

The Devil's Apprentice
and Other Tales of Victorian Terror
and the Supernatural



John Wallen
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This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Preface

This is a collection for the connoisseur of literary horror, written with more than a passing nod to several masters of the classic Victorian tale of terror and the supernatural.

For those who delight in tracking down arcane references, allusions may be found in these stories to M. R. James, Arthur Conan Doyle, Bram Stoker, Algernon Blackwood, Wilkie Collins, and Charles Dickens. The last of these also provides one of the best literary testaments available to the age of the stagecoach, prior to the laying down of the nineteenth-century railway track. His masterful description of the tempest and shipwreck off the Suffolk coast in *David Copperfield* was an inspiration to Leo Tolstoy, representing as it did (and does) the most powerful of all Victorian examples of pathetic fallacy.

What more to say? Only that I could wish the reader a tempest-torn sky and a flickering candle as an ideal backdrop by which to read these stories!

John Wallen, 2009

The Devil's Apprentice

The daily coach from London to Edinburgh had been supposed to make its first stopover at Slough, but the wild and inclement weather had convinced the coach driver to break the journey more than five miles short, at the small village of Langley. The wind roared through the wooden joints of the old coach, and the rain lashed on the gutted little track along which it travelled. Shivering inside, the five occupants felt as relieved as the two coachmen above them as the old carriage slowly drew up outside the one small isolated inn that existed in Langley: “The King’s Head.”

Inside the small tavern all seemed quiet and deserted except for the presence of a bald and lugubrious middle-aged man who, without any unbecoming enthusiasm, declared himself to be the landlord. The little inn possessed only twelve rooms, and several of those were already filled by seasonal agricultural workers. The travellers quickly accounted for the other rooms until eventually all had been filled—without the successful

accommodation of the last gentleman in the party! This gentleman muttered that it was quite all right and that he might easily sleep downstairs on the divan as long as the landlord could find a warm blanket and some comfortable pillows for him. At this declaration the landlord, possibly put out at the prospect of losing a paying client for the night, remembered two small rooms that existed on the top floor of the inn and declared his intention of accommodating the last of the travellers there.

Now that everything had been arranged, the guests were shown to their rooms, and eventually only the final guest remained still to be directed. The innkeeper led him up some rickety flights of stairs, bearing a candle before him, until eventually they reached the top floor. There, two doors were discernible: one was numbered 12A and the other 12B. This arrangement of numerals struck the traveller as strange, and he enquired about the absence of number 13. The landlord gave the other man a quick look of embarrassment and muttered something about superstitious farm workers not liking to accommodate themselves in a room number 13. Having said this, the man unlocked the door to 12B and led the weary traveller inside.

The room itself seemed pleasant enough, even if a little small. A large window in the far wall of the room allowed radiant beams of moonlight to brighten the darkness to the point where the landlord's candle was no longer needed. After a few more words of cordiality, the landlord wished the tired traveller a good night's rest and left the room. A few minutes after the landlord's departure, the weary man had thrown himself onto the comfortable looking bed and had immediately sunk into a profound sleep.

The exhausted traveller slept long and deeply. However, when he awoke, it was still pitch dark in the room, and he recognised that some persistent sound had awakened him. For a moment he listened intently and was rewarded with a clear apprehension of someone—a man certainly—breathing deeply. Thoroughly alarmed at the idea of an unknown stranger being alone with him in the darkened room, the man hopped nimbly out of bed and lit a candle. He moved it slowly in all directions, but could see no one else in the room about him. As the candle flickered its light into the obscure corners of the room, the man was suddenly struck by a new sensation: surely this room was far bigger than the one he had gone

to sleep in? Even the decorations seemed richer and more ornate than in the room in which he had laid himself down to rest. Overcome by the certainty of this impossible conclusion, the awakened man, almost unconsciously, walked slowly over to the large window and looked out.

In the dim moonlight he was able to discern the shape of an ancient Elizabethan cottage lying opposite his room. This cottage lay completely dark and silent, yet somehow its sturdy-looking black and white joints, together with the continued absence of the heavy breathing which the man supposed had originally awoken him, convinced the traveller that he had merely been the victim of a particularly bad dream brought on by excessive tiredness. Moving back to his bed and looking around the room with his candle as he walked, the man suddenly made a determination to check his room from the outside. He quickly turned the key in the lock, stepped out into the corridor, and saw—something that seemed to chill the blood in his veins! Outside, on the little landing there were no longer two rooms numbered 12A and 12B. Now there was only one door to be seen, and in ornate silver lettering the traveller observed the

inexplicable number of the room: it was number 13! Staggering back into the room in a state of shocked hysteria, the man lurched over to the window in order to fling it open and get some air, but what he saw outside in the dim moonlight stopped his shaking hands from busying themselves with the casement: opposite him, in the place where just a moment ago a cottage had stood, was nothing but a charred black ruin!

The next morning found the weather just as filthy as ever, but the coachman and his party determined, in spite of this, to make an early start. The man who had stayed in room 12B on the upper floor of the old inn was unfortunately sick, and so he would have to remain at the inn for at least another twenty-four hours and resume his journey on one of the following days.

The man himself had fallen into a deep sleep and a subsequent delirium on waking early that morning to find his room shrunken to only half its night-time size and the number 12B once more on the front of its door! For the rest of the day he slept a light feverish sleep, and the

innkeeper's maid, who had been given responsibility for looking after the ailing gentleman, privately began to doubt whether he would ever leave the inn alive. At ten o' clock in the evening the servant left him for the night with water, fruit, and milk next to his bed, and, as she departed, she decided in her own heart that there was only a 50 percent chance of finding the poor gentleman alive come morning.

At first the traveller slept deeply after the maid had left him, even as he had on the first night of his sojourn at the small inn. However, at a time that must have been about three o' clock in the morning, he suddenly woke up, shivered, and sat up in the clammy bed. As on the previous night, he was sure that the sound of heavy breathing had broken his rest. Looking about him in the faint light of a candle that trembled in his hand, he saw that the room had once again, and totally inexplicably, doubled its size! The man, now fully awake and possessed of a dread intimation of horrible danger, climbed quickly out of the bed and, again as on the previous night, walked quickly over to the large window as if in search of some few comforting beams of moonlight. Immediately opposite he saw once again the old Elizabethan cottage

horribly complete, but even as he gazed on it, flames began to lick hungrily at its sides and roof. Then—quite suddenly—the heavy breathing (which seemed to have stopped since the time when he had first awoken) commenced once more.

Two hairy hands of devilish strength were suddenly around the traveller's throat, and two small beastly eyes were fixed with hatred on his face. One of the steel-like arms freed itself suddenly from the sick man's throat and raised itself up to its threatening apex. A moment later a hairy clenched fist came crashing down on the traveller's head, and he knew no more.

It was mid-morning when the traveller awoke to find himself in the presence of the innkeeper and his faithful maid. He was lying on a sofa downstairs near to a merrily blazing fire with numerous heavy blankets thrown upon him. As soon as he gained consciousness, the innkeeper uttered a prayer of thanks and the maid was sent off with instructions to bring a flask of brandy. In her absence the old innkeeper admitted that he had given up all hope for

the revival of his suffering guest and had been on the point of calling in a priest. The traveller was now himself again, seeming to have thrown off his previous illness, but the thought of the terrible hands that had only recently been about his throat urged him to candidly tell the landlord of everything that had passed in room 12B over the last two nights. The innkeeper listened with a sorrowful countenance as the traveller's horrific story was related, and, after making sure his guest had drunk long and deeply from the maid's proffered flask of brandy, he slowly began to narrate the fearsome story of room 13.

Five years before the time in which the present actions took place, the old Elizabethan cottage that the traveller had seen from his window had truly stood opposite the little inn. In it had lived an elderly widowed lady with her beautiful young daughter who was gifted in all the virtues except one: the virtue of choosing a good man to be her partner in life. She had fallen hopelessly in love with the blackguard of the village, a certain Ozias Cutler by name. After running through the greater part of the old woman's inheritance (a mild mother who could never say no to the entreaties of her daughter), Ozias Cutler had, without a word of warning, left the village of

Langley and gone to London. It was said at the time that he had murdered and then buried a young farm maid whom he had had his way with in the village. Whatever the truth of that may have been (and no body had ever been discovered), Cutler disappeared from Langley and several years passed without anyone hearing anything more about him (though it was rumoured that in London he had been taken in by a master of the black arts who had determined to fully train him in the Devil's own dark secrets). Years passed and the influence of Ozias Cutler over the beautiful young lady of the cottage began to fade. She met another man, superior in every way to the bestial Cutler, and began to plan for a future life with him as her partner.

A few days before the arranged wedding was due to take place, Ozias Cutler arrived back in Langley and, on hearing of his former love's proposed new marriage, insisted on seeing her in order to return certain keepsakes the lady had given him at an earlier date. He declared his intentions to be in every way honourable and that he wished only the very best of good fortune for his former love and her new sweetheart in their future life together.

Knowing Ozias Cutler only too well, his former love insisted that she would only visit Cutler in some public building or place—and only in the company of her new fiancé. To her infinite surprise, Ozias Cutler agreed to these conditions and suggested that she should come to see him in the local inn where he was staying: in room 13!

“It was at this point,” the bald innkeeper continued, “that my own involvement in the whole catastrophe was confirmed. I allowed the young lady and her sweetheart to go up and see Cutler on the top floor of my establishment where he was staying, as I have said, in occupancy of room 13. For five minutes we heard nothing, but suddenly and without any prior warning, a horrible screaming began to issue from the room and, in its wake, the most terrible and evil cackling I havebb ever had the misfortune to hear in my entire life.

“I and several of my employees rushed up to the top storey of the inn, though on our arrival the only sound I could hear from within was one of subdued heavy breathing. Taking the spare key from my work frock, I turned it in the lock, opened the door, and entered the room, only to see the most horrific and devilish of sights

ever presented to a poor man's eyes. The lady and her sweetheart both lay dead in a pool of blood in the middle of the room, and the lady—oh the dear lady—had been totally decapitated by the gouging strokes of a large knife. Cutler himself stood over the unfortunate young people, still holding the devilish instrument that had deprived them both of life. With a terrible cry he bounded past us and down the stairs of the inn. As we knelt helpless and bewildered next to the slaughtered young bodies, I now know that Cutler had run across to the cottage opposite and set it alight on several sides. It was only the terrible screams of the young lady's invalid mother that brought our attention round to Cutler's new crime. As the waves of flame gathered in force and power, Ozias Cutler plunged into the very heart of the raging flames and perished in that terrible conflagration along with the mother of his former love."

After his terrible tale had been told, the innkeeper paused for several moments as if reluctant to continue. After a while, however, he found the fortitude to go on. "After the initial scandal and horror had died down, it became clear that no traveller, however tired, would ever willingly sleep in room 13 knowing of the double murder

that had taken place there. For this reason I turned room 13 into two smaller rooms, numbered 12A and 12B. However, due to a series of inexplicable events in the small hours, travellers still refused to make use of either of these two small rooms. Neither had been used in more than a year when your travelling party from London posed me with the problem of how to accommodate all of your people overnight. To my own shame I decided to take a risk and I placed you in one half of the old room 13—now numbered 12B—with the consequences you have since narrated. Thanks be to God that you are now well and able to recommence your journey onward. I swear to you that I will never allow those rooms to be used again. This very day I am going to commence the work of having the top floor of the inn removed and that devilish room, with all its content of hatred and misery, destroyed for all time.”

At four o’ clock in the afternoon of the same day, the traveller was transferred in a coach of the innkeeper’s providing to the nearby town of Slough. The following morning he was a passenger on the daily service to Edinburgh, and he never returned to Langley again.

The Candle of Mortal Existence

Lady Penelope Carstairs had lived a life of predictable affluence with few vicissitudes in her twenty-three years of existence. She had attended exclusive schools in London, Geneva, and Florence, always obtaining top marks in every subject. Her parents, Lord Henry Carstairs and Lady Belle Carstairs, doted on their eldest child and had travelled with her to three continents. New York was almost a second home, and few young ladies in society knew Europe so intimately as Lady Penelope did. Many of her friends believed that she had been born under a particularly fortuitous star as, in addition to her educational accomplishments, Lady Penelope was also one of the most beautiful young women in London, with the bluest of blue eyes and luxurious golden blonde hair.

It might be thought that one who commanded such an excellent array of virtues was, in some quarters at least, the object of some natural envy, but the truth was that Lady Penelope possessed such a kind and caring nature

that men adored her and women revered her. She had kind words for everyone and never spoke harshly against anyone. For the last three years she had been engaged to be married with Lord James Harvey-Smythe of Kensington, and, as one would expect of such a woman, she had showered all her love and affection on the man who was destined to be her future husband.

Then suddenly one day, the letter had arrived. It read as follows:

My Dearest Penelope,

I know that you fully appreciate the profound regard in which I hold your future happiness. It is due to this latter regard that I must inform you of something that is bound to cause you pain in the short term, but which from a longer perspective is motivated only by the wish to ensure a happy and prosperous future for you and your family. Let me to it then: my dearest Penelope, I CANNOT MARRY YOU. I am not worthy of you and you must forget me. I am sorry to state the fact so baldly, but sometimes clarity is of prime importance (as it is here), and it is mere cruelty to pretend that hope remains when in reality all hope has long since been extinguished.

In time I hope you will be able to forgive me.

James.

In a daze Lady Penelope had read this letter over several times. She felt confused and unhappy, but not bitter or vengeful, as these latter qualities did not exist in her placid nature. Her family and friends, however, on hearing of the letter, had sworn to make Harvey-Smythe pay for his desertion by branding him a pariah in London society. However, shortly after the arrival of this letter, Harvey-Smythe had started on a round-the-world trip accompanied by an unknown lady of Slavic origins. A little detective work, paid for by Lady Penelope's parents, had discovered that Harvey-Smythe had been visiting this lady in her Chelsea apartments for over a month and had lavished expensive gifts on her. Indeed, even the apartment itself had been paid for by Harvey-Smythe. A little deeper detective work revealed that the lady's name was Svetlana Romanskaya and that she was a native of Kiev in the Ukraine. She was nearly forty years old, but still breathtakingly beautiful, and she had arrived in London two months earlier accompanied by her brother, Vladimir, and had immediately begun to gather the most eligible bachelors of the capital around her. It was said that she possessed mediumistic powers and ran séances in her apartment several times a week. Clearly, Harvey-

Smythe had become smitten with her charms and this was the reason for his sudden decision to break off his engagement with Lady Penelope.

While others around her demanded redress, Lady Penelope herself could not find it in her heart to hate the man she had once loved. Even now her affection remained and she only hoped that Harvey-Smythe would enjoy a happy future with Svetlana Romanskaya. However, she did realise how important it was to break free of her own love for Harvey-Smythe, and with this aim in view she set herself the task one Monday morning of burning all the letters she had received from him. Lady Penelope was engaged in this task when her maid announced that Peter Harvey-Smythe, the brother of her former fiancé, was waiting to see her. She told her maid to immediately show Peter in, and, laying the remaining letters on a small coffee table, she went to a chair and sat down in anticipation of Peter's arrival.

Moments later a tall thin man of about twenty-five strode into the room and took Lady Penelope by the hands as she rose to greet him.

"My dear Lady Penelope, I am so sorry about what has happened. That cur who is my elder brother has let us

all down in this wretched business. Not only has he abandoned the most worthy lady in London, but he has also disgraced a family of noble lineage. I assure you he will pay for what he has done.”

Peter Harvey-Smythe spoke excitedly and with barely suppressed rage. However, Lady Penelope’s reply was conciliatory: “Don’t blame him too much for what has happened. Clearly he has found someone who is able to satisfy him completely. I now know that I could never have done that, and in a way it is good that we should discover our incompatibility before any irrevocable harm is done.”

Peter Harvey-Smythe gave a hiss of disgust.

“Lady Penelope, you are too kind to that monster—far too kind. He has betrayed us all and deserves to suffer for what he has done.”

Lady Penelope’s eyebrows knitted together at these words of her former fiancé’s brother, and she raised her hand in a sign of her pain.

“Please don’t speak of your brother in that way, Peter. He is a free man and able to make whatever emotional choices he wishes. Rather than attack him,

you should join with me in wishing him all the best for the future.”

Peter Harvey-Smythe’s face displayed frank incredulity at Lady Penelope’s words.

“How could such an angel ever come to love a blackguard like my brother?” demanded Harvey-Smythe with bitterness in his voice. As he spoke, his eyes rested on the little table with the pile of letters on it, and from there he gazed at the fire which was burning brightly due to the recent infusion of paper.

“At least I see,” he began, “that you are beginning to displace the rogue from his usurped place in your heart.”

At these words Lady Penelope blushed slightly.

“I assure you that I wish him well for the future, but it is clearly time for me to forget one who does not love me. I admit to some present pain, but it will pass ... yes, it will pass,” she ended wistfully.

“Allow me to present you with some news which may permit you to forget the scoundrel more quickly,” he said. “We have discovered that my brother and Madame Romanskaya have temporarily halted their round-the-world trip and rented a palazzo in Venice for six months. They have several servants there with them, including

my brother's man, Alfred. Terrible rumours suggest nightly arguments of a ferocious nature between James and Madame Romanskaya's 'brother,' Vladimir, who is reputed to be not her brother at all, but her lover!"

At these words Lady Penelope covered her ears and flashed a warning of her eyes at her former fiancé's brother.

"Do not speak such things in my presence. Although your brother is no longer my fiancé, I cannot believe—will not believe—that he could do anything really dishonourable. I am sure you are wrong and that Vladimir is truly no more than Madame Romanskaya's brother."

In spite of the certainty of her words, Lady Penelope's voice shook a little as she spoke. Peter Harvey-Smythe gazed at the wronged woman with tenderness and the suspicion of tears in his eyes.

"What a great soul you have to forgive the villain so," he muttered thickly. "If only you had loved me rather than him: I would never have let you down in such a way."

At these words Lady Penelope raised her hand in a sign of protest. She knew very well that Peter Harvey-

Smythe had been in love with her for some time, but now was not the time to speak of that.

“Please stop,” she whispered in an almost inaudible voice.

Peter Harvey-Smythe at once recognised that he had gone too far and begged to be pardoned of Lady Penelope: “Forgive me, my dear Penelope, for adding to your burden at this terrible time. I have been much excited by this terrible turn of events. I will return and see you again when I am better able to control the mix of passions which at present contend within me”—and with a swift bow the brother of Lady Penelope’s former fiancé was gone. For a moment the wronged woman gazed searchingly into the fire. After a few moments, however, she recommenced the destruction of the letters.

Some weeks later it became known that James Harvey-Smythe and Svetlana Romanskaya were to marry in Venice. It also became common knowledge that the former had insured his life for the sum of ten thousand pounds sterling with a highly reputed firm of London life

insurers; the entire total of which, in the event of his death, should go to Madame Romanskaya. Harvey-Smythe's brother saw connivance and the possibility of criminal mischief in this latter provision, though Lady Penelope did her best not to take an interest in all the rumours and gossip about her former fiancé's actions in Venice. She threw herself into the round of society events and was frequently to be seen at the opera, the theatre, and occasionally even the ballroom. However, in spite of these sociable activities, it was noted that Lady Penelope remained sad and strangely isolated. She was rarely accompanied by young men in her social rounds, and her most common companion was her own younger sister, Netty. The company of Peter Harvey-Smythe she avoided altogether, being still unable at this time to forget her previous close relationship with his elder brother.

In this way the spring and summer passed, and in late June it was heard that Harvey-Smythe and Madame Romanskaya had married in Venice. On hearing this expected but still unwelcome news, Lady Penelope had embarked on an American trip with her parents and sister. It was only on her return to London, nearly six

months later, that she became apprised of the fact that James Harvey-Smythe lay at death's door in the old palazzo in Venice where he had ensconced himself months earlier with his bride to be, Madame Romanskaya. The rumour was that he had caught a bad cold in November and, thinking nothing of it, had continued to venture out in the bitter winter months. By the middle of December he was suffering with double pneumonia and, at the time of Lady Penelope's return to London on the twenty-second of December, little hope was given for his recovery. Indeed, two days after Christmas, in the last days of the year 1889, it was reported on the society grapevine that James Harvey-Smythe had breathed his last on Christmas day itself inside the old Venetian palazzo that had originally been hired to celebrate his nuptials with Madame Romanskaya, but which had now become the tomb in which his earthly remains temporarily rested.

The effect of all this bad news on Lady Penelope was pitiful to behold. The American trip had by no means cured her of the melancholy which, in spite of herself, still gnawed at her heart in the aftermath of her breakup with her former fiancé. Now the news of James Harvey-

Smythe's death caused her to reflect on the many good times she had enjoyed with her former fiancé during the course of their five-year relationship, and the more she dwelt on these, the more she wept inconsolably—even to the point of seriously alarming her distraught parents and sister. At last it was determined that Lady Penelope should embark on a European tour with her parents and sister Netty. Logistics were set in motion and the journey of recuperation was scheduled to begin in a month's time. However, unwelcome news reached Lady Penelope's ears just days after her shock at hearing of her former fiancé's death—and Peter Harvey-Smythe was the bearer of this news.

He appeared at Lady Penelope's parents' house one Tuesday morning and insisted on speaking with their daughter. Almost against her better judgement, Lady Penelope allowed the brother of her dead ex-fiancé to be shown into her boudoir. However, as soon as Peter Harvey-Smythe entered her room, Lady Penelope regretted her decision. Peter's face was black like thunder and it was clear that something had enraged him. This clear surmise was fully confirmed as Peter began to speak.

“That she-devil has wasted no time. Already she has contacted the insurer’s office and asked to collect on the ten thousand pounds. Fortunately the senior directors of that company see my brother’s recent life policy and unexpected death as being suspicious in the first degree and have dispatched two senior employees of the company to Venice in order to investigate the details of the case. It is my firm belief that they will discover a heinous murder carried out by Madame Romanskaya and her ‘brother,’ Vladimir.”

At these words Lady Penelope sank faintly into a chair. Quite frankly she didn’t know what to think. Certainly it seemed very suspicious that James should be convinced to take out an insurance policy on his life and then die only months later. Nevertheless, Lady Penelope’s kind and trusting nature could not believe that anyone in the world could be evil enough to marry for money alone and then inherit by murdering her husband. Surely the very thought was incredible? And yet...

“As James’s brother,” continued Peter Harvey-Smythe, “I have convinced the insurance company to keep me informed of their investigations in Venice. At

the first suspicion of foul play, I will travel out to Venice and add my influence and resources to theirs in making sure the guilty party—or parties—is brought to justice and made to pay for what all reasonable people must believe has been a horrible crime perpetrated on the very life of my brother James.”

At Peter's words Lady Penelope attempted to rise from her chair but her legs would only half obey her mind's command and she buckled at the knees as she tried to get up.

Lady Penelope had fainted.



Two weeks after the distressing scene in Lady Penelope's boudoir, Peter Harvey-Smythe received the following letter from the insurance company:

Dear Mr. Harvey-Smythe,

Our representatives in Venice have now communicated their full findings to us, and it is our conclusion that your brother was not the victim of foul play. Nor is there a shred of evidence that your brother's taking out of a life policy in recent times was in any way connected with his tragic death.

On arrival at the palazzo in Venice where your brother spent his last days, our representatives were very civilly welcomed by Madame Romanskaya's brother, Vladimir. Madame Romanskaya herself was said to be still in a state of emotional prostration after the tragedy of her husband's death. In spite of this disappointment, our representatives were given *carte blanche* by Mr. Vladimir to investigate the circumstances of his sister's husband's death. Death certificates were produced and the reliable doctor who had attended your brother during his last illness gave his testimony.

It now appears certain that your brother caught pneumonia after suffering a soaking and failing to change his clothes promptly. At first there was no sign that Mr. James had received his death chill, and he merely complained of a bad cold. After a few days, however, the cold became a bad case of influenza and your brother took to his bed. It was at this point that Doctor Enrico Galliardi was called in for the first time, and he attended the patient for several weeks as a bout of influenza inexorably deteriorated into a case of double pneumonia.

Everything is fully documented in Doctor Galliardi's medical reports over a three-week period, and there is no room for the smallest suspicion about your brother's death. Doctor Galliardi left a day nurse with your brother for the full three weeks of his final illness, and there was no way that anything improper could have happened. Indeed, the nurse—Carla Ponte by name—is effusive about the selfless way that Madame Romanskaya devoted herself to your brother's recovery in the final weeks of his life. This devotion, according to Ponte, was made all the more admirable by the fact that your brother's personal manservant, Alfred Jones, had left your brother's service several weeks earlier due to an argument with Mr. Vladimir. My representatives did wish to know what the nature of this disagreement may have been, but the man seems to have disappeared without leaving any trace

of his present whereabouts. A sister in England was contacted, but she claims to have heard nothing from her brother in months. This sister—a certain Agnes Bulstrode by name—appears to be a most honest and reliable lady, and there is no reason not to credit her simple statement of fact.

Madame Romanskaya's brother Vladimir was not frequently present in the palazzo during most of your brother's illness, being away on business for much of the time. However, he returned a day or two before Mr. James's demise. When questioned about the argument with your brother's servant, Mr. Vladimir told us without preamble that he had caught the man stealing and had insisted that he resign and leave your brother's employ immediately. He had not denounced the man because he had known how much pain this would have given to your brother James, who had first hired the manservant many years before and trusted him implicitly.

In conclusion let me say that Doctor Galliardi himself signed your brother's death certificate, and a reputable funeral director was employed to bury Mr. James's earthly remains in a small Protestant cemetery not far from the cathedral of San Marco. All avenues of investigation have now been fully explored, and not a trace of anything untoward has been discovered. In these circumstances any further delay in payment of the ten thousand pounds life insurance policy to your husband's wife would not be justified and, indeed, might affect the hard-earned reputation for honesty and probity possessed by our company. In consequence the payment has been approved and Madame Romanskaya might be expected to receive the monies after the shortest of possible bureaucratic delays.

Wishing you good health in body and mind, I remain,
Yours sincerely, Horace Blenkinsop, Senior Partner,
Blenkinsop & Sons, Insurers and Underwriters, Baker Street,
London.

Lady Penelope wept silently in the small Protestant cemetery just ten minutes walk from Piazza San Marco. It was six months since the death of James Harvey-Smythe, and, after spending several months in the south of France, Lady Penelope and her family had finally made their way to the place where her ex-fiancé had died. More than this, they had hired out the same old palazzo where James, his wife, and the mysterious Vladimir had stayed together; tonight would be their first night in that desolate edifice.

Lady Penelope had quickly discovered the room at the top of the house where her ex-fiancé had obviously stayed during his final illness, with several personal items such as shirts and shoes still in evidence. A couple of old Italian servants, who came with the palazzo, had confirmed James's residence in the room. To Lady Penelope's surprise, they had also stated in a matter-of-fact way that Harvey-Smythe, Madame Romanskaya, and Vladimir had all possessed separate private rooms in the palazzo during the period of their stay. Lady Penelope, for

reasons of sentiment, had taken James's top floor room for her own, and her parents would stay in Madame Romanskaya's old room. Netty had taken Vladimir's room. Now, while her family members were back at the palazzo settling in, Lady Penelope had come to pay her last respects at James's grave in the cemetery. The few words written on the conventional stone cross said little enough:

"James Harvey-Smythe, English Gentleman, RIP"

It struck Lady Penelope as odd that the dates of James's life had not been included. Furthermore the essentially Catholic flourish of "RIP" seemed oddly out of place in this sober little Protestant cemetery. Lady Penelope speculated that Madame Romanskaya might not have known the year in which her husband had been born, and the "RIP" might be explained if an essentially Catholic sensibility had prepared the little Protestant burial. Lady Penelope didn't know to which branch of the faith Madame Romanskaya belonged, but, given her obviously Slavic origins, a Catholic or Orthodox background was likely enough; and to a Protestant sensibility, Catholic and Orthodox amounted to very much the same thing.

Lady Penelope gave a deep sigh and muttered a contrite prayer. With all her heart she tried to let go of any unresolved negative feelings that might still exist in her heart toward James. Just a short time ago she and the man who now lay stretched before her, dead, had envisioned a future life together, but destiny had parted them and extinguished the candle of James Harvey-Smythe's mortal existence; in that drear moment of realisation, Lady Penelope felt that her own future life would never be so innocent nor so carefree again.

Peter Harvey-Smythe laid Lady Penelope's letter from Venice aside with an attitude of utter stupefaction. What he had read therein had shaken him to the core of his being. For a moment he merely stared unseeingly into space with the air of a man whose wits had been unexpectedly assaulted and dispersed. Finally, after some minutes had passed, he took up the letter again and began to read it for a second time.

Dear Peter,

If you loved your brother or have any pride in your family honour, you must immediately put aside whatever you may be doing at this time and travel to Venice. Events have occurred which I am hardly able to relate, but I must harden my resolve in the interests of your brother and his family's honour. Oh dear God, how hard it is for me to write this, but the truth is that your brother did not die a natural death. He was murdered! How hard it must be for you to accept that hardest of truths, but let me relate to you what has happened and then you will draw your own final conclusions. I am confident that they will prove to be the same as mine.

As you know, our family had rented out the same palazzo where James had died for our place of domicile during what was to have been our brief stay in Venice. On the first day, I visited James's little plot in the Protestant cemetery and experienced the most lugubrious feelings of desolation during my visit there. On returning to the palazzo, I questioned the Italian servants who had been in service throughout James's final illness about his last days. Of course, they merely confirmed what we already knew: James had taken a chill after a soaking and, partly due to his own lack of care, had allowed this chill to degenerate into a bad case of pneumonia. The servants were present during the whole final illness and knew Dr. Galliardi as a pure and honest man. The doctor, they told us, had done everything he could to save my brother and, when the inevitable came to pass and he finally slipped away, had signed the death certificate in their presence.

The servants all had high words of praise for Madame Romanskaya and her "brother," Vladimir, who had nursed your brother throughout his illness (they insisted) in the kindest and most patient way. They confirmed the realtor's story about their hurried final departure after the burial and the visit of the London insurer's men. Madame Romanskaya, heartbroken at her husband's death, broke out herself into a dangerous illness that lasted several days. Dr. Galliardi was

consulted and came to the conclusion that Madame Romanskaya's constitution had broken down under the strain of nursing her husband and that she was now threatened with brain fever. The doctor's advice was clear: a change of air and situation was now vital to her own good health. Under this advice Vladimir bought two tickets on a cruise ship to New York, and, on a date that couldn't have been very much after the time Madame Romanskaya received the insurance check from London, she and her "brother" left Venice for Genoa with the intention of catching a cruise boat to the United States. All this has been confirmed to me personally by Doctor Galliardi himself. I also spoke with the funeral director who buried your brother, and he corroborates everything the doctor and the servants say about what happened (at least in regard to the burial itself).

After having both heard and confirmed this woeful testimony, there seemed nothing for me to do but regret my earlier suspicions of Madame Romanskaya and her brother. Both Dr. Galliardi and the funeral director (Cesare Orsino by name) who organised your brother's burial are honourable men: they would never perjure themselves for financial gain. As I say, I began to feel that we had badly misjudged the whole case and that Madame Romanskaya and her brother deserved our contrite thanks rather than the suspicious enmity we had maintained toward them up until that point.

Resolving to stay in Venice for no longer than five days, I went to sleep that night in a contrite frame of mind. I was lying in the very room, indeed in the very same bed, where James had passed his time in Venice, fallen ill, and eventually died. Somehow I felt that, by performing this action for the period of my stay, the departed James would know of my continuing concern and good wishes for him, even from beyond the grave. The bed was a big four-poster and very comfortable. In just a few moments after lying down, I was sleeping soundly—and soon I began to dream.

In my dream I saw a glowing, spectral something, descending slowly from the high roof of the room. At first I was unable to make out what it was, but as the object continued its slow descent, I suddenly realised that I was looking at a disembodied head! I screamed, but in the horror of my dream, no sound was omitted from my open mouth. The head eventually came to a halt when it was several feet above my bed and glowed above me.

Peter, I have never seen anything so hideous in all my life! The face was completely unrecognisable, seeming to have suffered terrible disfigurement from the use of acids and other chemicals, and the horrible eyelids appeared to be gummed down in some strange way over the hollow-looking eye sockets themselves.

For an indeterminate period of time, I gazed at the unknown head in an agony of fear and revulsion until suddenly I heard a prolonged screaming and by degrees became aware that the screams were my own. As I suddenly tore myself from the grip of some dark power and rose myself up to wakefulness, the terrible head disappeared and I heard a loud knocking and shouting at my door: my parents and sister had been awakened by my screams and had come to the door of my room to investigate their cause. Naturally I immediately poured out my story to the members of my sceptical family who, perhaps understandably enough, were inclined to view my whole tale as the nightmare of an impressionable young woman who was sleeping in the same room where her ex-fiancé had died. Of course, they insisted on my changing rooms and I am at present sleeping with my sister.

My dear Peter, please believe me when I say that it is my sincere belief that something horrible took place in that room connected with the death of James. Apparently he died peacefully enough and is buried with all Christian ceremony in the little Protestant cemetery. However, I cannot but believe that some diabolical outrage was perpetrated on your brother

in that room. Is it not natural enough that his poor dumb and neglected spirit took the opportunity of communicating this horrible fact to me, one who had loved him dearly in life and still—in spite of everything—continues to revere his memory in death?

I can write no more. Peter, if you wish to redress a terrible injury done to the honour of your family and to the very soul of your brother, take an immediate train to Italy from London and join us here in Venice as soon as possible. I will do all in my power to detain my family in this place for longer than the five days that we originally intended to stay here. There is a dark and terrible mystery at the root of the horrible vision I experienced, and with your help I intend to get to the bottom of it so that James, your brother, can rest in peace.

Please send me a letter stating your intentions and timetable before you leave London. Likely enough it will arrive before you do yourself and, in this case, I will do all I can to meet you at the station. However, in case of any mix-up, you are already well acquainted with the address of the palazzo where your brother died.

Waiting anxiously for your letter and arrival, I am your good friend,

Penelope Carstairs.

After the completion of this second reading, Peter Harvey-Smythe groaned and, with the whitest of white faces, moved across to a little writing table on which stood paper and ink. Without a moment's further hesitation he sat down at the little table and began to write. Ten minutes later he rang the bell and instructed

his manservant to have a letter posted immediately. After that, he rose and walked quickly into the library from where he took up a well-thumbed book.

It was a London train timetable.

“I think you must try and see what happens.”

Lady Penelope was speaking earnestly to Peter Harvey-Smythe on the veranda of the Venice palazzo where her family was staying. The latter had arrived in Venice earlier that same day, and, after making a hearty lunch with all the Carstairs family members present, Lady Penelope and the new arrival had moved out on to the veranda to speak in private about the real object of his visit. Peter had just tentatively suggested that he was ready to sleep in his brother's room that very night, and Lady Penelope had replied in the manner related above. In the light of Lady Penelope's response, Peter Harvey-Smythe moved his legs uncomfortably in front of him and tried to communicate his somewhat complicated and subtle view of Lady Penelope's disturbing experience.

“Of course, I agree it’s extremely unusual and that what you saw in the room was most distressing, yet you must acknowledge that your strange experience might have been no more than a particularly bad nightmare.”

Lady Penelope shook her head in a decided rebuttal of Peter’s words.

“No, no, it was far more than that, Peter. It is impossible for me to fully convey to you the grotesque reality of what happened. You must simply spend the night in the room yourself and tell me of your own experiences on the following morning.”

Peter Harvey-Smythe looked uneasy about something after Lady Penelope had finished speaking, and, after a moment’s pause he began to make his deepest reservation known to the beautiful lady who stood beside him.

“My dear Penelope, you know the bad relations that existed between my brother and me. Even if everything you say is true, why in heaven’s name should James reveal himself to me in the same way that he has revealed himself to you?”

Lady Penelope waved these words away with a sudden, dismissive flutter of her hand.

“Whatever disagreements you may have had with James, he was still your brother and that is a profound personal connection. Whenever James spoke to me of you, Peter, it was always clear to me that he held your honesty and integrity in the very highest regard. Now I feel sure that James will take this opportunity of communicating with you, at least he will if you keep an open mind and give him a reasonable opportunity of establishing a connection.”

At Lady Penelope's words, Peter Harvey Smythe's face became resolute.

“Certainly I am ready to put your theory to the test, Penelope, and see what happens,” he replied with the doggedness of one who may doubt, but is yet determined to please. “But what about your parents?” he added suddenly. “Perhaps they will not want me to stay in James's room this evening.”

Lady Penelope gave a little smile and took Peter's hand gently in her own.

“Why on earth not, Peter? It is the most natural thing in the world for you to want to stay in your late brother's room during your short stay with us. Indeed, I

have already informed my family that this is your wish, and everything has already been arranged in the matter.”

After Lady Penelope had spoken, Peter Harvey-Smythe felt there was only one thing left for him to say—and he duly said it: “All right, my dear Lady Penelope. Tonight I will sleep in my deceased brother’s room, and if his spirit should wish to communicate with me, it shall certainly have its chance!”

That night Peter Harvey-Smythe retired to his room early, declaring himself sorely tired after his long journey. Indeed, this was the truth and, after a mere five or ten minutes, he fell into a deep and profound sleep. As he lay dormant in that strange limbo land between life and death, strange visions came to him concerning his brother. He viewed the apartment in which he lay as it was when his brother was alive and still resided in it. There in a corner of the room sat James himself writing something in a hurried and distracted manner. After a moment a lady, surely Madame Romanskaya, stepped into the room and began to speak.

"Tell me, James, why do you treat your own wife with such clear disdain? What have I done to justify such contemptuous treatment?"

At these words James turned round with a snarl on his lips.

"You confounded sorceress, what unholy enchantment did you use to make me love you? To think that I betrayed the sweetest lady who ever lived in order to join my destiny with that of a harlot! I am now writing to the insurers in England telling them of my determination to divorce you and revoke the life insurance policy which I foolishly agreed to sign under your accursed influence."

Madame Romanskaya looked at her husband more in sorrow than in anger.

"Why have you come to hate me so, James? Tell me what crime I have committed toward you?"

At these words James's face turned crimson and he pointed an accusing finger at Madame Romanskaya, a finger that trembled excitedly in the air.

"What have you done? What have you done?" shouted James in the very extremity of human anger and consternation. "You have deceived me criminally about

Vladimir, who I am now quite certain is no brother of yours. He is your accursed lover and I know that you go to him every night. My man Alfred has seen you slip out of your own room and go to Vladimir's in the early hours of the new day. You are a deceptive fiend who only married me for status and money."

Madame Romanskaya replied in what seemed a small and offended voice: "I am sure you do not really believe that, James. Vladimir is truly no more than my brother, and, if your servant has occasionally seen me entering my brother's room at strange hours, that may easily be explained by the fact that Vladimir is currently engaged on writing a biography of Tsar Ivan—known in English as the 'Terrible'—and he frequently works on it through the night. Occasionally he summons me at odd hours to help him revise particularly difficult sections of his work. There is no mystery and no evil design in all this."

Toward these attempts at soothing away his suspicions, James was dismissive and brutal.

"You are no better than a common prostitute," he shouted, almost completely losing control of himself. "Indeed, you are far worse than a prostitute as you are deceitful and evil in your actions too. Leave me alone."

At these words Madame Romanskaya merely gave a little strange bow and laid down a bottle of port and a glass on the table in front of her husband. After doing this, she turned, walked back to the room's entrance, and opened the door. From the open doorway she merely said, "I hope the port will help to clear your head," before closing the doorway behind her.

After she had left the room, James poured himself a glass of port and swallowed it in a single gulp before continuing with his frantic writing. After some moments his writing became less frenetic, and suddenly the pen with which he had been writing dropped from his fingers. Moments later he slumped down in the chair in which he had been sitting, apparently in some profound sleep.

An indeterminate period of time passed before Madame Romanskaya returned into the room accompanied by a swarthy Slavic-looking man. The man and woman observed the slumped form of James Harvey-Smythe without surprise. Next, Madame Romanskaya spoke.

"We acted just in time, Vladimir. He was already writing the cancellation of the life insurance policy when

I entered the room. The question is, what should we do next?"

The man called Vladimir seemed to ponder the question deeply for a moment. After a while, he spoke: "We are faced with a difficult problem. We cannot allow him to cancel the policy, but to kill him now, under the present circumstances, would be an act of folly that would be sure to lead to our discovery. Let us for the present time take him down into the basement where I keep my laboratory and tell everyone—including his manservant, Alfred—that he is currently unwell with a fever. In this way we may gain some precious time to think things over and decide upon our next step. I think it is also in our interest to send Alfred to the pharmacy in order to take some medicines for his master. In that way he is less likely to suspect what has really happened to his master."

Madame Romanskaya merely nodded her head submissively at Vladimir's words and then the two conspirators passed out of the room, being careful to lock it behind them.

Peter Harvey Smythe's "dream" continued now in a different place—the large reception room downstairs—and at a different time. James's manservant, Alfred, had just returned from the pharmacy with some medicines in a packet, but he was soaked from head to foot, white as a sheet and trembling violently. Vladimir looked him up and down in some obvious surprise before addressing himself to the man.

"Alfred, in your hurry to help your master, you didn't take an umbrella with you, and now I fear you may soon be as ill as he unless you change your clothes immediately and take a hot bath."

The little white face seemed transfigured with horror as the manservant made his reply: "I am afraid it is even worse than that, sir. Some years ago I suffered the most terrible attack of brain fever after having been caught out in the rain overnight during a military manoeuvre—I was a soldier at the time, sir. Although I hung at death's door for several weeks, by some miracle I didn't die. However, the doctors assured me that if I ever got another drenching in similar circumstances, my death was assured. I am a dead man, sir. Of that you can be sure."

Once more the scene shifted strangely, and suddenly Madame Romanskaya and the man called Vladimir were standing outside the palazzo on the same veranda on which Lady Penelope had spoken to Peter Harvey-Smythe shortly after his arrival. Madame Romanskaya was speaking.

“So the manservant has agreed to our plan, Vladimir?”

The man so addressed nodded his head thoughtfully.

“Yes, my dear. He now knows everything and has agreed to our plan. In return for five hundred pounds to be immediately sent to the unmarried mother of his child—I have already signed the check and sent it off to the given address—our man will go through with the pretence of playing the dying role of James Harvey-Smythe. The man speaks well enough and the doctors will never suspect that they are not attending on the last illness of the real gentleman himself. Of course, they will never have seen him before and they clearly possess no idea of what the true Lord James Harvey-Smyth looks like. When the little farce has finally played itself out, our

most respectable doctor will sign the most respectable of death certificates and the funeral director will arrange for the most respectable of Protestant burials. I feel our plan cannot now fail—though I admit we have been lucky.”

In spite of Vladimir’s assurances, Madame Romanskaya still looked uneasy and her nervousness was confirmed when she spoke.

“But what shall we do with the real man, Vladimir? At present, as you know, he lies drugged and bound in your makeshift laboratory in the cellar. We cannot leave him there forever, and if, as I suppose, it will eventually be necessary to kill him, what on earth shall we do with the body? Furthermore, what about the daily Italian servants? What will they say?”

After finishing her questions, Madame Romanskaya looked gravely into the eyes of her companion, clearly assured that the man would be able to provide satisfactory solutions to her doubts. In this, Vladimir did not disappoint her.

“Why, the Italian servants pose no problem at all. During our time here your dear husband has constantly kept to his room and only ventured out on the rarest of occasions. I am convinced that none of them have any

clear idea of how Harvey-Smythe looks as a man. The manservant, Alfred, has also kept to his master's suite of rooms and rarely, if ever, come into contact with the Italians. You and I shall support his lordship in his final illness, and we will not allow the Italian day servants to come anywhere near him. So far I see no difficulty that stands in the way of our little plan."

Madame Romanskaya looked relieved by Vladimir's words, but she asked another question: "And his lordship himself?"

In response to these words, Vladimir's eyes glittered though his lips broke into a tranquil smile.

"As for his lordship himself," he answered calmly, "we must rid ourselves of him as soon as possible. As you know, my chemical experiments have been in the area of developing strong dissolving agents. Now we will be able to make some use of my careful scientific experiments and simply make the body of Lord James dissolve away into thin air."

After uttering these words, an evil-sounding thin little laugh emanated from Vladimir's pale thin lips, and Madame Romanskaya, finally confident that her partner had thought of an answer to all essential questions, gently

rested her head on his shoulder and spoke only the following six words:

“Oh Vladimir, how I love you!”



The unearthly “dream” suddenly shifted its flexible time and place again. Madame Romanskaya and Vladimir were once again alone, but this time they were back in James Harvey-Smythe’s room. On the bed lay the obviously dead manservant, Alfred, who had played out his role as James Harvey-Smythe faithfully to its final denouement. Madame Romanskaya and Vladimir talked in loud whispers at the foot of the bed.

“That old fool of a doctor took his time over signing the death certificate,” observed Madame Romanskaya, spitefully.

Vladimir nodded his head calmly. “Yes, he did my dear. But, believe me, he was completely without suspicion. It is merely the way of these pompous medical men to make a grand fuss on such occasions. Now we must quickly arrange the funeral; after that, we can sit

back and wait for our check to arrive before leaving Venice forever.”

Vladimir gave his dark chuckle once again. As he finished, Madame Romanskaya asked a question: “And the body will be completely dissolved before we finally leave?”

At this question Vladimir began to exhibit signs of some apparent unease.

“Everything should be fine,” he began in a voice that lacked a sense of absolute certitude. “The skeleton is taking rather longer to dissipate itself than I had hoped. Nevertheless, everything should be gone by the time the check arrives.”

Madame Romanskaya looked at Vladimir with a look of clear alarm in her face.

“Vladimir, my nerves are shot to pieces. I cannot stay in this place an hour longer than is absolutely necessary. Please tell me that everything will be completed on time.”

The man Vladimir gently took Madame Romanskaya’s little hand in his own and kissed it. Next he kissed her on the forehead. After this he smiled and uttered the following ten words confidently enough:

"Don't worry, my dear. Everything will be finished on time."

The time and scene shift again, and now Madame Romanskaya and Vladimir were back on the veranda again in earnest communication with each other. At this moment it was Vladimir who was speaking in some agitation.

"There is nothing I can do. The dissolving process took longer than I anticipated, and I cannot make the head disappear in less than another two weeks."

Madame Romanskaya seemed to almost swoon at these words.

"Oh Vladimir," she began, "you were so sure that everything would be finished in time. I am sorry, but I refuse to stay in this house for another two weeks. We now have the check from London and it is most expedient that we embark on our journey to America immediately. I cannot stay here for even another unnecessary day; two weeks is quite out of the question."

With these words Madame Romanskya buried her face in her hands and began to sob uncontrollably. Vladimir put his hand under her chin, lifted her face gently upward, and kissed her tenderly on the lips. After that, he began to speak in a low tone.

“Perhaps there is a way we can get away immediately, my dear. As you know, I take an interest in medieval architecture, and during our time here I have read several books on the history and construction of the type of palazzo we are living in. All of this literature confirms the idea that this style of palazzo invariably included a secret hiding hole in the master’s bedroom. It was not the aim to hide a person in this hollow, but to provide a secret spot where important documents and valuables might be hidden from the prying eyes of visitors and servants. Let me tell you immediately, my dear, that I have discovered the secret of this hiding place in the duke’s bedroom. It is not a large space, but possesses enough room for us to secrete an unwanted head inside it. No one else is ever likely to discover the hiding place, but even if they do, how will they know that the object inside is his lordship’s head? After all, it is well-known to everyone here that your husband died after a short illness and now rests

peacefully in the Protestant cemetery. I will so disfigure the features of the face that no one will ever be able to say that this is the head of James Harvey-Smythe. What do you say to this new suggestion, my dear?"

As Vladimir finished speaking, it was to be observed that Madame Romanskaya's face, now smiling and radiant, was looking at him both steadily and adoringly.

"You are so very intelligent, Vladimir," she began with an unutterable relief clearly expressed on her beautiful features. "We will follow your new plan exactly and be out of this accursed place by tomorrow!"

It was now the following morning and Peter Harvey-Smythe had just narrated the content of his previous night's "dream," while sleeping in his brother's room, to Lady Penelope. The time was not yet seven, and the other inhabitants of the house continued to sleep soundly. Lady Penelope and Peter had taken a frugal breakfast together, during which Peter's astounding story had been told. Only one old Italian servant waited on them and the two young people only spoke when they

were quite sure he was out of the room. At length Lady Penelope told the old man in very respectable Italian that he could leave them alone. As soon as the servant had departed, Lady Penelope took Peter's hand in her own with a gentle compassion in her eyes. After a moment she spoke.

"So now we know everything. Poor James was murdered for the insurance money, and those two devils fled to America after receiving their check. The man who lies in James's grave is not James at all, but his treacherous manservant, Alfred. The body of poor James has been dispersed to the four winds, but something yet remains of him in the room in which we have slept."

Peter Harvey-Smythe nodded his head lugubriously. He looked ghastly and white after his experience of the previous night.

"A very correct assessment," he began in a voice that shook slightly as he spoke. "And we will need that 'object' in order to make a case against the two murderers."

Lady Penelope looked at Peter in an uncertain way.

"But what about the manservant, Alfred? Can't we just have his body exhumed? Everyone will be able to see immediately that it isn't James."

Peter shook his head slowly.

"I think we must have some proof of our case before we ask for an exhumation. Coroners will not help us unless they feel there is a case to answer, and ghostly dreams will not hold up in a court of law."

Lady Penelope nodded her head in quiet agreement.

"We must find the 'object' then, Peter. But how? We might look for years and never find the secret compartment which we know must exist."

Peter looked at Penelope searchingly with the beginnings of several ideas in his mind.

"No doubt I can find the same books and documents that Vladimir found. However, it's likely enough that he will have seen significance in things that I might not even notice. A better plan might be to question everyone who has known about this palazzo in the past. I don't believe that any of the present servants know anything about the secret compartment, but we might be able to find out the names of servants who worked here years ago; perhaps we might also discover the names of past

owners of the building who are still living. It is possible that someone amongst these people will be able to tell us something about the secret apartment.”

Lady Penelope was able to see the merit in this idea immediately.

“Yes, yes, it’s possible that someone from the past might know something. But how can we find the people we so urgently need to speak with?”

Peter looked at Lady Penelope with a light of hope in his eyes.

“First, I will go to see the realtor who lets this building. Perhaps he can help us. If not, I have some other ideas.”

Lady Penelope took Peter tenderly by the hand.

“I do so hope we can get to the bottom of this terrible tragedy,” she began earnestly. “James’s spirit must be allowed to rest in peace.”



Peter had some initial luck with his enquiries. The present owner of the palazzo (who knew nothing of secret compartments in the house) was able to put him in touch

with the previous owner of twenty years ago. This previous owner was now over eighty years of age and nearing his mortal end. He lived in a comfortable hospital-home in some luxury. The address given by the present owner was of a village some twenty miles distant from Venice itself, and Peter was able to hire a carriage early enough to ensure his return to Venice later on the same day.

The old man's name was Carlo di Renzotto and he looked at Peter with disinterested eyes as the nurse led him into the little drawing room where he spent most of his waking hours. He was dressed, even now, in the fashionable clothes of a dandy, but Peter had rarely seen a living creature who looked so thin. The fashionable clothes hung upon the old man like expensive rags on a skeleton, and instinctively Peter was aware that he stood in the presence of one who was "not long for this world" (as people like to put it). Perhaps, thought Peter, he had been just in time in tracing the whereabouts of Carlo di Renzotto. Peter's Italian was quite accomplished, and he began in as polite a manner as he could.

"Signore, sono davvero felice di averti trovato prima di lasciare la Venezia. Ho un affare importante di seguire qui, e

lei sia l'unico uomo chi puo' aiutarmi di raggiungere la fine che spero."

Peter hoped that his ornate compliments to Signore Renzotto as the only man in Venice who could help him in his hour of need, would have its affect on the old man. After a moment Signore Renzotto replied in equally formal terms, informing Peter that he would do whatever lay within his power to aid him in his important enquiries in Venice. Having heard these words of invitation, Peter lost no time in asking the old man about the palazzo in which he used to live. Had there been a secret compartment somewhere within the master bedroom, a place where important items might be hidden? At these questions the old man laughed outright. If Peter Harvey-Smythe was some kind of treasure hunter, then he, Carlo di Renzotto, could assure him that he was addressing the matter of the secret compartment at least one hundred years too late. There *was* such a compartment in the master bedroom of the old palazzo, and, indeed, it had contained jewels worth thousands of British pounds. However, everything had been discovered a generation before he, Carlo di Renzotto, had occupied the villa. In his time the secret compartment had contained nothing

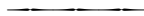
more interesting than a few dead mice, and he had only bothered to open it two or three times in the whole thirty years in which he had resided in the villa. Mr. Peter Harvey-Smythe should forget all about any tales of undiscovered treasure he had heard pertaining to the palazzo.

At the old man's words Peter's heart seemed to skip a beat. There *was* a secret compartment in the master bedroom of the old palazzo, and this dying man knew where it was and how to open it! Peter hurriedly assured Carlo di Renzotto that he was not a treasure hunter, but merely an architect interested in the construction secrets of old buildings. As Signore Renzotto was aware, he was now residing in the old palazzo for a short period of time and he wished to thoroughly investigate the old building's secrets from top to bottom before he left. Would Signore Renzotto, under these circumstances, kindly inform him of where the secret compartment was and how it should be opened?

Carlo di Renzotto, always speaking in his florid and baroque Italian, replied in the affirmative. The secret compartment lay behind the small bookcase on the left wall of the room as one entered. On top of this bookcase

was a small bust of the divine Dante which on close inspection would be found to be firmly secured to the bookcase on which it stood. The palm of one's right hand should be placed on the bottom of Dante's chin and the head pressed upward. A movement in the desired direction would then take place, and subsequently the front of the little bookcase would turn outward, revealing the secret compartment beyond.

Peter thanked the man profusely and took his leave of the old dandy with a hundred epithets of pleasure. The secret was now known to him and soon the old compartment would offer up its fearsome, but vital "object" to both his own eyes and to those of Lady Penelope.



It was seven a.m. the following day, and, after an early breakfast, Lady Penelope and Peter Harvey-Smythe had, by a prearranged plan, gone up to the currently empty master bedroom in order to see if, using the old man's instructions, they could find and open the secret compartment. As they entered the room and glanced to

their left, the small bookcase, with its severe bust of Dante on top, presented itself clearly to their eyes. With no more than a moment's hesitation, Peter strode up to the bookcase and placed his palm under the chin of Dante. Lady Penelope was right behind him, and, as he pushed the chin upward and the whole head moved off in a vertical direction, she gave a little gasp. This gasp was occasioned by the sight of the bookcase swivelling suddenly outward and revealing a dark compartment behind.

Within a single moment Peter was on his knees, groping around inside the hidden recess which lay behind the bookcase. Behind him Lady Penelope called a question.

"Can you see anything, Peter? Does there seem to be anything inside?"

Peter had just taken a match from his pocket and lit it. There was nothing right in front of him, but as he searched the recesses of the little compartment, he caught sight of a small canvas bag, pushed away in the far corner. He communicated as much to Lady Penelope, who with a trembling voice told him to retrieve the bag and bring it outside where they could both look at it.

Peter did this and backed out of the dingy hole with the small canvas bag in his hand. Blowing out his match, Peter rose to his feet and quickly transported the “object” over to a table in the centre of the room. Lady Penelope followed him, though she knew herself to be in a highly agitated state of nerves. On arriving at the central table, Peter pulled off the string on the top of the bag and emptied its contents onto the table. Through nervousness, he allowed the contents of the bag to bounce off the edge of the table onto the floor, and, as the round object rolled some little distance across the carpet, a small gold artifact detached itself from the main round form and came to rest a few inches away. Lady Penelope gave a horrible scream as, terror-stricken, she recognised what the object in the bag was or had once been. Peter Harvey-Smythe, for his part, went pale as a sheet and felt sure he was about to buckle at the knees.

There, lying on the floor just a few feet away from them, was the decapitated head of a man—or something that had once been the head of a man. Now the grisly face, clearly treated with chemicals and acids to hide its identity, looked up at them with a terrible leer like some

devil from hell. A single word escaped from Lady Penelope's lips before she swooned onto the floor.

"James ..."



Jeremiah Fox, Esq., famous dental surgeon of Kensington, London, carefully examined the small gold object that had arrived in the post that morning in tandem with a letter—a letter that had been surprising enough in its purport. Mr. Fox laid down the golden object which he had been examining, feeling sure that his careful perusal had confirmed the issue in question beyond the shadow of a single doubt. He now picked up his pen and began to write. After some time he finished the letter and addressed an envelope. Before placing the letter inside the envelope, he read it through one more time.

Dear Mr. Harvey-Smythe,

There can be no doubt that the partial denture you have included with your letter was made by me, last year, for your late brother, James Harvey-Smythe. I have no idea of the precise reasons why you should possess such a deep interest in this matter, months after your brother's untimely demise

(though your conjectures have disturbed me greatly), but certainly both my records and my own eyes confirm that the partial denture you have sent me is no other than the upper canines I made in ceramic and gold for your brother. As requested, I will retain the denture in a place of safety on the assumption (the truth of which you assure me in your letter) that it will soon be needed by Scotland Yard to assist them in the investigation of a particularly horrific murder.

*I am and remain your humble servant, Jeremiah Fox,
Dental Surgeon, FRSDS*

It was ten weeks later and the body in the small Protestant cemetery in Venice had been exhumed and identified as that of James Harvey-Smythe's manservant, Alfred. The evidence of the denture had been enough to facilitate this. Soon it was widely known to both British and continental police that a most terrible murder had taken place in the old Venetian palazzo, and that the perpetrators of this murder had escaped scot-free to America with their ill-gotten gains. The European police had quickly communicated the circumstances of the case to their American counterparts, and after a nationwide search Vladimir had been traced to a small town in Los Angeles, California, called "Hollywood." He was living a

life of some opulence there with a young American girl, Lily, who was only seventeen years old. Apparently, only halfway across the Atlantic Ocean, Madame Romanskaya had become violently sick with something that the ship's doctor had diagnosed as "a nervous attack" and, after an illness of only a few days, had died and been buried at sea. When Vladimir, months later, had realised that the game was up, he'd refused to surrender to the police and, in consequence, had died in a Hollywood gun battle.

The mortal remains of James Harvey-Smythe (his head) had been given a Christian burial in England and his body (or head) interred with his other deceased family members in the Harvey-Smythe vault. Both Lady Penelope and Peter Harvey-Smythe had attended James's funeral, and some observant mourners noticed that the two young people, who had done most to bring the awful murder of James to light, occasionally sought extra strength by holding hands. A week later Peter had asked Lady Penelope to marry him and she had accepted his proposal with all her heart. Right now the two newlyweds were in the Highlands of Scotland enjoying their honeymoon in a rented villa in a small village where not more than one hundred and fifty people lived.

It was just after breakfast on a Monday morning, and the two young people were sat outside on the small but neat veranda. Lady Penelope had a thoughtful look on her face, and Peter, who truly worshipped the ground that she walked on, asked his wife if there was anything wrong. Her reply was immediate and to the point.

“I was just thinking about James. Do you think he would have approved of our marriage?”

Peter Harvey-Smythe gave a non-committal shrug of his shoulders. He had sometimes asked himself the very same question and, knowing his brother to have been an exceedingly jealous man, had answered it in the negative. However, he felt it was better not to communicate this judgement to his wife.

“I think so. Why on earth not? Poor James is no longer in the realm of the living, and I’m sure he would have wanted someone close to him to continue looking after you.” Peter, thoughtfully, did not add that, in his opinion, James had acted like a complete blackguard toward his fiancée and had brought all his terrible suffering down upon his own head. It was only thanks to the pure and kind nature of Lady Penelope that the details of his awful murder at his own wife’s hands had

become known. Suddenly Lady Penelope gave Peter's hand a little tight squeeze and looked up earnestly into his face.

"Oh Peter, poor James suffered so much and sometimes I feel his still-anxious spirit is not very far away."

For a moment Peter dwelt on what his wife had told him, and then suddenly he asked a question.

"Anxious about what?"

Lady Penelope smiled at her husband's words. They were the very ones which she had been hoping and expecting.

"Anxious that you should forgive him for what he did to you and to me, and now embrace your future destiny as my husband. He loves you and wishes you to know that he is sorry. Oh can you forgive him, Peter? Can you be noble-hearted enough to forgive your suffering brother James?"

As she said these words, Lady Penelope looked earnestly into her husband's face and her eyes began to drop great tears onto the ground below. One of these fell on her husband's hand, and, his own heart also now overcome with emotion, he held up the remnants of the

great sparkling tear to the morning sun. After some seconds he spoke in a soft and trembling voice.

“James, Penelope’s higher morality expiates you of all error in your brother’s eyes. I freely forgive you for all past wrong and beg you to forgive me in the same way. Let there be no further antagonism between us, but only the natural brotherly love that we truly owe to each other.”

Having said these words, Peter looked quickly into his wife’s face and saw it beatific and tranquil before him.

“Thank you, Peter,” she murmured softly. “Within a year you will be a father.”

Adalgisa

The best days of my life had been those spent alone with Adalgisa. I had hoped to marry her, and her parents had been indulgent to a young man's obsession. Three times a week I'd visited her home in Kensington and been ushered into the grand drawing room where Adalgisa would always be eagerly awaiting me. We had talked of many things and, toward the end, even admitted our love for each other and tentatively looked to the future as man and wife. Then suddenly everything had finished. Adalgisa had become sick and was no longer able to see anyone except for her family and a certain Serbian doctor called Baron Breszhka (a tall thin and angular gentleman with oily black hair and strange red eyes). He was an expert on obscure diseases, and apparently Adalgisa's family had come to believe that he might be able to save her from the feared end. Unfortunately my dear Adalgisa's illness proved to be beyond the skill of any mortal man to cure, and, precisely six weeks after my darling had stopped receiving me in

the beloved drawing room where I had spent the most dear days of my existence, she had died surrounded by her loving parents and relatives. After a few days of mourning, Adalgisa had been buried with the necessary religious rites and laid reverently in a cold tomb in a Kensington cemetery.

Needless to say, I was heartbroken at the tragedy that had befallen Adalgisa and all those who loved her. After her burial I became listless and depressed, and, finally, in despair at what I should do next, I'd rented some rooms on the first floor of a house that looked out on the little cemetery where Adalgisa lay buried. I had known that the idea was a morbid one, but my will to live was almost extinguished by the terrible event which had overtaken me, and it seemed to be the most natural thing in the world to want to sleep near the place where my darling Adalgisa herself slept for all eternity.

On the second night in my rented rooms, the strangest thing had happened: I'd dreamt that I'd seen Adalgisa tapping outside my window and asking to be admitted inside the room. Of course, I'd welcomed her in with all my heart—and the dear girl had somehow passed over the threshold of the window and entered the room.

She had looked on my still sleeping body with the most tender compassion in her eyes, and after a few moments she'd bent down and kissed me lovingly.

This sequence of events had continued for a week. By this time I never bothered to get up anymore, but just spent my days and nights in bed. A strange lethargy had come over me and the only thing I looked forward to was Adalgisa's nightly visits to my bedside. My landlady, concerned at the fact that I never left my room anymore, had called in the local doctor who, after closely examining me for several days, had seriously enquired if I'd ever suffered from a blood disorder. As he asked the question, he'd looked at me in a peculiar way—and I'd enquired of him, in my turn, why on earth he should feel the need to ask me such an odd question. His answer was enigmatic. He told me that on every occasion he'd examined me he'd noted that the blood in my veins was becoming thinner and less plentiful. He could only account for this strange occurrence by reference to a hereditary blood disorder of some kind. I told him straight that he was on the wrong path. No such illness existed in my family, and, in any case, I was feeling fine. Couldn't he just leave me alone and let me solve my own problems

after my own fashion? He had merely shaken his head sadly and taken his lugubrious leave of me.

When Adalgisa came to me last night, she had been in the company of the accursed Baron Breszhka. He had remained near the window while my love approached me and kissed me on the neck as normal. However, his silent presence disturbed me deeply and I began to believe that in the Baron I had a serious rival for Adalgisa's love. I resolved not to let the occurrence of his presence pass me by for a second time without comment.

Tonight I am weak, waiting in my bed for my beloved Adalgisa to visit me. At last she arrives, but once again the hated figure of the Baron is present with her: he stands broodingly near the window while Adalgisa approaches my bed and kisses me as tenderly as on every other night. This time, however, I refuse to ignore the odious figure of the Baron and I shout out some words:

“You inhuman fiend, you shall never take Adalgisa’s love from me ... never!”

The figure of the Baron at last acknowledges my existence, and his glowing red eyes bore into me like diamond-hard gimlets. Adalgisa has risen from my bedside, the night’s offering of blood dripping from her mouth, and now her master approaches too in order to take his own share of the sacred red liquid. His teeth, like Adalgisa’s before him, sink easily into my neck, and I feel the life force slowly leaving my body and entering into his. I have only time to utter four simple words before the shroud of darkness closes all around me:

“Adalgisa, I love you.”



The next morning, the body of the dead young man was discovered by his concerned landlady. She immediately summoned the doctor to come and see the man, sign the death certificate, and name the cause of his untimely death. After examining the body, the doctor spoke out plainly without the shadow of a doubt in his voice.

“My dear lady, this unfortunate man has died through loss of blood. His stark white face silently asserts the inexplicable truth: not a half pint of blood is left in his veins!”

The Man with the Staring Eyes

He was following me; I was sure of it. He'd certainly been with me since I'd arrived at Paddington Station earlier in the morning, and I had an uneasy half-memory of his presence on the train from Swansea to London. Now he stood, head looking down at a newspaper, half a carriage along as we hurtled between Paddington and King's Cross on the Circle Line.

A sense of resentment welled up inside me. I wasn't involved in espionage or criminal activity. Today I was on my way to Kettering to see my two children who had lived with their mother since our rather messy divorce six months previously. It should have been a special day, but instead this ominous and uncompromising figure had decided to attach himself to me.

At King's Cross I alighted and so did my shadow. He was ridiculously dressed in a dark homburg hat and a heavy black overcoat of Italian styling. He moved in a rather jerky and self-conscious manner, as if not really

suited to his present occupation. Anybody could have spotted him a mile off.

When I got into St. Pancras station, I bought a ticket to Kettering, and, on looking round after completing my transaction, I saw that my odd nemesis had disappeared. There were only a few minutes left before the departure of the train, so I hurried quickly past the barrier, delighted in the knowledge that I'd be travelling alone.

The journey to Kettering was uneventful, and, just after eleven a.m. I alighted at the small and rather sleepy station. There was no sign of the dark-overcoated man and I put him out of my mind once and for all. Today would be a special day with the children. I hadn't seen them for some time, as I'd been abroad for the last month on business. I was carrying a large bag containing mementoes of my time in Egypt and Turkey. I hoped they'd got my postcards safely.

Emerging from the station, I set off at a brisk walk for the town center. As an afterthought I'd had the idea to purchase some small gift there for my ex-wife. Nothing too extravagant, but something that might contribute toward keeping her sweet for the duration of my stay.

The road from the railway station to the center of the town in Kettering is quiet at the best of times, and on this particular occasion it seemed deserted. Suddenly I heard footsteps behind me, and, irritated now beyond all endurance, I turned to discover my erstwhile companion almost upon me. It was certainly time for a showdown. I stopped and waited for him to reach me. This farce had gone far enough and it was my intention to make certain things very clear.

The stranger's face was shrouded in the shadows of the homburg hat and the great turned-up lapels of the Italian overcoat as he drew up to the place where I stood.

"Who are you? What do you want?" I began, as the man came up close to me.

Suddenly he raised his head and I screamed. Great bulging eyeballs without lids and naked teeth without lips leered at me from under the hat.

"I have returned," he rasped. "I told you I would. Come with me now; you know you have no choice."

Screaming, I stumbled back toward the station as the hideous figure, hands on hips, followed my faltering steps with his bulging lidless eyes. Suddenly he threw back his head and began to cackle. This cackle slowly changed

into a great roar of lunatic laughter that pounded upon my eardrums as I continued my desperate flight toward the station.

It was a dream. I met him in a dream. But such a dream that had bridged the material and shadow realms. Was I psychic? I hadn't thought so. Had it, after all, been just a dream? Often I had hoped so, but deep down I always knew it was more sinister than that.

In 1918, some years before my marriage, I'd purchased an old house on the hill in an outlying district of Swansea. Certainly it had been a bargain at the price. Even at that stage I'd been made suspicious by the alacrity and relief with which the owners had concluded a deal with me. It was two months later that I'd had the dream.

I was sick in bed, very sick. The bed I lay on was of a makeshift canvas type and was situated in a long row of similar beds, all occupied by desperately sick people. Opposite, an identical row of beds stretched out before my eyes in a neat line. However, I could hardly make them out due to the great darkness of the building in which we lay. Slowly my sluggish senses were able to trace the contours of a church and, at the southern end, a

great apse through which the cold night sky could be perceived. Suddenly there was a crash the like of which human ears have rarely heard, and the sky through the apse was lit up with a flash of light.

It is the beginning.

Unexpectedly and in the distance, I hear the sound of running feet. The sound comes nearer and nearer, until the door under the apse is flung open with violence and a man with desperate, rolling eyes stands in the doorway. He is dressed in rags and appears to be looking for something. He sees me and charges desperately toward me as if all the hounds of hell are tracking him down and somehow I represent his only means of escape. As for my poor self, I am stretched out helplessly on the canvas bed, unable to make a move to save myself. The man approaches at a frantic pace, but pauses for a moment at the foot of the bed. He rolls his bulging eyes and bares his naked teeth, then he screams and throws himself on my bed as I resign myself to death. However, miraculously, the man seems to pass right through my body without impediment and disappears. It is almost as if I am a passage or doorway for him into another world.

I begin to feel some relief that I am still alive, but suddenly the footsteps begin again and once more the doorway

under the apse is thrown open, and another man dressed in rags stares desperately around and picks me out. Immediately he careers toward my bed and, as before, hurtles on to me and passes straight through my body. I am helpless. I can do nothing. I am amazed to be still living. I pray to God for mercy. Agonizingly the footsteps begin again, and for a third time the door is thrown open and the desperate search is made. This time the man shouts out some words, however, in a horrible rasping voice:

“Remember me. We will meet again.”

As the others before him, he charges at me and plunges on to the bed, again passing through my helpless body. Somehow I become aware that I must struggle to consciousness and slowly awake. I am alone in bed in that eerily silent Swansea house. It was a dream. It was a dream.

It is now past midnight and he is waiting for me outside. I returned to Swansea without ever seeing him again and was able to lock myself inside the house. At eleven p.m. a figure in a homburg hat and an Italian overcoat appeared under a gaslight just outside my bedroom window. He's been there ever since: waiting, waiting—for what? Could it be the crack of doom itself? I am sick and lie on my bed unable to move. Will he come

for me tonight through the window? Suddenly a thought comes into my mind that makes my lips want to form a scream, but my throat is too dry and tired to allow any sound to issue forth. He will bide his time and wait for me to fall asleep.

Deep Down in the Recesses Far Below

In the summer of the year 1863, I was on my way back to London after a month of taking the waters at Bath. My family was of renowned respectability and, at the age of thirty-five, I had never done a serious day's hard work in my life. Perhaps my month in Bath had just been an antidote for middle-aged ennui rather than any real cure for an observable malady. In any case, on the evening of July eighth, I stopped at a small village called Sterford for the night, before resuming my travel for London on the following day.

Sterford's population was not above a few hundred people, and there was only one real inn or hotel in the village. This was called, poetically enough, "The Eagle's Nest," and it was there that I took a room for the night. The innkeeper was a rotund man of about fifty-five, and he gave me the key to a room on the third floor of the old building, muttering his assurances that I would pass a comfortable night there.

I spent the early part of the evening eating, drinking wine, and listening to the stories of an ancient doctor who seemed to be something of a troubadour of the old school. He was born and bred in the village and appeared to have an endless repository of interesting tales to tell. He told me that the old inn building was more than three hundred years old and that in the past it had served both as a religious retreat and as a private residence. He also reported the startling fact that when he had been a young man and the house had been in private hands, a young lady had been murdered—butchered—within its gloomy walls. The body, he had declared solemnly, had never been found to this day.

“And who was the gentleman who killed her?” I enquired with all the curiosity that the imbibing of copious amounts of red wine was capable of producing in a weary and bored traveller.

“Her own accursed husband!” declared the old gentleman with a tragic sigh. “A kinder and more beautiful lady never lived. The brute wrongly suspected her of infidelity and, on his own admission, stabbed and tore her to death with a kitchen carving knife. However, by the time of his confession six months later, he had

gone quite, quite mad, and no one was able to make him tell where he'd buried the body. After a year's horrific suffering in an asylum for the criminally insane, he died."

Tiring of the doctor's stories and beginning to feel the heavy dissolution of my own senses due to the anaesthetizing affects of the wine, I announced my intention of going to bed. Wishing my companions a hearty good night, I left the convivial atmosphere of the room. Just fifteen minutes later I was in my bed and sleeping deeply.

It must have been about three a.m. that I was awakened by something: a horrible scream, I felt sure! With all my pulses racing, I listened breathlessly for a repetition of the sound. After a few moments another sound became audible: a horrid knocking at the wall!

I jumped out of bed and tried to find the source of the knocking—but without success. Sometimes it seemed to emanate from one wall and then from another. At one moment it issued from somewhere overhead; the next moment I felt sure it was coming from a place deep down in the recesses far below. After a moment I stepped over to the window expecting to see I knew not what—anything except the thing I actually did see!

Against the wall of the building opposite I saw, through the medium of burning candlelight, the reflected shadowy scene of what was happening in the room directly below me. A hand holding a huge carving knife was poised in the air above the shape of a lady whose hands were in the air in a vain attempt to defend herself. Immediately the knife, held in the hand of a lumpish black shape, came down again and again and again. The woman screamed piteously at first, but after a while her shadow merely slumped slowly to the floor, nor did the lumpish black shape move again. Suddenly I heard a spine-chilling chuckle emanating from the same room, quickly followed by the unearthly and disembodied knocking which had disturbed me earlier.

I had seen and heard more than enough to know that a probable murder had taken place in the room below me. Quickly throwing on my nightgown and pausing only to pick up my heavy walking stick, I flung open the door of my room and careered down the stairs in the greatest of haste to the floor below. Ascertaining the room which lay immediately beneath my own, I tried the door and found it locked. Immediately I threw my body against the heavy door several times and, in my mad fury, smashed the lock

in moments. Inside, in the darkness, I could see nothing, but was able to instantly perceive some agitated groans. Doors were by this time crashing open all around me and the sounds of aroused sleepers were close at hand. Suddenly a candle was lit in the darkness—and the scared face of the innkeeper looked at me from the comfort of his bed. Next to him lay his old wife, white with fear, and as her mind slowly began to understand what had happened, she opened her mouth and screamed.

My attention now thoroughly engaged, I arranged the next day to stay on in the old inn for an extra night. The innkeeper confirmed that the murder which the loquacious doctor had informed me about on the previous evening, had taken place in the room where he habitually slept with his wife. It seemed that they themselves had never heard or suffered any disturbance while sleeping in the glum room, but the man did admit that, originally, they had started sleeping there because several clients, of a sensitive nature, had heard strange knocking sounds in

the middle of the night. On discovering this, I quickly arranged a one-night stopover in the fatal room, the innkeeper and his wife agreeing to spend a night accommodated elsewhere in the old hotel.

That night I retired to my room early, receiving several strange looks from the servants who had heard of my strange decision to stay in the “haunted” room for the night. I fell off to sleep easily enough and, after a deep slumber of several hours, was awakened once more by a sudden noise: a distinct knocking sound. This time the noise seemed much more localised than on the previous evening, and, slipping cautiously out of my bed, I began to move stealthily in the direction of the dead fireplace from where it seemed to be emanating. As I approached nearer and nearer to the fireplace in the bright light of the moon (which came streaming through the large window at the bottom of the room), the knocking sound suddenly stopped and a profound silence took its place. I continued my slow and stealthy progress to the fireplace even though the original knocking sound had stopped, and on arrival I paused to look around me for a moment and take my bearings. In that brief pause I heard a sound that seemed to freeze up the very blood in my veins: a

terrible, desperate scratching which seemed to issue forth from a projecting buttress on the left side of the fireplace! Horribly a vision came to me of the poor murdered lady on the other side of the wall, desperately scratching in order to get out of her hideous tomb! After a moment, however, I looked down and observed that, somehow, the innkeeper's cat had managed to avoid leaving his master's room for the night and inexplicably had attacked the buttress next to the fireplace in a terrible frenzy of claws and teeth!

The next morning I convinced the innkeeper and his wife to employ a builder in the task of knocking down the old buttress from which I had heard the terrible rapping sound emanate (and which the innkeeper's cat had so frantically attacked). Two hours work was enough to reveal the awful truth: the skeleton of a young lady was discovered walled up inside the buttress! Naturally the police were informed immediately as were several relatives of the murdered woman who were still residing in the village. These latter relatives (two sisters to be

precise) were able to identify the lady definitively by means of a necklace that was discovered still hanging around the skeleton's neck. The lady's sisters thanked me profusely for my discovery of the horrible and unsuspected tomb in which their poor relative had been walled up by her insane husband all those years ago.

Three days later I was happily able to attend the poor lady's Christian burial in the local church before resuming my interrupted journey to London.

The Withered Hand

Valletta 1900

Marco Pausini stared at the black and withered object that lay on the table in front of him and wanted to vomit.

It was impossible for him to believe that this was his hand, that it was connected to his body, was a part of him. It festered on the expensive tabletop, and, even as he watched, shredded black lumps of something—it could hardly be called flesh— onto the smooth ebony surface. A suppurating green fluid oozed from the black wounds. He would do it now. He would rid himself of this hideous, black monster once and for all.

Marco's eyes flitted to the Spanish sword that had been carefully mounted on the wall of room number 321 of the Al Hambra Hotel. His tormented mind wondered if the ancient artifact still had enough strength and sharpness to sever a limb. Would he be able to reach the wall anyway? With his right hand he took out a penknife from his jacket pocket. It wasn't much, but it could do

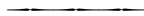
the job. He opened the largest blade and began to hack away at the wrist of his left hand.

The evil black creature appeared to quiver and scream, but Marco remained silent. After a few moments the severed black hand lay putrefying on the table, and Marco gazed with relief on the uneven stump at the end of his arm which pumped blood in such profusion.

Of course, he was going to die. Marco knew that very well. But death was far preferable to the life he'd known of late. How long did he have? Ten minutes? Five?

He tried to pray, but couldn't find the words: "Dear God ... Mercy ... Mercy?"

His mind began to float slowly away and he did nothing to impede it.



The island of Malta was just a step away from Sicily; that's why it was so convenient for Marco and the Davoli family. When things were hot in Catania, it was possible to take a vacation in Valletta or Gozo. Marco had often done so before, but this time it was different.

That crazy bastard Vittorio had virtually destroyed Marco's hand with his knife, and the remnants had had to be amputated at a private Maltese hospital just a couple of days before.

Bad news had been followed by good. Vittorio was dead, eliminated by Paolo Davoli himself in a revenge attack on his Siracusa home. Paolo had sent Marco Vittorio's left hand as a trophy, packed in ice. A lump had risen into Marco's throat at the sight. It was nice to know that you could rely on your friends.

At first Marco had thought nothing of the doctor's comment that it was possible to use the frozen hand in a transplant operation with a good chance of success. However, the more he thought about the idea, the more he came to like it. That son of a bitch had deprived him of his left hand. It was only right that he should compensate him with his own. It should also be an effective hand, as Marco knew that Vittorio had killed at least ten people with it. He had summoned the specialist and told him to go ahead with the operation.

"He had good hands. It was his brain that was weak. His hand may well prove itself to be more effective than my own. How long will it take?"

"The operation is delicate and a recuperative period will be necessary. Several months in all."

Marco shrugged his shoulders.

"I needed a holiday anyhow. A few months here in Malta will suit me just fine."

Everything had gone smoothly. A month later the bandages were removed and Marco was able to see his new hand for the first time. It was not a pretty sight. The hand seemed shapeless and withered, and the stitches around the wrist made him look like Frankenstein's monster. He wasn't able to do much with the hand except move the fingers slowly, and he made his disappointment clear to the doctors.

"Don't worry, sir. Rehabilitation will continue, and within a year or less you should have 70 percent mobility in the hand."

This sounded a lot better and Marco even agreed to pay for a thousand dollars' worth of drugs annually, in order to keep the hand functioning well. However, issues relating to the hand were becoming more complicated, and for the first time Marco began to ask himself whether he had made the right decision.

The first strange happening had taken place about a month later. Marco had been taking a stroll in the old Madina when he'd seen Rocco Brunassi. Rocco was a member of the Peruzzi family and a deadly rival to Marco and the Davolis. If he was hanging around, it could only mean bad news. Giovanni Peruzzi must be an angry man after the elimination of Vittorio, and it was likely enough that he was already planning his revenge. Marco determined to check Rocco out and made a beeline for where he stood, smoking a cigarette, in an alley beside a long-closed coffee shop.

"Rocco, *cosa fai qui?*"

Peruzzi's chief assassin gave Marco a disinterested look. "*Niente di particolare. Volevo trovarmi un posto tranquillo. Eccomi qui!*"

This seemed most unlikely to Marco. Men like Rocco didn't take holidays and they never relaxed. There were too many people who hated them. It had been Marco's intention to pump Rocco for information, but suddenly the wish to kill was upon him, and, as if it had a

life of its own, his left hand reached out and grasped Peruzzi's assassin by the throat.

Hatred surged in Marco's brain and the hand seemed to give him the strength of ten men. He squeezed and squeezed Rocco's throat until the fingers pierced the skin and wrapped themselves around the windpipe within. After just a few seconds the windpipe was ruptured and Peruzzi's man flopped on to the floor, already dead.

This incident had not concerned Marco too much. No one had been around to see the killing, and he told himself that it had been his own anger that had prompted him to get rid of Rocco once and for all. Yet in spite of this, Marco felt uneasy. He had never been a passionate killer like Vittorio and the vehemence of his response had unnerved him a little. The arrival of his wife, Federica, in a couple of days, should enable him to relax and unwind.

Later that afternoon the doctor informed Marco that everything was going well with the hand. Mobility was already increasing and it was possible that 80 or even 90 percent mobility might eventually be achieved. This was good news, yet for some strange reason that Marco couldn't fathom, his uneasiness remained. He tried to

rationalise things, and told himself that he'd endured a lot lately and needed time to piece himself together again. Federica was coming and she would help him to relax and attain normality. Even after fifteen years Marco still loved her with all his heart and he knew that his love was reciprocated.

At ten a.m. two days later, Marco found himself nervously waiting for Federica in the busy Valletta harbour. He sometimes felt like a schoolboy out on his first date when he met Federica after a period apart. He never took her for granted, and today he fingered the diamond necklace in his pocket that he'd purchased just an hour before in Valletta. She would say that he shouldn't have bothered, but secretly she'd be pleased, especially seeing that Marco had paid more than five thousand dollars for the bauble.

At eleven a.m. Federica emerged from the busy customs office. Marco spotted her immediately and pushed his way quickly across to the spot where she stood looking around.

"Ciao, bella. Come stai? Mi hai mancato molto."

Federica placed her head on Marco's shoulder and purred like a contented cat.

"Grazie, bello. Finalmente ci rivediamo."

The two lovers had lots to talk about and they spent the afternoon drifting around Valletta. They went to see a vaudeville review and giggled together in the dark like a couple of youngsters. By seven p.m. they were tired and Marco hired a carriage to take them to the Al Hambra Hotel. Federica's luggage had been sent on earlier, and everything was waiting for her in perfect order when they arrived in their room. Marco had done everything that could be expected of an attentive husband, and he took his reward on the great Spanish matrimonial bed. Half an hour later husband and wife washed themselves together before dressing for dinner. It was nearly nine o'clock before they finally sat down to a romantic dinner in the Al Hambra's rooftop restaurant. Throughout the evening a polished string quartet played Beethoven and Schubert sonatas.

"Federica, mi sembri piu' bella che mai."

"Grazie, tesoro. I like to hear you talk that way. I find you in better form than I anticipated. The new hand seems in good shape."

Marco moved uncomfortably in his chair.

“*Quel bastardo* ... I preferred my own, but Vittorio's is better than nothing.”

“*Non ci parliamo piu.*”

Marco and Federica remained in the restaurant until nearly eleven o'clock, and everybody noted how they held hands and kissed throughout the evening; some observers felt happy for them—others envious. It was rare to see such a beautiful and well-matched couple. Just before eleven Marco paid the bill and the two took the elevator down to their room.

After locking the door, Marco and Federica made love for the second time that day. They satisfied each other's needs in a way that no one else could have emulated. And this was the very simple secret of their lasting union. A little after midnight Federica fell asleep in Marco's close embrace. Marco himself, though very content, did not sleep until much later. The hand was giving him pain, and he had omitted to take the necessary drugs that day. He almost began to feel sorry that he had ever bothered with Vittorio's hand. Who wanted to be reminded of that crazy bastard every day for the rest of his life?

When Marco did finally fall asleep, he had a terrible nightmare. He dreamt that Vittorio's ghost was next to him, dripping blood from the stump of his wrist onto the bed's white sheets. Blood also flowed from his mouth, but in spite of this, the dead face grinned horribly upon the two lovers, entwined in each other's arms.

Marco awoke in a cold sweat of fear to find his left hand—Vittorio's left hand—tightly gripping his wife's throat.

She was dead. Federica was dead.

In a frenzy Marco wrenched the hand from his wife's neck. The ugly contusions made it clear that she had been throttled to death. Her body was still warm, yet it was clear that all life had departed. Marco wept like a child and his tears fell upon his wife's dead face. Now he was truly alone.

He fell into a stupor and prayed for his own death, here and now, in the same bed as Federica. Sorrow had used him up and he never even felt anger toward Vittorio. What did Vittorio matter now? If God were generous, He would unite Marco with his beloved Federica as long as his thoughts were not filled with hatred and he was able to pray for forgiveness.

But what about the hand?

He couldn't die with that monstrosity still linked to his arm. He would rid himself of it, even if it were to be the last action that his suffering spirit could compute.

Marco rose from the bed and staggered to the great table that lay in the middle of the room. He slumped into a chair and his eyes came to rest on the great Spanish sword that hung on the wall in front of him.

Was it still sharp enough to sever a human limb?

Another idea occurred to him. He picked up the jacket that lay on the back of the chair in which he was slumped and, from an inside pocket, took out a penknife.

Is There Anybody in There?

Number 36, on the hill, had always fascinated me. They said it was haunted by the ghost of Elenor Ganymede, who had lived there for five years before her death in 1850. At that time, Elenor had been just as old as the century and was well on the road to obscurity. She had been a great—perhaps the greatest—Shakespearean actress, but a doomed love affair with, it was rumoured, a member of the English royal family had finished her career in a storm of scandal before she'd reached the age of forty. In 1845, when the parts had all but dried up, she'd left London and moved to the small English village of Bedhampton, where she claimed her maternal grandmother had come from (though Elenor herself had been Irish).

In her first days in Bedhampton, Elenor had entertained on a grand scale, and the little village had played host to glittering parties with guest lists that had read like a who's who of the famous and the powerful. By 1848, however, these parties had ceased, as Elenor's fall

from favour became apparent to the cognoscenti, and subsequently the reclusive star had become a willing prisoner in her own house. Finally creditors were to be discovered, banging at the big oaken door, night and day—and on May 4, 1850, Elenor Ganymede had hung herself from the stair-post inside the big house. She had been discovered by her one remaining maid, and her body shipped back to Kerry in Ireland for a dignified burial, attended by just a few friends and admirers. The world had lost all interest in Elenor Ganymede.

At the death of Elenor the house had been sold to pay her debts. The new owner was a lawyer, John Turdlington, who had admired Miss Ganymede's acting skills and paid a higher price by some thousands than had been offered by anyone else for the solitary house on the hill. Three months after taking the house, Turdlington had been found dead in his bed, with an expression of the most hideous terror on his face. The doctors proclaimed that he had perished of a heart attack. The rumours of a haunted house began soon after.

The next owner of number 36 was an elderly spinster, who didn't believe in ghosts and was happy to acquire the house at a rock-bottom price. She had lived

there happily enough for two years. She had even reversed her opinion about ghosts during her time in the house and informed all the local people of Bedhampton that the house was indeed haunted by the specter of Elenor Ganymede, but that the spirit was in search of company and had welcomed the old spinster as a friend. After two years the spinster had been found hanging from the same stair-post from which the actress herself had perished. A verdict of suicide was recorded, and since that time the house had remained empty. Now it had become little more than a rotting husk on the hill.

My own interest in the house was generated by two factors: First, I was psychic, and secondly, I was a student of acting and an ardent admirer of Elenor Ganymede. A further reason for my interest was that I lived in Northampton, which was little more than half an hour from Bedhampton by fast horse. I had written several books on psychic phenomenon and was well respected in the field. If I could bring some light to the mystery of Elenor Ganymede, I would establish myself as the foremost psychic researcher in the field.

With all these considerations in my mind, I decided to spend one Saturday night sleeping in the old house.

Although the deaths of the previous two owners would suggest that my project was dangerous, on the night of my planned sojourn I found myself feeling almost strangely calm. To some extent this was explained by the fact that my psychic powers gave me profound advantages over the average person. Past experience had taught me that it was the ghosts who had cause to be frightened of me. Still, it was unusual not to feel the usual rush of adrenalin as I approached the house at about eight p.m. on Saturday, May 4, 1890—exactly forty years to the day since the tortured spirit of Elenor Ganymede had departed from this imperfect world.

I had been along to the house earlier some days before and surreptitiously broken the lock of the rotting door with a chisel of the strongest iron. After that, I'd arranged things so they looked exactly as before. Nobody ever came near this place anymore anyway—but it was best to be on the safe side.

The door opened easily to my touch and I stepped quietly inside, flashing my torch around the corrupted interior. Everything smelt of the earth. However, my usually infallible psychic sense remained obstinately dormant. I could sense nothing here. Suddenly an

object—a book, I thought—flew through the arch of light created by my lantern and crashed down on the other side of the room. It was a poltergeist! But how was it that my special power could tell me nothing? What kind of spectral being could nullify my potent gifts?

I remained still for perhaps five minutes, but no further sounds came to my straining ears. After a while I ventured forward once again., stealing slowly into the center of the room. I looked around and saw the evidence of opulent decay all around me. For some whim of Elenor's, the room had been decorated in the Turkish style, and the two subsequent dwellers in the house had never seen fit to change it. The great geometrically patterned curtains which covered the windows were thoroughly moth eaten and looked just about ready to collapse. Similarly the Turkish divan showed its interior at numerous points.

I flashed my lantern upward and caught the stairs and upper landing in a beam of light. There was the stairpost from which Elenor and the old spinster had hanged themselves. Upstairs would also be the room where the lawyer had—probably—died of fright. I had already

decided to spend the night in the same room, so slowly and moving very carefully, I walked toward the stairs.

Climbing the stairs, my psychic powers remained obstinately dormant. There was no suggestion of a tortured spirit planning evil for living entrants to the house. However, on the landing where the two women had hanged themselves, I did pick up an emanation that was suggestive of extreme sadness: rather inadequate, I thought, considering the events which had taken place there.

Inside the lawyer's room I drew a complete blank: absolutely nothing. I was quite sure that there was no tortured spirit lurking there. I was actually beginning to feel tired and the big old bed began to look rather enticing to me. Maybe I'd get nothing from this little sojourn except the elusive good night's sleep that I'd been looking for all week.

I explored the rest of the house, but nothing of any great interest presented itself to my tired eyes. Around nine thirty, I decided to retire to the lawyer's bed and take an early night. I would guess that, by the time I settled comfortably down into the sleeping bag I'd

brought, it must have been about a quarter to ten. I immediately sank into a deep and profound sleep.

My sleep wasn't quite dreamless. I had a vision of a poor old, trusting woman being struck down from behind by a vicious blow in the back. A furious struggle ensued between two women before the victim lay bound and passive on the floor. At that point, a sound, like the shuffling of rats' feet over broken glass, impinged itself upon my consciousness. At first I thought that the noise pertained to the scene I was witnessing, but as the sound became more distinctive to my ears, the picture of the two women vanished from before my eyes.

Suddenly I awoke. I was still in my sleeping bag in the old house, and I guessed that the time was about three in the morning. I lay absolutely still and realised that I had not been dreaming. The slow shuffle of feet was approaching the bed, was already almost next to where I lay.

I gave a strangled scream and plunged desperately out of the sleeping bag—just in time to avoid some heavy

instrument which thudded onto the bed, exactly where my head had been a moment before. Desperately I searched at the side of the bed for the matches that I'd left there. Luck was with me and my hand grasped them at the first attempt. I turned quickly on my heel, striking one of the matches on the box as I did so. What I saw transfixed my sight.

Next to the bed an ancient woman stood bent double, resting on the now vacated sheets the stick she had so recently and forcefully brought down with the intention of killing me. The face was covered in the deepest and most comprehensive network of wrinkles that I'd ever seen. Nevertheless, they couldn't hide the fact that this lunatic that stood before me was Elenor Ganymede herself!

In her lunatic eyes I read the truth in an instant. Elenor Ganymede, great Shakespearean actress, had never actually died. Somehow it hadn't been her that had been buried so many years ago. Somehow it hadn't been her that had been found swinging from the first-floor landing. She had remained in this infernal place for all these years, single-handedly creating the myth of spirits in the house and bringing a brutal end to the lives of the

two subsequent occupants. The rejection of the public had turned Elenor Ganymede into a psychotic killer!

The green eyes sparked at me with a lunatic light and the heavy stick was raised once more. The insane creature took a deliberate step toward me—and an almost youthful vigour and strength demonstrated themselves in the movement.

“I am going to kill you, young man,” came a cracked, old voice. “And after that,” she continued gleefully, “I will cook you and eat you for my supper. What a treat after so many years of cats and mice.”

It was clear that in spite of her years, she had all the frantic strength of the truly insane. She was an old woman and one of my earliest idols, but I couldn't afford to take any chances. After lighting a candle, carefully watching her the whole time, I drew out my Indian army-issue revolver from an inner pocket of my jacket.

“Stay right where you are, Miss Ganymede. I don't want to hurt you. On the contrary, I wish to help you. Let me inform the authorities of your plight and I'll have you out of here and into comfortable surroundings immediately.”

She never even seemed to hear me. With a terrible snarl she pounced and the stick swung up above her head. I panicked and the instinct for self-preservation prevailed as I shot her clinically in the chest.

Piece by piece the whole story came out. They had to exhume the body of Elenor Ganymede of course, and it turned out that the person they'd buried had been her maid. It was clear that Elenor had killed the maid in a fit of insanity and somehow succeeded in making it look like suicide. The maid had been dressed up in Elenor's clothes—and none of those who'd examined the body had known Elenor by sight. Back in Ireland all Elenor's relatives were long dead, and only the undertaker had seen the corpse's face before the coffin lid had been nailed down. After that, she'd remained in the house growing wilder and more insane with every passing day. The lawyer with the bad heart had been quite literally frightened to death by the figure of Elenor approaching his bed in the night, while the poor old spinster had initially made friends with Elenor, only to be rewarded

with an unexpected attack and an arranged suicide. Elenor had pushed the poor woman to her certain death from the first-floor landing. My psychic powers had been able to pick up little other than the sadness of this old lady, because Elenor had never been truly dead—until now.

The bullet in the chest had killed her instantly. However, I hadn't been charged with any crime, as it was said that I had acted in self-defense. On the other hand, I sometimes feel that I used too much force and that I should have found some other less fatal way of stopping her—but she was strong with the strength of the insane.

The Elenor Ganymede story certainly had the effect of kick-starting my stalled career—and some say that the perturbed spirit of Elenor Ganymede now truly haunts the decaying corridors of the mysterious house on the hill.

The Nose

Graham Hartley had been lucky enough on leaving medical school in 1874 to become a junior partner in Sir Christopher Soames' fashionable Kensington medical practice. It was true that Hartley was a distant cousin of Soames, but that alone would never have convinced Sir Christopher to take him on as a partner if not for the young man's outstanding record at medical school. Already Hartley had taken a good half of the burden from Sir Christopher's shoulders, and the day was surely not far distant when Sir Christopher would retire and pass over the whole practice to his young cousin.

The date when this transfer was to take place was brought substantially nearer by the fact that Sir Christopher had married a beautiful woman late in life and naturally enough wished to spend the latter part of his existence in the tranquil enjoyment of her company. Hartley's friends had whispered in his ear that, if he played his cards right, he'd be senior partner of the practice inside a year. One might think that such an

assurance would have delighted the young man—but it didn't. "Why on earth not?" you might ask reasonably enough. The answer, gentle reader, is quickly told. Graham Hartley was also in love with Sir Christopher's wife!

Everyone agreed that Lady Soames was the most beguiling of creatures. She was beautiful without a doubt, but her beauty was created to be shown off in equally beautiful surroundings. Never did Lady Soames look more wonderful than when seated grandly in her boudoir, dressed in the latest Parisian fashions and wearing the most perfect diamonds on her breast and in her auburn hair. On these occasions male visitors were likely to compare her in favourable terms with the nymph Calypso entertaining Ulysses in her magical Aegean grotto.

Lady Soames was just twenty-five and possessed exactly half the years of her doting husband. It was rumoured that she had married for money and influence without ever seriously considering love as a factor in the equation. If this was true—and most knowledgeable tongues averred that it was—then she had received her karmic punishment by falling desperately in love with Sir Christopher's young partner, Graham Hartley. In other

words, the two young people had loved each other with an ardent passion which neither was able to express for more than a year. Eventually Hartley had confessed the wretched truth—and Lady Soames had rewarded him with the knowledge of her own guilty passion. In the short term there was nothing that either of the two young people could do except hide their mutual love. Both trusted to the delights of a more distant future when Hartley would be senior partner in the practice and Sir Christopher merely a doting old man. At that time either the law of man or the law of nature might do something to help the enamoured pair. Before the arrival of that longed-for future time, the very closest silence was necessary in maintaining their guilty secret.

One Saturday afternoon in July, Hartley arrived back at the surgery tired and hungry, only to receive an urgent message from Sir Christopher that had been waiting for him for over an hour. It peremptorily summoned him to an exclusive address in Ferriers Row, not ten minutes away from the doctor's surgery. Muttering his apologies to the cook and leaving instructions to keep his lunch warm, Hartley immediately set out in his carriage for the address Sir Christopher had left for him. During the brief

journey to Ferriers Row, Hartley tried to imagine what emergency had caused Sir Christopher to summon him in such a peremptory way. It was by no means the first such summons that the young partner had received, and experience told him that in all probability an emergency operation was going to take place at the address indicated for which the elder man needed his assistance. After a ride of less than ten minutes, Hartley's carriage reached the indicated address and he told his driver to wait in the quiet street for his return.

The apartment indicated was on the second floor, and Hartley found himself standing outside a heavy oaken door. Within the apartment he could hear not even the slightest sound. After the briefest of hesitation Hartley rapped sharply on the door and called out Sir Christopher's name. A moment later the door was quietly opened by Sir Christopher himself, who motioned silently for Hartley to enter. The great oaken door closed on the two partners, and Hartley found himself inside a tastefully decorated room with a very large window facing onto the street.

"Thank goodness you're here," muttered Sir Christopher in a thankful voice. "I'm afraid we are

confronted with a most tragic case here—most tragic! The lady concerned has cancerous growths throughout her head, and the brain itself has become contaminated. I must concentrate on the delicate brain surgery. You will help me, Hartley, by acting as my assistant and making a preliminary operation while I prepare myself for the surgery on the brain.”

Hartley stole an uneasy glance to the door at the other end of the room which no doubt led to the patient's bedroom. He didn't like the sound of this emergency case.

“Wouldn't it be better to transfer her to hospital before performing the surgery, Sir Christopher?”

The old doctor shook his head sadly.

“We have no time, my dear Hartley, we have no time. Furthermore the slightest journey is sure to prove fatal for the poor lady. Let us waste no more time and immediately enter the bedroom where our operation must take place.”

With these words Sir Christopher strode over to the door that Hartley had previously seen and threw it open. Inside, a patient lay on the bed, covered completely with

a sheet except for the smallest of holes toward the top of the bed—from where a nose protruded!

“First, my dear Hartley, you will make the initial operation and remove the nose. While you are doing that, I will be preparing myself for the trepanning of the skull.”

For some reason the young doctor shrank from the task ahead of him.

“Is the removal of the nose absolutely necessary, Sir Christopher? You know as well as I do that such a procedure will mean terrible disfigurement for the rest of the lady’s life.”

Sir Christopher patted his junior partner on the back in an encouraging way.

“Between you and me, Hartley, there is little chance of survival. However, we might learn something useful for the future if we complete all our operative procedures. I do assure you that the poor lady has absolutely no chance of survival without our intervention.”

The young doctor sighed and began to prepare himself for the unpleasant task that lay ahead of him. Within a few moments he was ready with the box of

surgical instruments in front of him. Before beginning the operation, he asked another question of Sir Christopher.

“The lady is fully anaesthetized and will feel nothing?”

Sir Christopher looked up from his own preparations and nodded his head impatiently. With no further questions left to ask, Hartley began his brief but grisly job. Within a moment the nose—a remarkably pretty one—had been detached from the rest of the body and Hartley laid it in a receptacle close at hand. At this point a most remarkable thing happened: Sir Christopher emitted a terrible cackle and fixed his young partner with the most hideous and malevolent of leers. Next he scooped up the nose from the receptacle in which Hartley had laid it, and dashed across to the, half-open window. Once there, the old doctor flung the nose out into the street below with all his considerable strength, still cackling uncontrollably. After a moment he fixed Hartley with the same horrible leer as before and slowly advanced toward the bed.

Poor Hartley could only explain Sir Christopher's inexplicable actions in one way: The surgeon had been overtaxed in some way and had completely taken leave of

his senses! However, as the old man reached the other side of the unfortunate lady's bed, he began to talk to the younger man in the bitterest of voices.

“So, Hartley, you thought you'd pulled the wool over my eyes? You didn't think I knew anything about your little liaison with my wife and her filthy return of your detestable passion? Now, my dear partner, look and pity the woman who you so earnestly wanted to steal from me!”

Having finished these words, the gloating madman who was Sir Christopher Soames pulled away the covering sheet that lay over the unknown lady's body, and there—in front of Hartley's eyes—lay the mutilated remains of his own adored lover!

Leonora

The young man and his wife were lost. For the last twenty minutes he'd tried to deny it, but now he needed to face the fact. His pretty blonde wife had been resigned to the situation for some time and was attempting to retain her composure and smile.

"I told you that I'd seen a sign for Catbrook twenty minutes ago. Why on earth wouldn't you listen to me?"

Caroline tried to make her words sound upbeat and lighthearted, but the sentences came out irritable and tense—which was exactly how she felt.

Her husband, Graham, grunted.

"What difference does it make now? The truth is that it's one o'clock in the morning, it's raining cats and dogs, and we're lost, driving around in the middle of nowhere."

The evening had started well enough. Graham and Caroline were staying with friends for a week in Catbrook, just outside Tintern, in Monmouthshire.

That day, they'd driven to Monmouth where they'd spent the time strolling around the shops and quaint

museums. Wales was certainly a whole lot different from New York.

After eating, they'd finally started back to Catbrook at around seven o'clock in the evening. However, they'd decided to stop at a pretty little pub in Tintern to enjoy the mild summer night, and had consequently resumed their journey late.

It was on the relatively short step back to Catbrook that Graham had missed the way. Caroline had told him that he'd driven past the turning, but he was sure she was wrong and the correct turning lay half a mile ahead. Now it turned out that his wife had been right after all. This knowledge did nothing but increase Graham's irritation.

"OK, you were right; you should have insisted more. The important question now is what the hell do we do next?"

Caroline shrugged her shoulders dejectedly.

"I guess we'd better find a house and telephone to Catbrook. We'll never find our way back now without some help."

In the last ten minutes Graham had made an astonishing number of right and left turns in a desperate attempt to get back on course. However, he had only

succeeded in plunging them even deeper into the wild and deserted countryside that surrounded the small village of Catbrook.

“They’ll all be in bed by now. Maybe we should think about staying somewhere for the night?” he said.

Caroline groaned out loud.

“Graham, don’t talk nonsense if you can help it. Do you really think that we’re going to find a hotel in this God-forsaken place?”

Her husband smiled, but nodded his head with conviction. “Sure I do. At least we will if we drive around for long enough.”

“Oh that’s great. And tomorrow we’ll find we’re in the middle of Scotland. We ought to phone Steve and Pam...” Caroline let the sentence trail off as if a new thought had struck her.

Graham’s answer was non-committal.

“Well, whatever we decide to do, we’re going to have to find a house or a telephone box first.”

Caroline laughed harshly.

“You must be kidding. There’s no chance of finding a phone box around here, and I wouldn’t put any bets on us finding any houses out in this wilderness either.”

Graham gave an almost imperceptible nod as if half agreeing with his wife's pessimistic assessment.

"At any rate, we'll just have to keep driving and hope for the best. Maybe something will go our way."

The rain was pouring down, creating great moving masses of water which hurtled along the narrow road, threatening to sweep everything away in the sudden deluge. Overhead, great forks of lightning flashed across the angry sky.

Caroline was more frightened than she wanted to admit to her husband. Before leaving the States, she'd had a dream —the most terrible of her life. And it had started like this ...



In the dream she'd been riding in the car, next to Graham, in the dead of night, with a ferocious storm breaking all around them. Suddenly they'd caught sight of an old house with two ancient chimney pots.

Graham pointed excitedly. "Look, Caroline. It's a house."

In front of them there was an old detached house with four or five lights shining in the darkness. Graham slowed down and pulled up outside the old gate from which an intricately winding path led down into the blackness and the lights beyond.

“Well, no point hanging around here,” he said. “Let’s go and give a knock. At least we’ll be able to phone Catbrook.”

Caroline felt strangely uncertain.

“Maybe we should just drive on for a while and see if we can find a hotel.”

Graham snorted with indignation. “You were just saying you didn’t think we’d find a hotel and that we should call Catbrook. Now you want to bed down for the night?”

Caroline shifted in her seat uneasily.

“Well, now it’s getting a bit late to phone, and maybe it’s even too late to disturb these people. This place looks so deserted that I wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t even have a phone.”

Graham considered this for a moment.

“Come on, Carol. Everyone’s got a phone these days. As for it being late, well, this is an emergency. I’m sure

they won't object to helping out when we explain the situation to them."

Reluctantly Caroline followed Graham out of the car and passed through the large wooden gate that, surprisingly, stood open, almost as if they had been expected. It was pitch black except for the lights in the distance, and Caroline hung onto Graham's arm tightly. She felt afraid.

After some moments they reached the old wooden door, and Graham knocked loudly. They waited for a while, but no sound came from within.

"Graham, let's go. These people are either out or don't want to be disturbed."

Her husband gave an indignant grunt. "Out? In this weather? At this time? You must be joking. I don't care if they don't want to be disturbed. We only need to use their telephone."

Caroline gripped Graham's arm tightly. "But there are no pylons or wires around here. These people don't have a telephone."

"Well, you may be right. But we have to check and make sure. We might have missed something, or they could use a mobile."

Caroline shook her head in irritation. "Now who's kidding? Let's go Graham."

Her husband shook his head in return. "Not a chance. If they don't want to let us in, we'll have to invite ourselves. Let's try this door."

"Graham, don't do that," Caroline exclaimed in horror as her husband reached for the door handle, turned it, and gave it a mighty push.

To the astonishment of the two New Yorkers, the door was unlocked and flew open to reveal a narrow hallway within. Graham immediately stepped inside, much to the irritation of his wife.

"Come back. I don't want to go in there. It's creepy and I know there's something awful about this place. We have to leave at once."

Graham smiled at his wife from halfway along the narrow hallway.

"Don't be silly. If there's anyone here, they won't mind helping us out in an emergency. Come on in."

Against her better judgement Caroline joined her husband in the old hallway and looked around. At the bottom of the narrow hallway there were rooms on the

left and the right. The door on the left proved to be locked, but the door on the right stood open.

"Come on," said Graham. "Let's see what's cooking."

Inside the room an open fire was burning in the grate and an old iron kettle stood on top, whistling. The table was set for two, and large plates of vegetables and meat stood ready for consumption. In the middle of the table, the flames of two candles burnt steadily.

"Looks like they knew we were coming," joked Graham.

Caroline shivered.

"Graham, don't! There's something creepy here. Can't you feel it? We have to get out."

"Well, I don't know about you," Graham replied, "but I'm going to sit down and eat this meal. It looks just great. I'm famished."

Caroline could feel the malevolence in the house, but for some reason could not communicate the depth of her fear to her husband. She felt that she ought to have run out of the house screaming, but instead she slumped into the second empty place. Graham was already serving himself from the waiting dishes.

Weakly, Caroline tried again. "Graham, we must leave. This place is evil."

"What the hell are you talking about?" responded her husband. "You've been watching too many horror films. This is the real world, Caroline. Bumps in the night are strictly for kids."

Suddenly there came an enormous bang on the ceiling from a room upstairs. Caroline instinctively threw her arms over her head, but Graham jumped up from the table and rushed out of the room. Caroline could hear his feet rapidly ascending the stairs. Then there was silence for a moment before a terrible scream rent the air. A heavy silence followed.

Caroline couldn't move. She wanted to get up and flee, but her legs had turned to jelly, and now she heard very slow footsteps coming down the stairs and approaching the room where she sat.

After some moments a little girl of about thirteen entered the room. She wore a pretty but unfashionable white dress, and her long brown hair fell over her shoulders in carefully styled ringlets. Her face was beautiful, and Caroline became aware of the inevitability

of this meeting. The girl smiled and Caroline knew who she was.

"Where's my husband ... Graham?" Caroline asked, stalling for time.

The little girl shrugged her shoulders and looked bored. "You mean that silly man who just ran into my room and saw me being murdered? I think he's dead. At least he seemed dead. Papa cut his throat just after murdering me."

"Where is Papa now?" asked Caroline, feeling strangely calm for the first time.

The little girl gave a short laugh. "Oh you know Papa. I expect he's drinking somewhere. How have you been, Leonora?"

Caroline closed her eyes and felt the steady pulse beating harshly between her temples.

"Don't call me Leonora. My name is Caroline. It's Caroline!" she shouted, almost losing control.

The girl gave an indifferent little shrug of her shoulders.

"It may be Caroline now. But we are always truly the same person, aren't we, Leonora? You know very well who I am and you know why I'm here."

Caroline suddenly dissolved into great sobs. After some moments she looked tenderly at the little girl through red and tear-stained eyes. "Oh Alice dear, it's so nice to see you again. You don't understand the anguish I've felt. I am so, so sorry."

The little girl looked puzzled.

"What do you mean by *anguish*? Do you mean unhappy and sad? Why should you be sad? After all, I thought you made your choice in order to be happy."

Caroline shook the tears from her cheeks.

"Alice, I didn't know. Honestly, I didn't know. I would never ever have left you if I'd known or had any idea about what Papa was going to do."

Alice smiled sadly.

"But you did know, Leonora. After all, he'd also killed mother while he was drunk."

Caroline felt like she was going to faint and desperately clutched the table for support.

"What are you saying? Mama left Papa when you were only nine. That's why I agreed to come back and help to look after you."

"Oh no; that was just Papa's lies," replied the little girl with assurance. "Papa strangled Mama in bed one

night after he'd been drinking. Her body's buried out back near the woodshed. But her soul has gone away."

The little girl began to weep.

"I don't know where Mama is and Leonora has left me alone to be murdered by Papa. Being with her lover is more important to Leonora than staying with poor little Alice."

The girl continued to weep bitterly and Caroline moved around the table intending to embrace her sister and comfort her for all the years of loneliness. However, before she could reach Alice, a stern voice spoke grimly from the open doorway.

"Leonora, you have returned. Where have you been? Not with that man I hope? Alice and I have been waiting for you. Now you must be punished for your insubordination."

The man who stood in the doorway was dressed in a black tail suit and waistcoat. His hair was black, and great side-whiskers issued forth from his temples and cheeks. In his right hand he clutched a great carving knife which dripped blood onto the stone floor below.

Alice cowered behind Leonora and pleaded with her in a terror-filled voice. "Stay with me, Leonora. Don't

leave me again. Don't let me be murdered anymore. I want to go to Mama and stay with her forever."

Leonora pulled Alice to her by the arm and embraced her. "Don't worry, my little darling. You won't be alone this time. I want to see Mama too."

The man advanced slowly and menacingly toward the two defenseless sisters with the carving knife raised and ready to strike.

"I can see that you are the same kind of bitch that your mother was. It's better if I kill you both."

Leonora felt her anger rise.

"Sir, our mother was a beautiful and tender lady whose sole fault was her faithfulness to a drunken brute like yourself!"

At these words the man flung himself forward with the strength and speed of a demon and plunged the knife into Leonora's neck and body ... again and again and again and again.



There was no doubt about it: they were lost. Caroline and Graham had been in Monmouth for the day, but on

the drive back they had made the mistake of stopping at a pleasant country pub in Tintern and they'd spent most of the evening there. Now it was one o'clock in the morning, a storm was raging, and they had no idea of the right direction to Catbrook where they were staying with friends.

Suddenly the headlights of their solitary car picked out the chimneys and gate of an old detached house. Several electric lights were shining from within.

Graham stopped the car and looked at his wife Caroline in a dubious fashion. "They really are right out in the wilds here. But I guess they must have a telephone. Shall we give them a knock?"

Caroline shook her head with a little smile. "Let's drive on. It's too isolated here and we shouldn't disturb them at such an hour. If we drive on, we're sure to find a hotel or guesthouse soon where we'll be able to take a shower. After that, I'll be in the mood to enjoy myself, and I hope you will be too."

Graham gave his wife a big smile and took her hand tenderly. "I sure will be. What are we waiting for? Let's drive on!"

The Man Who Had No Face

Gervase Lafourge was much like all the other Frenchmen who returned to Paris at the end of the Great War in 1918. He had given the best years of his life to his country ... for what?

To return home with nothing. No money. No job. No hopes.

No face.

At least he had survived ... but sometimes he wondered if he wouldn't have been better off dead. His parents and his wife had all succumbed to the influenza epidemic that was sweeping the world. Gervase was alone with nothing ... not even a face.

Gervase clearly remembered the blast. He'd been cowering in a trench with an inferno of shells exploding around him. He had been so frightened that he'd soiled his pants. Seconds later there had been a great flash of light and he'd known nothing more until waking up in the hospital three days later. Oddly his first thought was what the doctors would have thought of him for soiling

his pants. He felt small and pathetic and wanted his wife and mother—but he remembered with a great surge of misery that they were both dead.

For days Gervase had hovered between life and death, but eventually he became aware of what was going on around him. After about a week a doctor came to speak with him. He was only about twenty-five and seemed embarrassed.

“Bonjour, Gervase. Ça va?”

The doctor seemed nervous and Gervase could tell that bad news was on its way. He wondered just how bad it would be.

“Gervase, you know that you’ve been badly hurt? That it will take time for you to recover from your injuries?”

Gervase nodded. He could see that what was coming was even worse than he had imagined.

“I will tell you straight, Gervase. You have lost the greater part of your lower jaw and there’s nothing we can do about it. Your nose is also gone, but that is a remediable situation. At present you are being fed intravenously. In the future you must educate yourself in a new method of eating. Essentially your diet will be

liquid based, though small, soft solids may also be permissible.”

Gervase struggled to take in the enormity of the doctor's words. The lower part of his face was gone and there was nothing the doctors could do about it. He was destined to be some kind of outlandish freak for the rest of his life. He was alone in the world. How would he be able to make any new relationships now? He wanted to cry out, but there was only silence. He couldn't talk. Would he ever speak again?

The doctor could see that Gervase was struggling to talk, and he hastened to his aid.

“Don't worry, Gervase, your tongue is still in place and you should be able to speak in a few weeks. Of course, it won't be as you did before, but you should be able to make yourself understood most of the time. We must be thankful for small mercies ... ”

Gervase didn't feel at all fortunate. He wanted to die.

In the following weeks Gervase slowly regained his strength. After the first horrific glance in the mirror, he had determined never to look at himself again. He wondered how the doctors and nurses managed to hide

their repugnance from him, because repugnance was what they surely must feel. Gervase was quite sure about that.

It was six weeks later that they'd told him about the mask. The French government had hired some of the best portrait artists and sculptors in the country to create masks for those people whose faces had been wrecked beyond repair. These artisans would use photos of the victims' faces before the war in order to create lifelike representations from thin and light metal. At a distance the men wouldn't be noticed, and even close up the deceit wouldn't be immediately apparent.

Gervase had grasped at the idea as a drowning man clutches at a straw. Perhaps it would not be necessary for him to live the rest of his life in hiding after all.

A week later an artist who had been commissioned to perform the grisly task came to meet Gervase. He asked for pictures of Gervase's face before the explosion and seemed frankly incredulous when Gervase showed him some photos of an exceptionally handsome twenty-five-year-old. Gervase watched the old man's eyes shift from the photographs to the present wreck that was his face. The aging artist couldn't hide his disgust and temporarily excused himself on a pretext.

Gervase felt sure that this was a crazy idea that could never work out. However, he had nothing to lose from trying.

But his loneliness led him to take a step that he would never have contemplated before his injuries: He wrote a letter to Elenoire.

Elenoire had worshipped the ground he had walked on when he had strutted as a young unmarried man. However, he had been several years older than she and more fortunate in his circumstances, so after sleeping with her a couple of times, he had broken off their relationship. In spite of this, he'd continued to receive letters from her, affirming her undying love and how she was destined to die a spinster as she could never marry anyone other than Gervase. Even while he'd been serving at the front, the letters had continued. Now, for the first time ever, he sat down and wrote a reply:

Dear Elenoire,

It has been so kind of you to continue writing letters for so long. I must admit that while I was married I thought it better not to reply. However, my dear wife is now dead from influenza and I am once again a free man. If you meant what you said about only being able to marry me and no one else, I

am now a free agent and would be most content to spend the rest of my life with you. Please write soon, dear Elenoire.

*With love and respect,
Gervase.*

A fortnight after the first meeting, Gervase and his assigned artist got seriously down to business. A week later the mask was ready. It had been quite amazing to see how punctiliously the old man had worked ... and what marvels he had achieved!

With the thin metal mask covering the lower part of his face, it was almost possible to believe that he was a normal human being again. Of course, up close it was obvious that he was wearing a mask, though even then the full extent of the horrors that lay underneath were not immediately apparent.

Still proudly wearing his mask, Gervase had received Elenoire's letter accepting his proposal of marriage. Gervase had told her nothing of his horrific injuries, and she was under the impression that he was recuperating after a minor shrapnel injury. She was delighted with Gervase's proposal to visit her for a week of

convalescence at her house in Saint-Étienne. Indeed, she was already counting the days until his arrival.

Elenoire could hardly contain her excitement. Today Gervase would arrive at her modest home in order to complete his recuperation, and in just three days' time they would be married. After all these years of waiting, Elenoire had finally got her man.

Elenoire—who was still beautiful at thirty—smiled contentedly to herself. Gervase had been her lifetime infatuation; she freely admitted it.

From the first time she'd seen his bold and handsome face, there had been no question of what she must do with her life: she would dedicate it to Gervase. It had been a staggering blow to her when Gervase had ended their relationship and a little later married Sophie. She had sworn she would never marry any other man and had resigned herself to a lonely life of spinsterish regret. Now, out of the blue, Gervase had asked her to marry him!

What would she wear for the wedding? Gervase was so handsome and she must not let him down. She knew that she was still beautiful with her perfect figure and long silken black hair. Nonetheless, she didn't feel herself to be worthy of Gervase. All the women had loved him,

and she remembered how all the other girls had envied her during the period that she and Gervase had been lovers. Now events had turned full circle and he was coming back to her.

Elenoire looked at the great clock on the wall. It was ten to three and Gervase had told her to expect him between two thirty and three. He would be here any moment. Elenoire felt as nervous as a sixteen-year-old out on her first date. Would he still like her? Would he still think she was beautiful? Would she still be able to satisfy him as she had satisfied him before?

In an agony of expectation Elenoire went to the window and looked out. A taxi was drawing up outside her house and from it stepped a man in a black overcoat and a black trilby hat.

Ecstatic with joy, Elenoire ran out of the front door of her house to meet her destiny.

The Soul of Lizzie Parker

After making a success of my first novel, I'd sat back for some time and rested on my laurels. However, modern publishing is a cutthroat business, and after two years I found that my book was no longer selling as well as previously—and also that new authors were beginning to push me aside. It was time to make a triumphant comeback with a second novel, but this was easier said than done. In the great metropolis of London, I could get nothing started, as sweet distraction diverted my attention in every direction except that of my typewriter. Finally I resolved to rent a house in the country for the autumn of 1895 in order to work out the plot of my next book. I struck lucky immediately, as a Chelsea estate agent was able to acquire a seventeenth-century cottage for my use, at a reasonable price, on the edge of the Essex marshes.

The house was near to a small village called Roxham, where about one hundred and fifty people lived. I received supplies from the Roxham shops twice a week,

and a local woman came to do my housework three times a week. In this tranquil environment I soon began to make some progress with my book. I would get up at seven each morning, eat my breakfast and, when the weather allowed, take a ramble over the marshes for half an hour before starting work punctually at eight fifteen. I would work at my desk straight through until midday and then take a break to eat a frugal lunch and nap for a few hours. On waking up at four, I'd take a second ramble over the moor before returning home to eat again at five. At seven I returned to my novel and examined the ideas of that morning in a critical light. Finally, after a brief supper, I'd read for an hour before retiring to bed before ten o' clock.

This Spartan regime worked wonders for my creative faculties, and after just a few weeks I was far further on with my new novel than I could ever have thought possible. However, my good luck was not to last, and a simple event transformed the nature of my stay near Roxham completely.

I had no neighbors within a three-mile radius, and the only sign of civilization that I would see on the moorland during my regular walks was a ruined and

abandoned cottage half a mile distant from the one in which I was staying. This cottage seemed to have been built at the same period and in the same fashion as my own. Why it should have fallen into disrepair while my own had survived was a mystery that didn't trouble my mind at all in those first weeks of my stay. Later, however, after strange events began to unfold, I gave my mind over to the minutest speculation on the origins and condition of that strange dwelling place.

It all started in the oddest way. I was just thinking about retiring to bed one night after resolving some particularly tricky plot problems, when a sudden and importune knocking disturbed my reverie. Who on earth could it be at nearly ten o' clock at night? I had no neighbors for more than three miles around, and in consequence the sudden pounding on my door elicited a more than usual anxiety. My tensed nerves relaxed though as the sound of an educated woman's voice came to me clearly through the heavy wooden door.

"I beg you, sir, for the sake of all that is good, to open your door and help me. I have been injured and am losing blood."

Naturally I immediately strode over to the door, lifted the heavy latch and flung it open. Outside a sorry spectacle met my eyes. A beautiful, dark-haired woman in a long white dress stood on my threshold, swaying from side to side. Blood was pouring profusely from her shattered nose, and I expected her to swoon on to my hearth at any moment. I took hold of the woman's left arm and led her gently into the safety of my home.

"My dear lady, what on earth has happened to you? I am afraid your nose is broken and you need more help than I am able to give. Nevertheless, rest by my fire and I will do what I can to assist."

Although by no means proficient in such matters, I did have a little training in first aid, and with the help of bandages and various unguents, I was eventually able to stop the flow of blood. I did my best to make a splint for the woman's shattered nose in the hope that I might be able to restore something of its original shape. The woman in front of me was truly beautiful, with fine bone structure and the palest of complexions. She had eyes of an elusive blue colour, and her thick black hair, which I assumed she usually wore up, hung thickly behind her shoulders and right down to her little waist. The great

blue eyes peered into mine, and I saw the shadow of a strange regret appear and dissolve again before the poor lady began to speak.

“Thank you for your kindness, sir. My name is Elizabeth Parker and we are neighbors. I live just over the moor. You can see my house from your front window.”

I looked at the woman hard. I had no neighbors, and the only house within three miles of my own was a hollow ruin. In order to confirm this, I strode over to the front window and gazed out over the black moor. To my astonishment I saw a light shining on two floors from a house about half a mile away: exactly the place where the ruined cottage should have been. For some moments I stared dumbly out of the window, attempting to make sense out of the senseless. Finally I concluded that I must have somehow missed a small occupied dwelling that stood next to the ruin; it was, after all, the only sane possibility. My mind returned to the more immediate matter of the woman's injuries.

“My dear lady, what on earth caused this terrible injury? Were you set upon by thieves and villains on the inhospitable moor?”

The woman gave a short and bitter laugh before replying.

“A villain certainly, but not one unknown to me, for it was my own drunken husband, Matthew Parker, who caused this injury by punching me ferociously in the nose. I’m afraid I should have left him more than a year ago, but he was a good man when we married and I wished to help him over his alcohol addiction.”

The woman’s words startled and disturbed me.

“Do you mean to say that your own husband is responsible for your injuries and that at this very moment he is skulking in that little house not more than half a mile from here?”

The young woman (for I adduced that she could not be more than twenty-five) nodded her head gravely.

“Yes, he will be stretched out in an armchair now, sleeping like a baby. When he awakes tomorrow morning, he will have no recollection of having abused me this evening. When he sees my injuries, he will cry and beg for my forgiveness, as he always does ... and I ... I shall forgive him as always.”

“My dear lady,” I replied urgently, “you must not return to this monster and suffer further abuse. How you

could possibly even consider forgiving such a maniac is totally beyond my comprehension. Tonight you will remain here with me; you may have my bed and I will take the armchair down here.”

The woman shook her head decisively, and the thick black hair fell across her ample breasts in the most provocative way. With both hands she pushed the mass of dark hair back over her shoulders. In spite of the blood, which had even become matted in the black hair, I found that the woman’s innate sexuality had affected me deeply. I tried to follow what she was saying.

“I am afraid it is impossible. Matthew will never let me leave him. He swears that if I ever make even a whisper of my injuries to someone outside, he will kill me—and I believe him. However, in his own strange way, I believe he loves me too.”

I tried to convince the woman to stay, but nothing could affect her fixed purpose of returning to her worthless husband. About two hours after her arrival, with the most profuse thanks and carrying a borrowed lamp, she left me and returned to her home opposite.

The rest of that night passed uneasily enough for me, and I blamed myself very much for allowing the beautiful

woman to return home to a waiting monster. I resolved that at the first break of day, I would go over to the small house next to the ruin and insist that she go into Roxham with me. Once in the safety of that small village, she could see a professional doctor and also visit the local magistrate and relate her terrible story. With luck her bestial husband would still be under the influence at the time I called.

Thus it was that shortly after dawn I crossed the moorland between my own cottage and the ruin opposite in search of the small house where the injured lady lived with her brutal husband. Forty-five minutes later I had to accept a most amazing reality: no such house existed!

Not surprisingly, I was completely baffled by my discovery. Where on earth had the woman come from? Where had she returned? Had I been the victim of some elaborate hoax? I decided that later that day I would travel into Roxham by coach. I had a lot of questions to ask.

Early in the afternoon of the same day, I found myself sitting across from Mr. Joshua Stirling, the estate agent I had rented the house from. He was narrating some nigh on incredible information to me.

“Elizabeth Parker and her husband, Matthew, occupied the cottage opposite to where you are living at present some twenty years ago. They were a quiet pair who lived on some small inheritance of Lizzie’s. Matthew was an actor by profession, but it seems that for some years he had done nothing but drink and beat his wife. The gentleman who at that time was living in the same cottage where you at present rest, now deceased, was on several occasions disturbed late at night by the frantic knocking of Lizzie Parker, who suffered some terrible beatings at the hands of her inebriated husband. On one occasion Mr. Smith, for that was his name, testified to the fact that the woman’s nose had been completely shattered. On another occasion she had suffered a broken arm. Mr. Smith was a medical doctor and was able to patch the woman up, but she always refused his advice to take her complaints against her husband to the local magistrate. In fact she always insisted on returning to the man after being helped.”

“On the night of October 4, 1875, Dr. Smith heard a furious knocking on his door just after ten o’ clock. On opening the door, he was horrified to observe Lizzie Parker moaning in agony on the floor with a knife pushed

deeply into her stomach. He helped the poor woman into his house and laid her on the divan, where she expired some minutes later. The infuriated doctor went upstairs and took his army pistol from the locked drawer next to his bed. Later he attested that his self-control had snapped under the strain of the terrible things he had witnessed and he had been determined to make Matthew Parker pay dearly for the death of his wife, Lizzie.

“Dr. Graham strode down the stairs and out into the black night. At least it should have been black. To his horror he observed a raging fire consuming the cottage opposite his own. He immediately began running toward the flames, but by the time he reached the cottage, it had already been destroyed by the terrible conflagration. Verdicts of murder and suicide were subsequently brought against Mr. Matthew Parker. It was decided that he had murdered his wife while in the mad throes of a drunken rage and then, on realizing what he had done, had set fire to the house where he lived and perished in the flames. That is the story of Matthew and Elizabeth Parker, and their tragic deaths here.”

For some moments after Mr. Stirling had finished, I said nothing. Finally I sighed and asked the estate agent the only possible question in the circumstances.

“Mr. Stirling, since the death of Lizzie Parker, has there been any suggestion of unusual activities in the vicinity of the ruined cottage?”

Stirling, a grey man of about fifty-five, shook his head.

“Not that I know of, anyway. What is it exactly, Mr. Smythe, that has interested you so much in the tragic history of the Parkers?”

I replied in a non-committal way, determining to say nothing of what had transpired the previous night. The whole thing was fantastic and inexplicable, and I needed time to think.

Over the next two weeks I decided that perhaps it had all been some fantastic coincidence, or perhaps that I'd been the victim of someone's perverted and sick sense of humour. On the other hand, the blood had been real enough. I eventually put the strange event out of my mind and began to make some real progress on my new book. Since my visitation I had decided to tailor it as a classic English ghost story, and a few elements of Lizzie

Parker's story had already been introduced into the tale. I decided that my protagonist, who I called Bessie, was earthbound due to the horrific nature and suddenness of her death.

One night at ten, nearly three weeks after Lizzie's first visit, I found myself making a few minor revisions to the seventh chapter of my book. I felt that the characterization was good and that the plot was beginning to come together. Unexpectedly a furious hammering began at the front door and I stiffened in my chair. The most terrible pleading voice could be heard through the great oaken door.

"Oh, dear sir, for the love of God, please help me. I am defenseless and my brutal husband has done me a most terrible injury. Please let me in."

Like a man in some terrible dream who knows exactly what torment is about to befall him next, I rose from the chair and went across to the door, unlatched it, and threw it open. Sure enough, there was the pathetic spectacle of Lizzie Parker in front of me, her beautiful face contorted in pain and her right arm, quite obviously broken, hanging uselessly at her right side. Once again the thick black hair lay loose around her shoulders,

though a fringe had been inexpertly cut in the front; remedial work to solve the problem of the dried blood, I concluded.

Of course, I let her in and sat her down on the divan. The break was a bad one, but I was able to fix it up with a splint and bandage. Lizzie stayed silent while I worked and occasionally I saw her tugging at the front of her hair, which had been cut a little too short. Finally I completed my work and stood up to address the woman.

"I have been able to give you some temporary ease. However, the break is a bad one and you should certainly go to the hospital for further treatment. I can arrange it for you myself, if you should so wish."

As before, the woman shook her head decisively.

"That is out of the question. They would make me testify against Matthew, and that is something I would never do."

"Why do you support the monster so?" I enquired in bafflement and irritation. "Does he not deserve the scorn and contempt of every reasonable man and woman for the ways in which he has made you suffer?"

Lizzie Parker gave a sad little smile.

"It is not a question of justice or desert. What he has done to me is most unreasonable, but I love him and do not wish to leave him. Deep down he is a good man who has gone astray, and I will stay by his side for as long as he needs me."

"And how long may that be, Lizzie?" I enquired quietly.

She gave me a quick look before pulling the mass of black hair over her shoulder and stretching it out tight.

"I think I will cut it all," she murmured reflectively. "I am a woman in a war and I have no time for aesthetic frivolity."

"Why are you still here, Lizzie?" I suddenly asked. "Why are you reenacting the sad story of what happened twenty years ago for my benefit? Isn't there some place that you should go to rest? Why do you come to me as a living, breathing woman, when I know that you are long since dead and buried?"

Lizzie looked at me steadily.

"It is Matthew. He still needs me and I cannot leave him. When it is time for us to go, we shall go together. Until then we are stuck in a single moment of time."

“And what in the name of God can help you to exit from this terrible repetition?” I cried, genuinely moved by the woman’s constancy and endurance. Lizzie Parker looked up at me keenly.

“It is you, sir. You are the one who can help us both. But you must act quickly for time is running short. “Act quickly ... quickly.”

As I watched Lizzie Parker’s intense, upturned face, it seemed that her body became lighter—even transparent—and some seconds later, to my absolute astonishment, the petite little figure sitting on my divan with her arm in a sling simply faded away into nothingness. Lizzie Parker had gone.

Over the next few days I thought deeply on what had transpired and continually asked myself the same two questions: how on earth was I able to help Lizzie Parker and her husband, and in what sense was time short? I understood that Lizzie was in some sense reenacting the events that had led up to her death and that the next visitation would result in her horrific murder—but what power did I have to stop that from happening? I sensed that the woman wanted me to do something before the final reenactment, but what?

This question obsessed my mind for two days. What impressed me most about the extraordinary situation was the love and forgiveness of Lizzie for her husband. I felt that somewhere within that thought lay the answer to how I could help. God had forgiven man for his sins through the sacrifice of His own Son, and Lizzie Parker had forgiven the sins of her husband through the sacrifice of her own soul. Lizzie had forgiven her husband's wrongdoings as God had forgiven men's. Perhaps Matthew needed to be convinced that he should now give up his continuous self-accusations and forgive himself?

I felt almost certain that I had now hit upon the right solution to the problem, and I determined to immediately seek out the aid of a priest in Roxham. I needed to relate the whole story of Lizzie Parker and bring him to the ruins of the Parkers' cottage, from where he might release Matthew from the misery of his own condemnation.

I lost no time in returning to Roxham. First, I needed to find out where Lizzie was buried. I would then get the priest to return to the cottage with me and perform a kind of exorcism. There were four churches in the village

of Roxham, and at the second, St. Christopher's, I found what I was looking for. It was a small Catholic church and Lizzie was buried in the well-kept cemetery.

I read the brief information on the headstone of the grave with a desperate pity in my heart: Elizabeth Parker, 1850-1875, RIP.

The parish priest, Father Joseph O'Hoolihan, was a little man of around seventy years, and he well remembered the events of twenty years previously. Lizzie had been buried in the churchyard, but Matthew, due to his terrible crimes, had been denied that blessing. In fact no one had ever collected his ashes from the ruins of the burnt-out cottage where, to the priest's best knowledge, they still lay.

I related my story to the priest, who listened in respectful silence. When I had finished, he nodded his head in apparent agreement.

"Yes, it is likely enough," began Father O'Hoolihan. "Lizzie Parker was desperately in love with her husband, and refused to leave him in spite of the advice she received from the people around her. She may still keep him company yet."

"But Father," I replied, "don't you think that Lizzie's love has redeemed Matthew? His crimes were against her and himself, and she has freely forgiven him. Now he should forgive himself as surely God will also, allowing them both to move on."

The old priest thought deeply for some moments. Finally he spoke.

"What you say may be true, but I cannot bring Matthew here. I'm afraid his crimes do not permit him to lie in sanctified ground. However, I can, as you suggest, come with you to the cottage one night at about ten—the time you have told me that strange things usually happen—and perform a blessing in its ruins. We can inform Matthew's spirit that his crimes are forgiven by those who matter: his wife and God."

I agreed immediately to Father O'Hoolihan's plan and begged him to accompany me to the old ruined cottage that very night. Fortunately the priest had no prior engagement that evening and he agreed. Thus it was that the two of us stood together in the dark ruins of the Parkers' cottage at a few minutes to ten that evening. Father O'Hoolihan had brought a Bible, a rosary, and a crucifix to aid him in his work. There was complete

silence all around as the priest began to recite his prayers and finger the beads. Finally he read a passage from the New Testament concerning Christ's saving power, before speaking directly to Matthew in these words.

"Matthew, why are you still here? Lizzie, your wife, still loves you and has forgiven you for what happened. Your Saviour, Jesus Christ, has also forgiven you. Can you not also forgive yourself? Your long sojourn in the nether regions between life and death has caused Lizzie even more anguish. Due to her love for you, she is unable to let you suffer alone and thus endures this limbo existence with you. It is time to forgive, to be forgiven, and to pass on. Do you hear me, Matthew Parker?"

Father O'Hoolihan paused for a moment and suddenly out of the deathly silence came a desperate moan that fairly made all the small hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, though it didn't appear to affect the priest at all. The long, drawn-out groan was repeated a few moments later, and Father O'Hoolihan took a step forward, holding up the crucifix.

"Matthew Parker, free yourself and Lizzie. Go to Jesus with Lizzie at your side and you will know the all-forgiving compassion of our Saviour."

Suddenly a wind sprang up from nowhere and shook the branches of the two or three trees that still grew in the deserted garden. The priest spoke again. "What you did was terrible, Matthew, but Lizzie still loves you, and for her sake, if not your own, it is time to leave this wretched existence and pass on."

The terrible groan repeated itself, though this time it was louder and more drawn out. At the tail end of its terrible falling cadence, words began to emerge in a recognizable form.

"I am worthless, worthless, worthless; both a murderer and a suicide. Where shall I go?"

"To your Maker!" thundered the old priest in the most peremptory of voices. "Go to your Maker and beg for His forgiveness. Be sure that you shall receive a merciful response."

"You are an old fool," returned the voice. "You know nothing of me and the evil I have done."

A horrible cackle followed these words, rising into a terrible crescendo before falling off into a whimpering cadence of soft sobs. I felt that it was time for me to intervene.

"Matthew," I shouted, "think of your poor wife, Lizzie. Why should she suffer the same torments as you? It is not fair. Free her at least, I say, if you are determined on your foolish course of action."

Suddenly I felt a breath of wind on my cheek, and, turning around, I beheld the beautiful face of Lizzie Parker floating in space at my shoulder, looking straight at me with reproachful eyes.

"My dear friend," she began, "thank you for trying to help us, but I do not stay here against my will. I willingly remain earthbound in order to help my husband."

A great wail from Matthew's spirit followed these words.

"Darling, my darling ... don't ... I cannot bear it any longer."

Suddenly Lizzie Parker's floating head disappeared and the unnatural storm died down as quickly and completely as it had begun. Father O'Hoolihan crossed himself and began to mutter Latin prayers with renewed vigour. We stayed on the site of the burnt-out cottage for another half hour, and, when we finally returned to my own cottage opposite, in our hearts I believe that we both carried the conviction that the story of Elizabeth and

Matthew Parker was finally concluded—on the earthly plane at least.

Some three months later I finished my book and took my leave of the old cottage just outside Roxham. I had heard no more knockings on my door in the dead of night, and I concluded that the sufferings of Lizzie Parker and her husband were now at an end.

However, if the truth be told, I will admit that I left my isolated cottage with some reluctance. During Lizzie's two visits to my house, I had entirely fallen under her spell, and with despair I had come to clearly realise in the lonely months which followed, that somehow, tragically, I had fallen in love with the soul of Lizzie Parker.

Two Lunatic Hands

My father had been a member of the Royal Academy before being unfortunately struck down with a mysterious illness and dying at the age of thirty-four. My dear mother, devastated by my father's death, had followed him to the grave just six months later. At the time, I had been just twelve years old, and I had gone to live with my paternal grandparents. They had looked after me well for the rest of my childhood and early manhood, but on attaining the age of nineteen, I'd left Harrow—the place of my birth and the family estates—and gone up to study philosophy and politics at Oxford. I had never been of a truly academic disposition, and after only one year of pursuing these dreary disciplines, I'd dropped out of Oxford and attempted to make my living by painting portraits and landscapes. My grandfather was incensed at my behaviour and refused to help me financially. At the age of twenty-one I was due to come into my father's considerable estates, but, until that time arrived, I was absolutely dependent on my grandfather for my economic

welfare. Nevertheless, I was a headstrong youth and I decided to see if I could not pay my way with my paint brush for a few years. I was aided in this enterprise by a very small annual income from my mother's side of the family which had come to me unconditionally on attaining the age of eighteen.

Thus it was that at the age of twenty I found myself cast out in the world with only my own paint brush to put the food into my mouth. The first thing I had to do was find new lodgings not associated with the university. This proved more difficult than I had thought likely. I was no longer being subsidised at student rates, and Oxford was an expensive place in which to acquire rooms. At last I was able to find a group of dingy upper-floor rooms where I might live and paint to my heart's content for no more than two sovereigns a week. Downstairs lived the old landlady who, since her husband's death a year earlier, had lived quite alone. She was a taciturn individual and had little enough to say. This was a state of affairs that suited me well enough, and, after having received the keys to my own upper level, I often found that I didn't see the old woman for weeks together—though she was civil enough to me when we did meet. For my part I ventured

out of my lodgings only rarely, determined as I was to make a name for myself in the world of art. Consumed by my new passion for portraiture and landscape, it took at least a month before the fatal day of the terror arrived.

It began with inexplicably black thoughts against my landlady, Mrs. Carey—who I still hardly knew! On that fateful day, I was painting a rather poor landscape—as was my wont during this period—when the thought suddenly occurred to me that I truly hated the woman who lived in the rooms below me. I hated her so much that I doubted whether she should be allowed to continue living. What was she? A mere blot on existence itself. What was she guilty of? For a moment this question confounded me, but suddenly the answer came of its own accord: she was a murderer. Whom had she killed? She'd killed ...

With a struggle I'd succeeded in emerging from out of this mental hell, and I'd found myself sat sweating on the dingy old sofa, paintbrush still in hand, trembling all over. This had only been the start! The thoughts persisted, and as the day had passed into twilight and eventually deepest night, I had realised why I hated the old woman downstairs so much: she'd murdered me! I'd

been kept locked up, restricted to the first-floor level of the house, but in spite of everything I'd been too clever for the old woman. Using some makeshift tools, I'd broken the lock ... yes ... and crept down silently to the ground floor where I'd known she was sleeping....

At midnight of the same day, I knew that I could take no more. I had caught a quick glimpse of myself in the long mirror and approved of my snowy white hair and long white beard. Most of all I'd approved of the coal black eyes that stared back at me from the mirror full of a burning hatred and murder. She couldn't stop me. I would break the locks again ... and this time ...

In a moment I had found a makeshift chisel and, in tandem with an old block of wood, broken the lock to the door which led to the blackness down below. Slowly I began to descend to the ground floor, certain that my victim could not escape me this second time.

As I reached the old woman's living quarters, I stopped and looked around, slowly taking my bearings. Yes, her bedroom was directly in front of me: she would not escape this time! Furtively I crossed the black parlour and silently tried the door. The witch had locked it! With a scream of fury I flung myself against the rickety

door and burst open the lock at my first attempt. A horrible laughter filled the room—and I knew that it came from me! Dimly I perceived the old woman's bed and a terrified pair of green eyes looking at me from it—her eyes! Screaming with impatience to be at her and to feel my fingers round her scrawny old throat, I flung myself onto the bed in a paroxysm of explosive rage.

It was daylight when I came to and found myself stretched out on the divan in the old lady's parlour. She was sat next to me, gently weeping. When she saw my eyes flicker and look around, she took me by the hand and told me to rest and recover my strength. For a moment she left, but soon returned with a tray of tea and biscuits. After I had silently taken a couple of gulps of tea, she spoke to me in the mildest of voices.

“Mr. D'Arcy, I am so sorry about what has happened. I am to blame, for I knew there was something strange about your rooms, but let them to you anyway because I was in need of the money. Do not try to speak right now,

but only listen and learn of what curse has fallen upon us both due to my own greed for money.

“A year ago my husband died after a long illness that had seen his mind slowly slip out of his control and become deranged. During the latter stages of his illness the doctor and my friends had earnestly advised me to have Jakob admitted to a lunatic asylum. However, I could not act in such a way toward a man who had once loved me so dearly. Instead I kept him alone upstairs in the rooms you have been renting. By this time he had become dangerous and I was forced against my will to keep the doors locked. I had an opening made in the wall through which I could pass his food to him, and for three months I saw nothing of Jakob—though we were still living in the same house together. During this period my husband seemed to have acquired some terrible and unjustified animus against me in his own twisted mind and had sworn to kill me.

“One night, just a little after midnight, Jakob rushed into my bedroom, just as you did last night, determined to strangle me with his own two lunatic hands. Fortunately his hideous laughter awoke me in time, and I was able to shoot him dead with a revolver I kept near to my bed at

night as protection against thieves and intruders. Of course, I was acquitted of all blame in the matter, and a verdict of death through self-defense was brought in by the sympathetic jury. However, since that time, a number of strange things have happened in the rooms above, and it was only because of my very great need that I eventually decided to let the rooms out.

“And now I clearly see how wrong I was to do such a wicked thing! Last night one or both of us could easily have died, young sir. When I saw you standing in the doorway, with a fiendish look of lunatic hatred on your face, I almost reached for the revolver once again. However, something—God be praised—stopped me at the critical moment. You then rushed into my room and threw yourself in a frenzy onto my bed just as I slipped out on the other side. As soon as you touched the bed, you lapsed into a profound unconsciousness. After an hour or so had elapsed, I got my housemaid, who sleeps in the room next to mine, to help me place you comfortably on this divan. Now you know everything, sir, and it only remains for me to beg your forgiveness for unknowingly exposing you to such a devilish danger.”

I had listened to the old woman's words like a man in a dream, and oddly enough a strange question now came into my head.

"I remember breaking the lock in my own room to come down here. Was the door really locked from the outside?"

The old lady shook her head.

"No, sir. The key had not been used and is no doubt still in your own pocket."



Of course, I left the house on the same day, aghast at the way in which the spirit of the old woman's lunatic husband had reincarnated itself in my own body. Humbled by my experience, I agreed to return to my studies at Oxford (and to the safety of university accommodation). Two years later I finished my studies and left Oxford with an undistinguished honours degree and a profound determination never to return there again.

The Devil's Subterfuge

The odd tale I am about to relate is true and happened to me when I was training to become a doctor of medicine at London University in 1886.

Why should I recall these strange and harrowing events more than fifty years later? Call it an old man's whim. As the narrative of my human life comes to its natural close, my mind turns back to that amazing sequence of events that so nearly deprived me of all the success and happiness I have since enjoyed: world renown as a surgeon, the love of a beautiful woman, worthy children, delightful grandchildren, and a comfortable and contented old age.

All those years ago, when I was a young medical student of twenty, I stayed in lodgings in Marylebone Road whilst studying anatomy under the highly respected Sir John Howell-Jones OBE. He kept dissection rooms over in Spitalfields, and three afternoons a week we would be instructed in the anatomical functions of the various human body parts. After observing Sir John's

example, we would studiously dissect the plentiful corpses that seemed always to be so readily available.

After I'd been studying under Sir John's tutelage for about two months, I came down with a strange illness which left me lethargic and disinterested in everyday life. I took to my bed, and, in spite of the ministerings of friends and family, my condition deteriorated to the point where a priest was summoned to give me extreme unction, or "the last rites" as it is more crudely known. Was I really dying? My mind was alert and I knew everything that was happening around me. I listened to the voices speaking about my impending death.

"Thank you for coming, Father O'Toole, at such short notice. The doctor tells us that the end is now in sight."

With this observation my mother burst into sobbing tears and buried her head in my father's comforting arms.

"He has been a good boy during his short life," said Father O'Toole thoughtfully. "God will welcome him into paradise. We cannot presume to understand the reasons why He gives and then takes away. However, we can be certain that many of the best souls live only brief lives. Think of Saint Theresa, God bless her loving heart.

Be comforted; the soul of your son is in the tender care of our Lord.”

My father spoke and I could hear every word clearly, although by this time I was unable to raise even a finger. “What a waste, Father; what a terrible waste. He was an intelligent and righteous young man. The good he could have done is all negated. Why in heaven’s name should God take him now?”

The priest shook his head and I could clearly observe the troubled look in his eyes. “Do you like poetry, Mr. Green? Cowper would seem to be appropriate: ‘God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.’ Have faith, my dear friends, and everything will become clear in time.”

My mother’s agonised sobs shook me to the very depths of my being, but it was my father’s hopeless anger that surprised me the most. That he, inveterate optimist that he was, should be reduced to such a state of black pessimism was almost more than I could bear. I tried to cry out, “Mother, Father, I am still with you and love you both with all my heart and soul. Have courage.”

However, I couldn’t even open my mouth. Suddenly fear seized me. They thought I was dying; soon I would be

pronounced dead and treated like a cadaver. The thought spurred me on to furious attempts to gain their attention. I had the idea that I could half close one of my eyes. Surely that would convince them that some intelligence still remained in the unmoving lump of flesh in front of them. "Mother, mother, I am winking at you, can't you see me? This is your dear son Phillip speaking. For the love of God in heaven tell them that I am not dead or dying; please, please tell them." But my mother noticed nothing and continued to weep.

An hour later I was officially declared dead, and my weeping parents brought my body home to their Chelsea house, where for two days I lay in the parlour and was visited by all my relatives and friends. To each one I tried to cry out: "Help me, help me. I am not really dead. Please tell my parents that I understand everything that is happening."

However, as each person bent his or her head and said a prayer for the repose of my soul, I understood that my situation was beyond hope.

My parents decided to hold my funeral on the third day after my "demise," and all the paraphernalia for burial was assembled. At two o'clock on a Monday afternoon,

my body was nailed into the coffin and transported in a solemn procession to a local churchyard. I will not weary—or, even worse, horrify—the reader with my sentiments as the black lid was fixed on the casket. Imagine your worst nightmare come true and it would still be inadequate to describe my terror.

When we reached the churchyard, I could feel my coffin being roughly handled by the bearers and then borne jerkily aloft, as if floating roughly on the sea. By this time I had given up all hope and could only pray that my sufferings would be brief. However, I could perceive several chinks of light at ill-fitted joins in the casket and this informed me that I would not suffocate until I was finally under the earth.

My coffin was lowered to the ground and I heard the voice of Father O'Toole speaking the funeral service. He had a few words of praise for what was surely going to prove a short sojourn on this Earth.

“Our much missed friend was a delightful boy who loved his family and friends, worked diligently, and always did his best to come to Mass on Sundays. It is difficult for those who loved him to understand why he should be taken from us at this time. But we must

patiently commend his spirit to God, our Father, who knows the answer to all questions and arranges everything for our eventual good. Let us pray for the dear departed's parents at this time, that God should give them the strength to bear such an unexpected loss."

As the priest spoke of my parents, I wanted to scream out in anguish. I was alive. At this moment I was alive, but would soon be dead. The thought of their needless suffering, allied to my own predicament, would have reduced me to tears if tears had still been able to flow from my eyes. There was nothing left to do except, as the priest had already done, commend my soul to God and His infinite mercy.

Suddenly I felt my coffin lifted. And then, unmistakably, it was horribly clear that I was being slowly lowered into the ground. At last I felt a jolt as my short journey terminated. For a few minutes I could still hear muffled voices above me, but then came the sound I had been dreading to hear: the crash of a first handful of soil on top of my coffin. I was about to be buried alive. Once again I prayed to God that my suffering would be brief.

It took them just a few minutes to fill in the shaft, and soon I was surrounded by a terrible darkness and

silence. It was my belief that I would expire quickly from asphyxiation, but I lay in that terrible black silence for what seemed like eternity—and life continued. A sudden horror-filled thought struck me: was I really dead and already suffering the Devil's subterfuge and the agonies of hell? But no, no: I pushed the thought from my mind. God was just and merciful. I had done the best I could during my short stay on Earth. The probable explanation for my continued existence lay in the nature of my illness. All bodily functions had slowed down to the point of virtual imperceptibility and this included my breathing. I was using up what oxygen remained inside the casket extremely slowly. I might have many hours ahead of me before death finally came as an eagerly awaited friend to steal my soul away.

There was nothing left for me to do except pray to God to have mercy on me and to forgive the many sins I had committed during my life. For what seemed an immeasurably long period of time, I recited all the prayers I knew over and over again.

Suddenly I heard a noise. It was faint at first, but unmistakable and growing gradually louder. How could it be? What could that soft scraping sound mean? As I

listened, the sound became more distinct and easier to categorise: not scraping, but digging.

Waves of relief flowed over me. They had somehow discovered their error and were coming to rescue me from the almost incomprehensible horror of my situation. I thanked God and all the angels in heaven for my deliverance. The noises were coming closer and now they seemed directly over me. At last I heard the sound of a spade crash on top of the coffin. They had uncovered me and I was saved.

However, as the lid of the casket was levered off, it slowly dawned upon me that I had not been saved by angels of mercy, but by something far more sinister: grave robbers. The moonlight, which to my light-sensitive eyes seemed like a thousand suns, disclosed above me two rough and furtive-looking men who without any ceremony manhandled me out of the coffin and into a dirty bag. I was then thrown onto the back of a waiting cart and covered in sacks, which—judging by the smell that emanated from them—had probably contained manure.

“Gawd, what a weight the blighter is. We earns our money in this game,” I heard one of the men mutter as I was covered in the sacks.

“Shut up and do the job you’re being paid for,” replied the other in a growl.

An instant later we were jogging along in the cart toward a destination I could only regard with agony and fear. Why did men steal bodies? The answer was so fearsome that I could almost have wished myself back within the bowels of the Earth.

In what was far too short a time for my trembling heart, we reached our gruesome destination, and I felt the men’s rough hands transporting me once again. After a few moments I was thrown on top of something that seemed like a flat table, and the body bag was ripped off. Next the men carefully undressed me and seemed to take great satisfaction from a close examination of the quality of my clothes.

As I had conjectured, I was on a central table in a dissecting room, but imagine my amazement on perceiving that it was one of the dissecting rooms of my own professor at London University, Sir John Howell-

Jones. Suddenly the plenitude of bodies for dissection in those chambers was no longer a mystery to me.

After a moment the two men left, taking my clothes with them, and I was alone. I had no idea of the time, but felt that the night was well progressed. Usually Sir John would begin one of his dissection classes at nine a.m. sharp, so I probably only had a few hours left before being butchered alive in front of an anatomy class. The thought of this seemed more hideous to me than the idea of being buried alive, and nauseous waves of fear swept over my body. I could only hope that Sir John or one of the students would recognise me and that this would save me from a fate that seemed genuinely worse than any other death.

Many hours later, long after dawn had broken, I heard someone moving in an adjoining room. Surely Sir John would recognise me and, if nothing else, at least send me back to the undertaker for reburial. However, it seemed to me that destiny itself was conspiring against me when the door of the next room opened and a little man, who I knew to be Sir John's assistant, came to the table where I lay and covered the lower part of my face and neck with a piece of grey cloth. I had forgotten that,

when Sir John was teaching some groups of particularly young and sensitive students, he would have much of the face of the cadaver covered in order to increase the sense of impersonality. Now there was surely no further possibility of rescue from my gruesome fate.

About thirty minutes later Sir John and a group of around six or seven students entered the room and approached the dissection table. Helplessly I listened to the clipped tones I had heard so often in the past.

“First, I will remove the heart. In order to achieve this, I will begin with a central incision down the torso of this specimen. After the heart has been removed, we will study its mechanical functions in precise detail.”

If only I could have screamed to notify Sir John and the students that I was alive, but not even a single breath would emanate from my immobile lips. Sir John spoke again.

“For this initial incision it is necessary to use a strong and sharp scalpel.”

Having said this, I heard a metallic scraping sound as he picked up a scalpel from the instrument tray. In a single movement the knife was at my throat and slicing down the center of my body.

I screamed as if the day of judgement itself had arrived and leapt off the table, blood gushing in all directions. Sir John staggered back, as might a man who had seen the pit of hell spewing out its wretched inhabitants, while the assembled students fled from the room screaming and crying. I staggered a few places forward, like some demented zombie, before crashing in a senseless, bloody heap on the dissection-room floor.

When I regained consciousness, I was in a hospital bed surrounded by my doting parents and relatives, the painful stitching down my chest the only tangible indication that I hadn't been the victim of some frightful nightmare.

Six weeks later I was discharged and returned to my studies. However, I discovered that Sir John was no longer employed at the university. He had been dismissed in disgrace for the manner in which he had procured his specimens for dissection, and in consequence I had been assigned a new professor of anatomy: Sir Graham Jenkins. He proved himself a competent and knowledge-able role model, but sometimes I couldn't keep myself from thinking that, although what Sir John had done had been against the laws of God and man, without his grisly

process of procurement, I would still have been lying in that cold casket in the ground.

Now I am an old man and each new dawn I thank God with all my heart and soul for the mercy He showed to me as a young medical student all those years ago.

*The Hierarchy of Sin**(The Confession of Jack the Ripper)*

The old Catholic church, Mary of the Scented Lilies, had stood in Spanish Place, Marylebone, since the repealing of the English anti-Catholic laws at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its construction had been financed by a group of rich Spanish businessmen resident in London, and within twenty years it had become the most famous Catholic church in England after Westminster Cathedral itself. Every day its exclusive clientele (for Mary of the Scented Lilies was situated in one of the most well-to-do parishes in England) streamed in and out of the imposing edifice, repeating catechisms, reciting Ave Marias and Our Fathers—and receiving forgiveness of their worldly sins from one of the resident priests.

On this rather sleepy Saturday afternoon Father Bernardo Angelico was on confessional duty in the church. Father Bernardo, as his name might suggest, was

originally from Italy: a Roman by birth. However, many years ago he had been assigned a duty in England by his church superiors and now—twenty years later—he felt quite at home—indeed almost an Englishman—in his somewhat exclusive London parish. So far on this Saturday afternoon Father Bernardo had heard just three confessions. The first had been from a very well-spoken young man, probably in his late teens, who had admitted to the sin of perpetual self masturbation. The Italian priest had advised the young man to find himself a suitable girl as soon as possible, and, in expiation of sins already committed, he had imposed the task of reciting fifty Ave Marias and twenty Our Fathers on the concupiscent young fellow!

The second confession had come from a middle-aged lady who revealed, in somewhat florid language, to have been conducting an affair with her husband's best friend. Once more, after insisting that the liaison should finish, the priest had uttered the words of expiation and imposed the usual penalty of fifty Ave Marias and twenty Our Fathers.

Father Bernardo's latest confession of the day had related to affairs of state, no less! The middle-aged man

who had addressed him through the confessional grate had admitted to being in a position of some prominence in the conservative government of the day. Furthermore he had allowed himself to be bribed by a foreign power which held no good will toward England. Copies of certain sensitive documents had been transferred into the hands of the said foreign power, and the politician's bank account had, in consequence, swollen by an additional forty thousand pounds. After careful consideration Father Bernardo had instructed the duplicitous politician to give 50 percent of his ill-gotten gains to the church and 25 percent to a charity of his choice. The Italian priest insisted that the politician should keep the remaining 25 percent of the bribe in order to perpetually remind himself of the horror of what he'd done. Again the words of expiation were cited and the penalty of fifty Ave Marias and twenty Our Fathers imposed.

After this last affair of state, not another soul had entered the small confessional box for more than twenty minutes. Father Bernardo was just beginning to think of curtailing his confessional duties half an hour early when he heard the soft black cloth of the confessional box rustle and the noise of someone settling himself or herself

down upon the little chair in the box next door. A few moments later a strangely accentless voice—very hard to place—repeated the standard confessional formula of those in search of forgiveness: “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned!”

The Italian priest, in his turn, gave the time-honoured reply: “May the Lord God place true contrition in your heart for the sins you have committed and enable me, His humble servant, to forgive you for the sins you are about to relate.”

There was a pause, as if the unknown man was struggling with some deep emotion. In Father Bernardo’s line of work, this was common enough, and he waited for the man to collect his thoughts and resolution. However, several moments passed without the unknown man speaking a word, so in the end Father Bernardo encouraged him with a few kind words.

“As you know, you may speak to me in perfect confidence as it is my present function to forgive—if that is possible—and not to condemn.”

At these words of the priest, a terrible groan issued from the cubicle next to where Father Bernardo sat in darkness—and at length the suffering man spoke.

“Dear God in heaven! Is it possible to forgive such crimes as mine?”

In spite of himself, the Italian priest felt some misgivings. In a career lasting twenty-five years to the present date, he had heard all sorts of sins and crimes described in his function of expiator of sins. Father Bernardo began to have a sudden inkling that this confession was going to be one of the more difficult kind. He just hoped that it didn't involve the one sin that even a priest of God could never forgive—the horror of divorce! Once again he encouraged the man to speak.

“Unload your burden, my son; this is the place for you to speak!”

Once more the man gave a groan, though this time not as strong as before. After a moment's pause he began to speak in a hesitating manner—but his words were clear.

“Father, I am responsible for the deaths of five women!”

At these words the old priest felt a little relief. The confession was not about divorce anyway! No doubt the man was one of those sickly types who blamed himself indirectly for the deaths of all those around him. Perhaps

his fiancée had died after getting a soaking in Hyde Park and the poor fellow blamed himself? Yes, yes, Father Bernardo now felt himself to be on surer ground. He replied to the confessant in a gentle tone.

“My dear friend, try not to blame yourself for everything that happens in life. Tell me how the ladies died.”

“I cut their throats, Father.”

For several moments Father Bernardo said nothing. In those moments he was thinking furiously, now at last aware of the fundamental error he had made. At last, collecting himself together, he asked the strange man a question.

“Why did you kill them, my son?”

The searcher after expiation answered immediately. “They were bad women, Father. Women who make financial gain from the sale of their own bodies to unknown men.”

Father Bernardo, took an uneasy breath before putting his next question.

“Did you know any of these ladies personally, my son?”

The answer came promptly: “No, Father.”

There was another long pause. The old priest was now thinking rapidly. He had read in the papers over the last year or so about the exploits of a criminal who rejoiced in the sobriquet of Jack the Ripper. Apparently five prostitutes had been killed and then butchered in the Whitechapel area of London without the police gaining any real clue to the perpetrator of the horrors. Was it possible that the killer of these women was now sitting calmly next to him asking forgiveness for his crimes? In order to give time for more reflection, the priest began to speak about gradations of wickedness and the hierarchy of sin.

“My son, if what you say is true, then the things you have done are terrible indeed. Do you not realise that, while prostitution is a horrible sin in the eyes of God, the sin of murder—which you have committed so egregiously and on multiple occasions—is even worse? Furthermore you have set yourself up as your own God; lacking all humility, you have become judge, jury, and executioner of these women without consulting the will of God at all (which may well have proved merciful to such poor sinful creatures!). Are these not terrible crimes indeed that you

have committed against all human decency and God Himself ?”

As he finished his diatribe, the old priest, listening intently, could hear nothing but a low and persistent sobbing. In these circumstances he determined to force the lesson home.

“Ah, now you cry, my son! It is too late for crying now! You should have used that terrible knife of yours to cut out the black wickedness in your own heart, before turning it against God’s poor defenseless creatures!”

The sobbing persisted and the old priest began to wonder what he should say or do next. It was within his power to forgive the man, as his crimes, horrible as they had been, did not place him beyond all hope of redemption. Perhaps his soul would need to be cleansed in the fires of purgatory for several hundred thousand years before becoming pure enough to enter the gates of heaven. In the meantime, if he was genuinely repentant, he should be forgiven and some small penalty imposed as a foreshadow of the more terrible punishment that would be waiting for him after his death. Accordingly, Father Bernardo spoke the following words in a louder voice so that the still sobbing man could easily hear.

“My son, these are great crimes indeed, but they do not put your soul beyond all hope of possible redemption. I have the power to forgive you for your terrible crimes in this world—and God Himself will conduct the latter stages of your purification, after your mortal days have run their course, in the world beyond this one. For now, I must ask you one all-important question: do you sincerely repent of what you have done, and furthermore do you guarantee never to perform such terrible crimes again?”

A small whisper came to the priest's ear in reply.

“Father ... I am so sorry—”

Father Bernard interrupted the man impatiently.

“It is good, as far as it goes, that you are sorry. But do you guarantee never to kill anyone again? Only if you do this can I give you God's forgiveness! And of course, if you subsequently break our contract, then you will be damned for all eternity and I will be able to do nothing more for you. Do you understand?”

A small whisper came in reply.

“Yes, I understand.”

“Very well,” said the priest. “By the power invested in me as one of God's clergy, I forgive you of all your sins. Recite fifty Ave Marias and twenty Our Fathers every day

for the next two weeks. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, leave this place now and try with all your heart to lead a good life. Go, and may God bless you.”

As before, there was a slight rustling of the curtains as the man rose and left the confessional booth.

Moved by a curiosity he had never felt before in his previous twenty-five years of experience as a priest, Father Bernard parted the black curtains which surrounded him and looked down the aisle of the church in the direction which the unknown confessant would need to take in order to make his exit from the church.

About halfway down this aisle, the priest saw the rapidly moving figure of a thin man with a large black cloak wrapped about his body and a great black felt hat on his head!

The Screaming Skull

Some of you will have heard my name in connection with the story of Dracula of Transylvania: my name is Van Helsing. After the adventures related in Bram Stoker's account of my vengeance upon the vampire who had deprived our beloved Miss Lucy Westenra of life, I spent some time in London in company with the Harkers and Lord Godalming. One day a strange letter arrived from one of the latter's friends in the country. Although it was addressed to Lord Godalming, the content concerned myself. I quote the letter below:

My Dear Godalming,

Something deuced queer is going on here and I wonder if that clever friend of yours who clipped the vampire's wings might be able to help us out? It's not an easy matter to speak about, but it concerns an old skull that my father brought home about 50 years ago from an unknown tomb in upper Egypt.

Well, it's sat good as gold on the mantelpiece for all that time with never so much as a peep out of it, but over the last week or two, it's taken to the most spine-chilling howling you can imagine! It really seems to be screaming for half the day

and night! Naturally enough it's started to give everybody the willies, and my wife and daughter now positively refuse to enter the morning room. I am a logical man and find it hard to believe that, after all these years, some priest of Isis has started to, at last, feel his pain. In other words, I feel sure that a logical explanation for this phenomenon must exist. However, so far, I must admit that I haven't been able to find it. If that clever Van Helsing johnnie would like to visit us for a couple of days down here in Canterbury, then perhaps he might be able to find out something that I haven't been able to discover as yet. Anyway, I think it's certainly worth a try.

Please telegraph response as soon as possible. The ladies of the house are already beginning to get hysterical!

Yours, etc., Sir William Warburton.

I immediately informed Lord Godalming that I would be more than happy to make a visit to Sir William and his family down in Canterbury—and my friend at once sent off a telegram to this effect.



I arrived at Sir William's country house in Canterbury at about two p.m. the next day. His wife and daughter were out, visiting some friends, but his young son Joseph, who was ten years old, was present with his father to greet me on my arrival. We shook hands

warmly, and, after a few more pleasantries had passed between us, Sir William led me into the morning room where the offending skull resided on the mantelpiece. Viewing the object from the doorway, it seemed harmless enough: yet suddenly a faint moaning began, gradually getting louder and more and more wild. Eventually Sir William and I were forced to put our hands over our ears. I stole a glance at Sir William's son, Joseph, and to my intense astonishment, not only did he not have his hands placed over his ears, but his lips were set in a ghoulish grin and his eyes appeared to be popping out of his head. After a moment more had passed, the three of us were forced out of the room and, at last, the fearsome wailing ceased.

For a few moments we silently recovered our nerve outside the door. Eventually Sir William looked at me in a wild fashion and enquired if I'd ever experienced such a strange phenomenon before in my life. Naturally I replied in the affirmative. After all, I am Van Helsing, destroyer of vampires! Next he asked a more pertinent question:

"My dear Van Helsing, do you have the faintest idea what caused that terrible screaming, emitted from the

mouth of a skull that has lacked brains for more than three millennia?"

I nodded my head affirmatively.

"Yes, Sir William, I think I can honestly say that I have already solved your little mystery."

At these words Sir William's jaw dropped open.

"What? Already?" was all he was able to gasp out.

I nodded my head a second time.

"Yes, Sir William. The solution to the mystery lies with that smart little boy of yours."

So far, Joseph had been following our conversation with interest, but when I uttered the words which implicated him in the mystery of the skull, his jaw—like his father's before him—dropped open. Recovering himself a little, Sir William addressed me with more than a little irritation.

"What can you mean, sir? How on earth can my son be implicated in that terrible screaming?"

I looked down at the still-astonished little face and patted Joseph on the head.

"Please let us not overreact sir," I began. "The boy has great ventriloquial skills and was able to throw his voice into the mouth of the skull. It was really no more

than a clever boy's practical joke. I was able to detect what was happening so quickly because I also possess the skill of ventriloquism. It was enough to observe your son's pursed-up mouth, red face, and popping eyes as he made the effort of throwing his voice into the skull's mouth. I could not be deceived."

As I finished speaking, Sir William looked at Joseph, anger clearly discernible on his noble features.

"Is this true, Joseph?" he asked in a low but intense voice. Seeing how angry his father had become, the poor lad burst into tears and confessed all.

"It was only a joke, Papa, and it was such a rum do to watch Mama, Cicely, and all the servants avoiding the room and swearing there was a three-thousand-year-old ghost haunting the house!"

Sir William's face was now very red, and he pointed meaningfully to the large staircase behind us.

"Wretched boy! You have deceived your own family and wasted the time of Mr. Van Helsing here. Go to your room immediately and await my decision regarding your punishment for this outrage!"

Tearfully the boy left us and began to climb the stairs. Sir William then turned to me and began to speak apologetically.

“My dear Van Helsing, you must forgive me for having wasted your time. You will certainly do us the honour of staying to eat dinner with us. I would like you to meet my wife and Cecilia. Cecilia is the sweetest of girls and at least you will see that not all my children are young rascals in the making.”

I was more than delighted to accept Sir William's kind offer.



Sir William's dinner was truly for the connoisseur. The roasted fowl was cooked to perfection and the wine ideally suited to the occasion. We were eating dessert when a sudden wail came from the direction of the morning room. Cecilia immediately dropped her spoon, and Lady Warburton screamed and put her hands over her ears. Next she began to speak out hysterically.

"I knew that wailing was caused by something other than Joseph playing ventriloquial games. That is a spirit screaming in agony!"

Both Sir William and I left our places at the dining table and raced out to the morning room from where the terrible screaming was now more fearsome than ever. Inside, the room was empty except for the awful, screaming skull on the mantelpiece. Sir William asked me breathlessly to remain in the room while he checked on his son. A few moments later he returned with the news that the room remained locked and his son was sleeping inside. There was no way he could be making the terrible screaming noise this time. Armed with this information, I quickly decided on my next move. I asked Sir William what he no doubt regarded as a strange question.

"Do you have a supply of garlic in the house sir?"

Sir William, quickly overcoming his astonishment, replied in the affirmative. I asked him to tell one of his servants to bring it to me. Five minutes later a servant, with his arms full of garlic and a most unpleasant expression on his face, returned to our sides, clearly suffering. I immediately amazed my host by taking the

garlic in handfuls and stuffing it into the skull's mouth, eyes, and other open orifices. When the skull had been entirely stuffed with the garlic—and the screaming had finally ceased—I took a step back and admired my handiwork. Sir William then asked a most natural question.

“Why in the name of goodness did you do that, Van Helsing?”

I smiled before briefly replying.

“The peculiar screaming that we heard this time was undoubtedly that of a vampire, Sir William. Clearly in the circumstances we cannot cut off this vampire's head or put a stake through its heart. However, we *are* able to stuff the head with garlic. We have now neutralised the danger and this particular vampire of ancient Egypt will never scream again. Leave the monster there overnight, and tomorrow morning crush the skull with a heavy hammer. You will never have a problem again.”

Sir William looked at me gratefully and shook my hand.

“My dear Van Helsing, how can we ever thank you enough?”

I took my leave of Sir William shortly after finishing dinner—and all his family thanked me once again for exterminating the monster in the morning room.

The railway station was only fifteen minutes' walk from Sir William's house, and in consequence I had decided to walk the short distance rather than take advantage of Sir William's kind offer to use one of his carriages. When I had been walking for about five minutes, I was accosted by none other than Sir William's son, Joseph. He seemed in high spirits and was making bloodcurdling screaming noises. At last he deigned to speak.

"You stupid old fool! Now I've been able to pay you back for ratting on me earlier. It was easy enough to climb down the ivy on the wall and get one of my friends to take my place in the room. When father came up to check on me after the skull started screaming again, all he could hear was the steady breathing of my friend inside, pretending to be asleep! In the interim time I'd crept round to the window outside the morning room and started the vampire screaming."

At this juncture the boy stopped talking and began the horrible wailing that we'd heard in the morning room once again. With a last scream of terrible defiance, he made a face at me and ran off into some nearby bushes.

For a moment I stood where I was, irresolute, thinking things over. It was my clear duty to return to Sir William and inform him of the truth, yet for some reason I felt reluctant to move. After a brief internal struggle I resumed my interrupted journey to the railway station. The mystery of the screaming skull had now been solved definitively, and—as with many of my previous cases—only the old vampire slayer himself was destined to ever know how things had really turned out.