

The Haunting of Charles Dubois

This is the story as I told it to some old friends. You know the kind of occasion - after long lunch at a good restaurant, and two bottles of a rather pleasant Chianti, we were swapping tales of the old days and of people we had known. The conversation turned to some of the less savoury characters we had encountered, and I offered up the story of Charles.

Charles Dubois was a financier of the most reprehensible kind. I had done some consultancy work for his organisation - mainly inspecting the accounts of companies he was taking over. He was doing nothing which was categorically illegal, but there were certainly deals which bordered on illegality, and it became clear to me that the morality or otherwise of his activities did not bother Charles in the slightest.

For this reason, I was reluctant to do more work for him, and told him so. He grinned (he was always charming) and said he was planning on retiring anyway. At this point he was a widower, with no ties, and plenty of money. He told me he planned to travel.

I didn't see him again for several years, but one day I saw Charles coming towards me on the pavement in Edinburgh's George Street. He seemed almost furtive, and when he saw me he jumped as if he'd seen a ghost. However, he greeted me warmly. How was I, what was I doing these days? He suggested we go for a drink, and with nothing better to do I accepted.

"You seemed shocked to see me just now" I ventured.

"I suppose I was" he replied. "The thing is, I've been seeing things lately. Well, people, really, not things. People who shouldn't be there. It's been going on for some time."

The first time it happened, Charles was on a busy street in Singapore when his limo was overtaken by a scooter carrying two people. The pillion

passenger looked back at him as they passed. It was a woman called Judy McLean, whose company he had bought in a hostile take-over and asset-stripped ten years before. The problem was, Charles explained, that Judy McLean was a homeless alcoholic in Dundee.

It might have been a case of mistaken identity, or someone who looked exactly like her, and Charles put it to the back of his mind. But then a few months later in the main square in Manaus, Brazil, who should walk unconcernedly past his café table but Nadeem Chowdrie. He was the CEO of a company whose shares Charles had shorted just before rumours emerged of financial irregularities. The rumours had turned out to be unfounded, but the market had lost confidence in Nadeem and the shareholders voted him out. Charles made a lot of money.

Chowdrie turning up in Manaus could have been a coincidence, of course, apart from the fact that he had committed suicide shortly after losing his job. Charles was shocked and stupefied by the encounter, and left the country immediately.

Gradually, wherever in the world he went, Charles Dubois started seeing people who he had wronged. A former employee, fired for no good reason. A supplier who he had deliberately underpaid for years. Some were dead, all of them had no reason to be where they were seen. Charles was a haunted man, in a state of constant terror.

I offered no explanation or advice, but privately I wondered if, perhaps, in the darkness of his subconscious, a still small voice of guilt was starting to affect his imagination.

We finished our drinks and went our own way. That was the last time I ever saw him.

However, not long after that I heard news through a very indirect channel - a friend of a friend of someone who had spoken to an Indian taxi driver from Jaiselmer in Rajasthan. Deep in the Thar desert, near the border between India

and Pakistan, Charles (and it was certainly he) was being driven to a luxury resort, far from any village. The road was dusty, long and straight, but an overnight flash flood had cut through it not far from the hotel. The taxi driver was unwilling to risk getting stuck in the gullies, but the hotel, shimmering in the heat, was less than a mile away. Charles took his bag and started walking, when the figure of a man appeared down the road in the distance. The driver turned round and was about to head back to town, but out of concern for the lonely Englishman he waited for a few minutes.

The man was walking slowly towards Charles as he made his way along the road. He could have been a dacoit, intent on robbery, but perhaps he was a porter from the hotel. The driver kept his eye on the rear view mirror, but did not move off. As he got nearer, the driver could see he was about the same size as the Englishman, with the same way of walking. They were wearing the same kind of clothes.

It was when the two men were within just a few meters of each other that the driver saw clearly the other man's face. It was Charles's face. Not just like his face - it was identical in every way. The other man *was* Charles himself. Horror-struck, the driver sped away.

There is no way of knowing what happened next. All we know for sure is that Charles never checked in to the hotel, and that no-one has heard of or seen Charles Dubois since that day.

I have often wondered who or what the doppelgänger was. I like to think that he represented a better Charles - how he could have been if he had a conscience. Perhaps he was Charles's opposite - a kind of antiparticle, and when they met they annihilated each other.

Around the lunch table, my friends were sceptical and dismissive. "Nicely told, but a load of cobblers" said Pete. "Anyone for brandy?"

But I felt sorry for Charles, despite his unscrupulous behaviour. Which of us can say we have always acted according to the promptings of our

conscience? Let us hope we will not meet the same fate as Charles Dubois.