall I shapeshift into a bridge so you can walk all over me?' Goessohn, the ogre asked, pumping his biceps, as curved and hard as scitimars that could pitch a cyclops into the hedgerows.

Paris' laugh rattled like rusted sleigh bells.

Most plebians worshipped the bones the dragon walked on. But Goessohn just gave a bulldog grimace, digging his chisel nails even tighter into the rucksack's straps. No matter. Paris could wait. The dragon burnished his scales, stroking them slowly with his rough tongue.

'I've heard ogres...taste like spare ribs...left to spoil...in the midday sun,' Goessohn's lips were tight and tingling.

Paris smirked.

‘I think I’ll take my chances.’

The dragon’s eyes devoured the stranger’s barrow-like chest, kerosene oil for his scorching stomach.

Paris unhooked the rucksack with his tail, the pain forcing Goessohn to let go at once.

Even mothballs would not have been enough to dash the feral smell of dead mourning dove, the ogre’s last meal.

Paris’ talons caressed a silver pocket watch. As the hour struck, a shadowy black panther stalked a be-silked Fairy around the clock face, the predator’s jaws tearing playfully at the Fairy’s coat tails.

Paris placed the spoils into his pouch as if the treasure was a parcel he had just received by post.

‘Blood-money...will pay with your blood - ’ Goessohn avowed, his stocky legs now drowsy and soft as dough.

Paris’ butter-yellow eyes feasted pilgrim-like upon a three-headed jade dog whose baleful, saucer-like eyes wept ethereal tears of diamonds and pearls.

Goessohn was now deer still.

The ogre’s heavy jowls sagged. He couldn’t even shiver, although his skin perspired greatly.

The dragon hissed like a rattlesnake’s tail.

Paris’ hind legs coiled like a wind-up, ready to pounce.

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Jack Horner Hall was the country estate belonging to Sir Dorian Plum-in-the-Mouth.

A gentleman of leisure who preferred animals to people, especially when the creatures were dead and stuffed. Dorian was not the first man to marry jelly-brained

alluring heiress. Argus-eyed chaperones always steering the conversation from more difficult topics.

Every morning, Sir Dorian trit-trotted his ex-racehorse Duke and his pack of foxhounds into Dearborn Forest.

A congregation of insects, reeer-reeer, raah-raah, mmh-mmh, chorused in the humid, clinging air and the mossy, glossy-barked trees.

The routine was as well oiled as a printing press.

Paris knew the estate would be empty, apart from the silent servants and gentle women-folk. Who knew what seraphim treasures lay within Jack-Horner Hall?

Paris slunk towards the front milky marble stairwell, blowing smoke rings in the footman's face. The frog's deep-set eyes had a downcast expression as though the dragon was beneath his notice until otherwise introduced. His face was blanched white with lead paint; two spots of rouge coloring his pimply cheeks. A great white wig wobbled like a jelly on his head, bedecked with tiny pink ribbons.

'I am Paris the Incurable!' the stalwart dragon announced, flexing his glorious heliotrope wings. 'Thief of Reticules and Swallower of Princesses! Snatcher of Statues and Fire-Consumer of Cities!'

The frog snatched a fly from mid-air and chewed it.

'Have you a card?' he drawled.

'I have a reputation infamously deserved! I need no letter of introduction *here!*'

Paris tore the white wig from the frog's head and worried it, like a dog.

'I'm bald!' the frog cried in horror, clutching at his bare, moist crown, now divested of his mark of rank.

'Downstairs servants are forced to take the last name of their served family,' Paris jibbed, 'You have always been, as you say, bald.'

'How dare you!' the frog croaked, his powdered visage streaking with mortified tears, 'I could have acknowledged your *reputation* if you had not wounded mine!'

The frog abandoned his post and frog-marched to the distant Dearborn Forest, repeating, 'I shouldn't. I shouldn't. I shouldn't.' He may still be there now, trying to

find something to put on his head. A bird's nest perhaps? Or a honey jar? Who knows.

Paris gave a low chuckle. All the golden pennies were falling into place.

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Paris hadn't meant to enter the salon.

He would rather have been Mr. Plum in the study wrenching something valuable open. The salon was eye-popping. Strawberry pink wallpaper embellished with clusters of laurel leaves lined the grand walls. A white brocade love seat with clawed mahogany lion's feet demanded an intimate tete-a-tete. A splendid mosaic floor of a rose in full bloom suggested the gaiety of spring. An igloo of books in regimental order dominated the rest of the salon as much as a bloated toad. And the glacé cherry presiding over all this pomp and lavishness was Lady Rosalie Plum-in-the-Mouth, her plump lips pursed in surprise. She wore a rose pink, low-cut gown, the bustle a cascade of bows like rainbow farfalle pasta.

'Please. Please. Please! Don't eat my daughter!' Lady Rosalie begged, hiding her face in her embroidery. 'I know she is a tiresome headache! Just last week she spat chewing tobacco on Countess Avon's sapphire slippers...'

Paris tossed his fierce horned head and displayed his imposing underbelly veined with spidery red-gold flame, sparkling like a birdcage glass-marble.

'You know, if you give me your horde willingly, I might just spare your lives,' Paris coaxed in an oily voice, as slippery and delicious as bread and dripping.

'Wait till I've finished this chapter,' a muffled voice exclaimed from behind a barricade of books, 'I've just got to the part when the man declares his passionate devotion for the heroine after a lot of self-denial and misunderstandings between them.'

'Marriage is not a fairytale,' Rosalie scoffed, chewing lumpy toffee, her peach-like cheeks a melt-in-the-mouth distraction to the dragon. 'But you plague me child

with your plain looks and your willful, direct-talking tongue. You'll end up an old maid, *or worse* a governess!'

Miss Rachel scrummaged out from piles of books, her dull face seemingly polished with olive oil and her figure devoid of curves. She was dressed in a comic sister to her mother's gown, gold lace with a bustle, a concertina of royal purple satin.

'Miss Ostentatious didn't have to put up with 'The Ice-berg', a slow-motion kisser,' Rachel continued, 'Or 'Father Time', as appealing as Father's stuffed vulture and a lot more free with his hands.'

Miss Rachel was a hothouse flower watered with skating parties, costumed balls, bonnet re-affixing and village walks, unused to tempests.

'Perhaps not dear,' Lady Rosalie sniffed, 'but they always gained ten thousand a year, which is always a comfort.'

Paris' steaming nostrils flared, raining sickly-smelling pumice stones on the two bewildered women.

'You must be very tired.' Paris commented in a measured, deep voice, fixing his ultra-dilated pupils on Lady Rosalie's perturbed face and curling his cherry-red tail around her waist, pinning her in place.

'Let your worries fall like water droplets into a stream.'

Miss Rachel charged into Paris' body but the dragon just shook his prickly scales like a dog.

'Let your troubles float into the air like a kite...*And give me the keys to the master's study.*'

Lady Rosalie was known to do anything nonsensical in her sleep. Rosalie's Sleep Talk was defensive and omniscient; 'I *am* awake! You were just talking about flying pigs...' Lady Rosalie's Sleep Wanderings found her reclining on the grand piano, her mattress apparently being too soft. Her pink kimono folded as neat as tissue paper beside her. And so it came of no surprise when Lady Rosalie muttered groggily, 'Stop tickling me...' and unfurled the tarnished silver key from around her titan neck, placing it into Paris' pearly talons.

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Sir Dorian Plum-in-the-Mouth's study stared.

Glass glazed eyes stared from all the four walls. A white weasel crumpled forward, its tiny teeth snarled. A tawny owl's head twisted at an unnatural angle, its claws reaching towards the dragon. A bear lurched on its hind legs, like a boxer in the ring. The study smelt of stale cigars and violin rosin. The frescoed walls depicted hairy satyrs chasing semi-naked nymphs. The Minotaur leather lounge was low and dimpled, inviting one to sink into it. The soul of the study was a walnut roll top writing desk, littered with newspaper clippings, telegrams and a whalebone ashtray. Paris padded around, pouring over the stained glass windows, inhaling the scent of a gold-rimmed vase of hyacinths, sampling the decanter of mint liqueur and stroking the heavy brushstrokes of the still life oil paintings. The dragon's pouch was soon bulging almost uncomfortably to overflowing.

It was then Paris saw it.

It was rare, choice, must-have.

It could hold black crepe de chine from Crème de la Crème Emporium, where poor seamstresses hand stitched mourning veils and garments for the Fairy Court. The garments were hand-woven and stitched by Cyclops, in between dripping their red-rimmed eye with eye-drops. It could hold a knotted, rose-gold ring from Raiment Forge, where the broad dwarf smiths forged and charmed spells into treasure, this ring charmed to change color with the wearer's mood. It could hold a gilded, ivory comb from Del-noblesse, where Fairy merchants painted with precious sheets of gold leaf and twittered about their own glittering reflections. The round, metallic lid had the stamp of a faded Forget-me-not flower. Paris' claws punctured the rubber seal. The platinum box disgorged bile-black spectres of village-children, their hair long, silky and ringleted into cherub curls. The boys each wore a blue velvet doublet embroidered with brown boats and silk stockings. The girls wore red muslin dresses laced with grape-like diadems. The children gaily formed a circle and joined dimpled hands, the girl's wrists chaperoned by their dress sleeve's lacy cuffs. Then they danced. It was far from rosy. They scratched like flea-ridden mad-dogs. They sweated like horses galloping around a ring. Their bodies swelled with black, fist-like welts.



They coughed droplets of blood into their perfumed handkerchiefs. Then, beyond exhaustion, they fell down dead.

‘Don’t be such a namby-pamby baby,’ the children’s rasping voices teased as they vanished.

Paris’ eyes streamed lava like hose pipes and he checked his stippled armpits for the odious, bulging buboes. Paris longed for a dust bath; the dust would warm his goose-pimpled hide. Paris longed to stopper cotton wool into his blue-furred ears to block the child wraiths’ harsh, echoing voices. The dragon’s lungs pumped a firework of flame into the onyx fireplace, an armory of fire.

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Bang!

Sir Dorian Plum-in-the-Mouth stormed into the study, trailing mud as he went.

Dorian’s features were starch white and his fists were curled into a knuckled smile.

‘You vile worm!’ Dorian bellowed, his alpha fox-hound nudging its head against his houndstooth-clad thighs.

‘The seal from the box is dwarf made. It was the one thing keeping the Pestilence contained.’

‘But surely I will be unaffected,’ Paris rumbled, his eyes lingering on his weighty pouch and smoldering scales, as a glorious talisman.

‘Against Death? Hardly,’ Sir Dorian gave a cynical snort, ‘The Pestilence doesn’t discriminate against young or old, rich or poor, high or low-born.’

The dragon’s cheeks drained bloodless. Paris’ distinguished whiskers drooped.

He no longer felt incorrigible but as weak as watered brandy.

‘By claw or by tooth, I will tar the wound I have caused!’ The dragon’s clawed hand expunged all of his hat-pin sharp fangs. ‘There is ancient magic which humans no longer care to know.’

Sir Dorian gaped, as Paris sowed the seeds of dragon teeth into the plum-pudding-scented soil of his potted palm. Thin, sleek stalks erupted towards the ceiling. Thick, thorny stems blossomed with roses, shaking out goddesses like bees from a hive.

The Furies each wore a sweeping white veil of tears, serpents entwined in their thick hair, hobnail boots with beating wings and each flourished a fiery torch.

They spoke in unison in the tone of a cracked mirror. ‘From blood you summoned us and for the shedding of blood we remain. The font of the Pestilence must be destroyed as must the perpetrator of their release...’

Paris shuddered. Cold as a vault full of gold. His empty, inflamed gums had once held a crown of teeth.