

The Tale of a Sinister Sibling

A Space 1889 adventure

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With a bow to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

This adventure is intended for a group of characters of high social standing, or with friends or employers in exalted positions in Crinolia (or another suitable Canal city to which the GM may relocate the adventure). Characters of the common adventurer type will have difficulties operating here. A mix of human and Canal Martian PCs would probably be beneficial.

The true challenge of this adventure is not to solve its mysterious mass murder. Instead, the PCs, after having discovered the identity of the assassin, must cleverly fabricate a plausible but false explanation of the events and find a suitable scapegoat. If they implicate the real culprit, they will end up in serious trouble, since the truth is politically very sensitive.

A Murder Most Foul

Waakini (“duchess”) Maaribiith, primary spouse of the Anwaak (“city prince”) Kaashim of Crinolia has grown awfully tired of entertaining nobles with aspirations on her younger sister’s hand. Their nagging mothers, incessantly trying to speak on those their sons’ behalf at every available opportunity, are even worse. She knows that they are merely seeking the power connected to marrying into the princely family. The young Muurigaava is too inexperienced to understand such cruel intriguing and is even quite fond of some of the young fellows. Sending her to live on the family estates in the countryside has had little effect since she actually invites them to visit her there. Maaribiith decided long ago that something would have to be done about it.

It was her husband’s cousin Aalanio who brought a solution during a visit to Crinolia. When he heard of her complaints he presented her to his friend Choorad, a prominent though somewhat repulsive merchant from Hellas. Aalanio hinted that the fellow was somewhat knowledgeable on poisonous substances. After some prodding, the Hellan offered her a gruesome recipe in exchange for relief from the city tolls, an easily arranged matter for the Waakini of Crinolia. Choorad was later invited to stay as her guest in the Palace of 17 Joys, the Prince’s city residence.

Three weeks passed without event. Then, Muurigaava got the idea to arrange an informal dinner for six of her favourite courtiers. The evening came and dinner passed smoothly, the young nobles seemed to get on well with each other and Muurigaava enjoyed herself thoroughly. The courtiers decided to stay when she excused herself later in the evening. They went to a sitting-room to converse in private over a few samples from the Prince’s nectar attic, asking not to be disturbed. One of them, Haoreen, left very early after a short dispute with one of

the others. A servant in the adjoining library heard the remaining five complain about the sour flavour of the nectar later on. They eventually quieted down, but did not leave when the late evening passed into night. The servants assumed the young Canal Martians could find their own way out and went to bed.

The courtiers were found early next morning, still seated in the same armchairs—all limp, motionless and apparently blind, deaf and numb to everything around them. Two of them turned out to be dead, though it was a while before the servants could determine who were still alive and who were not. It was a grisly sight. Several of the shocked servants later told of an eerie feeling, describing the very air in the room as “sick and greasy”. Indeed, every single object felt clammy to the touch, as if some great foulness had entered the room and defiled everything in it with its presence.

It is at this point in time that the characters become involved in the case. The Gamemaster must of course first arrange a plausible reason for their presence in the Palace of 17 Joys. There is some general hysteria in the palace at first, but it soon gives way to a nervous watchfulness when people begin wondering what has really happened. Anyone who can shed some light on the mystery will then be welcome to investigate.

The True Tale

Maaribiith’s plan was simple; if something really awful would happen to some of the courtiers, it would discourage others from making further advances towards her sister.

Choorad had the means to achieve it, so he was invited to stay in the palace to await a proper opportunity. The poison he used was a specially prepared form of Xeeto roots, a poison found among the distant Brijesec Hill Martians in Hellas and known to induce catatonia. The dried root-paste had been mixed with wax and

moulded into candles, twelve of which were put in the room where Choorad knew the courtiers would be sitting. He has a few unused candles left, stashed in his coffers.

The five Canal Martians had the candles lit when they entered the room, thus releasing the poison into the air and inhaling it. The effect was slight at first, not inducing much more than depressed moods and a slight nausea, which was blamed on the nectar. Haoreen was not exposed long enough to suffer any ill effects. As the candles continued to burn, the concentration of poison slowly grew in the air and caused apathy, then real catatonia. Before all the candles had burnt down the courtiers had been inhaling ever stronger doses of the Xeeto poison for more than two hours. Their nervous systems had by then taken enough damage to make its effect irreversible. Two of them were not strong enough to survive such a treatment. The fumes, being heavier than air, slowly settled and condensed on all exposed surfaces in the room, causing the nauseous effect noted later.

Further Developments

Something horrible has happened to five young noblemen in the Palace of 17 Joys, in itself a scandalous fact. Kaatrob, the Anwaak's eldest son and heir, puts the Red Spears (the Anwaakian Guard) on alert at once, thanking the stars that the Anwaak is away to his country estates at the moment. He also contacts Spymaster Shiister, chief of the Vicious Eye (the Prince's Secret Police), who promises he will have his underlings investigate the matter, and turning his attentions to the surviving courtier Haoreen.

Muurigaava returns from her rooms later that morning and becomes totally devastated when she hears what has happened. Her grief is well founded; one of the dead was Beeritim, a young minor noble whom she was beginning to feel genuinely attracted to. He had very few influential relatives and had far less to gain on a marriage with her than had the others. She is certain that he courted her out of sincere affection. The young female sits weeping in a secluded corner of the courtyard for most of the afternoon. Maaribiith must spend much of the day staving off courtiers who want to offer solace to Muurigaava.

Two days later, guards (or the characters) respond to sounds of screaming and objects shattering in the princely chambers. The noise turns out to be a violent quarrel between the Waakini and her sister. Muurigaava promptly leaves at the interruption, locks herself into her rooms and refuses to let anyone in. She does not leave until late next evening, when she goes outdoors for a walk. A gardener sees her as she enters Choorad's room in the guest wing of the building.

Choorad is found lying in his bed the next morning, as mindless as the courtiers found three days earlier. The

clammy feeling from the sitting-room can be noticed in the air and on every object here as well. The other servants hear from the gardener of Muurigaava's visit to the merchant the previous evening. It is not long before whispered rumours tell of black magic and of the girl's supposed connections with forces of Darkness.

Another True Tale

Maaribiith makes a mistake when she decides to inform her sister of the truth. She knows nothing of Muurigaava's feelings towards the dead Beeritim. When she tells her what really happened, the girl becomes furious and starts screaming and throwing things at the bewildered Maaribiith. It develops into a cat-fight before they are interrupted, but neither of them will explain the reason behind it.

Afterwards, Muurigaava sits staring blankly out her window for long hours. She fumes with hatred and knows that she must somehow take revenge before she can ever sleep again, but striking against her sister is unthinkable. It must be against Choorad, then. Knowing she is no match for his strength, she resolves to defeat him with her wits and goes to pay him a visit. She tells the initially suspicious Hellan that her sister has revealed everything to her. Pretending to be merely curious and indifferent to the courtiers' fate, she eventually charms him into telling her more of the poison and even showing her the remaining candles. Then, swallowing her disgust, she allows him to seduce her and goes to bed with the loathsome Choorad. She rises later in the night, careful not to rouse him, puts some of the lethal candles in sticks on the bedside table and lits them. Then she quickly gets dressed and stalks back to her rooms. The rest of the night she spends washing herself.

A Preliminary Timeline for the Adventure

Day 1: The courtiers are found in the sitting-room. Kaatrob puts the Red Spears on alert. The PCs begin their investigation.

Day 2: People are speculating and asking each other questions, officers of the Red Spears is asking questions and some strange people whom everybody assumes are Vicious Eye officers are asking questions. The PCs must repeatedly give accounts of their whereabouts the previous night.

Day 3: Maaribiith talks to Muurigaava and informs her what really happened. A fight ensues between the two women. Muurigaava is seen visiting Choorad later in the evening.

Day 4: Choorad is found in the morning, permanently catatonic. Foul rumours of Muurigaava are in circulation before the sun sets.

Some Notable People and Places

Choorad

The Hellan merchant has a mainly Hellanian descent, though with Parhooni blood as well. He is from the city Far Hellania where he made a career in illicit trade with the Red Men. His business contacts with Hellan rogues has given him an extensive knowledge of the use of poisons.

Choorad is a repugnant fellow, though mostly in behaviour rather than in looks. He is greedy, ruthless and lacks any kind of morale, which soon becomes fairly evident to all around him. The servants in the Palace are surprised that the Waakini will entertain such a figure. The Red Spears are thinking of finding an excuse to arrest him before the Anwaak returns home.

Choorad is a huge Canal Martian, close to seven feet tall, with broad shoulders and long, wiry arms with broad scars along them. He sports a thick, drooping moustache; a remainder of his Hellan origins.

Haoreen

Haoreen is a member of a local noble house. He is little more than a spoiled puppy whose ambitions to Muurigaava's hand are directed by his parents.

The young Canal Martian's eyes are opened to the court intrigues in a brutal fashion when suspicions of mass murder are cast on him, and he finds all of his friends turning against him. Even members of his own family turn their backs on him in fear of being too closely associated with a suspected criminal. He sends messages to Muurigaava to plead with her to help him, but never receives a reply. Prior to the third day, she is not certain of his innocence anyway.

Haoreen is normally a rather attractive young fellow with bright blue eyes and a charming smile, but the present distress is evident on his appearance.

Muurigaava

Maaribiith's beautiful sister is perhaps the only member of the princely family with no political ambitions of her own. She is a mere youth, much younger than Maaribiith. Her father passed away when she was still an infant, and following the death of her mother twelve years ago, she was sent to the city of Crinolia to live with her sister. Muurigaava has become a popular figure at court with her good humour and endearing manners, though she is seldom seen publicly. She is not really spoiled, but has grown up and lived in a protected environment without ever having to face toil, poverty or submission. The girl is simply incapable of imagining what such things are like.

Muurigaava is bored with the people surrounding her. It was all really exciting when her brother-in-law

ascended the throne, but everything has turned into militancy and power-lust since then. The only member of the family that she can relate to is Kaatrob. She feels more at ease with her courtiers. Contrary to what her sister believes, their true motives are transparent to her, but at least they give her their undivided attention. They have provided her with some scarcely found amusement, though she could never have anticipated what effect the young Beeritim—and his death—would have on her.

The Palace of 17 Joys

The Palace of 17 Joys is a vast complex in the Old City in Crinolia's heart, overlooking the Grand Canal. The granite and marble structure comprises several hundred rooms connected by long, winding corridors. In its centre is an enclosed courtyard with a magnificent garden and fountains spoken of throughout the realm. The splendour and luxury of this environment should be stressed to the PCs.

Its layouts are not of importance in this adventure, so the building is not described in detail. Note that the second floor is reserved for the princely family's private apartments; the Red Spears will not allow the characters to enter it unless they have official permissions or happen to be close friends with the family. In any case, all important events in this adventure take place on the lower floors.

Conducting the Investigation

Starting the PCs

The best dramatic effect is achieved if the player characters are present when the courtiers are found, and see the awful scene with their own eyes. It ought to be enough to arouse their curiosity. They should also be made to realize the extent of this scandal and the need for discretion when investigating it.

Clues

There are a few clues that might help the PCs to figure out the murder method. There is some nectar left in the courtiers' bottles. It can be tested (or drunk) to show that there is nothing wrong with it. All open surfaces in both rooms are somewhat clammy and sticky to the touch, so whatever caused that must necessarily have been air-borne.

Numerous lit candles were present and the only source of light in both rooms. The remaining candles can be found in Choorad's coffer. They are bluish and a little granular, so an inspection of them would quickly reveal that they are not made of ordinary candle wax. Traces of the same bluish wax can be found in the bottom of the candlesticks in both rooms.

If asked, several guards remember having seen Choorad in the corridor outside the sitting-room on the evening of Muurigaava's dinner, but he was at the docks during the latter part of the evening — when the candles were already in place. The only thing the courtiers brought with them to the room was the nectar. It is unlikely that Haoreen could have had an opportunity to distribute a poison through any other medium. Muurigaava was never near the sitting-room.

As in any mystery, the obstacles lie in the way the clues are hidden. The sticks with the burnt-down candles are still in place, but they are not very noticeable in rooms full of other objects and furniture. The fact that the true culprit is unable to talk after the third day is definitely a drawback as well. The Red Spears and the Vicious Eye officers dislike having the characters meddling in their investigation, and would gleefully remove evidence from the scene if they could only discover some of it themselves.

There is also a question of sensitivity. It is certainly important to free Muurigaava from suspicions, but if Choorad can be indicated as the delinquent the connection between him and the Waakini only makes the matter worse. No blame must fall on her; Spymaster Shiister will personally make that clear enough to the PCs if needed. They may make up whatever motive they like for Choorad's part, but the Vicious Eye officers will show no remorse if they try to involve Maaribiith in the scandal. Vicious Eye will invent an economic connection between Choorad and one of the courtiers to explain the poisoning, and claim that the Hellan then tried to commit suicide.

Interviewing People

Questioning Maaribiith

The Waakini may consent to grant the characters an audience during the first two days. Pretending shocked by the event, she has very little to tell them. The dinner was her sister's idea from the start and she had nothing to do with it. For her own amusement she might launch a private theory that British agents are involved; everyone knows the perfidy of these Red Men of London. If asked about Choorad, she says he is a friend of the family.

Maaribiith will refuse to speak to the characters from the fourth day.

Questioning Muurigaava

The young female is not very communicative during the investigation. She is stricken with grief the first two days and has nothing to tell, apart from that the courtiers were all fine when she left them.

After the fourth day she will brighten up somewhat and may possibly ask the characters to help her once she hears of the rumours about her. She will of course say nothing of her night with Choorad and claims that his fate is a mystery to her. If confronted with the statement that she visited him on the evening of day three, she will call it an outright lie.

Questioning Choorad

Choorad is not in the least interested in the whole affair, which he will tell anyone who cares to listen, but he gets visibly upset if the characters tell him the courtiers were killed with poisoned candles. He will then be anxious to dismiss their theory as utter nonsense before the Vicious Eye hear of it. If pressed for a theory of his own, he claims that Haoreen probably poisoned the nectar to get rid of his rivals.

From the fourth day onwards, Choorad will of course say nothing whatsoever.

Questioning Haoreen

Haoreen knows that he is a prime suspect and realizes that anyone who approaches him from now on might be a Vicious Eye agent. He is hence not too inclined to converse with strangers. His private opinion is that some other courtier is behind it all. Everyone knows the six Canal Martians at the dinner were among Muurigaava's favourites, so someone else could have arranged the whole thing to terminate his most dangerous rivals. He is all too willing to give the characters a few names, but have no idea how the deed was accomplished.

Questioning Kaatrob

The Warden fears for the safety of his family. He has nothing against answering whatever questions the PCs might have, but does not hide his doubt about their ability to solve the mystery. He thinks they should step aside and let Spymaster Shiister and his people handle the investigation. Choorad is a decidedly foul character in his opinion, but since his mother has invited him Kaatrob dares not speak out against him. Besides, he has nothing specific to go by and refuses to speculate on the matter.

Questioning the Servants

Most of the servants suspect supernatural forces, but initially have no guesses as to who brought them forth. From day four onwards, they are convinced that the five noblemen and the Hellan were killed with black arts by the Waakini's sister. They dare not really say so openly, of course, but may give the PCs a few whispered hints.

Questioning Other Courtiers

Kaatrob can give the characters a list of the other courtiers who were not invited to the dinner. Should

they visit some of them and ask for their opinion, most of them think Haoreen is the culprit—or at least so they say. He is one of Muurigaava's favourites, and they would be well pleased to have him out of their way.

Questioning officers of the Vicious Eye

The officers are irritated that civilians have been given access to what they think should be secret information. They are much more interested in asking questions than giving answers, and do not hesitate to threaten the characters if they grow too curious. This might give some PCs an idea that the Vicious Eye is guilty of the deed, a theory that should not be discouraged.

The Aftermath

Ideally, the entire affair should be officially disregarded as a regrettable incident caused by an unscrupulous Hellan. The Princely family will probably not suffer much from it — Kaashim's repute is unblemished under

any circumstances — but it might cast a sour mood among the nobility.

Rewards

If the PCs solve the case with no suspicions cast on the two sisters, they can expect rich rewards from the Prince's family. Ideally, the Gamemaster should think of a personalized reward for each character, keeping in mind that Crinolia's ruling family can afford a lot.

An unsolved mystery will probably only bring thanks from Kaatrob for the PCs' assistance.

Should the PCs publicly point out the Waakini as the mind behind the scheme (thereby telling the truth but showing a monumental disregard to diplomacy and common sense), they would do well to forget rewards and realize that they are in serious trouble. They must disappear before they suffer death at the hands of Shiister's underlings.