

THE CHAPEL OF UNREST

by

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Being a reading for two actors.

The YOUNGER MAN might be dressed in a black suit and tie.

The OLDER MAN might be dressed in a dark suit and overcoat.

Neither need be "period".

The set might be a coffin and two chairs.

Or not.

Lighting might be candle light.

Or not.

The props might be a cross on the wall, a crucifix round the young man's neck, a Bible on a lectern, some ancient-looking books.

Or none of the above.

OLDER MAN:

In the forty years or so I have been collecting all manner of first-hand experiences of the untoward, the outré, the inconceivable - in my role as a self-proclaimed "Amateur Supernaturalist", if you will - I do not think there is a story I heard more worthy of doubt, but equally one that has haunted me more...

It was told me in a certain public house in Tadcaster, up north, a town more replete with breweries than would seem rational. I was young and the man was old, and placed his story between the two World Wars which turned this land, by degrees, into a "spectred" isle, of sorts. Ghosts do not go away. Sometimes they are seen, and sometimes merely felt. This man knew about death. But worse - far worse - he knew the limits of death, and what things lie beyond...

YOUNGER MAN:

There is one question I cannot answer. Given the choice, would I have chosen a different profession? The business was my father's, and his before him. Ours was the name on the window, and somehow I knew that from infancy my destiny was to be fulfilled therein. By the time I was old enough to question, I was too old to change my ways, and there it is.

The profession of funeral preparation necessarily separates its acolytes from everyday society. Apart from the solitary nature of the work, there is some suspicion on the part of a public satiated by centuries of folklore, that such practitioners may somehow be privy to some dark knowledge best left alone, that we possess some occult sensitivity merely by dint of our contact with the dead. It is a view one must grow accustomed to tolerating. People brand us as carriers of melancholy and gloom merely because our station requires a modicum of dignity and respect. I became used to being treated as an outsider, as everyone in my trade must. I also became used to my own company, for the same reason. I have only had three friends in my life, and two are dead. I buried them both. The third will bury me, I suspect.

But we are needed. Why?

Because people fear the dead. People do not wish to do what we do - they would rather entrust the task of handling their dearest ones to a complete stranger. Peculiar, I will never understand it, but nevertheless it is true. This is because, I think, they imagine a corpse to retain something of the nature of the living being that preceded it. In my experience, there is no such ambiguity. The dead are sad objects. Empty vessels. The souls have

gone. We deal only with the husks, and it is our function, therefore, not to attend to the needs of the deceased so much as to the needs of the living - by providing sympathetic rituals to aid the natural process of grief. That is our function, and it is a pragmatic one - not one to be approached with fear.

I have said that word again... - fear...

Because one thing happened to make me question all the certainties I have just expressed. One thing made me begin to approach my job with increasing - unease. Even, yes - caution...

It was a bitterly cold day in March, but more like midwinter. I remember because thought I saw specks of pollen in the air from my window, then I realised it was snow. But the sun shone brightly. It was by no means miserable - externally. My heart was another matter. I had stayed in my office all night, poring over the accounts and gloomily pondering my future. My father had died seriously in debt, and however I juggled the figures, it always came out the same - I owed his creditors several hundred pounds. I could not even afford to pay them pennies. The resolution that greeted me with the brittle dawn was the only one possible. With a heavy heart I decided to sell the business. These thoughts were foremost

in my mind as I received a typically brusque telephone call from Dr Frith.

OLDER MAN:

"Nimrod? Charlie, isn't it? Good lad. Knew your father. Good man. Now then. Death. Big House. West of town. Know it?"

YOUNGER MAN:

I did. It had been called 'The Big House' since my childhood, though its true name was Jacobsdale. Still in a stupor of misery, I called upon my assistant Jonas to accompany me, drove the hearse to the place I was bidden, and found myself ushered by the doctor into a death-bed tableau no different from dozens at which I had been present in my years as an undertaker.

OLDER MAN:

"Come in."

YOUNGER MAN:

The owner of the house was an elderly man who might have once had military bearing but now displayed remarkable fragility. He greeted me with politeness, if not cordiality, and spoke with the merest hint of a Northern

accent.

OLDER MAN:

"Thank you for coming."

YOUNGER MAN:

I gave my swift, automatic condolences. He sat immobile in a cushioned chair as the doctor and I conversed, all the while his eyes fixed with a kind of deep suffering upon the pitiful figure in the bed. Occasionally his eyes darted sidelong, nervously, or he would blink, or twitch, but always his eyes would return to rest on the deceased.

OLDER MAN:

"To answer your question, she is my daughter. Christina."

YOUNGER MAN:

...he said. Evidently a woman of some forty years of age. Lying as peacefully in death as if she had been arranged there for the composition of a Pre-Raphaelite painting. Her hair was red and lustrous, and lay thickly on the white of the pillow. Yet I saw no tears in her father's eyes, merely numb and staring eyes set in a wan and haggard countenance. But grief takes many forms, I knew from

experience, and thought no more of it.

The doctor signed the death certificate and I said Jonah and I would transport the body to my Chapel of Rest.

At the front door the old man hesitated, as if to say something, then declined, and shut the door. Only when closing the back of the hearse upon the coffin, and hearing the bolts thrown from inside the house, did I notice that every one of the windows of Jacobsdale was barred - like those of a prison.

Preoccupied by my troubles, I could do no more work that day. Instead, I confined myself to my office. I even drew the drapes to block out the mocking sunlight. Once more I applied myself to the books, and once more could only come to one conclusion: sell the business. I paced, stamped, cursed. I prayed to God: give me a way out of this mess! But no answer came.

I had just taken my coat from the peg to go for a brisk walk to work off my frustrations, when there was a knock on the door.

It was the old man I had met earlier in the day. George Arbuthnot. The breeze was icy.

OLDER MAN:

May I come in?

YOUNGER MAN:

He wore a heavy coat and had his hands stuffed firmly in the pockets. Against the darkness of the material, his pallor seemed almost grey. He refused my handshake and did his best not to rest his limpid blue eyes on my own.

OLDER MAN:

"I have come to discuss -- arrangements."

YOUNGER MAN:

"Very well," I said as I showed him through to my office. "Have you spoken to the vicar, sir? Or would you like me to take care of everything? Naturally, you will want things taken care of as soon as possible. Perhaps we should strive for a Friday funeral? I'm sorry, I have not asked if you are Church of England, Roman Catholic, or..."

OLDER MAN:

"I want no service. I simply want burial. Burial. At the earliest opportunity."

YOUNGER MAN:

"I see. I see... Well, we have a rising scale of prices; perhaps you would like to see that?"

OLDER MAN:

"No."

YOUNGER MAN:

"We have a wide range of caskets available: oak, mahogany, satin black, plain, velvet-lined - with gold furniture or bronze. Let me see if I..."

OLDER MAN:

"I am not interested in the quality of the coffin."

YOUNGER MAN:

"Then, what have you come to discuss, sir?" I enquired, with what small amount of politeness I could muster. He replied:

OLDER MAN:

"The preparation of the dead."

YOUNGER MAN:

"Ah. You would want our full treatment, sir? Yes, we can do that. Naturally, we can do that. The normal health and hygiene processes..." I used the usual euphemism for embalming, of course...

OLDER MAN:

"No."

YOUNGER MAN:

His pale eyes were unblinking as he drew an envelope from his coat pocket. It fell to the floor. I picked it up, as he made no attempt to do so himself.

OLDER MAN:

"I wish to prescribe my own manner of treatment. I realise my request is unusual, and when you read it, you may well have extreme reluctance to carry it out. I can only say, however, that my daughter's - condition necessitates such action. And if you will not comply, I shall find another who shall."

YOUNGER MAN:

Holding the envelope in my hands, I let out a light laugh. This all seemed terribly over-dramatic: why didn't the old man merely tell me his instructions? Why the secrecy? Why the warning? What could be so - objectionable?

I was soon to learn. And as I read the enclosure my fingers began to tremble, and a cold sweat broke over my entire body. After reading it, I flung it down.

"In the name of God, man!"

OLDER MAN:

"Yes, sir. Very much in the name of God."

YOUNGER MAN:

My first instinct was to throw the fellow out. Had he not been so old and frail I may have dealt him a blow. As it was, I just stared, and he stared back at me.

OLDER MAN:

"There is nothing to be gained from explanation. I could tell you the truth, or I could give you one of many lies, but I have no intention of doing either. You accept the work, or not, as your feelings see fit."

YOUNGER MAN:

"What kind of monster are you?" I blurted, able to keep my silence no longer. "This goes against every law of God and Man. It is the foulest of all deeds to abuse the sanctity of the dead!"

At this Arbuthnot sneered with awful bitterness.

OLDER MAN:

"You need not lecture me about the sanctity of the dead, sir. I have my reasons. Religious, philosophical - call them what you will. I need your co-operation, and for the use of an hour of your time, and your guilt, I am prepared to pay, let us say - substantially."

YOUNGER MAN:

"Nothing can pay for this! This -- abomination! Good God, she was your daughter! Does that mean nothing to you?"

OLDER MAN:

"It means everything to me..."

YOUNGER MAN:

He looked down and I saw that a cheque was enclosed with the sheet of paper. Upon it was already written my name.

OLDER MAN:

"One thousand pounds. In your pocket or another's, I don't care. Nobody will ever know. The grave cannot speak."

YOUNGER MAN:

I was struck dumb. My thoughts spun, my head swam, no

longer with disgust but with... interest. The rest of the conversation I cannot, will not, remember. I poured myself a brandy, and to my horror found that I had poured two, and before I realised it we had raised the glasses and made a toast for which, to my eternal horror, I was, in that moment, eternally grateful.

But later that night, as I lay on my bed, fully clothed, the clock in the room ticked like the workings of an infernal machine, each passing minute reminding me of the first two words of George Arbuthnot's abhorrent instructions...

OLDER MAN:

"Before sunset..."

YOUNGER MAN:

I turned on my side, closed my eyes to block out the room, but could not block out the thoughts. I felt unclean. I felt as if I had been complicit in a Faustian bargain. My body churned inside, my professional ethics flung asunder: my soul felt like a sacrificial lamb, terrified, bleating, yet unable to escape. To do this - to succumb - for greed? Where was the dignity of death? Where was the dignity of life? I would tear up the cheque. I would destroy it.

Now.

OLDER MAN:

"Before sunset..."

YOUNGER MAN:

No! My humanity does not have a price. There are more important things. I shall not do it. I shall resist. I respect the dead.

But why? What does it matter?

What are they? A husk of flesh and bone. And I am alive and can be helped. It was a blessing, albeit a blessing in hideous disguise but a blessing nonetheless. And what about the sin of pride if I were to turn it down? For the sake of my own... what? Cowardice? Qualms? Sensitivity? But in a few short minutes the deed would be done...

OLDER MAN:

"Before sunset..."

YOUNGER MAN:

Yes! Do it! Now, quickly. Don't be weak, have strength for once in your life. The sort of strength your father

had. Do it and build the business again, save the men who would face the dole queue. If you don't you'll go under, and they'll go under too - without a word of thanks to you and your stupid principles, that's for sure.

Suddenly in an instant I became aware of the lengthening shadows in the room. The sun was setting over the far rooftops. I sat up, rigid.

OLDER MAN:

"Obey the instructions to the letter. Before sunset..."

YOUNGER MAN:

I stood. I looked at the cross on the wall, feeling ashamed and then all the more determined. It goes against God, yes. But where is God in my hour of need?

I took up the sheet of paper again, and read it, but by now I'd learned the directives by heart.

OLDER MAN:

"Before sunset..."

YOUNGER MAN:

Yes, yes!... I picked up the box on top of the wardrobe which contained all the equipment I needed. It had not

been taken down since my mother had died. It seemed faintly sacrilegious even to touch it - but I dispelled my fears. I also took the crucifix from the wall above the sampler reading "Home Sweet Home", then descended to set about my task.

The last glow of sunlight imbued the passage downstairs with a church-like serenity, filtering as it did through the stained-glass of the front door. For once I wished that my profession did not regale in the trappings of Christianity. The portrait of Jesus stared with accusing, watchful eyes as I entered the Chapel of Rest.

My hand twisted the handle of the door.

In the ante-chamber, coffins were stacked in rows, one on its end, its lid half-open. I used one arm to part the scarlet drapes that led into the Chapel itself, and the candle that I had brought from upstairs lit my path with a flickering, beeswax glow.

The Chapel was not a catacomb. It was not shadowy, nor sepulchral, nor even eerie. But the silence of the place seemed designed to catch any whisper - even the unsaid whisper of a guilty mind. I was afraid even to breathe.

The coffin lay on its bier, without a lid. I paused for a moment, looking down at the pallid figure of

Christina Arbuthnot.

I thought it must have been the intensity of my emotions, or the ambiguity of the candlelight, but for an instant I would have sworn she had the face not of a forty-year-old woman, but of a girl of less than twenty summers.

I saw that my hands were shaking. But I could not shy away now. I had come too far. Now it must be done quickly, without faltering.

OLDER MAN:

"Place a cross within each of her hands."

YOUNGER MAN:

Holding my breath, I placed the cross from my bedroom wall in the corpse's limp right hand, closing its fingers tightly around it. Strangely, they were not yet stiff with rigor mortis. In fact, they were curiously warm and clammy. Hastily removing a crucifix I wore around my neck, I placed this second one in the palm of her left hand.

OLDER MAN:

"And a Bible upon her heart... the Trinity to bind her to the place... the weight of the Lord's might to hold her down... And in penance for her Sins, in Hell for all

eternity..."

YOUNGER MAN:

I turned and went to fetch the large, leather-bound Bible from the lectern that faced the pews. I placed it upon the dead woman's breast, the cross embossed on its black leather covering her heart.

OLDER MAN:

And finally, before sunset...

YOUNGER MAN:

I opened my mother's sewing-box. You cannot imagine how long it took for me to thread the needle with thick black twine. The perspiration more than once blinded me. I licked the end of the cotton a hundred times into a tiny point, but still it would not thread.

OLDER MAN:

Before sunset - without fail...

YOUNGER MAN:

The needle finally threaded, I leaned over the beautiful face beneath me. The beauty of the dead had not been lost

on me. The sadness of a perfect child. The pity of beholding the full bloom of womanhood cut off in its prime. But here was something altogether different. Something inexplicably different about the upturned nose, the full lips, the almond-shaped eyes.

OLDER MAN:

...without fail...

YOUNGER MAN:

I touched her lips. I puckered them together between my forefinger and thumb and began to sew. I had seen my mother preparing the Christmas turkey, pricking the pale flesh with the needle, forcing it through, pulling, stitching again, yanking the twine until the whole was a tight, immovable scar...

OLDER MAN:

...the mouth must feed no more. Let her not hunger...

YOUNGER MAN:

The twine criss-crossed the mouth, pulling it shut, dragging the entire face into a grimace, drawing hideous wrinkles across the once-perfect cheeks. With the black

outlines, it seemed she had the grinning teeth of a skull. I bent down and bit off the twine, and knotted it.

And now...

My breath was inaudible, but seemed to echo around the Chapel as if grotesquely amplified. The stone angel stared with unseeing eyes, blind but all-knowing. Oh God. I must finish. Finish and go. But my task was not yet over.

OLDER MAN:

And let her eyes not open...

YOUNGER MAN:

I took the needle to her left eye. Beginning at the inside edge, I inserted it just under the tear-duct, and through the inside of the upper lid, out, and in through the lower lid again. I made in all seven stitches to seal her eyelids together before moving over to begin on the other eye.

Suddenly it opened.

Like a glistening pearl it shone in the darkness, with the same steely blue as her father's. But staring, bulging, terrified, darting to and fro.

With a scream wrenched out of my intestines I fell

back, spewing the contents of the sewing-box over the tiled floor of the Chapel, needles and cotton-reels and buttons tinkling in all directions.

In an instant I was out of the place, falling against the staircase, using my arms desperately to claw my way up the carpet, rebounding along the walls to the sanctuary of my room. I flung myself on the bed, at once rising to lock the door, and place a chair against it, and for an hour sat on the bed, shivering and gibbering like a lunatic, my eyes never leaving the door-handle.

OLDER MAN:

...let ...her ...eyes... not...

YOUNGER MAN:

Shut up! ... I woke at two in the morning, as if from a nightmare. I prayed it was. A brandy bottle lay upended on the floorboards. My head was throbbing. The chair was propped against the door.

Wearily, I forced myself downstairs, one hand gripping the banister rail as if for dear life.

I entered the Chapel of Rest to find that the coffin was empty.

"Dear Lord!" I cried aloud, almost collapsing with

horror. Within minutes I was at Jacobsdale, roaring that horror at the perpetrator of the crime face to face, and with no holds barred.

OLDER MAN:

Mr Nimrod.

YOUNGER MAN:

"You vile wretch, sir! You are not only perverse but evil! You deceived me! You lied to me! That you wanted to do this, this disgusting ritual - was bad enough, to a dead body! But she was not dead! I saw her! She looked at me! Dear God! May God have mercy on you! She was alive!"

George Arbuthnot said nothing for a long while. He seemed in a dark reverie, a prisoner in the book-lined library in which we confronted each other. Beside him was a side-table on which a pair of wooden glove-stands sat in an attitude of prayer.

"Your daughter is alive!" I screamed again through my tears.

OLDER MAN:

"No. Christina is dead. She died fifty years ago."

YOUNGER MAN:

I was, for a second time, overcome with the urge to attack him, but found myself instead uttering a laugh that seemed to come from someone other than myself.

OLDER MAN:

"And she is not my daughter. She is my sister. My twin sister."

YOUNGER MAN:

"Liar! That's impossible!"

OLDER MAN:

"Perhaps. But it is nevertheless true."

YOUNGER MAN:

"I'm leaving! I've had enough of madness. I am going to the police..."

OLDER MAN:

"You are not. I know you are not."

YOUNGER MAN:

...he said, even though I had already reached the door.

OLDER MAN:

"Because if you go, you will never know the truth."

YOUNGER MAN:

And he was right. I paused. Still quivering with rage, I took the seat opposite him. The room was lit by gas from the glimmering wall-hangings, but darkness separated us like a black river. His voice was a croak, as if his throat protested against the tale he told...

OLDER MAN:

"I am an army man, like my father and his father before him. I think one of us was at Waterloo. They say it runs in the blood. Blood runs, I'll say that much. That's all soldiering teaches you, in the end. Blood, and not much else, I'd say.

Before you were born - some half century ago now - I was posted to India. Non-Commissioned officer. Nothing grand. Sergeant-Major. Had the lungs for it. My sister had always been nervous - dreadfully nervous type, and I couldn't bear to leave the country without her, so we faked a bit of paperwork and she came along as my wife. She hadn't found a man, you see. Not a man to care for her. Other than myself. Just, as I say - paperwork.

Christina was a book-reading, studious child, and I the running-round, dam-building, tree-climbing one. She collected butterflies. My own inclination was to tear the wings off them. You see me trembling? It is because I have not heard her innocent laughter for fifty years. Please... Please, light the burner at my elbow... There are substances within to ease my pain.

YOUNGER MAN:

I did as I was asked, impatient for him to return to his story. I blew out the match and the glowing disc beside him emitted an intensely perfumed smoke.

OLDER MAN:

"One summer I became incapacitated with fever, and confined to bed. Christina was not a good nurse, and I told her to travel onward with my Battalion, that I would meet her in Ushpur. My sickness became worse and I was delayed much longer than I thought - and when I was strong enough to lift a newspaper, I was horrified to find that Khanduri brigands, religious fanatics, a devilish horde, had invaded Ushpur, and that all Europeans, together with thousands of innocent local women and children, had been flung into the vile pits of Ushpur prison.

"In a state of panic, I hastened to the city in the company of urgent reinforcements, only to find the place in an abject state of siege.

"It was four months before the Khanduri were routed and we found the prison in a condition far beyond our worst nightmares of human degradation. Hundreds upon hundreds of people had been confined in utter darkness - and left to starve. I helped clear the many dead bodies. I touched living and dead hands. Black and white. I dug through near-skeletons in the dark. Many had been mutilated as if by pestilential vermin. As for the living - their pitiful eyes looked up at me, but my only thought was for Christina.

"I found her, a withered shadow of her former self, a tiny stick-puppet cowering in the dank dungeons of Ushpur amongst the slime of decomposition that surrounded her like a bog of inhumanity. She could neither speak nor move.

"I returned with my sister to an officer's house in London. I'd saved his life with a lucky bullet and he offered it to us for her recovery when he saw her sorry state. We had no family, so it was I who gradually nursed her back to health. Or, more correctly, what I believed to be health. For it became clear that her mind would never be the same. She stared out of the window, took no joy in

the scent of flowers or the beautiful music I played her. She ate little, to begin with: then ate nothing. And yet she was no longer losing weight. In fact, she began to show a glow in her cheeks that the Christina before Ushpur never had.

"She slept erratically. More than once I woke from my own fitful slumber to hear an unfamiliar voice echoing throughout the building, uttering words neither English nor Ushpuri, indeed approximating no tongue I had ever encountered before. And uttered by a voice racked with the anguish of sheer physical torment. The voice of a lost soul howling in the dark.

"One night, I was so agitated I went to her room, but the bed was empty, the bedclothes strewn around, the window open. I found her a street away, walking blindly. When I called her name, she stopped, and, suddenly aware of where she was, began weeping. I carried her home.

"Not unreasonably, I became curious as to the cause, purpose, or intent of her somnambulation. And thought, perhaps, like the doctor and nurse observing Lady Macbeth, I could deduce some answer to this peculiar malady by means of a nocturnal vigil.

"To that end, the following night I entered her room, fully dressed, and sat in a corner far from her bed,

paraffin lamp at my side. For an hour nothing occurred. Even the streets were chillingly quiet: no passers-by, no street vendors, no vehicles. Just the silent eye of the moon. Finally, my sister began to toss and turn. Her long fingers clutched at the sheets, pawed at her belly and throat -- then she rose from the bed and slowly, like a phantasm, drifted to the door and out, into the night.

"I hastily followed.

"She descended the cobbled path towards Highgate Cemetery, and I watched her scale the iron gates like a cat. Once inside, she became ever more like a stalking animal. Her eyes, glazed in half-sleep, fastened upon a marble tomb in the corner of the graveyard reserved for poets. With a quiet intensity she set to the door, which, even though split, must have been incredibly heavy. Nevertheless the urgency of her task imbued her with supernatural strength, and the slabs were cast aside as if they were cardboard..."

YOUNGER MAN:

Overcome by the memory, Arbuthnot closed his eyes and took a long inhalation of the thickly perfumed air before he could carry on...

OLDER MAN:

"You can have no idea... No man can have any idea -- what I beheld when I looked into that... that ravaged sepulchre. She stood over the open coffin with the hideous gruel of the grave staining her chin and breast. The inhabitant of the long box was a man, decomposed, half lifted out, his head tilted back, his sagging jaw dropped almost to his chest, no eyes in those dark orbits. Christina had his arm lifted in what I first took to be the act of running kisses up the corpse's festering arm. But the sounds... the sounds, you see! The sounds, they were of crunching, they were of breaking... they were of gnawing, chewing, swallowing...'

YOUNGER MAN:

My heart was in my throat. I could not believe what I was hearing.

OLDER MAN:

"You see, there were no vermin in the dungeons of Ushpur. Or if there was, it had two legs, two arms, and the face of a beautiful young woman."

YOUNGER MAN:

I struggled to comprehend the full nature of horror he was forcing upon me.

OLDER MAN:

...You look dumb! Do you still not understand? Perhaps you have read the Arabian Nights? How Amina, the wife of Sidi-Nouman, nightly deserted the marital bed to feed upon the dead?

YOUNGER MAN:

Arbutnot directed my gaze to the book-lined shelves.

OLDER MAN:

"In the age of Plutarch, the daughters of King Orcommenu were imprisoned in his palace. Soon they were unable to resist an insatiable urge, falling upon the young Ippasus and devouring him. Hoffmann told the tale of "Aurelia" to his Serapion Club. Same story. Same creature.

YOUNGER MAN:

"Creature? This is absurd! What kind of creature?"

OLDER MAN:

"Dear God! Do I have to spell it out to you? In the dungeons of Ushpur, those who survived did so by the only means possible - by cannibalism.

YOUNGER MAN: (LAUGHS)

No.

OLDER MAN:

"Yes. I see your visage darken. Sadly I am beyond such horror now. And certainly beyond laughter. I have learned, over many years of research into the literature and mythology of countless lands, that such an act is not beyond human endeavour - or human taste. The Scythians and Bretons devoured their dead. The Carthaginians, ancient Gauls, and Sioux Indians of North America... all consumed the flesh of their enemies as a way of assimilating their courage. And in Ushpuri legend, a cannibal in life will become a ghoul in death - and be condemned to eternal purgatory on Earth."

YOUNGER MAN: (STUNNED)

"I was never a great reader," I said. "...and never more glad of it than I am now."

OLDER MAN:

"Back then, I was similarly ignorant... I need not tell you the thoughts that raced through my mind as I followed the creature that is Christina back to our London home. I did not sleep, but in the morning resolved that my sister would not be made to endure further horrors. The bespoilings of Highgate were already public knowledge, and to give her up to the police or an asylum I could not bear. But surely the trail would soon lead to her - or else she would be apprehended, in flagrante.

"We moved north. I imprisoned her here. This was to be her tomb - and mine. For the first years, I was dominant and she was the prisoner, but then, as I became older, she began to inflict her horrifying will. Without feeding, she began to waste away to a near-skeletal state. Unable to withstand that, I began to give her... offerings. God help me - I became the grave robber!

"But she demanded more and more. It became like the addiction of a drug. Christina could derive pleasure from nothing but the consumption of human flesh. The Demon within her tormented me as it did her. I felt that I might lose my sanity unless I found her some escape.

"I read, I read... Calmet's Daemonialitate,

Garaamuel's Teologia Fundamentale -- everything!

Searching, desperately, in some old grimoire, in some folk-tale, for any recipe to rid me of my hideous tyrant.

"I found it in Stefan Hock's masterwork... - instructions for the destruction of a ghoul. Precisely those which I specified to you in detail - to be administered whilst the monster was in satiated slumber. For the ghoul, like the vampire of legend, reverses the biology of life, sleeping during the day and scavenging by night...'

YOUNGER MAN:

"There is a question I must ask," I interrupted. "If you believe all this..."

OLDER MAN:

"Believe? What is there to believe or not believe when you have seen such things with your own eyes?"

YOUNGER MAN:

"Yes, I know," I said, hesitating... "But - why did you come to me to begin with? Why could you not carry out the instructions yourself?"

Arbuthnot's eyes vanished into slits and he sat back

in his chair so far I thought he might melt into the shadows.

OLDER MAN: (LAUGHS)

YOUNGER MAN:

From the dark I heard a hideous laugh with no humour in it, that stopped as abruptly as it started.

OLDER MAN:

"Oh, but I did. I did. I took the equipment in hand, I visited her bed. I stood over her. I brought the needle towards her eye. But I hesitated, you see - and I was lost. I could never do it again. She made sure of that."

YOUNGER MAN:

"She - she made sure of that?" I repeated, almost too afraid to hear his reply.

He lifted his arms from beneath the shawl that covered his knees, and I saw that they ended in blunted stumps, severed at the wrists. I also realised that the glove-stands beside him were not glove-stands at all.

OLDER MAN:

"She made sure of that because she ate my hands."

YOUNGER MAN:

I ran from the house with the madman's insane and pitiful cries in my ears. He implored me to stay, to not leave him - but I ran without looking back, like a child running from a haunted house.

My conviction that Sergeant Arbuthnot was quite mad did not diminish with the passing of time. My conclusion was that I had been cruelly duped by a sadistic creature who wished to exact an awful torment - of being both disfigured and buried alive - upon his innocent sister. The thought of having been a pawn in such a bizarre and insidious game filled me with self-loathing, not least because it made me see in my own character aspects more odious than I would have imagined I possessed. Whether I would recover from having been a participant in such a horrifying enterprise, I did not know. But I did tear up the man's cheque, and burn it. Financial stability is not worth the price of one's sleep - or one's soul.

However, within the week, I was visited by Constable Opie. It was not unusual for our paths to cross, since the police are often amongst the first on the scene of a death.

But the body he delivered to the Chapel of Rest that day shocked me to the core.

It was that of George Arbuthnot, and the face, remarkably altered, showed an expression of aching peace.

OLDER MAN:

"Suicide. Poison, Dr Frith reckons. Some exotic stuff at that. In a room with a locked door. Locked windows, too. Don't make much sense. To me, anyway. And he had a letter on the table addressed to you, sir - In person."

YOUNGER MAN:

When the Constable had gone I opened the letter to find that it contained not only a second cheque as substantial as the one I had destroyed, but a note upon which three words were written:

OLDER MAN:

"Bury. Me. Deep."

YOUNGER MAN:

I stared at the corpse in stunned, wordless dialogue. Arbuthnot's tale went through my head. That mad tale. And I heard again his final, pleading screams as I ran away.

Screams pleading with me to finish my uncompleted task.

I set about cosmeticising the body, without delay. With my thumbs I forced his staring blue eyes closed. I combed his cotton-hair. I used mortician's putty to fill the sunken cheeks, and fixed the jaw closed. With foundation, rouge, and cochineal I worked to give his pale visage a mask of health it never had in life.

The funeral was arranged for Monday, and I was pleased to be able to give his body three days' solace in our Chapel of Rest before going to its final resting place. Each morning and evening I visited it and paid my own respects, and gave my own prayers.

The funeral was attended only by myself, and Jonas, my trusted assistant and friend whom I'd feared I'd have to lay off. But now there were two names etched on the window-pane - "Nimrod and Carter" - and the debtors were on the retreat. So why did I not feel more at ease with the world?

Walking back from the cemetery with our feet crunching on the light snowfall, Jonas seemed concerned that we had been the only ones to pay respects. I mumbled an explanation, not too far from the truth, that Mr Arbuthnot, being elderly and somewhat reclusive, had few friends or relatives, and that he shouldn't worry on such a

score.

OLDER MAN:

"Was feller never married then?"

YOUNGER MAN:

...said Jonas. "Not that I know of," I replied.

OLDER MAN:

"Who was woman, then?"

YOUNGER MAN:

"Woman?" said I.

OLDER MAN:

"Aye. Woman who came yesterday.

Dressed all in black, and skinny like. I thought she must be a relative, in her widow's weeds and that. She didn't say owt, even when I asked, like, but she'd obviously come to pay her respects. You were off doin' summat, so I showed her into the Chapel of Rest. I stayed and waited, because she was a bit, well, queer like, to be honest. And watched.

She just stood there. Didn't pray or nowt. Just

stood as still as still can be. Then raised her veil to
kiss the body on the cheek and... P'raps I shouldn't have
looked, I know, but...

YOUNGER MAN:

"But what?"

OLDER MAN:

She dropped her veil when she saw me staring. But I
couldn't help staring, see? Then she went. Turned her
back swiftly and was gone. But I saw it. Clear as I see
you now. Her mouth and eye, all stitched up closed, honest
to God, and the other eye, the good eye, staring... Just
one eye, Charlie - and it was weeping.

*"The Chapel of Rest" was first performed at The Bush
Theatre, London on March 15, 2013 with the following cast:*

Older Man - Jim Broadbent

Younger Man - Reece Shearsmith

Director:

Madani Younis