

FROM THE FIELDS OF CRIMEA TO THE SANDS OF MARS



BY MICHEL POULIN

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TO THE SANDS OF MARS**

A HISTORICAL FICTION/SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY MICHEL POULIN

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS MANY HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT REFLECT HISTORICAL EVENTS AND ONLY DESCRIBE ALTERNATE HISTORICAL SCENARIOS. RELIGION-RELATED EVENTS DEPICTED IN THIS NOVEL IN NO WAY REFLECT THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE AUTHOR.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is the seventh and last installment in a collection of novels depicting the adventures through time of Nancy Laplante, a female Canadian war correspondent from 2012 and the chief of operations of the Time Patrol, an organization originating from the 34th Century. Those novels were written prior to the fictionalized events of the 21st Century depicted in them, thus should be treated as novels about alternate realities. The years in the dates shown in the headings are followed by either the letters 'A', 'B' or 'C', denoting in which timeline the action is happening. Timeline 'A' is the original historical line, while Timeline 'B' is a parallel alternate history created accidentally by Nancy Laplante when she was transported against her will from 2012 to the year 1940 and

involuntarily changed history by her actions. Timeline 'C' is a second parallel history created from 1941 'B' when enemies of Nancy tried to kill her to change history in their favor. While Nancy Laplante 'A' died in 2019 'A' while reporting on a war in Northern Iraq, her young timeline twin, Nancy 'B', has taken over her mantle as a field agent of the Time Patrol, while Ingrid Dows 'C', timeline twin of the adopted daughter of Nancy, is opening the use of Space for the United States.

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CHAPTER 1 – AMNESIA

21 :12 (London Time)

Saturday, March 11, 1854 ‘A’

Hyde Park, London

England

The loud crack of lightning falling nearby made Lady Carmelia Smythe jump with fright as her carriage was rolling down Park Lane. Her son Gordon then put a protective arm around her, smiling reassuringly.

“Don’t worry, Mother: that one fell at least one mile away. Besides, lightning will strike one of the park’s statues first, not our carriage.”

The distinguished, 54 year-old woman looked up at her son and caressed his chin tenderly. A tall and very handsome young man, Gordon was wearing a striped dark blue suit and overcoat tonight instead of his uniform of captain of the 8th Hussars, which was truly a shame: he was so dashing when in uniform. Gordon was Carmelia’s only child but he had made her rightly proud of him. Her only disappointment was that he was still resisting the advances of the young, respectable ladies Carmelia kept presenting him, like tonight at the reception given by Lord Carver. Gordon had still not completely come over the deaths less than three years ago of his young wife Megan and of his newborn son. His most persistent objection to hopeful ladies was that, while well bred and proper, they lacked character and were often vain and boring. Carmelia had to recognize that Gordon’s wife had been a real firebrand, owing probably to her Irish bloodline. Finding another woman like her that was not from hopelessly low class was proving to be quite a challenge.

The voice of Thomas, their foot servant and carriage driver, came up above the drumming of the rain on the roof of the carriage as they were approaching the Duke of Wellington’s triumphal arch.

“Lady Carmelia, there is a lady walking in the rain near Wellington’s arch. Should I offer her a lift?”

Carmelia frowned at that: what kind of lady would be walking alone at night in such weather?

“Does she look like a proper sort, Thomas?”

“Hard to say from this distance, maam. I...”

A blinding flash accompanied by a terrifying detonation cut off the driver, who then had to fight hard to regain control of his terrified horses. On her part, Carmelia literally jumped in her son’s lap from the surprise and fright. A strange, tickling sensation ran through her body for a second, while her hair and that of Gordon puffed out.

“MY GOD!” Shouted the driver. “THAT WAS A CLOSE ONE: IT STRUCK THE TOP OF THE DUKE’S STATUE!”

The driver’s remark made Gordon open the door on his side of the carriage and look out. After a quick look he closed his door and knocked sharply on the wall of the carriage to attract the driver’s attention.

“THOMAS, THAT WOMAN IS LYING ON THE ROAD NEAR THE ARCH. GET TO HER QUICKLY!”

Both Gordon and Carmelia were pushed back in their bench seat as the driver yelled at his horses and the carriage took up speed. Gordon jumped out in the rain as soon as they came to a stop. Looking out by the window of the door, Carmelia saw Gordon and Thomas pick up a woman lying still on the pavement. Opening the door, she held it open as both men carried the woman to the carriage and labored to get her inside. The stranger was very tall for a woman and, while not apparently overweight, appeared to be quite heavy, making Gordon swear as he pulled her inside and sat her on one of the two benches.

“Bloody hell! She must be made of stone!”

“Gordon, watch your language!” Protested Carmelia as she examined the young woman. The stranger’s dress and coat, of rich and fine make, was burned in many places, proof of how close to the lightning strike she had been. Part of her black hair, twisted into a bun behind her head, had been burned, filling the carriage with an acrid smell. Carmelia couldn’t help notice the necklace, broche, earrings and rings worn by the stranger: they appeared to be very expensive jewels.

“Well, whoever she is, she must be from a high class.”

“That’s not important right now, Mother.” Replied Gordon, a bit annoyed. “Let’s get her to our home so that she could be treated. THOMAS, GET HOME AT THE DOUBLE!”

The young man held the unconscious woman in a sitting position as the carriage started moving again. Going through the arch and down Grosvenor Place, they turned onto Grosvenor Crescent, arriving within minutes at Gordon's townhouse on Belgrave Square. Alerted by Gordon's shouts, two servants came out of the four story building at a run and helped him take the young woman out of the carriage. Taking the stranger in his arms, Gordon shouted at the driver as Carmelia got out of the carriage and ran inside to escape the driving rain.

"THOMAS, GET DOCTOR PORTAL AND BRING HIM HERE AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN!"

"RIGHT AWAY, SIR!"

Walking quickly inside with his load as the carriage sped away, Gordon went through the front hall and the large reception lounge, then climbed the main staircase to the first floor. Carmelia and two maids were already ahead of him, waiting in one of the guest bedrooms. As soon as he lay the still unconscious woman on the wide bed, his mother shoed him out of the bedroom.

"The poor girl's clothes are all wet. We have to undress and dry her before the arrival of Doctor Portal. Just send him upstairs as soon as he arrives."

"I understand, Mother. Could you check if she has any papers or things that could identify her, though? Her relatives will undoubtedly get worried about her."

"A sensible thought, Gordon." Replied Carmelia, smiling. "I will keep you informed."

She then closed the door on her son and returned to the side of the bed, where the two maids had already started to take off the wet clothes of the stranger. Grabbing the woman's overcoat first, Carmelia searched it, quickly finding a purse in a large pocket. Opening it, she was disappointed to find no papers inside that could have helped identifying her. Her eyes bulged though at the sight of a large assortment of banknotes and silver and gold coins, plus a set of keys.

"My god! There is over four hundred pounds in here!"

That made the two servants stop and look at her in shock.

"Four hundred pounds!" Exclaimed the younger maid, Judith. "She must be a very rich woman."

"She must be!" Added Clara, the other maid, while raising the woman's inert right hand to let her mistress look at it. "Look at that emerald and diamond ring, madam!"

“A rich woman indeed!” Agreed Carmelia. “She must belong to a prominent family. Let’s dry her quickly, girls.”

The two maids had to be helped by Carmelia when they removed the dress with its flounced skirt.

“God, she is really heavy for her size!” Said Clara. “She must be all muscles.” They soon saw for themselves when they removed her wet undergarment and Judith passed a towel over the stranger’s nude body to dry it.

“Not an ounce of fat on her but look at those muscles.” Wondered the young maid. “She reminds me of an acrobat girl I saw once in a circus.”

“A circus girl with expensive jewels and four hundred pounds in cash?” Replied Carmelia, dubious. Judith didn’t answer back, waiting for Clara to laboriously turn the woman on her belly before continuing to towel her dry. A multitude of old, faint scars covering the woman’s back, buttocks and legs made her hesitate and stop. While obviously dating back many years, they were still fairly easy to see.

“Sweet Mary! What happened to her?” Bending over to have a better look, Carmelia nearly immediately recoiled from surprise and shock: those were whip marks! Looking again more closely, she was then able to see a number of burn marks on her back and buttocks. Turning laboriously the woman on her back, Carmelia saw similar whip and burn marks on her chest and belly.

“My god! This poor woman was tortured once, horribly.”

“Tortured, madam?” Said Clara, shocked. “Why, and by whom?”

“I don’t know! Forget about that and cover her with the bed sheets. Judith, bring her clothes downstairs for drying.”

Carmelia had a last look at the young woman as the maids covered her. While beautiful and shapely, her shoulders were broad and she was easily close to six feet in height. She may be rich but she certainly didn’t look like a typical aristocrat.

Gordon noticed the puzzled look on his mother’s face when she came down the staircase and joined him in the lounge. Walking quickly to her, he gallantly took her hand and guided Carmelia to a sofa, sitting besides her and looking into her eyes.

“Is something wrong? Has her situation deteriorated, Mother?”

“No, Gordon. She is still unconscious but her breathing is strong and regular. I didn’t find anything on her that could help identify her, except that she had four hundred pounds in cash and expensive jewels on her.”

“Then, she must be an aristocrat.” Proposed Gordon. Carmelia hesitated before replying slowly to that.

“Maybe, maybe not. Gordon, why would anyone torture a young woman?”

“Torture?” Said Gordon in a shocked voice. “Was that woman tortured?”

“She was flogged and branded extensively all over her torso and buttocks a few years ago. The scars are faint but still visible. Again, why would someone torture a woman?”

“Uh, to get answers, probably to make her say where her gold is.” Proposed Gordon, at a loss for any other answer. His mother looked gravely at him then.

“Gordon, you may have a point there. That woman is obviously rich, so someone could indeed have tormented her to get at her money. Poor girl!”

A notion then went through Gordon’s mind, raising doubts in it.

“On the other hand, maybe the bastards who tortured that girl were not after money.”

“What do you mean? What else could it be?”

“Information... secrets, I don’t know really!”

“She could be a spy?” Said Carmelia, horrified. Gordon then shrugged, truly at a loss.

“I don’t know! I was just speculating. Look, why don’t we let the benefit of the doubt to that poor girl and wait until she wakes up to ask her a few questions?”

“Alright, that sounds fair enough to me.” Replied Carmelia while rising from the sofa, helped by Gordon. “I will go put her money and jewels in a safe place now: we don’t want one of our maids to rob that unfortunate woman.”

“Mother, you should have more confidence in my maids. Clara and Judith are honest women. However, in view of the sum that girl had on her, your idea is still a good one. Here is the key to the secure drawer of my work desk.”

“Thanks, Gordon!”

Gordon watched his mother go upstairs again, then resumed his pacing around, his mind boiling over Carmelia’s remarks. Doctor Portal, followed by a drenched and shivering Thomas, showed up ten minutes later, his medical bag in one hand.

“Where is this woman, Mister Smythe?”

“Upstairs!” Answered Gordon, taking the doctor’s coat. “My mother will show you to her.”

He then looked up and around in time to see Carmelia appear in the staircase.

“Mother, could you show the good doctor to our guest?”

“Of course! This way, Doctor.”

As the doctor climbed the stairs, Gordon faced Thomas, who was still wearing his wet overcoat.

“Well done, Thomas! Go to the kitchen and warm yourself up in front of the stove with a hot cup of tea. Take this as well for your diligence.”

The servant looked down at the gold coin Gordon had taken out of a pocket and grinned before accepting it.

“It is always a pleasure to serve a true gentleman like you, sir.”

“The pleasure is mine, Thomas. Now, go warm yourself.”

Letting the happy driver go to the kitchen, Gordon ran up the stairs to the first floor and went to the door of the guest bedroom, knocking lightly on it. His mother cracked the door open a bit and looked at him.

“I’m sorry, Gordon, but you can’t enter now. The woman is not decent at this moment.”

“Could you let me in when she will be?”

“I will. Be patient, though.”

Carmelia then closed the door, prompting Gordon to pace impatiently the hallway. The door opened again after fifteen minutes and his mother motioned him to come inside. Gordon did so and found Doctor Portal sitting on the bed, holding the right wrist of the still unconscious young woman. Grabbing a chair near a dresser, Gordon put it besides the bed and sat on it, contemplating for a moment the face of the young woman. She was certainly beautiful by any standards.

“How is she, Doctor?”

Portal put down the woman’s wrist before looking at Gordon, uncertainty on his face.

“She will live, Mister Smythe, but she suffered a severe shock and is in a coma. The next few hours will be crucial: if she wakes up soon it will be a good sign. If not...”
Gordon took a few seconds to digest the doctor’s statement.

“Uh, what about the scars on her body, Doctor?”

Portal shook his head as he looked at the comatose woman.

“They were quite a shock to me, Mister Smythe. They are effectively marks from horrible tortures suffered by this poor woman years ago. From their severity and density of pattern, I would say that they were not sustained simply as some form of punishment ordered by a court. Whoever tortured her went at it for hours, maybe days, and probably

wanted some kind of answers. She probably passed out a number of times during that ordeal. There was also a scar from a long gash made by a blade weapon on her belly. She however looks extremely fit and strong and is otherwise in good health. In fact, she is by far the most fit woman I ever saw.”

“What could she be then, Doctor? She doesn’t exactly fill the mold of an aristocrat.”

“Quite! The only thing we can do for the moment is to let her rest and wait for her to wake up by herself. Make sure to note the hour she will wake up, though: the length of her coma will be critical for my diagnostic.”

“Then we will keep a vigil at her bedside.” Decided Gordon, getting a nod from his mother. “Could I interest you in staying overnight, Doctor? I have a second guest room available.”

“I am afraid that I will have to pass your generous offer, sir: I am hosting guests at my own house tonight.”

“Oh! In that case I will let you know when that poor woman wakes up. How much do I owe you, Doctor?”

Portal stopped Gordon as he was searching his pockets for money.

“I will wait until I finished treating her before presenting my bill, sir. Have a good night, sir and madam.”

“Let me at least get my carriage driver to give you a ride home, Doctor.”

“A kind thought, sir, which I will accept gladly.”

Escorting Portal out of the bedroom, Gordon was back in after a few minutes, closing the door before looking at his mother.

“I will take the night vigil, Mother. You can replace me in the morning, after you have rested.”

Carmelia hesitated for an instant while glancing down at the young woman in the bed: the stranger was naked under the bed sheets.

“Alright, but let me get a night gown for her first: we don’t want her to wake up and think that she was abused in any way.”

Gordon gave her a pained look at those words.

“Mother, I am not that sort of bastard.”

“Of course not, Son! I just want that girl to feel secure.”

“I understand. While you get the gown, I will get myself an extra oil lamp and a good book.”

Going to his study, Gordon took the lit oil lamp on his work desk and used it to scan the rows of books filling the wall shelves. A well educated man, he always enjoyed reading and could do so in Latin and Greek as well. He finally grabbed a thick book on the life and death of Joan of Arc, his favorite heroine, and returned to the guest bedroom only to find its door blocked by his mother, who signaled him to halt.

“You will have to wait a bit: Judith and Clara are busy putting a night gown on her.”

She then looked at the book in his hands and smiled.

“Still stuck on Joan of Arc, I see?”

“Hey, is it my fault if she was such a brave girl, even if she was bashing on English soldiers? Besides, you know that I am attracted to women of character rather than to those spoiled aristocratic girls I keep bumping into.”

“I noticed!” Replied his mother rather frostily.

Gordon had to cool his heels another few minutes before the two maids left the bedroom and he was allowed in by his mother. Putting a chair besides the bed, he moved the bedside table so that he would be between it and the bed, then put the oil lamp on the table and sat in the chair. Before starting his reading, he admired the face of the sleeping woman: a physical attraction towards her was now growing quickly in him. His secret hope was that she would prove as attractive of character as she was physically. Since he still had over three weeks of leave left, he should have ample time to find out about her. With a sigh, he opened his book and started reading.

Hours later, having gone through one third of his book, Gordon rubbed his tired eyes and, putting down the book on the bedside table, rose from his chair to stretch his legs a bit. Taking out his pocket watch, he saw that it was merely one thirty in the morning. This was going to be a long night indeed. Turning around to face the bed, Gordon nearly did a double take from surprise: the young woman was now looking at him with dazed eyes. She then spoke in a weak voice as he was hurrying to her side of the bed.

“Où suis-je¹?”

¹ Où suis-je? ‘Where am I?’ in French.

Silently swearing at himself for knowing only half a dozen words of French, Gordon knelt besides the bed and gently took one of her hands. His hope now was that she could speak English.

“You are in my home, miss. You were nearly struck by lightning and have been unconscious for hours. Can you understand me?”

“Yes.” She replied weakly in English, bringing a feeling of relief to Gordon, who smiled down at her.

“Good! A doctor already examined you a few hours ago. You suffered a severe shock. Can you tell me your name, so that we could advise your relatives?” The woman was about to speak when she froze, a growing look of despair and horror appearing on her face.

“I... I don't know my name! I can't remember who I am!”

Patting the hand of the now distraught young woman, Gordon spoke to her softly, trying to reassure her.

“That is quite normal after the kind of shock you suffered, miss. You will probably remember everything back after a good night's sleep. The best you can do now is to rest. I will post myself outside in the hallway to leave you some privacy.”

The quickness and fierceness of her reaction to his words came as a shock to him: a look of sheer despair appearing on her face, she grabbed his right arm with a strength that surprised Gordon.

“No! Don't go! Don't leave me alone!”

Gordon looked down into her beautiful green eyes and saw genuine distress in them.

“Alright, miss, I will stay. Now, calm down and rest.”

Followed by her eyes, Gordon sat back in his chair and picked up his book to resume his reading. He soon saw from the corner of one eye the woman go back to sleep. Then staring at her, he pondered how he would handle an amnesiac French woman but decided to leave that problem to Doctor Portal later. The French embassy would probably have to be contacted as well at one point. She didn't wear a wedding ring when she had been picked up, even though she wore three rings on other fingers. Now feeling really tired, Gordon decided to replace his straight chair by the easy chair near the dresser. Switching them around as silently as he could, he then got himself a thick wool blanket and installed himself as comfortably as he could. He was asleep in less than a minute, dreaming about charging on his war horse and saving a tall, beautiful French woman.

06:37 (London Time)

Sunday, March 12, 1854

14 Belgrave Square, London

Gordon was awakened by progressively more vigorous shakes and opened his eyes to find the French woman standing in front of him, dressed in a night gown that stopped at her knees. She then asked him something in French that he didn't understand, making him shake his head apologetically while replying in English.

"I'm sorry, miss, but I don't speak French."

The young woman, who looked to be in her early twenties, hesitated a bit, then switched to a fluent English.

"Could you tell me where I am and what I am doing here, mister?"

"But, I already told you when you first woke up, miss." Said Gordon, both surprised and alarmed: if she couldn't remember such a recent event, then her mind must have been affected quite severely. "My name is Gordon Smythe and you are in my London home on Belgrave Square. Me and my mother picked you up in Hyde Park after you were nearly struck by lightning. Can you remember your name now?"

The woman's green eyes wandered around as she seemingly concentrated. She finally sat back heavily on the edge of the bed and answered him in a soft, discouraged voice.

"I...I can't! What am I going to do now?"

Gordon threw away his blanket and got to his feet, then took her hands to reassure her.

"Do not worry, miss. You are safe in my home and can count on the full support of both me and my family. You must be hungry by now. Would you like to have breakfast?"

She answered by nodding her head sheepishly. Gordon then showed her the door.

"Then let's put one of my robes on your first: a lady such as you should be dressed properly in public."

"How do you know that I am a lady and not some tramp?"

Her question made Gordon smile.

"Tramps don't go around wearing expensive jewels and with over four hundred pounds in cash in their purses."

She instinctively raised a hand to her throat, searching for a necklace. Gordon quickly reassured her.

“Don’t worry, miss. Your valuables are in a safe place. Just tell me when you will need them and I will get them for you. This way, please.”

As he was leading her towards his bedroom, she looked at her left hand and slowed down, forcing him to stop and turn around.

“Tell me, sir, was I wearing a wedding ring?”

“No, miss. You did have three rings on other fingers, though.”

“Then I must be single.” She said after a pause. Gordon nodded and, getting to his bedroom, opened the door and invited her in. Going directly to the main closet and opening it, he pulled out a warm burgundy robe made of thick wool, along with a pair of sheepskin slippers. He still had his back to her when she spoke, excitement in her voice.

“You’re in the Army, mister?”

Gordon then realized that she must have spotted his Hussar’s uniform, visible inside the closet. Smiling proudly, he took his uniform out to display it to her.

“I’m a captain in the 8th Royal Hussars, presently garrisoned in Winchester. I am right now on a long overdue leave.”

“It is a nice uniform.” Said the woman while detailing the golden cordons and embroidering on the vest. She then stared for a moment at the two medal ribbons sewn on the left breast of the vest. “You served in India and Afghanistan?”

Gordon raised an eyebrow at that, not a little surprised and impressed: few people knew well enough military ribbons to identify those two service ribbons. As for women, Gordon had never met one who knew military ribbons well.

“I have effectively served in those two countries, miss. How come you know those ribbons?”

She hesitated while concentrating and trying to remember. She finally shook her head sadly.

“I don’t know. The only thing that I know is that I seem to be familiar with things that are military and about war.”

She then looked around the closet, apparently searching for something.

“I don’t see your combat uniform, though.”

Giving her a dubious look, Gordon put back his uniform in the closet and handed her the robe and slippers.

“Miss, that uniform is meant for parades as well as for the field. You should know that if you are really familiar with the Army.”

She somehow seemed to have troubles with that notion, looking perplexed as she put on the robe and slippers.

“You use such a flashy uniform in the field? Wait! What year are we in?”

“I believe that we are still in 1854, miss.” Replied Gordon sarcastically. The shock from the near lightning strike had decidedly been more severe than he feared on her. “To be exact, we are on Sunday, March twelfth.”

“1854... The Crimean War, of course.” She muttered to herself, making Gordon tense up.

“Which war, miss?”

“But, the Crimean War, you know! The one between England, France and the Ottoman Empire on one side and the Russian Empire on the other side.”

Gordon was speechless for a moment, staring at her. The situation in the Balkans was tense and the Russians had been fighting with the Turks for a few months now but England and France, while diplomatically supporting the Turks, were not yet at war with Russia.

“Miss,” he said coldly, “where did you get this fancy notion of a war between us and Russia?”

“I don’t know!” She replied vehemently. “It just popped in my head when you mentioned the year 1854.”

“The year 1854...you are speaking as if it was already history, miss.”

“It feels like it to me.” She said, her tone heating up and obviously getting irritated by his skepticism. “The Crimean War was so primitive in terms of tactics and weaponry! I...”

She then stopped speaking, realizing how odd her words had been. On his part, Gordon was starting to seriously wonder if her mental state could make her dangerous. He finally resolved to watch her closely for the time being, in case she did something regrettable.

“I see. Well, let’s forget this, uh, Crimean War, and let’s go downstairs to have breakfast.”

“As you wish, sir.” She replied, obviously unrepentant. Whoever she was, Gordon could see that she had to be a woman of strong character.

“Please, call me Gordon, not sir. You are my guest, remember?”

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