

# LADY MIDNIGHT



james robert french



# Lady Midnight

*James Robert French*



Letters  
Concescent Letters

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# Acknowledgments

DO WHAT THOU WILT SHALL BE THE WHOLE OF THE LAW

*...The strong brown reaper swept his swathe and rejoiced. The wise man counted his muscles, and pondered, and understood not, and was sad. Reap thou, and rejoice!*

*—Liber Cordis Cincti Serpente 1:56*

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LOVE IS THE LAW, LOVE UNDER WILL



# 1

## I

The morgue was more or less as David had expected. Cold, both physically and in terms of atmosphere. The various workers traversing the hall outside the waiting area and sitting behind the desk didn't act as if they were the final caretakers of anyone's mother or brother or sister. They could just as easily have been working in any other office processing any other sort of daily business. Only it would have been a particularly dreary office, with bland, grey-brown paint slapped over brick. When he looked at it that way the officer behind the glass, to whom he'd shown his summons, seemed less distant and callous. What effort there had been to make this place "normal" was at least subconsciously recognized by all as a patina over the real nature of the job.

There was a woman sitting in the red plastic chair in the corner diagonally to him. Whose idea was it, he wondered, to screw candy-bright half jars of plastic to grimy metal and stick them against the atrocious tinge on those walls? They seemed out of place here, as did the woman. She did not look bereaved, but then David didn't imagine he did either. The only reason he was here was that the cops couldn't dredge up anyone else to tell them if the corpse they'd found was his landlord.

It was hard to judge her age. Maybe around forty. Lovely, in her own way, but made of hard lines. This, along with extreme contrast between her ivory pale skin and the mane of black hair pulled into a severe ponytail, gave her a cold, aesthetic beauty unrelieved by sensuality. She

wore a rather conservative indigo suit. David decided she must be a cop herself.

The coroner's orderly entered and proved him wrong. "Mr. Hill, Ms. Styx, please come with me."

They both rose, looking at one another with more than a little suspicion. Ms. Styx spoke up, as he knew she would. "Pardon me, but isn't this a bit inappropriate, calling us in together like this?"

"Would be," said the orderly, "if you weren't going to see the same body."

"That's nuts," said David. "I'm here because I'm the only person you guys could find who's been in contact with Mr. Wilcox in the past three years."

"I said it was the same body," the orderly countered. "We haven't identified it yet. That's why you're here. Got it?"

The orderly continued down the hall in front of them, and they followed, though Ms. Styx was not quiet about it. She turned to David and said, "This is how they treat people who might have lost a loved one? Like chores to finish?"

David looked at her sideways, "I think he knows better, at least in my case. You don't seem that broken up about the main issue, either. With all due respect."

Ms. Styx mumbled something he couldn't understand. He supposed it was some variant of "piss off" and shut his mouth. They approached the viewing window, and David felt a little like a trespasser. This moment was meant to be for family, or at least friends. He felt like someone who had slipped into the Mysteries at Eleusis and gotten away with it. The thought was strange for him, as he hadn't thought about Greek history since college, almost twenty years ago. He supposed proximity to real death brought those sorts of thoughts on.

The orderly uncovered the face and shoulders of the corpse. Nope. Not Mr. Wilcox. It looked enough like him that he could understand why he'd been called in for this, but this fellow's nose was too small, and he lacked the scar over his right eye. Ms. Styx's answer came before his, at the speed of certainty.

"Yes, that's John," she said. There were no tears in her voice, no emotion whatsoever. Maybe she was holding it back and would collapse the second she got into her car.



The orderly started talking to her about arrangements and other things that didn't concern him, so David walked away. As he hit the door to the street, the question of just who that man had been to that woman wouldn't let him go. Something was off there, and it was the sort of thing that drove him bonkers. He tried to put it out of his mind as he headed to the bus stop, but the scene kept playing over and over. There was no one thing that bothered him, and that was part of the problem. Topping it off, he felt as if someone were following him all the way back to his apartment.

It wasn't an abstract feeling of being watched. This was the sort of sensation you get when someone is right behind you, breathing down your neck. David expected to turn around and see either Ms. Styx or, even weirder, the body on the slab in the morgue, standing behind him. This sensation stayed with him until he fell asleep in front of the television, a fifth of vodka all but drained on the coffee table, at five-thirty the following morning.

## II

The woman whom David knew as "Ms. Styx" left the police station with her mind in chaos. The years of learning to still her internal chatter, to calm her body's natural reactions of fight or flight, were the only thing that kept her from raw panic. A few fugitive thoughts made it to the surface, no matter how deep her mastery of herself. "If they know about 'John,' I'm already dead." "Who sent that other man?" And, most damaging, "how did I not see this coming?"

As she slid into the driver's seat of the sedan that had been chosen for her because she was so unlikely to buy a car like that, a familiar, somewhat pompous male voice came from the back seat. Or appeared to, she reminded herself.

"You never see the Test coming," it said. "Otherwise, you might look ahead at the answers."

She turned and faced the direction that the voice seemed to come from. The smiling, dapper visage of Phineas Iff flickered in and out of focus. It was the sort of answer she had come to expect of her "Holy Guardian Angel," obscure, cryptic, but nevertheless understood by the deeper part of her that heard what was said between the words.

“Okay,” she said. “Do I at least get a clue about what to do next?”

“Of course,” said Phineas. “Look to the boy.”

“The boy?”

“From the police station.”

“Ms. Styx” raised an eyebrow. She supposed that, to a being of Phineas’ perspective and somewhat preposterous heritage, that man would look like a boy. But to her it seemed condescending nevertheless. He couldn’t have been much younger than herself.

Later that evening, she turned down the lights in the safe house she’d come to see as a home and began the induction that would let her see the nature of her connection to that oddly met young man. At first, she was afraid her mind was too troubled for the Work, that the banishing, perhaps having grown too rote, had not been sufficient to organize her energies. For the first few cycles, it seemed as if her attention was on everything but her breath. Then she felt Phineas’ touch on her shoulder, carrying with it waves of warmth that drove her awareness deep into her belly.

From there it was a matter of following a well worn mental track onto the Inner Planes. “Ms. Styx” first noticed that the man, his name was David, she learned, was aware of her. What she was seeing had already happened; David’s trek back to the dicey part of town in which he lived. Yet he’d known she was watching, even though this was a record and not a current event. Interesting.

At his home she saw a familiar pattern. Drinking heavily to shut out the awareness. He did this almost every night, she understood, though this evening was much heavier because the impressions were coming on strong and seemed almost terrifying. Well, he would be oblivious to her soon, so she did not withdraw as she might have if her presence continued to discomfort him.

She left his immediate surroundings, and felt him relax. Fascinating. Even through all that alcohol, he was still aware of her. How much did he know? She decided it couldn’t be much, judging by the fragmented, disordered energies in his bedroom. No outright filth, but a great deal of clutter without a hint of organization, or any effort in that direction. The bed was a disaster. Everything crumpled. The fitted sheet pulled off the corners of the mattress, forming a sad jumble of dirty white. This framed the small mountain of balled-up comforter in the center.

All around it swirled the chaotic astral ephemera of nightmares and late night television, peppered over with the spice of some very edgy pornography. No, this was not a man with any training.

Trying to ignore the clamour from the bed, she examined the somewhat less unpleasant dresser. The mirror over it reflected his image of himself back at her, and she felt a twinge of disgust, followed by compassion. Not so long ago, she had hated herself that way. Still, the eyes dogged her, both hungry for something and hateful of everything. The signal to noise ratio here was decidedly low. It required a great deal of focus to find what she needed.

As it was, she almost missed it. Near the edge of the dresser closest to a window that looked out on a graffiti riddled wall, there was a statue of Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings*. Around the figure's neck David kept a cheap watch given to him by the bank where he worked. Wait. It was a gift, from his landlord, and she felt the circumstances lent to the presentation of that gift some sort of black humor or irony. Which wasn't all that important, other than that it meant that Mr. Wilcox, rather than David, was Connected. What mattered was that bank was none other than Merchant's International, where this entire mess had started.

### III

David awakened with a stiff neck in the recliner in which he'd passed out. The morning fog had rendered his apartment iceberg frigid, but he was sweating. That could only mean one thing would occupy the first hours of consciousness. He felt it arise, unwelcome and acrid, then return to the foetid depths of his outraged stomach. The next advent, he knew, would not be so timid.

Stumbling, finally crawling to the bathroom, he bent over the toilet and allowed the poison to exit the way it had entered. Though unpleasant, there was an element of catharsis to this genuflection. David knew he didn't need to be quite so loud, but when else did he get to bellow like this? With his vomit, he let all the fear and anger of the work week come roaring out of him.

The sound of glass breaking in the door downstairs interrupted David's post emetic fugue. The world seemed to become very bright, his mind mimicking a state of attention. He recognized, at some level,

that this was not the case. That any decision he made would be flawed at best. But his body was running.

He shut the bedroom and bathroom doors, since the latter also had an entrance to the former. As footsteps, heavy, angry, booted, came up the stairs, he was pushing his bed against the entryway of his room. When, as he had feared, the boots began to pummel his own door, David already had the chest in the bathroom against the entry from the living room, along with the shower rod propped between this and the wall in an attempt to further shore up the walls of his fortress.

It had always been a nagging fear of David's, in this neighborhood. The home invasion. Thugs not content to pilfer his belongings, but bent on violence for the sake of the exercise. But why at this hour and not the middle of the night? He brushed the thought away as irrelevant.

"We know you're in there, motherfucker," one of the men outside said. His voice was accented. Some flavor of Eastern European. Strange, considering the neighborhood.

"You think we're here for your shit?"

David winced as he heard his life shatter and snap beyond the door. There were a few more taunts, and then the sound of something sloshing and splatting brought him close to panic. As it was, he puked again, this time in the middle of his floor. If he was right, it wasn't going to matter. The smell of smoke following the final tromping away of the foot steps let him know he was. They had set fire to the place and meant to trap him there until the smoke killed him.

"Bullshit," he said. He went to the window and looked down. Only three stories to fall, and the dumpster was open and full of bags. The worst he'd get was a bruise. David opened the window and crawled out onto the minimal amount of brick that lay beyond. Breathing deep, he pushed off with what he assumed was enough force to propel him into the center of the garbage bags waiting to catch him.

David had perhaps looked out the window five times since he'd moved into this place. It faced a wall, so the view was hardly worth it. Out of those five times he had looked down maybe once. Both the size of the dumpster and its proximity to his window were thus both matters of guessing to him.

He guessed wrong. Most of him cleared the edge of the dumpster. But he had his left leg out a bit straighter than his right, and it slammed

against the metal edge with a thud, a crack, and a stab of agony. David rolled over in the trash and held out the leg. His nausea returned as he saw his shin bone sticking out of the back of his calf, blood flowing from the ragged gash where it had exited.

A few moments later he passed out, just as his stove exploded above, sending flames and bits of his home jetting out of the window.

#### IV

Ms. Andrea Styx awakened to the sun on her face, and for a moment was able to entertain the fantasy that the last fifteen years had been a dream. She had not opened her eyes that morning, at first relishing for the hundredth time the yin yang effect of Jacob's jet black skin against her own whiteness, awareness of the blood creeping into her half awake mind until she turned him over to see his eyes staring at nothing. Jacob was in the shower, and they would make love again, a good morning fuck, when he returned and saw her lying there looking so good.

As she had many Saturday mornings, Andrea let the fantasy play out, fingers inside herself to recall more satisfying adventures. But as she was reaching climax, the phone rang. She let it go the first time, but upon the second cycle heard another voice that had been with her nearly as long as her memory of that horrid morning.

"Bitch quit playing with yourself and answer the fucking phone," Vicki told her through the machine's speaker.

Andrea managed a slight grin. She pulled her sweats back up and rolled over to grab the receiver. When she picked up, she offered her usual contribution to this particular bit of badinage. "Were you watching me again, pervo?"

Vicki said, "No time today, babe. Just trying to get your attention. So was it John?"

Andrea sighed. "Yeah. It was John. They said he had a heart attack while hiking on Mount Tam. A ranger found him. They're calling it an accidental death, since what actually killed him was hitting his head on a rock at the bottom of a hill."

Vicki responded to this with a snort. "Did you see any accidental bullet holes?"

Andrea swung around, sat up, and put her feet into her slippers.

“Didn’t get that close. This is bad, Vick.” She put a hand to her forehead.

“They could be legit,” said Vicki. “That fool was almost seventy. It’s not too crazy to think all that mountaineering and shit finally iced him.”

Andrea said, “I don’t think so.”

There was a pause on the line. Vicki came back a few moments later with, “Something from Phineas?”

“Yeah. It had to do with this guy who was there to see the body. For some reason they let us both look at it at the same time.”

“That’s weird.”

“I thought so too,” said Andrea. “In fact I’m pretty sure it’s a breach of some protocol or something. I can’t believe they’d have a stranger show up for something that could be gutwrenching for the other person.”

“Well, cops don’t give a shit about that sort of thing,” Vicki said. “Besides, he was supposed to be your assistant, not lover or father or whatever. Who was he to the other guy, or who did they think he might be?”

“His landlord,” said Andrea. “I know what you mean. But Phineas told me to look in on the guy, his name was David, and I found out that his landlord is connected to the bank.”

“Shit.”

“Shit indeed,” Andrea said. “I feel the need to point out that if I’d turned state’s evidence when they offered it to me, I’d be on the other side of the country from all this.”

Vicki made a dismissive hiss. “If you’d turned state’s you’d be a kindergarten teacher in some fucking bourgie school with a sensitive white boy who plays guitar and writes novels no one understands for a husband.”

“Vicki!”

“Now I know you like dark meat, so don’t even play with me bitch.”

Vicki was reverting to the back and forth between them as a way of changing the subject. It annoyed Andrea, but she went with it. “And you know you prefer oysters, so let’s not worry about who’s coming to dinner. What are we going to do?”

Vicki paused again. “Tell you what,” she said after a minute. “Why don’t you come Home for a bit, and we’ll see if this is anything to worry about? You’ll want to grab the guy too, if you can. He might not be safe,

either.”

“He most certainly isn’t,” Phineas said from behind. “In fact, you need to get to him as soon as possible.”

Andrea shook off the disorientation that trying to hold conversations on two planes of reality brought on. “Right,” she said to both of them. To Vicki she said, “If I’m not at the gates of the Berkeley address by 1300, send the dogs.”

Vicki said, “Acknowledged,” and they hung up.

About twenty minutes later, Andrea passed by the apartment house she’d seen on the astral the night before. There were fire trucks outside, and flames coming from most of the third floor. She cursed and slammed her hands against the steering wheel.

Phineas said, “General.”

Andrea turned around and shouted at the half image in the back seat, “What the fuck does that mean?”

The entity stared at her like it should have been obvious. “The hospital. San Francisco General. I was attempting to be succinct. My apologies for upsetting you.”

Nodding, Andrea said, “Understood.”

She managed not to break any traffic laws on the way to the hospital. When she told the desk nurse that she was looking for David Hill, the woman looked like she wanted to hug her.

“Oh my God,” she said. “Yes. I’ll take you to him. He’s just finished giving a statement to the police and really needs to see a friendly face. What relationship are you to him?”

Without much deliberation, Andrea said, “I’m his girlfriend.”

“Lucky guy,” said the nurse.

They went down the hall to the critical care unit. In the second room on the left, surrounded by a curtain, was David. He looked like shit. Not just the injury to his leg, but his whole aura was off. Andrea imagined it would be, if he’d had the sort of night he must have after downing all that vodka, then having a fire to deal with. Probably arson, to boot.

She went to his bedside and kissed him. “Hey, sweetie,” she said. “I was so worried about you when I saw your house. Don’t ever do anything like that to me again.”

“Um, okay,” said David. He looked at her with what she could only compare to looks she’d seen in pictures of third world children as they

watched their families getting slaughtered by some junta.

Andrea turned to the nurse. "Can he go home?" she asked.

"Well, there's nothing life threatening, but we were going to keep him here under observation for another twenty-four hours."

In twenty-four hours, anyone could get to him. And if she stayed, both of them were likely to find themselves at the location of their first date. "Oh, I can keep an eye on him at home," she said. She slipped into a combination of hypnotic voice and plain old "innocent" girly whisper. "If anything happens, I'll just call an ambulance. It'll be okay."

After a little more of this, the nurse said, "I think it should be fine. Just let me ring the presiding doctor to sign off on it, okay hon?"

Andrea was on the edge of dropping the cute girlfriend act and just shooting anyone who tried to stop her by the time they got the doctor's approval. Not that it took a long time. She just didn't have much time to begin with. As she pushed David to her car in a wheelchair, she called the Berkeley site and told them to have medics on standby. This guy was still in shock, and had internal injuries that the geniuses here had somehow missed. The ride across the Bay was going to be tricky at best.

## V

David understood that he was being kidnapped. But morphine, shock, the lingering effects of alcohol poisoning, and something going wrong with his mind, all conspired to remove any shred of concern. As the woman from the morgue drove him across a bridge made of rainbows and fossilized dragon shit, he cycled through various levels of delusion.

There was a man beside him in the car sometimes. He looked like an older Oliver Hardy or W.C. Fields mixed up with Alfred Hitchcock. It seemed he was trying to give encouragement, but then he would turn into a butterfly with a deer's head that flew out David's window and got smashed against the front windshield. The air rushing against all the innards would reform into a face that wanted to eat him.

The next instant, everything would be normal, if a bit dulled by the painkillers. Then he would try to say something, but found he didn't quite know what to ask. The woman looked concerned for his well-being, so he imagined she didn't plan to kill him. In fact, he got the distinct impression that if he'd stayed in the hospital for another hour,



they'd have found him dead.

In answer to this thought came a very clear image of himself, in the critical care unit, his head lolling back with his mouth open to reveal a black tongue. His eyes were wide open but milky, the consciousness behind them gone. Then, as if to ameliorate the horror of such a vision, he reverted to the weird otherverse of rainbow bridges and fat men that turned into bestial butterflies.

David recognized the neighborhood they arrived at as being somewhere in the Berkeley Hills. The morphine was beginning to wear off, and the delirium took a turn toward the macabre. It seemed an army of raccoons, all of them a few days dead, was advancing on the car, with the intent of making the two of them suffer aeons of agony before being ripped apart. He'd never thought of raccoons as remotely sinister before now.

He screamed, and then began to whimper. It was embarrassing, but he also felt entitled. David was convinced that he was going to die. When he looked up again, however, the world was semi-normal, and he was simply in epic pain.

They pulled into the driveway of a very expensive looking estate. His mysterious benefactor came around to the back of the mid-range sedan and put her hand on his shoulder. There was a heat there, and it spread through him, easing his fear and suffering. He waited while she took the wheelchair out of the trunk and unfolded it, then let her help him get in.

Three people, one woman and two men, dressed in white jumpsuits, came running down the driveway to meet them. They examined him and made concerned noises. The woman from the morgue said something about "internal injuries." One of the men nodded and took out a syringe David hoped had more morphine in it. He thanked him when the warm rush confirmed that this was the case.

More time passed entering and leaving the sharp focus of reality. Sometimes he saw images of Andrea—or Vivian; she had two names—in prison. A black woman with a shaved head was telling her things like "there's nothing on the Inside that isn't there on the Outside. It's just buried under a lot of bullshit," and "a government's just the first gang on the block. Then they make up all kinds of shit to make you think they take their orders from God all-fucking-mighty. But it's really just

a protection racket with higher stakes.” There was a double meaning to what she said, and Vivian/Andrea was learning about that too.

When the delirium broke for the last time, it was dark outside the large room they’d put him in. It didn’t have the institutional chill of a hospital, though it was fitted out with medical equipment. David’s first thought was to run, but he realized that this was impossible. His leg was going to keep him immobile for a while. Besides, where would he go? His apartment was gone, and no one he knew had a place this swank. Best to just relax and luxuriate in the silver lining.

Andrea (he knew, somehow, that he was to call her that, instead of the other) came in, along with the black woman from his visions. Andrea opened her mouth to give introductions, but he interrupted.

“You’re Andrea,” he said. Then, looking at the other woman, “and you’re Vicki.”

Vicki raised an eyebrow. “Damn. Dude takes a leap out of a window and suddenly he’s a regular seer. Of course, you always had that, didn’t you?”

“You knew I was monitoring you last night, for instance,” said Andrea. “Which is why you drank so much, to shut it out.”

David sat up in the bed and stared at them. The place suddenly felt ridiculously hot. These people were some kind of cult, only they also had some real powers, or something. He felt the pounding of his pulse against his eardrum, the sweat beginning to saturate his gown.

Taking great care to sound calm so as not to make them do anything that involved any more drugs, he said, “Who the fuck are you people, and what do you want with me?”

“We want to protect you,” said Andrea. “Of course, since you also have some significant latent psychism, it would be good to help you learn to use it instead of resorting to self-medication. Unless you enjoy waking up feeling like you’ve spent the night being pummeled about the head and shoulders.”

“Look at it this way,” Vicki said. “You’re going to be laid up for a few weeks at least. Do you have anything better to do?”

David looked around. These people didn’t seem dangerous. A little weird, a little sketchy maybe. He knew without asking that the house they were in was paid for by the proceeds from numerous felonies. But he also felt he could trust them, as long as he didn’t try to get one over

for himself. And since he was never very good at manipulation, the chances of him being tempted were nil. Still, the whole “latent psychic” thing sounded like a scam, even if he had had dreams that provided accurate information about people he didn’t know. Most of that could be suggestion, and the rest made up. He wasn’t going to ask about the prison, for instance. That could be a product of his own subconscious.

“I don’t suppose you have any, like, Sudoku books or anything,” he said, half grinning.

Vicki said, “We offer him training in the Great Work and he wants to play motherfucking Sudoku.” She patted Andrea’s shoulder, “You got some heavy lifting ahead of you, sister.”

Andrea rolled her eyes and then winked at him. Without another word, they left. David sensed that he’d just all but signed his name in blood.

# About the Author

James Robert French is an initiate of the Open Source Order of the Golden Dawn. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

# About Con crescent Letters

Con crescent Letters is dedicated to publishing unique works of Poetry and Prose with spiritual, magickal, occult, esoteric and Pagan themes. It takes advantage of the recent revolution in publishing technology and economics to bring forth works that, previously, might only have been circulated privately.

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# Colophon

This book is made of Times and Didot, using Adobe InDesign. The cover was designed by the author and Kat Luneo; the body was set by Sam Webster.

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Fifteen years ago, they murdered her lover and pinned the crime on her. Now, Andrea Styx uses her psychic abilities and occult training in the service of an organization dedicated to the downfall of a corrupt system.

But the arrival of a new protege brings her past screaming to her own back door, and awakens doubts about the purpose to which she has dedicated her life.

She has a plan. The Cosmos has other ideas...



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