

When one finds employment as an antiquary with interests such as mine, one becomes accustomed to a certain measure of scepticism from fellow academics and a certain degree of curiosity from the laity. Some months previously, an investigation of mine had attracted the interest of a national newspaper and subsequently I had resigned myself to acceptance that my studies would periodically be interrupted by people keen to offer me the benefits of their insights. This I undertook to endure stoically, though I will perhaps be forgiven if I did not attend my club or give public lectures quite so often as had once been the case.

I could not, however, remove myself from public life completely, for any serious academic – and I assure you, despite what some have written about me, I very much consider myself so to be – needs must visit research collections and conduct fieldwork. And so it was that on a cold February morning not long before the beginning of the Great War, I found myself in the Reading Room of the British Museum. Having submitted a ticket for several volumes pertaining to some curious events reported to have occurred near Pickering in the early sixteenth century, I settled down to read my newspaper while I waited for the attendants to fetch me my books.

After some several minutes I became aware that I was being watched. A curious fellow on the next table but one was regarding me over his wire-rimmed spectacles, a newspaper of his own held in his hand, though whenever I glanced up he gave no intention that he meant to read it, or even recalled that it was there. I am, as I say, well used to such attentions, and my response was that of any serious-minded Englishman when faced with such a situation: I cleared my throat, shifted slightly in my seat, and returned my attention to the news of yesterday's goings-on in Parliament. I became engrossed in some minor political debate and for a short time quite forgot about being watched, until I was surprised by a gentle touch on my shoulder.

The fellow was standing beside me, and what was more, I felt, slightly too close. He was a slender man in early middle age, his hair receding and his narrow face lined in a way that suggested a clerk or perhaps an auctioneer at one of the lesser houses. He was better dressed than most who accost me, but had the look of one whose clothes had been provided for him by his employer rather than presenting a true reflection of his means and taste.

Carefully I folded my newspaper and politely asked whether I could help him.

He nodded, once or twice too often. ‘Thank you,’ he said in a high and rather feeble voice. ‘Thank you; yes indeed.’ He proceeded to enquire as to whether I was indeed the man he believed me to be: the scholar responsible for – and here he went on to list a great number of my publications from the specialist press until I held up a hand and entreated him to stop; that I was indeed the man in question and how might I be of service.

With a look of some considerable relief he explained that he was a junior partner in a firm handling property transactions in the area. I thanked him, but told him that I already had lodgings in London, with which I was perfectly contented.

‘No, sir. You misunderstand. My company would like to seek your advice in a... professional capacity.’

I had not misunderstood at all, of course. I had merely hoped to forestall the inevitable second half of the encounter, to which we nevertheless now progressed. The man asked whether I knew the house at 73a Russell Square. Slightly puzzled by the question, I confessed that I must have walked past it this very morning, as I did every day when I came to the British Museum, though I had never paid it any especial attention. He nodded again, as if this was exactly the response he had expected. The house was a large and well-appointed one, he explained, of the kind always much in demand in that part of the city. There were, however, certain unsavoury rumours attached to number 73a which had ensured that it had remained empty since its previous owner died almost two decades ago.

I snapped my fingers, realising in a sudden flash of memory that I did indeed know the house to which he referred. Indeed, when I had first moved to the city from Oxford several acquaintances had suggested I look into the matter further, hoping, I suspect, with a certain degree of mischief, that I might choose to adopt the place as my London home. The rumours had interested me little. They were *outré*, to be sure, but in a thoroughly conventional manner that would scarcely have warranted a by-line had it not been for the house's location in such a desirable part of Bloomsbury. I had dismissed them as typical *fin-de-siècle* credulity and put the gloomy old pile out of my mind.

For in his day the last occupant of 73a Russell Square had been notorious as the self-styled 'most wicked man in England'. He was said to have consorted with anarchists, sorcerers and homosexuals and to have delighted in scandalising polite society with transgressions each more outrageous than the last. He called up spirits in the night, it is said; he kept a daemon chained in the cellar. He presided over witches' sabbaths under the full moon and he was unkind to kittens. Anything undesirable, unfortunate or unexplained which transpired in the city was attributed to his unspeakable depravity and ungodly rites, until, in the dying days of Victoria's century, the ghastly fellow was finally found dead in mysterious circumstances. He lived without servants, had no close friends and few enough acquaintances. Given the speculation and innuendo which surrounded him, it is little surprise that his body lay undiscovered for a considerable time before, drawn by the smell, an unfortunate constable finally forced entry and discovered the grisly sight. By that time the remains had been thoroughly worked over by rats or worse, and little could be determined about the cause of death. For years afterwards, however, stories circulated that it had appeared as if something had clawed its way out of him: that, if they had not known better, those who witnessed the body would have believed that the fellow had perished *in childbirth*. What manner of infant they supposed him to have sired, and what became of it subsequently, remains a mystery, for no trace of it was ever found.

In short, nothing but the penny-dreadful suspicions of well-to-do Bloomsbury imaginations grown over-active through want of anything practical to fill their days. As the gentleman in the Reading Room recounted a brief précis of this tale, I concluded that my opinion had not changed in the intervening years, and I looked around hopefully for any sign of my books and an excuse to withdraw from the conversation.

'Of course, none of us believed a word of it,' the fellow said as he reached the end of the story. 'And when a gentleman from the United States enquired about purchasing the property as a European *pied-à-terre* we were only too happy to oblige. But when we began to clear the house ready for redecoration, we discovered... *things*.'

'Things?' I asked.

He nodded. 'Things. And papers. Such curious papers... Mr B— looked at them and was so discomfited that he was obliged to take the rest of the week off. They describe things which cannot possibly be the case.'

'The writing of fiction is not exactly unknown in Bloomsbury,' I replied with an even smile.

'It didn't have the ring of fiction about it, Dr F—,' he said, wringing his hands anxiously. 'Come and take a look, and I promise you will see.'

Curiosity is an occupational hazard in men of my profession, and I must confess the talk of objects and papers had me intrigued. Rumours are ten-a-penny but it was rare indeed for the tales to take a material turn. There was still no sign of my books and Russell Square was only a few minutes' walk away. It would take very little time to investigate the fellow's claims and ascertain whether there was anything to them. I informed the Reading Room attendants that I would return presently, and accompanied the gentleman out of the Museum.

And so it was that I came for the first time to the notorious 73a Russell Square, the house that would come to play such a dark and central role in my life and career thenceforth. When I first stepped across its threshold and beheld its dark and lofty rooms, draped in dust-cloths, little sense did I get of the evil that still persisted there. Perhaps even now, after so much, I have only glimpsed but a shadow of the truth. Had I known then what I now suspect, I fear I should perhaps have forsaken my researches altogether and retired to the Cotswolds to grow roses. Instead I pressed on, and allowed myself to be led up a narrow and rickety stairway to a garret at the very top of the building. The bare floorboards there were thick with candlewax and chalk; an unidentifiable odour cloyed the still air. In the middle of the floor was an old portmanteau, embossed in faded gold with the initials E.C.

Inside I found the detritus of a life lived in sin. Fetishes and dollies, obscene etchings and glass bottles containing the preserved remains of things I could not name. Other items too, things that would chill you to hear of, if I even had the words to express them. Things I fear mankind was never meant to see and which had no place on God's good Earth. And, as the slender man had promised me, there were papers. Old notebooks bound with leather and loose leaves yellowing at the edges. It was an archive that could sustain years of study and even a cursory glance was enough to convince me that the contents were of the most occult and esoteric nature. Picking a notebook at random, by the flickering light of my companion's candle I began to read. What follows is that account, reproduced in full, just as it appears in the original.

Doctor Who

Of Death

By Philip Boyes

Tuesday 15th December, 1891.

My dreams last night were not as I had hoped. Before retiring I spent two hours studying a volume of blasphemous Dutch lithographs, eating overripe Camembert and playing forbidden harmonies on the pianoforte's boîte diabolique in the hope that, so primed, my sleeping mind might usher forth the visions of the macabre and ungodly which have been my chief nocturnal pleasures since I sacrificed the goat to Mephistopheles. Instead of insights into the sweet depravities of the Pit, however, I was visited by a tableau of humdrum domesticity. Two youths caught within the grasp of some untrammelled hysteria, shouting at each other in voices which eluded my perception, their faces streaked with tears. Beautiful these ephèbes were, even in their distress. And yet as unlike as night and day. The boy was dark and sallow, raven-haired and with eyes in which raw emotion burned out of control, unhindered by any restraint of intellect. His partner was a girl as pale and golden as the dawn, and with the same thin, watery quality as its light. Like a watercolour painting made flesh, her appearance somehow transcended beauty entirely and passed on into a kind of bland and vapid perfection which I found vaguely repellent.

They shrieked and wept at each other as only lovers can, though I could not hear their words and not once did they touch or give the faintest gesture of affection. As one who shuns the bodily and spiritual contamination and the intellectual enervation which are the inescapable sequels of consorting with the distaff, such scenes of emotional delirium struck me not only as unwarranted, but moreover somewhat unsettling. Drawing on the mental discipline and strength of character with which my experiments and rituals have instilled me, I wrested control of the dreamscape and sought to explore the environment in which I found myself, abandoning the pair to their wailings.

I was in a house. Of that I was certain, but the details were indistinct, appearing to me as through rippling drapes of diaphanous gauze. The place was suffused with light, but that light had the unnatural, sickly tinge of wormwood. The echo of music on the edge of my hearing seemed to lead me onward, at once peculiarly familiar and yet unlike anything I had heard in London or the Empire. I followed it into a room where, in the light of a window I saw a young man with golden hair. He turned to look at me, and as he did, the dream ended. I awoke in my own bed. I could smell blood and taste its iron tang on my lips.

Over a breakfast of kippers and opium I speculated as to the significance of the nocturnal vision, for though it was not what I had sought, there was no uncertainty in my mind regarding its status as a message from powers beyond and beneath this earthly plane of ours. Too vivid was it, too structured to be mere chance. That the dark boy and golden girl symbolised moon and sun seemed a natural starting point, but why then were their genders reversed from that familiar from ancient theogonies and esoteric lore? We initiates are used to associating the moon with the feminine: Selene, Hecate, Anumati, Losna. As befits the governing principle which orders our world and grants life, the sun is male. Helios, Belenus, Utu, Ra. The inversion was perplexing, until I thought deeper. Natural though it may seem to us that the primum mobile and dominant

force be male while we associate with the woman the smaller, secondary orb whose light is but a pale reflection of the other's, did not other learning preserve alternative cosmologies? I recalled Sumerian Nanna and Egyptian Khonsu; Eos, Arinna and oriental Amaterasu. It was an interesting thought, but I could not see what it availed me in the matter of this oneiromancy. I wondered briefly whether I ought to write to a certain Austrian doctor whose acquaintance I had made some years earlier and whom I knew to be interested in such things. We had, however, parted on ill terms after he took some unaccountable offence at his wife's insistence on serving me sausage roll each night for dinner.

I decided to repair to my study where I smoked a cigarillo and attempted to recreate the dream-music on the pianoforte. I was, perhaps, making some little headway when I was interrupted by an impatient rapping at the front door. Lacking servants (the spineless wretches having all fled the last time I endeavoured to summon Buer in the pantry, leaving me to clean up the mess myself), I raised the flintlock that lay atop the piano and fired it through the front window in the hope of driving off whomever was responsible for this unconscionable interruption. I am, they say, the most wicked man in England and even I would think twice about calling upon someone before the hour of midday. Not just because I am a notorious misanthrope, but also for the simple reason that no man should be expected to have to be dressed and presentable without at least three gin-and-tonics and a hearty lunch in his belly. To make this point, when – after a brief pause – the knocking resumed, I deliberately unfastened my silken dressing-gown, fixed myself an absinthe, and answered the door like that.



The nun's expression almost made up for having to look at the face upon which it appeared. Swaddled under wimple and bonnet and scarves, most of her features were concealed. But I could see the pale, milky skin of a girl barely clear of her teens, and delicate features that might have been attractive under ordinary circumstances, were it not for the long scars that slashed across them. But it was not the wounds that marred her; nay rather the insufferable air of piety and acceptance with which she bore them. That any child should have come by such cicatrices was mystery enough, but that any could wear them so resignedly and with so little bitterness made

me want to retch. Indeed, she seemed more concerned about the cold, labouring under half a laundry's worth of blankets wrapped around her slender frame. There was a thick coating of snow in the square, but it clearly wasn't half so cold as her wraps and shivering would suggest, since the unsightly crippled urchin who begged across the way from my door had still not yet frozen to death. That was a matter of some minor satisfaction to me. During a drink- and drug-fuelled evening in with Baphomet, I had made a bet with the goaty one that the fellow would last at least until the end of the week.

'M... M... Mister C——!' the witless woman stuttered, trying and singularly failing to look anywhere other than at the fine physique my current state of dishabille had revealed. 'I... I did not realise I should be disturbing you!'

'Did you not?' I enquired. 'Was the fact that, so far as I recall, I did not invite you here not a clue? Did the amount of time you had to keep up your confounded banging not perhaps tip you off that I was other than overtaken with delighted eagerness and urgency to answer? Or did you perchance imagine that I sit here each morning with nought to do but stare blankly into the middle-distance and hope that this day I might be fortunate enough to be blessed with a visit from a ruined-faced sister rattling a collecting-tin?'

She looked down at the tin she was carrying and at least had the good manners to look shamefaced. I do so love tormenting nuns, and I had wished this one especial ill from first I laid eyes on her. Only orphans make for more delightful sport. Last Christmas I went to Limehouse and hired a lady — I use the word in its loosest possible meaning — and a trio of thoroughly wicked young cutpurse. Under the pretence of being a wealthy family eager to distribute largesse and seasonal presents and — I dropped subtle hints — perhaps looking for a sweet young child to adopt, we toured a number of orphanages and workhouses of the East End where, after gaining entry, we proceeded to teach the young children the foulest obscenities the English language has to offer; incited them to begin praying to Kali, the foul murderess-deity of the Thuggees, in the false belief that this would make them more attractive potential adoptees in our eyes; before finally rubbing their noses in the ostensible perfection of our pretended family life, declaring that we would not wish to jeopardise our happiness by adopting such as they, and kicking over the gruel-bucket on the way out. A thoroughly pleasant day was had by all. Or at least by me, and that's all that really matters in the end. Since then I have been well-known to the sisters of London's convents and charitable institutions, and they have generally known better than to trouble me with their evangelism or begging.

'I'm collecting for the children, Mister C——,' the unusually persistent nun wittered on. 'They told me not to come; said the most unchristian things about you, 'ow as you 'ate children and don't give to charity and 'aven't never been seen in church for as long as anyone can remember. But I didn't believe them, Mister C——. I didn't believe nobody could be as wicked as everybody says you are. Won't you spare a farthing or two, to bring warmth to the needy this winter and to brighten the Christmas of them as 'as precious little light in their lives?'

I regarded her with an icy disdain I had perfected at my mother's deathbed. There was never any doubt as to my reply but I enjoyed watching her shiver as she stood there awkward and

embarrassed, hopeful entreaty welling in her bovine eyes. I swilled my absinthe around the glass and sipped it through a sugar cube.

'Sister,' I finally said, 'you are quite as stupid as your fellows are well-informed. Not only do I despise children but also the poor, women, men and – with piteous few exceptions – everyone else upon this planet. I do not merely not give to charity; I have been known to hold up hansom on their way to take collection-money to the banks. Not because I want the money – I am, as you will have noticed, a very comfortably-off gentleman. No, rather for the sheer entertainment of seeing tin-rattlers like your good self gape as I empty their takings into the city sewers. And believe me when I tell you, sister, that I do not merely neglect to attend church on Sunday; I reject your God and everything He stands for. Indeed, I enjoy a number of standing arrangements with Satan; have my soul mortgaged to the hilt, and cavort drunk and naked and with pagan demons most nights. Now, if you'll excuse me, I was in the middle of deflowering a trio of very naïve and innocent young clergyman's daughters. Well, they began the day very naïve and innocent. Good morning.'

I slammed the door in her guileless, vapid face and returned to my study with a spring in my step.

She was there. Sitting at the piano and smoking one of my cigarillos.

I was so outraged at the intrusion that for a while I quite forgot to question the sheer impossibility of it.

'I don't believe a word of it, Mister C—.'

I must confess I found myself quite without a reply.

'I think it's an act,' she went on. 'I think you put on a pretence of bein' all evil and wicked because...'

I finally found my voice. 'Because of what, woman? Do go on: I am very much enjoying the fruits of your insights into my psyche.'

'Well truth be told, I ain't rightly sure yet, Mister C—. But I'm certain I'm right. I think the Lord's speaking to me. I think he wants me to make you my special mission.'

I gave her the kind of look one gives a dog that has used one's bed as a toilet. While one is still in it. I was about to reply angrily that making me any kind of mission was liable to prove extremely prejudicial to this presumptuous young lady's health when a better idea struck me.

'You may be right, sister,' I heard myself say. 'Heaven knows, everyone else in the Church gave up on me at an early age. It's true, I desecrated the altar of the parish church with the entrails of my schoolmistress's cat as part of an ill-advised attempt to invoke Bastet. But is that any reason to give up the immortal soul of a child of six?'

She made no reply, either because she had none or because she took my question as rhetorical.

'Tell me, sister,' I proceeded. 'Is your church open tomorrow?'

'It is always open, sir. To whomever seeks to enter.'

'Even the basest sinner such as I?'

'Especially such as you, Mister C—. The Lord welcomes all who truly repent.'

I pretended to consider this, fighting manfully to keep my face free of a smile.

'In that case, sister, I hope I shall see you tomorrow.'

She smiled, but made no move to leave my study. Rather than suffer her presence, I departed for the library to fetch a book on the interpretation of dreams. When I returned I was unsurprised to find she had gone, though I had heard neither footsteps nor the opening and shutting of the door.

Wednesday 16th December, 1891.

This morning I attended church voluntarily for the first occasion in my life. St. Barnabas' is a squat and ugly place of modern construction rather further from Russell Square than I had anticipated. Since I am barred from London's hansoms after the incident with the Duke of Northumberland's aunt, I had no recourse but to walk. The weather being foul, this made for a tiresome pursuit, and by halfway there I had half a mind to abandon the whole enterprise, or at least to carry out my plan in a house of God nearer my own abode. I was kept going by the imagined face of that interfering nun, however; the anticipated delight of proving her wrong in her presumptuous assessments of my character. Matters brightened somewhat towards the end of my promenade when I was afforded the opportunity to take out my frustrations by kicking a passing elderly widow into a snowdrift. Better still, the inattentive old bat had been looking quite the other way and did not see me do it, thus granting me the ability to blame the incident on a pauper who happened to be in the vicinity and to set about the fellow with my cane until he apologised. The man was quite black and blue by the time I was done with him, and, should we be fortunate, will think twice about polluting the public highway with his presence in future.

This interlude meant that I arrived at the church slightly later than I had planned, after the service had already begun. In the event it mattered little, however, as several of the companions to whom I had written the previous day and invited to join me had also yet to arrive. Some of the most reprehensible, unrepentant, not to mention foul-smelling and uncomely coves ever to be sprung from Her Colossal Sulking Majesty's gaols, these cutthroats, burglars, wife-beaters and blackguards were not accustomed to arriving promptly for any appointment, save perhaps a court appearance for which their successful timekeeping was to be credited to attentive constables rather than any organisation or respect for the institutions and processes of justice. I heartily approved. Needless to say, they were no more acquainted with the church than I was.

Some of the motley band I knew in a business capacity. Already waiting for me in the alley beside the church-yard were Abner and the Knife, whom I employed from time to time to procure cadavers for me for my experimentation. Abner was a man in his middle years whose vain attempts to cultivate the airs and appearance of a gentleman served only to compound his general aura of disreputability. Everything about him was subtly off, from his crooked stovepipe hat to his muttonchop whiskers and threadbare three-piece. Even I felt a nagging urge to cross the road to avoid him; a sensation in no way alleviated by the fact that he was constantly accompanied by the Knife. It was said that the Knife was a man, but his manners and habits were those of an ape

escaped from the zoo, albeit one unnaturally bald from one of the many skin complaints which evidently afflicted him. In all the years I had known them, I had never heard him speak, nor had so much as a rumour ever reached me that he had any other name. They were the basest of acquaintances, but I had found it paid to suffer them occasionally. They were quite the most efficient resurrection-men in London, and were always swift to deliver whatever I required, either from Highgate Cemetery or, if I had need of something fresher, from the stews of the East End. I asked no questions of them, nor they of me.

Others present I knew less well. They had once or twice done me the service of ridding me of busybodies, or of police officers who showed more interest in my activities than I found agreeable; or else were strangers whom I knew by reputation only, or who had been invited by others and whom I did not know at all. All were welcome for what I had in mind. All were thoroughly ruthless and would slit my throat as soon as look at me, I was under no illusions. The first thing I did upon meeting them was to demonstrate that I was carrying no money upon my person. I made no effort to conceal the derringer in the inside pocket of my frock coat.

We proceeded into the church, interrupting a rendition of 'Oh Little Town of Bethlehem' by a dozen or so malnourished urchins and a handful of old widows who seemed barely awake, still less cognizant of the ostensible act of religious devotion and epiphany in which they were supposed to be taking part. We took up places in pews at the back, to suspicious glares from all present save the nun who had visited me yesterday. She stood alongside her juvenile charges and beamed at me with unconcealed delight. The expression froze on her face when, as the doddery old vicar rose to deliver his sermon ('deliver' as a midwife might deliver a bloated, ugly-faced whelp to a dull, unhappy mother who has had more than her fill of such spawn already), I announced our entertainments would now begin.

Though I lacked legal tender, I had come equipped with a wide selection of gaming chips and playing cards, both conventional and from tarot decks. I swiftly distributed these to my companions and within moments the priest's droning was lost beneath the rowdy and foul-mouthed banter of a band of drunken ex-convicts. The initial reaction by the pious was typically English: first, faltering attempts to pretend we weren't there; then pointed but vaguely embarrassed clearing of throats. It was only when I began handing out cigars and laudanum that we were asked to leave. My fine, stalwart, chaps not being men whose natures disposed them favourably to such requests, a fight swiftly broke out, in which no-one will be at all astonished to learn the clergymen had much the worse of it.

Having caused such ungodly chaos, I felt I had accomplished as much there as I was going to and decided to make a discreet exit before the police arrived. I passed the nun on the steps as she and her colleagues anxiously shepherded their orphans back to the workhouse. I grinned at her wolfishly, expecting to see delicious disappointment and hurt in her face. Instead she only smiled evenly back at me.

'I still don't believe it, Mister C——,' she said. 'What're you trying so 'ard to prove?'

I was so irritated that I failed to look where I was going and proceeded to march straight into a gentleman who came barrelling into my path from the left. The man skidded on the ice,

struggling, with much windmilling of arms, to retain his balance. It was an ultimately futile attempt and he landed on his back-side in a pile of brown, sludgy snow.

'Oh, I am sorry!' I exclaimed on some instinct.

'No, no,' the fellow replied, getting up and brushing himself down. 'No harm done. Should have been looking where I was going.'

He was a small man, middle-aged and dressed like a master at a second-tier boarding school, all tweeds and a burgundy waistcoat. He wore a panama hat, a paisley scarf, and slightly fraying red fingerless gloves to match his waistcoat. He was, I determined, far too old and respectable to have been doing what I suspected he had been doing; viz. having a snowball fight with a troupe of sooty-faced children in the churchyard. I scowled at him. He grinned back, I noticed that the nun too was smiling.

'What?' I demanded.

'You apologised,' she said.

'I what?'

'When you knocked me over,' the gentleman said, 'you apologised.' He had a soft Scottish burr. What business Scottish men in their twilight years might have with the working-class children of the capital, I was sure I didn't know.

'I did no such thing.'

'I'm rather afraid you did. It was quite my fault and yet you apologised anyway. The English gentleman is a wonderful thing, quite without parallel in the universe.' He was still smiling when a snowball hit him full in the face, almost knocking him over a second time. He grinned ruefully, doffed his hat, and disappeared off to rejoin his playmates.

'He's right, you know,' the nun told me. 'You are a gentleman. I see it in you. You're not like them ruffians you brought along today. All that — it's like what the little ones get up to. All puffin' up your chest an' makin' out how big and bad you are. I just don't believe it, Mister C——. I think you're scared of somethin'.'

'Poppycock!'

'I think you're scared of what you'll be if nobody 'ates you.'

I was scared, I confess, but I had precious little intention of discussing it with her. I had been preoccupied all morning and that, I suspect, had had much to do with my inadvertent politeness to the Scotsman. For last night I had dreamed of the sun-girl and moon-boy again. But no mere recurring nightmare, this. So real had the vision seemed, so true to life in each and every detail, that wrenching myself from it and into wakefulness had felt as difficult as raising a pistol to my head and pulling the trigger. I was afraid because if I had dreamed of them two successive nights, was there not every chance I might dream about them a third? And if it grew still more intense tonight, would I have the strength to drag myself free from it at all?

Whatever I am, whatever I have been, first and foremost I have always been immutably, irrevocably me. No parent nor schoolmaster nor churchman has ever succeeded in breaching the ramparts of my individuality one iota. No concern for others nor worry what they think of me has ever impinged on the splendid freedom of my will. I am who I want to be. I do what I like.

~~Last night I lost myself. My mind and body were not my own.~~

~~I was in an Oxford study surrounded by books; a young, red-haired don with an unfastened collar and no necktie was talking to me. I peered back from under a lank, raven sweep of hair.~~

~~I shouldn't have been there. Nobody knew I was.~~

~~Not even my uncle. Not even—~~

NO!

I refuse to waste time recounting such claptrap. I am Edgerton C—, not some lovelorn whelp. I will spill no more ink on the childish angst and confusion I felt ~~when confined within the youth's pitifully small mind. I care not a fig for Oxford, for scholarships, for degrees in English poetry. All that matters is my Work.~~

I fixed the nun with my most withering gaze. 'I am scared of nothing, madam.'

'Of course, sir. You're the most wicked man in England, after all.' Her tone was gentle, but slightly mocking.

'You doubt me? Even after this —' I gestured towards the church, where the police had arrived and were struggling to break up the brawl — you doubt the blackness of my heart?'

She smiled indulgently.

'Very well, then! Madam, you have provoked me! I shall show you the manner of man I am!'

I cast around for something, anything, that might prompt a new idea for a scheme; one so depraved that even a creature so optimistic and blind as this deluded pure-heart would have no choice but to acknowledge that I was beyond all hope of remedy and redemption. My eyes alighted on the Pyramid of Primrose Hill, rising darkly above the London rooftops, its crumbling granite pinnacle shrouded in fog. Often things become so familiar to us that we fail to notice them, that our eye passes over them without the mind ever registering their presence or consciously considering their possibilities. So it had long been with the Pyramid.

It had been erected in the morning of the century, the mad dream of an architect too puffed up with the scale of Empire; too entranced by the Egyptophile fashions of the day. Like the monuments of oriental despots of old, it was obscene in its magnitude, looming over the city like a headstone for us all. Fitting enough, given its function. At the time it had been built, before Highgate and Kensal Green and the other great cemeteries of London, the city had heaved under a surfeit of corpses. One had only to put spade to earth and it would split open, vomiting cadavers like maggots from rotting fruit. Banner years for necromancers. The Pyramid had promised to solve the problem at a stroke. It covered acres at its base and rose almost a hundred storeys skyward (and rumour had it there were nigh as many floors of vaults underground, omitted from the public plans and reserved for who knew what manner of secretive practices). Its vaults and catacombs were claimed to have room for five million or more dead, a veritable nation of the departed dominating the skyline at the heart of the Empire.

But the Pyramid General Cemetery Company had bankrupted itself in the construction. The Pyramid fell into disrepair, its façade pitting and crumbling in the ice and rain of the city. First robbers and rapers, then moss and ivy colonised its passageways and vaults. Whispers began to circulate about still darker things abroad in its catacombs.

No-one knows how many were entombed within that grim folly by the time, thirty years ago, its remaining attendants ushered out the last and most distinguished party of mourners and shut the gates with heavy padlocks behind them. Certainly well short of five million, or even one. But still, perhaps, hundreds upon hundreds of thousands. From all over the city one could lift one's eyes skywards and see it: likely the final resting place of some acquaintance, relative or friend. A dark and foreboding Egyptian-Gothic memento mori raised to stand watch over London. What else could the people do but strive not to notice it? To let their eyes glide over it and go about their lives, growing a little more glum and dour with each passing day, though never knowing quite why.

I felt disgusted with myself for not realising its potential until now.

The nun followed my eyes and I fancied I saw her quail a fraction.

'Tell me, sister. Do you know who the last person to be buried on Primrose Hill was?'

'Course I do, sir. Everyone does. 'Twas the Prince Consort 'isself. 'Er Majesty's dear beloved 'usband, Lor' rest 'is soul.'

'Indeed, Indeed.

The late, lamented Teutonic twit looks down on us from his mausoleum atop the Pyramid as he looked down on us in life, while his useless widow spends the years mooning after him and growing fat on grief as the Empire goes to pot around her.'

'That's no way to talk about the Queen!'

I ignored her. 'But suppose for a moment there was some way of bringing dear Prince Albert back? Suppose there was some way of his reclaiming his place at Victoria's side?'

'No-one can do that save the Lord.'

'Nonsense. Do you know in Haïti there are priests who, through special incantations and appropriate draughts, can return the dead to life?'



'Black magic and devilry!'

'Well, obviously. But the point is, the dead rise. They walk and move around and can perform whatever tasks are required of them – after a fashion. To be sure, they are not as they were in life, but then the Queen herself is hardly the specimen the Prince would recall from their time together. And more to the point, these revenants are entirely lacking in self-will. Like the peasant or the factory worker, they have not a single thought save what is told them by their masters. So the man who reanimated Prince Albert would have the Crown of the Empire his to command. He would rule the world! Or at least, all the parts that are worth ruling.'

She laughed, though a little nervously, I thought.

'Oh, Mister C——, you're teasing me! For a moment there you 'ad me goin'. You are a bad one, all right. I admit it. But you know, you shouldn't talk lightly of such things. To be rude about the Queen and the late Prince is one thing, and 'Eaven knows that's bad enough, but you really didn't ought to joke about pagan rites and suchlike. It's blasphemy twice over, dabbling in ungodly affairs and trying to bring back those that God has seen fit to return to Him!'

'Finally, sister, you start to see what I'm about. Understand, then, that I am a resolvedly serious gentleman. I do not dabble and I do not joke. When I say I mean to do something then you can be assured that that is precisely what I will do. Now, you must excuse me. I will be visiting Primrose Hill tonight and have much to arrange.'

Wednesday 16th December, 1891.

~~I stand in the hallway with the letter. Around me there is only light. My head is spinning. Oxford. Oxford! But what about Uncle? He's always alone. Always disappointed by everyone he tries to get close to. Without me, what will become of him?~~

~~I stare at the letterhead and a thousand futures unfurl themselves in my mind's eye. I am lost within them like a blind man in a hall of mirrors (what?!). I am a student, for the first time among my intellectual equals, revelling in the ideas, the sweet opiate of intelligent discourse! I am a poet. The major publishers have shunned me, but I have a dedicated following online (on where?!). People who I respect. I make it big. I'm asked to be on Radio 4. I turn them down. Too lowbrow. I perform to small crowds of intellectuals in Oxford literary cafés. I'm the Poet Laureate. I'm dead at thirty, the tragic voice of a jilted generation.~~

~~The heady rush of possibilities overwhelms me. I swoon, but gentle arms catch me.~~

~~Her! My beloved!~~

~~My world becomes real. At her touch I can think again. I am whole. She completes me. Without her, not one of the profound beauties that spill from my pen is possible. Golden sun! Beautiful dawn, breaking over my life! Before her there was only night! After~~

~~I freeze at the unaccustomed thought, hateful intruder!~~

~~She's talking, taking the letter from my hands and reading it. Oh, wow! she mouths, filled with joy. Her arms are around me. We're dancing.~~

~~But I can't hear her, can't feel anything.~~

~~That cuckoo thought has ruined it. In that instant I betrayed her. I tried to halt it half formed, before it could take hold, insidious whisperer of lies! Too late! I thought it. Thought what I have never thought before and never should.~~

~~After Isobel...~~

~~She's not been accepted to Oxford. She can never be. She's not like me. All those futures I saw, and she wasn't in any of them!~~

~~I'm weeping now in her arms. Innocent heart, she's weeping too, though she doesn't know why. It rends her to see me like this. We clutch each other and cry, because I know in my soul that this letter is the end of everything.~~

What in the name of all that is solemn and unholy is that turgid drivel? After writing my journal yester-day I turned the notebook to a fresh page and left it on the desk in my study before I went to bed. Such is my habit. I slept deeply that night, and although I was beset by dreams – and dreams indeed which bore a great similarity to the scene described above – they did not seem to me quite as unsettling as they had on the preceding night. When I awoke, and passed through my study, I saw the words written there, unfamiliar but unquestionably in my own hand. I had – and have – no memory of rising in the night to commit my dreams to paper; on the contrary, I am certain I did not. At least, not while my own mind was resident in my body. But these words, written by my hand, were not the products of my mind. Some other was at work, some incubus which afflicted me through dreams. I was certain now these were no natural night-visions. I was suffering from some supernatural malaise or uncanny bewitchment. An occupational hazard for one such as I, you might imagine, though I could call to mind no mistake I had made; no power, mortal or otherwise, I might have offended which in revenge might be assailing me thus. Had I the time, there were a dozen rituals I might have performed to shed light on my strange predicament, but I had an appointment at Primrose Hill. Discomfited and unsettled as I was, I prepared myself and set off through the night towards the Pyramid. For all my arcane knowledge and unusual skills, I am not a physically powerful man, and any other night the thought of the kinds of men rumoured once to have frequented the Pyramid's dark catacombs might have instilled in me a healthy sense of foreboding. Tonight, though, the insecurity within my own mind, the crack in my own very sense of self, through which who-knew-what was trying to intrude, filled me with a fear and discomfiture more grave than any necropolis.

It has always seemed to me that the chief obstacle to gaining access to those things which the powers-that-so-called-be label forbidden is not practical but cerebral. Doing the thing is a mere trifle (indeed, in many cases rather more straightforward than a mere trifle, owing to the lesser involvement of custard); it is the conceiving the notion of doing it which represents the real breakthrough, the true step beyond the accustomed norms dictated by that strident schoolmarm we call Society. So it proved with all my hermetic experimentations, and so it was with the Pyramid.

It was, in the end, simplicity itself to gain entry. So trusting had the caretakers been of the place's morbid and dangerous reputation to protect it from intruders that the single padlock and heavy chain which fastened the doors were the only things barring our ingress. I had not, of course, expected a detachment of dragoon guards or an array of serried fortifications, but given the vast resource the place represented for necromancers such as myself, I was surprised that it was not even protected by a few basic wards or abjurations. As we had arranged earlier in the day when I bailed them from the police lock-up where they had been taken after the fracas at the church, Abner and the Knife met me by an old hawthorn tree not far from the base of the Pyramid. Abner was, as usual, smoking a cigar. The Knife was carrying a large Gladstone bag containing the tools of their disreputable trade. It was the work of mere moments for them to break the chains and unlock the doors.

We progressed inside the house Pyramid and found ourselves in an entrance hall which was somewhere between the waiting room of a railway station and an undertaker's office. The walls sloped inward slightly as they rose towards the high ceiling, lending it an uncanny, oppressive feeling. Between broad Egyptianising columns the walls were decorated by geometric reliefs and lotus borders. They may have been painted in vibrant oriental colours. In the monochrome glow of moonlight from the doors, any colour was washed away. It felt like it had been sealed for centuries, not decades. The lilies in the vases around the room were dry, brown and sagging as mummy-skin.

Abner lit a paraffin lantern and raised it high. The shadows danced in sharper relief but it did little to diminish the blackness that enveloped the room's distant corners. As I stepped forward, my feet crunched on something. Dead leaves and rat bones.

The Knife hesitated on the threshold. He had a cosh out in one hand and the blade that was his namesake in the other. His beady simian eyes darted this way and that.

'What's the matter?' I demanded of him impatiently. 'I haven't got all night. We have to get to the pinnacle and it'd be too much to hope that the steam lifts are still operating.'

As ever, Abner replied for both of them. He dragged deep on his cigar and said, as if he were my equal, 'This piece 'as a reputation, Mister C——. Can't say we never gave it much thought before you brung it up this afternoon, but seems there's a reason folk like us stick to Highgate and the like. Ghouls and cutthroats, they say there are in these catacombs. Ghouls and cutthroats.'

I confess I struggled to retain my equanimity. 'You're bodysnatchers, Mister Abner! You are ghouls and cutthroats!'

'Aye, and Limehouse on a moonless night holds no terrors for us. But this place, Mister C——, this place is an hunknown quantity.'

'I shall tell you what is not an unknown quantity, Abner. And that is the amount of financial recompense you will be receiving from me in future if you do not cease this superstitious vacillation immediately and come on. That figure, I assure you, will be nothing. And believe me, I shall instruct all my friends to eschew your services to boot.'

That was too far and I knew it. The Knife made a sound somewhere between a hiss and a snort. It was, so far as I could tell, what passed for laughter with him.

Abner glanced at him. 'My esteemed colleague observes that you ain't got no friends, Mister C—. If it were to come to altering our arrangements, what's to stop 'is slitting your throat right 'ere an' now and us exacting what we deem to be a fair payment for all we 'as availed you?'

He did not frighten me. 'You know quite well, Abner, that I am not so unwise as to carry money around the likes as you.'

'That's as may be, Mister C—. But I'll warrant you're carrying the keys to your 'ouse and I'm sure we'd find somethin' of value in there.'

'You will never step foot in my house, Abner. Whether I am alive or dead, you may be certain of that. Even if you did, the value of the items you would find within would be quite beyond your estimation or comprehension. Now put an end to this messing about and come on.'

I took his lantern and strode forward, leaving them no option but to retreat outside or to accompany me, or else be plunged into Stygian darkness. After a moment's hesitancy I heard them fall in behind me. I made a point of not looking back at them, but I could sense the unhappy restlessness with which the Knife twirled the blade in his hand. I was taking as big a risk as I ever had with these two, I knew, but I was not frightened. Not by the likes of them.

~~THE KNIFE OF MY FREEDOM~~

As I had predicted, the steam lifts were beyond use, their wrought-iron cages rusted and twined with ivy. We had no recourse but to ascend the Pyramid on foot, via the wide ramped passageway that spiralled up its interior. It had been designed large enough to take a horse-drawn hearse; now the large proportions merely added to the nagging feeling of wrongness, as if the edifice had been constructed according to a geometry other than Man's. The walls were in a frightful state, suffering from the decades of neglect and damp. In places the stone cladding had crumbled away to reveal the bare dark-red brickwork beneath. Under all the extravagance and oriental trappings this was nothing but a warehouse, an industrial facility of the kind that the Empire was built upon: a storehouse for the decaying.

We climbed higher and the areas of exposed brickwork took on a certain comforting quality as the decoration of the ashlar facing-stones became ever more fevered and overwrought. Hieroglyphic tracts and obscure treatises on death and the afterlife gave way to figurative reliefs, swarming, bulging cascades of suffering and tormented flesh. Those depicted seemed to clamber and tear at each other as if to escape the hellish confines of the walls. More Brueghel than Karnak, there was something about the pathetic desperation with which those arms stretched out into the passageway, pleading for help, which chilled even my blood. Abner and the Knife had long-since stopped even looking at the decoration. They kept their eyes fixed on the floor ahead and their weapons readied in their hands.

I wondered what sort of intellect had conceived such a decorative scheme. Not a healthy one, by any measure. Certainly not one motivated by the rational pursuit of profit from grieving families. Little coincidence it was that as we ascended closer to the pinnacle, more and more of the vaults and cubby-holes along the way were vacant. I regretted not coming here before. This baroque cathedral to insanity could have offered countless new flavours of power to my experimentation.

'Did you 'ear that?' asked Abner, stopping suddenly and hefting his pistol.

It was far from the first time he had uttered those words this night and I ignored him.

A moment later there was a sound. A squamous dragging, slithering rasp. I hesitated, raising the lantern. I expected to see a large rat or perhaps a stray cat scurry away into the shadows. Instead there was a glimpse of something dark and slick as leech-skin. It was there for less than an eye-blink, and it was gone.

That instant was more than enough for a pusillanimous wretch like Abner. Uttering an obscenity he turned on his heel and sprinted back down the ramp. Lacking a lantern of his own, he made it only a few dozen feet into the inky darkness before he tripped on something and I heard him hit the floor with a crunching of bones and a new flurry of curses. The Knife hesitated, caught between his doglike instinct to follow his master and his desire to stay close to my light.

His mind was made up by a rush of movement in the shadows. Something – whatever it was we had glimpsed – shot through the darkness towards where Abner had fallen. The resurrection-man shrieked, first in terror, then in pain. I could not see what had descended upon him, and I confess I was glad for it. I fumbled a length of chalk from inside my cloak and hurriedly began sketching out a protective mandala on the floor. The Knife reacted with the more visceral instinct of the East End brigand. With an animal scream he raised his blade and ran towards the creature. There was a violent thrashing, more screams, and then silence.

That moment seemed to last forever. Then finally the quiet was broken by the faint, intermittent rasp of something dragging itself haltingly towards me. I did not try to run. After all it had availed my companions nought and I had confidence in the power of my design to protect me. I stood up tall and faced it down as it shambled into the light.

It had a face. That was a surprise. But it was a long way short of human.

The upper portion of the chimera was serpentine. A flattened, sabre-fanged and horned head emerging seamlessly from a sinuous neck maybe six feet or more in length and as thick as a small tree-trunk. But this was no mere snake. The serpent's body emerged from an impossibly narrow waist, from which trailed a pair of wasted but unmistakeably human legs. There was no possible way they could have stood upright and supported the weight of its neck even if they had been strong and vigorous. Instead they dragged uselessly along behind it, scratched and bruised and deeply gouged by the detritus that littered the passage floor.

'What manner of beast are you?' I asked. 'You cannot approach me; I am protected by powerful magics.'

It hissed and lunged and, magics or no, I knew no more.

THESE ARE THE WORST PART



Friady 17st Dethember, 1841.

I saw a flicker of light in a cavalcade
Briefest candle; ephemeral beauty
Hurts worse than Dante's fiery visions
when the light fades out.

Now I am forlorn and forgotten
I have been cursed with body and consciousness.
Q! Cancer that is breathing in and out
Have mercy and give this darkness totality.

Death,
Perchance to dream,
Perchance to die again,

Death,
of midnight
Covers me with its black wings,
Takes me to its dark caverns,
But I escape,
For now.

I am made of glass
Like Charles VI,
The world around me drives great cracks
Through my skin and through my soul,
I lie amid the torture rooms
Where children scream and die,
Alone I take the rusty knife
And slide it through my wrist.

Infinite love that shall never die
Sadness inside, I never ask why
Orbit of the moon around the sun
Beautifully shining upon
Endless winter in my seasonal heart
Lost is what I am. Without you there is no light.

Poems which once glimmered with profundity and meaning now seem hollow scrawls born of blindness and hopeless immaturity. I can't recapture the way I felt when I composed them. I struggle to regain that perfect, all-encompassing love. But perfect love is unselfconscious. You don't try to feel it: you just do. Like you breathe or think or watch Hollyoaks. It's just something people do. But it's a dream, but once you wake no amount of effort or wishing will let you re-enter it.

I'm awake now, in a strange and terrible world. It frightens me.

What can I do?

~~How can I ever tell her how I feel?~~

She's sitting opposite me now, all aglow with happiness as she twitters on about some flowers or butterflies or unicorns (delete as applicable) she saw in the park this morning. Her life's so full of joy and wonder, the counterpoint to the darkness in my own heart. What am I without her? Anything but a broken and stunted orphan? For so long I believed she was the thing which defined me, who gave my life meaning. It never occurred to me I could be something in my own right. It feels oddly like I've been tricked. I gaze into her lovely eyes, no less lovely now despite everything, and though I love her, something's different. I think I despise her a little too.

I should tell her. Let her know how I feel. She's so good at clearing the confusion in my mind. I should tell her. I should be a man and take that step towards the future.

I...

I open my mouth, but what comes out is, ‘Come with me.’

~~We're both surprised. She breaks off her story and stares. 'Oh,' she says.~~

'Come with me when I go to uni. Live with me, in secret! None of this has to change! It can carry on just as it always has. Me and you. Together for ever!'

And then, finally, she gets it.

A single perfect tear runs from her starlight eyes. Then another and another.

'Oh,' she sobs. 'Oh Craig! Oh...'

I'm crying too, I realise. This is how it feels: the end.

'Oh Craig,' she sobs, distraught. 'Oh my sweet love! I can't.'

What follows is wrong in every way. We cry together and I argue against her. I tell her she's wrong, that she's being stupid (I've never told her she's wrong before, never questioned anything she's said). I tell her I need her, that I'm nothing without her, that everything in my life is changing and I can't go through that unless she's there by my side.

She tells me that's exactly why she can't be. I need to go out into the world and be my own person. To go to Oxford and 'be wonderful' and not have to worry about hurrying back every evening to my secret girlfriend. She'd only be holding me back, she tells me, and I know she's right even as I scream at her that she's wrong. We'd thought our love was perfect and special and eternal, something cosmic that transcended the stars. But it came to an end the same as that of any other stupid young teenage couple. Nothing epic and romantic and desperate. Nothing eternal. Just tears and begging and recriminations. It shouldn't have been like this.

After she left, I put on Linkin Park, got rat-arsed on Uncle's two thousand quid a bottle absinthe, and cried myself to sleep on a vomit-stained bed.

I woke with the taste of blood in my mouth again, and the smell of it raw in my nostrils. Not just a little blood, but the harsh, overpowering metallic tang of great torrents of red gore, steaming in the winter cold. It felt familiar and in some uncanny sense comforting, and not just because of all those live cats I've eaten.

But there was no blood in the dark crypt in which I found myself. Nothing but dead leaves and decaying masonry. And a small, middle-aged Scotsman giving me a concerned look.

'You!'

He smiled but said nothing.

'You're behind all this, aren't you?'

'I'm sorry?'

'All this! Admit it! You planned it all. You deliberately ran into me so that damned nun would hear me apologise and I'd take it in my head to come here! It's all some grand manipulation, isn't it? Who put you up to it, hmm? Was it Hargreaves?'

He pottered over to me, evaded my flailing hands, and checked among my blond hair.

'No sign of injury,' he muttered to himself. 'Are you feeling all right?'

Feeling all right? The pure love which was the only thing that had given my life meaning was over! Isobel was— No, that was the other person, wasn't it? That insipid, half-witted moon-boy who had taken over my dreams. I could still feel what it was like to be him. The purity of emotion, the lack of restraint or let to those gushing adolescent sentiments. They infected me like a cancer. I could no longer be sure where Edgerton C— ended and the boy Craig began. Who am I if not myself? Was this the fate that lay before me? Not death but subsumption, the disipation of my identity in the face of this overwhelming onslaught from beyond?

Gathering my composure, I regarded the Scotsman from under my black blond fringe. 'Tell me, sir. Do you know what it is to be haunted?'

The clownishness in his demeanour suddenly vanished, and when he replied it was with a fearsome authority that warned of depths even I should be wary of probing. 'Yes,' he said darkly, sadly. 'I know.'

I merely nodded, and we lapsed into silence.

I wondered how I had come to be here, about the legged serpent in the passageways. Had it dragged me here, to some sort of lair? But there was no sign that the monster inhabited this place, nor did it seem I was at all hurt. Had it even happened? Or was it some figment or delusion brought on by the nocturnal derangements from which I was suffering? I recalled Abner and the Knife. They certainly weren't here, but that could mean anything.

Never have I felt so uncertain of myself. Everything was in flux. Everything was shadow and dust.

There was blood on my shirt. It wasn't mine.

'What am I doing here?' I asked my companion.

'I was rather hoping you would tell me.'

'You followed me here? From that churchyard?'

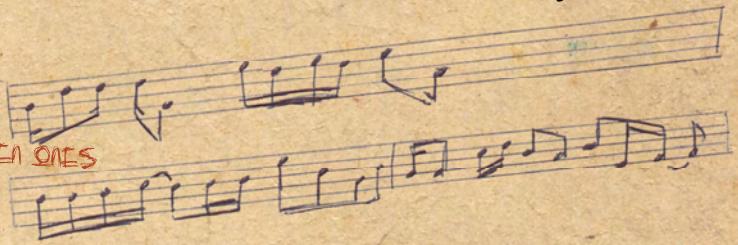
He shook his head. 'I followed her.'

In the archway that led from the vault to the passage, the nun smiled at me and beckoned.

LOOK AT YOUR CHILDREN
SEE THEIR FACES IN GOLDEN RAYS
DON'T KID YOURSELF THEY BELONG TO YOU
THEY'RE THE START OF A COMING RACE

She led us upwards. She never spoke, despite the Scotsman's best efforts. For my part I remained silent. It took all my concentration to remain in control of myself, to block out the whispered voices and nagging teenage angst in my mind. The blood-taste was almost overpowering now. More than once I could have sworn I saw it, dripping down the walls and flowing in runnels down the ramp. More figments: there was nothing. Nothing but blackness and the obscene, insane reliefs. The walls' geometry seemed to warp and shift around me. If I did not force myself to remain focused, I should have found myself believing I was in a house, light and airy with green patterned wallpaper. The house from my dreams. I could hear the music all around me, lyrics almost distinct now.

I THINK ABOUT A WORLD TO COME
WHERE THE BOOKS WERE FOUND BY THE GOLDEN ONES
WRITTEN IN PAIN WRITTEN IN AWE
BY A PUZZLED MAN WHO QUESTIONED



'What do you see?' the Scotsman whispered to me as we reached the pinnacle and the grand wrought-iron gates that led to Prince Albert's mausoleum.

'Things which have no place here,' I grunted back. 'We mustn't talk about them.'

The tomb was a pyramidal chamber at the very apex of the Pyramid. Its ironwork was gilt and the Egyptianising reliefs which decorated its walls were even grander and more elaborate than in the rest of the Pyramid. At the back of the chamber, in a niche in the wall, lay the Prince's sarcophagus, surmounted by a magnificent military statue. The place had not been spared the ravages which had befallen the rest of the edifice. A large, ragged chunk of wall was entirely missing – probably from some long-ago lightning-strike. Ivy tumbled in through the gap and ravens nested among the rubble. They had spread their filth throughout the room, littering it with twigs and trinkets. The fine carved moustaches of the Queen Empress's beloved consort were spattered white with their leavings.

The room was not empty.

A mahogany occasional table had been set up in front of the sarcophagus, and beside it a large and well-upholstered leather armchair. Sitting in the chair was a man in an immaculately-cut but slightly old-fashioned black suit and wing-collar. He watched us coolly with dark eyes as the nun ushered us in. He had the head of a jackal.

'Anubis,' I murmured.

'Really?' the Scotsman asked. His intense little eyes narrowed. 'Edgerton, what do you see?'

What sort of question was that, I wondered to myself. Was the fellow blind as well as Scottish? For it is true, the Egyptian god of the afterlife is not the first thing one expects to happen across on a night out, even when one is a black-hearted necromancer passing the witching hours in a neo-Egyptian pyramid of the dead. But if there has been one iota of progress in this stultifying Victorian epoch of ours it is surely in the acceptance that empirical observation is the

A CRACK IN THE SKY AND A HAND REACHING DOWN TO ME
ALL THE NIGHTMARES CAME TODAY
AND IT LOOKS AS THOUGH THEY'RE HERE TO STAY

fundament and underpinning of all sure knowledge. Whatever 'logic' or 'reason' or any of those false idols of the scientific age might hold, the basic premise allowed no dispute: the jackal-headed god was real and he sat before us.

Indeed, once that simple fact was accepted, much else we had experienced made perfect sense. I recalled my studies of the Book of the Dead in translation and in the original hieroglyphic; the finely-copied plates reproducing the ancient illustrations. They abounded with monsters and chimeras of all kinds, but above all with snakes. Asps and vipers and desert cobras. But also winged snakes and horned snakes and snakes with human legs.

'They invited something in when they built this place,' I murmured. 'Something Eastern and unholy in the heart of London. What did they expect? It should never have been allowed here.'

It was not, I hasten to add, that I objected in principle to the advent of an Egyptian deity in the English capital. Nor, as will be clear, did ungodliness concern me one whit. Rather, the reason for my vexation was the careless and unthinking manner in which this apparent summoning had been accomplished. Not by any of the grand lodges or magic circles, or indeed, it seemed, even by any of the myriad amateurs and enthusiastic dilettantes whose activities were the one thing that united us masters in all our disparate hues and affiliations in a shared sense of indignation and frustration. This Pyramid had been made by mundane architects and financed by earthly entrepreneurs for nothing more or less than the pursuit of profit. It had no loftier ambition than that. To pursue such banal ends in such a way as to inadvertently bring about the advent of an ancient oriental deity was not only grossly irresponsible; it was bloody annoying for those of us who'd been trying and failing to accomplish the same through ritual and magical study for decades.

The Scotsman frowned, concerned. 'Edgerton,' he said gently, as if I were a bedridden convalescent or a flighty woman recovering from a touch of the vapours, 'where do you think you are?'

'Where do I think I am?' I snapped back impatiently. 'Damn your impertinence, man! I know exactly where I am. I'm in Prince Albert's burial vault at the top of the Primrose Hill Pyramid! Now stop wasting time asking damn-fool questions like that. The real matter at hand is what this fellow wants.' I gestured towards Anubis, who had been listening to our exchange equanimously, the nun hovering silently at his shoulder. 'Lord, I am Edgerton C—, renowned as the wickedest man in England. For many years I have practised your rites. You may have heard of me?'

~~The house is empty because of the manifestation Uncle's investigating. There are security guards on the entrances. Vacant-faced workaday chavs who can't possibly understand the torment in my heart. They're nothing to me; not part of the same world. I stroll past them without a glance. One shouts at me to stop.~~

~~I call back, 'Don't you know who I am?'~~

~~That makes me giggle. Does anyone know who I am?~~

~~Anyone but her?~~

~~I have to find her. Everything else is confusion and unfocused, but that alone is clear. All this is wrong. So wrong. It can't end like this. Not so banal. Not so tawdry. We're special. A~~

~~thousand poems run round my head, clashing and mingling like ducks in a... I don't know. I thought I had a simile there but I lost it. Maybe not ducks. Maybe something else. Walruses?~~

~~Walruses are significant.~~

~~I'm so confused. Is this how Mum felt?~~

~~Seeing Isobel's face will make things clear.~~

~~Until then I grip the knife so tight the blood's dripping down my hand.~~

I waited for Anubis to answer. Studied his canine face for any clue as to why he had brought me here ~~he didn't bring you here you came by your own choice!~~ Shut up!

He said nothing.

'Edgerton-' the interfering Scotsman began again. I ignored him. I failed to understand why he was even present. His story about following the nun had not the faintest whiff of truth about it. Even if it was not lies, what business did he have with her? I have never heard of a Scotsman who solicited the company of nuns for any innocent reason. The fellow's 'explanation' raised nothing but questions and enigmas. Until he should become more forthcoming with answers I had no intention of wasting my time on him. Not when there was a god in the room.

Anubis still said nothing. He was utterly lacking in warmth, in the myriad minuscule animal signals which living beings habitually and unthinkingly communicate to one another. I struggled to read him but there was nothing to latch on to. An absence in the shape of a living thing.

'Are you truly manifested?' I asked. 'Or is this but a vision? Is there something you desire me to accomplish to bring about your advent? Simply name it, great lord. Tell me what you would have me do. I wish only to serve, and in return to share in thy power.'

I regretted the 'thy' at once. I had uttered it without thinking, it seeming the natural manner in which to address an ancient deity. Spoken aloud, it sounded merely ridiculous.

The Scotsman placed a hand on my shoulder, 'Focus on it, Edgerton. Look hard and try to let go of your fear.'

'Fear?' I shook off the presumptuous little man's hand. 'Do you know how many puppies I have personally splayed open as gifts to unholy powers? What on Earth makes you think I am afraid?'

'Just try.'

I am certain my bravado accio fooled neither of us. How simple it would be if this was indeed a risen pagan god! A haunting power of the world before. That at least was within the ambit of my experience, the compass of my day-to-day ambitions. But when I looked again I saw not Anubis but a blond man, slightly older than myself. He had a superior, aristocratic bearing and wore a disdainful sneer. The drink in his hand was absinthe, not brandy. The sickly green seemed to infect the atmosphere of the place. He resembled me. Closely enough that I might have been looking in a distorting mirror.

'Who are you?' I demanded. 'What are you?'

I stand at the end of a long and cursed bloodline. Shunned by Society, disdained by the great houses of Europe in whose exalted halls we once commanded fear and respect, now my family name may not even be spoken in polite company for fear of banishment and ostracism. I am the

last, I believe. I had a brother once but I understand him now to be dead. I have no living relatives and will sire no descendants. And yet this apparition before me bore a face that might have been that of my own son. I remembered my dreams, and saw traces of this face in them too.

Haunted, I had proclaimed myself. But are we always haunted by the past?

Nothing changed, and yet the blond man was gone and in his place an old and hideous man: leather-faced, hairless and bulbous-nosed, drinking tea from a chipped and grimy mug. It was not that he had replaced the other, any more than he had supplanted Anubis. They had always been there, I understood.

'What are you showing me?'

The Scotsman spoke again, and this time there was a new sense of urgency underlying his soft burr.

'Edgerton, there's nothing there.'

The ancient spectre convulsed and spat out his tea in an uncouth spray of brown.

May I ask you something?

Who wrote that?

I did. Inasmuch as either of us are writing anything. I'm the Doctor. I'm trying to help you, Edgerton. You're not well.

Nonsense. There's nothing wrong with me.

You said you were haunted. I wanted to know what by.

I'm nothing of the sort. I banged my head. I was delirious.

There's nothing wrong with your head. Edgerton, what are you doing now?

Doing?

Yes. Right now. What are you doing?

I'm writing in my journal.

Writing up what happened in the Pyramid?

Obviously.

And where are you?

In the Pyramid. I just told you.

You're in the Pyramid now? You brought your journal along so you could write down what you're doing as you do it?

I... Well, no. Of course not. That would be absurd.

So where are you?

I... I don't know.

But you've left the Pyramid. You've gone home and collected your diary and now it's all in the past and you're writing it up.

Manifestly.

So what happened? How did you escape?

I... How should I know? I haven't written that bit yet!

Edgerton, none of this makes sense. Think about it. You're a necromancer and a sorcerer. You're the most wicked man in England, or so you claim, but no-one's ever tried to stop you. Perhaps because the limit of your evil is going around being mean to children? There's a Pyramid full of corpses in London which you've never thought about before and then suddenly decide to break into so you can take over the Empire?

How do you know all that?

I'm afraid I read your diary. Edgerton, do those sound like the kinds of things that really happen to people? Does that sound like reality to you?

How are you writing here at the same time as I am? Why can't I see you?

I'm not. I'm part of the delusion.

Delusion? Confound you man! What delusion? The only one deluded here is you, I fear.

The words you think you're seeing - what you think I'm writing. It's not real. Well it is real, but it's not writing. It's me, psychically projecting. Transmitting my thoughts directly into yours.

I know what psychic projection is. And I know it to be so much hokum.

It's the only way I could get through to you. The only way I could break through the illusions your mind's spinning for you. Do you understand, now Edgerton? There is no Anubis. No nun, no Pyramid on Primrose Hill. All this - all of it - is in your head! Oh, you silly man! The rituals you do, the powers you meddle with - they've opened a conduit for something you can't possibly comprehend! Something that's hurting you. Your mind's tried to process and rationalise its psychic influence by constructing this scenario but you're not strong enough to maintain it. It's breaking down around you.

I'm losing my mind? Is that what you're saying?

You've said as much yourself, again and again. I can help you but you have to let me! Please, Edgerton. You need to tell me what started this. You need to tell me what else is in here with us.

There's a boy. Raven-haired and pale as the moon. He loved a girl so fiercely it has consumed him. They have realised now, and she has tried to set him free. But it's too late. There's nothing left.

He's the one haunting you?

I hear him in my mind. Oh God, Doctor! I hear him all the time. The fear! The anger! The bloody awful poetry!

Show me.

I enter the drawing room where the manifestation occurred. A psychic entity from beyond space, Uncle said. I think he just made it up. The 'proton scanner' he used to make the diagnosis was a broken Freeview remote. All around the room are ancient Egyptian memorabilia. The dead man was a collector. The blank gold faces on the sarcophaguses stare at me as I enter, as if they sense the darkness inside. They know emptiness. They know death. Uncle's oblivious. He's got music on loud while he investigates. I say 'investigates'. He's just dancing in the middle of the room while the others do all the hard work. They're all dupes, fools. Going about their day-to-day jobs like it's important. None of it matters. We're all just unread poems at the end of the day. And not even good ones.

Isobel's there. She tenses as she spots me.

'Oh!'

'Sweetheart!' I shout as I run to her. 'Darling, I need to talk to you!'

'Craig,' Uncle says, 'what are you doing here? You look ghastly and you're dripping blood on this sixteenth-century carpet. Why aren't you at university? Oxford is a terrible dump but if I am paying the extortionate fees I find it objectionable that you are not attending.'

He understands nothing. I shove him aside and he falls on the floor. So frail, behind the arrogance. I look down at him and shake my head, wondering how I could ever have respected him. 'How can I go to university without my Isobel? How can I do anything? How can I go on breathing? How can the sun even rise?'

The profound beauty of my words touches Isobel deeply. She's starting to cry, her tears stardew and angel-twinkle.

'Craig, don't make this harder than it is, please.'

'How can I make this harder? You're the one doing this! We're in love! Why are you denying it? How can you pretend you don't love me?'

The others press forward but she waves them away. 'Give us a moment, please!'

She comes close to me, caressing my face with her soft, pale hand. Her scent is like dawn and summer's first glow. 'You know it's not because I don't love you. It's because I do. So much! I've been selfish, Craig. So selfish. My people are born lonely. Our broken natures crave comfort. We reach out, across the boundaries of space and time and life itself, for the one who can bring it to us. If we find it, we cling to it, clutching it tight for all eternity. That's why you need to let me go. I've been using you, Craig. Using you for the love I need, while you waste your days on me. You need to forget me and get on with living your life!'

What does she know of loneliness? How can she tell me what I have to do? I know what I have to do. It's over and done. She's not coming back to me. But we can at least make it end the way it should. There was only one way our love could ever come to an end. Not with rows and tears like lesser romances. Not us.

It should be epic. Epic and tragic as any love-story for the ages. Romeo and Juliet. Tristan and Isolde. Troilus and Cressida. Isobel and Craig.

'You can reach across time and space?' I breathe. 'What about me? What am I supposed to do? Alone. Broken. More wretched than before I even met you. What chance did I ever have? Latest screwed-up stupid kid in a screwed-up stupid family. We're born failures, born to bring

darkness into the world. There's nothing good about us; do you think I don't know? Not even good enough for you. How can I go on living knowing that, on my own? What comfort is there for me?

I show her the knife.

'Only this.'

The others are screaming and shouting. Rushing forward to try and stop me. They won't get here in time.

Isobel's not screaming, though. She knows how it has to be. She could stop this in an eyelink if she chose to. Like me, she has darkness inside her. She need only embrace it for a second and she could snuff me out like a... like a candle. In the wind. No, not that. Oh I don't know! It doesn't matter now, right. Poetry doesn't matter! I was a crap poet anyway. God knows why Oxford ever accepted me in the first place. What matters is that Isobel chooses not to stop me doing what I do. It's basically what she wants too. I have no doubt. I embrace her and look into her eyes.

'Don't do this,' she whispers. 'There is good in you.'

'I love you more than life,' I tell her. 'More than everything.'

I use the knife.

Is it possible for the future to haunt the past?

Yes. Yes, if the psychic ripples are strong enough.

The boy and the girl. He kills her, doesn't he?

Perhaps. I only know the fragments you're telling me.

I've been able to taste the blood for days. To smell it. He kills her. And he kills himself. And everyone else in the room too, perhaps. Doctor, there's so much blood.

It bothers you, doesn't it?

Of course not. Murder is my bread and butter. Dead children are a mere bagatelle to the likes of I, the most...

The most wicked man in England. Yes, I remember.

But something like that. Could it create these... psychic ripples?

It might. It depends on so much. On the time, the place, who's involved. Even an event like that wouldn't usually generate enough psychic resonance in humans to project it back in time. A Sensorite or a Void-Dancer or even an Etheri perhaps...

There's something otherworldly about the girl.

'Reach across space and time and life...' Yes, there's something otherworldly about you all.

They're connected to me, aren't they? My future. I'm not the last. This wretched, broken line goes on.

Does that frighten you?

I don't know. Should it?

No. No, I don't think so. It frightened him. The boy. Frightened him so much that in the psychic bleeding it's imprinted on you. But you're not him. You don't have to feel what he feels.

I'm not him. I know that. But am I really that different? You think it was all vainglory, Doctor? You think I've never killed? You think I've never taken an innocent life?

It doesn't matter what I think you've done. It doesn't even matter what you think you've done. All that matters is what you do from now on. The past needn't haunt you any more than the future.

So that's it? That's your solution? Your way to solve this? 'Be a good man'?

It's all I can offer. This is all in your mind. Only you can change it.

The manuscript simply ended there. I cast around in the portmanteau in search for any more sheets but I found nothing. I went away downstairs, breathless and unsettled, but also a little disappointed for I now wanted to know what became of poor Edgerton C—. What was it that I had read? Some fiction dreamed up from a warped imagination? The delusions of a self-confessed opium-eater and practitioner of the dark arts? For all that my work brings me into contact with some of the most tragic and disordered cases of derangement in the human mind, there was something curiously gloomy and distressing about reading the account of a man so self-evidently losing his grip on reality. Mr C— had survived several years after the affair, of course, before his eventual death in 1895, but I felt a new pity for the fellow. He cannot have been a well man, mentally. I recollect those stories of how his body had been found, broken open from within as if by some ungodly child. What black secrets surrounded his death? Had the future which had haunted him finally brought about its own advent, claiming his life in the process?

The man from the property firm met me in the front hall.

‘You read it?’ he asked me, grim-faced.

I nodded.

‘And?’

'I fear that the writer was mentally deranged. There is not an ounce of truth in it. You know as well as I that there is not, nor ever has been, any kind of necropolis on Primrose Hill, though I do recall that such an idea was considered at one point. Or take the marginalia. You will have noticed that they are often in a script that you cannot read. That is Enochian, which Dr Dee believed was the language of the Angels. Or rather, the script is Enochian. If Mr C— believed himself to be writing that language he was sorely mistaken: the passages when transliterated are straightforward English, and what they transcribe is quite simply gibberish.¹

¹ Although I am sure you will have understood the nature of the marginal scrawls at a glance, I include the transliteration keys here anyway, in case it may aid you in your reading:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
Ճ	Վ	Յ	Ճ	Շ	Ճ	Ծ	Գ	Լ	Լ	Յ	Ը	Ը
N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
Ճ	Լ	Ո	Ա	Ճ	Ճ	Ճ	Ճ	Ճ	Ճ	Ր	Ղ	Պ
a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m
Ճ	Վ	Յ	Ճ	Շ	Ճ	Ծ	Գ	Լ	Լ	Յ	Ը	Ը
n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z
Ճ	Լ	Ո	Ա	Ճ	Ճ	Ճ	Ճ	Ճ	Ճ	Ր	Ղ	Պ

The same goes for his use of alchemical notation. He knew that he was losing his mind, but I suspect even he did not apprehend quite how badly. It is sad what befell the man, but it is, I am convinced, beyond the purview of my researches.'

I did not believe those words, even as I spoke them. But you and I know the value of a well-meant lie, I think. I meant to protect the man, to deflect his mind from the anxiety that something might still linger here.

But no, that is a lie, too, isn't it? One I tell myself. The truth is, at that moment I wanted nothing more than to be free of that house. I am not by habit a cowardly man and I have never shied away from investigating any number of incidents which I had every reason to believe might be detrimental to my long-term health. Once or twice I have even encountered things which defy rational explanation within the compass of modern science. Evil and dark things, such as many should quail at. Never before had I felt it necessary to deny my intuitions, nor to invent a pretext to withdraw on account of my own fear.

But there was something about the atmosphere of the place. Some lingering taint of madness and desperation and betrayal which seemed to inhere in its very fabric. It exerted uncanny pressures upon mind and body and soul, such that so long as I remained within I am certain I should never be able to feel entirely rational and at ease.

And then there was the journal. Because you said you were not writing, that all those words were but in the poor man's head. And yet I saw them. I read them, there on the page in thick black ink. So either you were lying to him, spinning yet another deception around his bewildered mind, or else I too am mad, and already victim to whatever darkness resides in this place.

Such dark thoughts filling my mind, I retrieved my cape and hat from the hatstand and made as if to leave.

‘Do you think she was right, sir?’

I paused upon the threshold. ‘To whom are you referring?’

'The strange sister in the journal. Do you think she was right that there was some good in him? Do you think he ever did manage to live a good life and prevent that evil seed within him?'

I thought about this for a moment. ‘If we are to believe what is written later there never was a nun. She was but another figment of Mr C——’s psychosis as he endeavoured to rationalise the conflicts within him. He believed there was good in him, or wanted to.’

I considered the magical fetishes and dollies in the case, all neatly packed away and hidden. Had he turned away from his path of darkness, if only for a time? I felt a pang as I recalled the hideous, unnatural circumstances of his eventual demise.

I knew then I could remain an onlooker in this matter no longer.

‘This American of yours,’ I said thoughtfully. ‘Has he begun formal proceedings to buy the house?’

‘We were to begin negotiations when he arrives in London next week.’

‘Please inform him that it is no longer available, if you would be so kind.’

‘Sir?’

‘He will thank you in the long run, I shouldn’t wonder. I wish to purchase the house. As it is. This very day.’

‘But sir...’

‘There is something at work here. Something uncanny. I mean to mount an investigation and get to the bottom of it. I will root out Mr C——’s secrets, and perhaps set his ghost to rest.’

And so it was that I came to begin my time at 73a Russell Square. After all that has happened since, I wish to God I had stepped through that door and left it to the American. But in the end I am too much like you. I cannot resist the trap of my own curiosity, nor leave other people to encounter dangers which by facing first I might protect them. It will be the end of me, and before very much longer now. I pray that you will return before the end. Not that you might save me; for I know I am now well beyond saving. But because I would know why you hid the worst from him; and because the trials of these final days should seem more bearable with you at my side. Many of the house’s secrets have been laid bare to me over the years, but still I do not quite understand. Perhaps, with your help, I finally shall.

She is coming again. The Nun. Ha! I still call her that, though I know now she is anything but. The sun’s pure light casts the darkest shadows.

Please, come quickly.

I need you, Doctor.

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