



## The Vesuvius Club: A Bit of Fluff (Lucifer Box Novels)

By Mark Gatiss

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**Meet Lucifer Box: Equal parts James Bond and Sherlock Holmes, with a twist of Monty Python and a dash of Austin Powers, Lucifer has a charming countenance and rapier wit that make him the guest all hostesses must have. And most do.**

But few of his conquests know that Lucifer is also His Majesty's most daring secret agent, at home in both London's Imperial grandeur and in its underworld of despicable vice. So when Britain's most prominent scientists begin turning up dead, there is only one man his country can turn to for help.

Following a dinnertime assassination, Lucifer is dispatched to uncover the whereabouts of missing agent Jocelyn Poop. Along the way he will give art lessons, be attacked by a poisonous centipede, bed a few choice specimens, and travel to Italy on business and pleasure. Aided by his henchwoman Delilah; the beautiful, mysterious, and Dutch Miss Bella Pok; his boss, a dwarf who takes meetings in a lavatory; grizzled vulcanologist Emmanuel Quibble; and the impertinent, delicious, right-hand-boy Charlie Jackpot, Lucifer Box deduces and seduces his way from his elegant townhouse at Number 9 Downing Street (somebody has to live there) to the ruined city of Pompeii, to infiltrate a highly dangerous secret society that may hold the fate of the world in its clawlike grip--the Vesuvius Club.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Darkly erudite and fiendishly unputdownable -- Lucifer Box is the most likeable scoundrel since Flashman."

-- Jasper Fforde, author of *The Big Over Easy* and *The Eyre Affair*

"With its quaint dust jacket and Beardseely-inspired illustrations, the book feels like a visitor from a more elegant era; it has the smell of fin de siècle about it....[Lucifer Box] belongs to a lineage which stretches from Sherlock Holmes to the indestructible James Bond, via the queasy phantasmagoria of Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu stories...But Gatiss is more than a *pasticheur*; he has ambitions beyond literary ventriloquism. Midway through the story, Box is revealed to be bisexual, and we feel that this is a novel which Doyle, Stevenson, and Rider Haggard would not have been allowed to write. Giddily inventive and packed with delirious incident, it suggests a post-modern project comparable to Michael Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*."

-- *The Times Literary Supplement* (London)

"Gatiss mixes in *The League of Gentlemen's* penchant for horror with large doses of arch wit and louche laying about. It's Oscar Wilde crossed with H.P. Lovecraft....this could be the bit of fluff you've been looking for."

-- *The Telegraph* (London)

"It's Gatiss's impeccable lightness of touch and huge delight in wordplay that makes this a joy. Studded with epigrams, asides, such wonderful names as Strangeways Pugg and Everard Supple, this is a wickedly written romp to put a smile on the face of anyone amused by the strange alchemy of the words 'a peculiar horror of artichokes'"

-- *SFX* magazine (UK)

"Plenty of sly comic detail (Box lives at Number 9 Downing Street 'because someone has to') and a surrealist narrative that fans of *The League of Gentlemen* will recognize...kidnapped scientists, poisonous centipedes, foggy chases through London by hackney cab, and a fiendish volcano-based conspiracy that provides the big SFX climax. It's all great fun."

-- *Time Out* (London)

"The preposterous Lucifer is an entertaining hero and *The Vesuvius Club* is a hugely enjoyable romp."

-- *Image* magazine (UK)

"Self-deprecatingly subtitled *A bit of Fluff*...Gatiss' prose is upholstered in a rather superior grade of fluff: redolent of soft leather chairs in fine gentlemen's establishments, and the cracking of whips in the basements beneath them....Set amid the decadent fleshpots of the Edwardian demi-monde, the novel introduces the raffish toast of London society, Lucifer Box, leading portraitist of the age and undercover agent on behalf of His Majesty's government....Box works his way dandyishly through a sequence of adventures which leads him to penetrate a secret Neapolitan crime ring, plus the willing rinf of several secretive Neapolitans....perniciously addictive piece of escapism."

-- *The Guardian* (London)

"Lucifer Box, society darling and spy, investigates the secret Vesuvius Club. Brilliant stuff."

-- *Heat* magazine (UK)

"In the appallingly appealing Lucifer Box, Mark Gatiss has created an anti-hero for the ages. Watching the number of chapters, then pages, dwindle, was heart-rending. No one has ever combined the seedy, the stylish, the rumbustious, the raffish, the egregious, the outrageous, the high and the low with such wit and grace."

-- Stephen Fry, author of *Revenge* and *The Liar*

"Mark Gatiss has brought his customary wit and outlandish style to the page...sharp, witty and shocking."

-- *Derby Evening Telegraph* (UK)

#### About the Author

Mark Gatiss writes for the multiaward-winning British television comedy *The League of Gentlemen*, on which he portrays a debt collector, a cursed veterinarian, a dog cinema owner who has recently branched out into VHS and DVD rentals, and a *Knight Rider* fan, among many other characters. He also stars in the feature film *The League of Gentlemen's Apocalypse* and has written episodes for the rejuvenated *Doctor Who* television series. He lives in a laboratory with a stuffed cat.

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### **Chapter One: Mr Lucifer Box Entertains**

I have always been an appalling judge of character. It is my most beguiling virtue.

What, then, did I make of the Honourable Everard Supple whose likeness I was conjuring on to canvas in my studio that sultry July evening?

He was an imposing cove of sixty-odd, built like a pugilist, who had made a fortune in the diamond mines of the Cape. His declining years, he'd told me during the second sitting - when a client begins to thaw a mite - were to be devoted entirely to pleasure, principally in the gaming houses of the warmer and naughtier parts of Europe. A portrait, in his opinion (and his absence), would be just the thing to hang over the vast baronial fireplace in the vast baronial hall he had recently lavished a hundred thou' upon.

The Supples, it has to be said, were not amongst the oldest and most distinguished families in the realm. Only one generation back from the Honourable Everard had been the less than honourable Gerald who had prospered only tolerably in a manufactory of leather thumb-braces. Son and heir had done rather better for himself and now to add to the title (of sorts) and the fake coat of arms being busily prepared across town he had his new portrait. This, he told me with a wheezy chuckle, would convey the required air of old-world veracity. And if my painting were any good (that hurt), perhaps I might even be interested in knocking up a few carefully aged canvases of his ancestors?

Supple blinked repeatedly, as was his habit, one lid lingering over his jade-irised glass eye (the left one) as I let myself imagine him tramping into the studio in doublet and hose, all in the name of family honour.

He cleared his throat with a grisly expectoration and I realized he'd been addressing me. I snapped out of my reverie and peeped around the side of the canvas. I've been told I peep rather well.

'I do beg your pardon, I was absorbed in the curve of your ear-lobes.'

'I was suggesting dinner, sir,' said Supple, flipping a half-hunter watch from his waistcoat. 'To celebrate the successful conclusion of me picture.'

'I should be delighted,' I lied. 'But I feel it only right to warn you that I have a peculiar horror of artichokes.'

The Honourable Everard Supple rose from the doubtful Louis Quinze into which I'd plonked him, sending a whisper of paint-flakes to the dust-sheeted floor.

'We might try me club, then,' he suggested, brushing the sleeve of his frock-coat. 'Or do you have somewhere you artistic-types favour?'

I rose and ran one of my long, bony hands through my hair. They are long, white and bony, I cannot deny it, but very fine. Waistcoat and face flecked with paint, I shrugged.

'As a matter of fact, I do,' I said. 'Charming little spot in Rosebery Avenue. Come back at eight and we'll drive over.' So saying, I suddenly turned the easel on its squeaking castors, revealing the portrait to the golden light washing through the skylight. 'Behold! Your immortality!'

Supple creaked forward on his expensive boots and fixed a monocle, rather unnecessarily, into the orbit of his false eye. He frowned, cocked his head to left and right and grimaced.

'Well, I suppose you get what you pay for, eh, Mr Box?'

My name is Lucifer Box, but I imagine you know that. Whether these scribblings eventually form the core of my memoirs or are found secreted in oilskin wrappers at the bottom of a lavatory cistern years after my demise, I have no doubt that, by the time you read this, I will be most terribly famous.

I handed Supple his soft kid-gloves with as much brusqueness as I could muster. 'You don't like it?'

The old fool shrugged. 'Just not sure it's terribly like me.'

I helped him into his overcoat. 'On the contrary, sir, I believe I have caught you.'

I smiled what my friends call, naturally enough, the smile of Lucifer.

Ah! London in the summertime! *Hellish*, as any resident will tell you. Even in those first few innocent years of the new century it smelled of roasting excrement. So it was with 'kerchiefs pressed to mouths that Supple and I entered the dining rooms I had selected. They were alarmingly unfashionable but, in the long light of dusk, the white-panelled plainness could have been called Vermeer-esque. Not by me, you understand. A flypaper above the hearth twisted lazily, amber and black like a screw of ear-wax.

This place, I told Supple, was owned and run by a woman called Delilah whose crippled daughter I had once painted as a favour.

'She was not, perhaps, the bonniest thing,' I confided as we settled down to eat. 'Lost both hands to a wasting disease and had them replaced with wooden ones. And - oh! - her little legs were in horrid iron rings.' I shook my head despairingly. 'Ought to have been exposed at birth, her father said.'

'Nay!' cried Supple.

'Aye! But her dear mother loved the little mite. When I came to paint the portrait I did my best to make little Ida look like an angel. Prophetically enough. Though it turned out she had some pluck.'

Supple wiped soup from his pinkish lips. Sentimental old Victorian that he was, a tear sprang to his one good eye. Most probably the Death of Little Nell had been like mother's milk to him.

'Poor Ida,' I sighed, picking idly at a chicken leg. 'Grabbed from her bath-chair by a gang of dacoits and sold into bondage.'

Supple shook his head mournfully. No doubt an image of the doe-eyed cripple had flashed into his silly old brain. His fingers tightened on the fish-knife. 'Go on. What happened?'

'She made a bolt for it, God bless her,' I continued. 'Took off across the rooftops with the fiends in hot pursuit.'

Blink-blink. The jade glass eye regarded me steadily. 'And then?'

I closed my eyes and steepled my fingers. 'She got as far as Wapping before her brittle little legs gave out. She fell through the roof of a sugar merchant's and into a vat of treacle. Of course, with those wooden hands she could get no purchase on the rim and she drowned. Very, very slowly.'

Drinking the last of an indifferent burgundy with an air of finality, I clapped my hands and turned the conversation towards more cheerful matters. Now I had Supple's trust, it was time to betray that of others. I wanted the practice.

I regaled Supple with what I know to be an inexhaustible supply of anecdotes (not many of them true, certainly not the best ones) concerning the greatish and goodish who have paid yours truly not nearly enough to be immortalized in oils.

'You are very indiscreet, sir,' laughed the old man, cheering up. 'I am glad not to have confided any of my secrets in you!'

I smiled my wide smile.

Supple, for his part, talked at length about his time in South Africa and the great adventure a young man like me might have there. He told me about his own daughter - a great joy to the old man by his account - and I nodded and smiled with the air of sagacity I like to assume for such occasions. I put on a good show of being fascinated by his colourful account of dawn over the Transvaal as I took out my watch and stared at the second hand racing over the porcelain dial. I could hear the soft action of the tiny spring.

It was midway between the fish course and the pudding, as Supple opened his mouth to begin another interminable tale, that I did the decent thing and shot him.

A stain spread across the breast of his stiff white waistcoat like poppy petals emerging through the snow. How I wish I'd had my sketch-book with me! The scene was a riot of crimson possibilities.

There, now. I've shocked you, haven't I? What the deuce can Mr Box be up to? Are customers in such abundant supply? Well, you'll just have to be patient. All good things et cetera.

Supple's face, never particularly smashing as you may have gathered, froze in an expression of pained surprise and a little bubble of red spit frolicked over his lips. He slid forward on to the table where his teeth met the rim of his pudding bowl with a shocking crack, like the knees of an out-of-practice suppliant.

I watched smoke curl from the end of the snub-barrelled pistol I'd used, then replaced the weapon under a jelly mould - silver and shaped like a sleeping hare - where it had been until recently ensconced.

Lighting a cigarette, I re-pocketed my watch and, rising, dabbed a napkin at the corners of my full-lipped mouth (it's a very pretty mouth - more of it later). Taking up a dessert spoon, I dug it into Supple's left socket

and carefully removed the old fellow's glass eye. It popped out with just a little poking and lay nestled in my palm like a gull's egg. I looked at the iris and smiled. It was just the shade of green I had in mind for a new tie and now I had a match for my tailor. What a happy accident! I slipped the eye into my waistcoat and draped the napkin carelessly over the dead man's head.

A large and ugly mirror hung over the fireplace of the dark little room. I checked my appearance in it (very acceptable), adjusting my stance to avoid the mottled edges of the glass, which tended to obscure the wonderful cut of my best tail-coat and pulled the tatty bell-rope that hung close by.

The doors were opened almost at once by a huge woman in a daffodil-coloured frock. Her gin-flushed cheeks, abutting a long, blotchy nose gave her face the appearance of bruised knackers in a harness.

'Good evening, Delilah,' I said, with just the slightest turn from the mirror.

'Hevening, sir,' said the drudge. She shuffled a little awkwardly, glanced at the table and cleared her throat.

'Heverything in horder, sir?'

I turned, cigarette between teeth, adjusting my white tie with both hands.

'Hmm? Oh yes. The burgundy was deadly and the partridge a trifle high. Other than that a most satisfactory evening.'

Delilah nodded her massive head. 'And the hother gentleman, sir?'

'Will be leaving us now, thank you.'

Delilah thrust both mitt-like hands under the armpits of the Honourable Everard Supple and dragged the one-eyed corpse with apparent effortlessness towards the doors. I hopped athletically over the dead man'...

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Mary Richards:**

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possess when the spare time coming to you actually of course your answer can unlimited right. Then do you try this one, reading books. It can be your alternative within spending your spare time, often the book you have read is definitely The Vesuvius Club: A Bit of Fluff (Lucifer Box Novels).

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