The Bewitchment

A haunting tale of sex and possession

By
Wilson Henshaw

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"THE BEWITCHMENT"

By
Wilson Henshaw

Dedicated to the memory of Sax Rohmer (1883-1959)

PROLOGUE

It was as if an irresistible force had invaded his slumbering mind. A female force. So powerful that he, despite his much-valued sense of manhood and what it meant to be an upstanding exponent of his own gender's qualities - if one wished to be respected by one's peers, that is – could do no more than bow before it.

At least in those dreams he was at pains not to share with another living soul; lest he himself be thought… corrupted.

Lord knows the world viewed what he did with a cynicism that often descended into outright contempt.

But for him to confess he was being…

The prospect was simply untenable.

And the consequences still more so.

With each visit to his nocturnal habitat, the amorphous invader tore at his defences; insisting he give ground before her imperious and inflexible will. It was, he assured himself upon waking – sometimes even within the dream itself – no more than a triggering of external preoccupations resulting in an overactive subconscious. Nobody, after all, could work in his rarefied line for very long without the sights, sounds, and experiences to be found within its sensational subject having a deleterious effect upon an imagination that was fertile to begin with.

But this!

The female inhabitant of his sleep, the same inhabitant with the incredible female body and the amorphous face that prohibited him from supplying that face a name, seemed no less real during his waking hours than it did when his eyes finally succumbed to the wiles of Morpheus and the female revenant, succubus, or elemental – for he had yet to settle upon a description, given that all three seemed apt at one time or another – who he was now fighting during his time conscious as much as he did when in sleep.

The latter struggle, he confessed in more honest moments, one that was not going well for him.

More and more, his dream persona was submitting to the lustful wraith that seemed intent upon claiming him.

Totally and unreservedly.

And seeming more real with each passing episode.

He sensed her will overriding his own and, strangely – scarily – with each advance his nightly tormentor made so did her form; even her face; become more distinguishable.

Though that "amorphous face" seemed more resistant to transparency than the body that was doing so much on its own to enslave him.

Alcohol before sleep – and copious amounts of it – had succeeded only in making him intoxicated rather than benumbed, and only the fact that his great friend and host was even more a fan of various Ports and Spirits had spared him embarrassment after his wife had departed for her own chamber.

But nothing could spare him the embarrassment of his own thoughts immediately upon waking from a dream in which she featured.

The dream – or nightmare, as he described it – he was currently experiencing being very much of the unforgettable kind.

And "unforgettable" in a way he could never bring himself to find positive.

As her labia, made slippery by the copious evidence of her own perverse arousal, slid the length of his unresisting face and back again, he realised there was both another aroma and another taste introducing itself into the mix of her sexual frenzy.

As his nightly tormentor allowed yet more of her waste nectar to moisten his handsome features, he screwed both eyes and mouth shit against the obscenity.

But it wasn't until the female voice that grew stronger with every dream said the word of command that he awoke from his torment bathed in the cold sweat of horror.

And the word?

"Lick!"

ONE

"There," pointed," Major Hawtrey, fetching us up short on the brow of the hill, indicating a valley with slopes carpeted in multi-coloured heather hemming it in.

"Low Belgrove," he said in a low voice, almost to himself, an unmistakable look of foreboding clouding features that had been untroubled before as my eyes followed his to house resting in the hollow of the dip. A low, rambling building, parts of which were showing evidence of great age, while others bore testament to recent attempts at renovation.

"That's the new wing to the left," continued Hawtrey. "It's the only addition I've made to the house, which, as it stood, had insufficient accommodation for the servants."

"It's certainly a quaint old place," I answered truthfully, feeling, if I'm honest, a little disturbed at sight of it myself. "Moody, would be a good description for it."

"I can do no less than agree. Just the same, I'm loath to part with it, especially as it means a big loss."

"Have you formed any theories since wiring me?"

"None whatever. I've always been a sceptic, Carnforth, but if Low Wakeham is haunted then I'm a Papuan head-shrinker."

I laughed reassuringly, my companion being the very antithesis of anything resembling a native of that area.

The two of us then descended the slope to a white gate giving access to a trim gravel path flanked by standard roses where Mrs. Hawtrey greeted us at the door. She was, as I had heard, much younger than the Major, and a distinctly attractive woman with a… *robust*… build. Junoesque, in fact. I had also come into possession of other rumours in regard of her but, unwilling to be either precipitous or judgemental, was neither ready nor willing to jump to conclusions. It being enough for me that my friend was happy with her and, from what I had observed of them when together during my last few days in the area, she appeared happy with him in return.

She greeted me cordially enough on this third occasion of our meeting, although I have known enough women who are naturally gifted actresses when it suits them to be; feeling sure, however, that she at least did not dislike me and did not suspect the real object of my visit to Low Wakeham for the first time since I came to the area at the confidential behest of her husband.

However, and being something of a lover of women – and especially those whose physical attractions far outweigh those of the beauteous, if you take my drift – I knew she would be occupying my thoughts at some stage during my stay.

And, if my instincts were right, as they usually were about such matters, beyond also.

Tea was served in a delightful little drawing-room which bore evidence of having but recently left the hands of London decorators, but when presently I found myself alone with my host in the Major's peculiar sanctum, our real business monopolised the conversation.

The room which Major Hawtrey had appropriated as a study was on the ground floor of the new wing - the wing which he himself designed and had built on to Low Wakeham. In regard to its outlook, it was certainly a charming apartment. Roses grew right up to the open window, so that their perfume filled the space inside, and beyond could be seen a prospect of coloured heather slopes and fir-clad hills.

Sporting prints decorated the walls, and the library was entirely, or almost entirely, made up of works on riding, hunting, shooting, racing, and golf, with a sprinkling of military manuals and crime and adventure fiction from the likes of Doyle and Haggard.

All in all, a most cosy room, probably because it was so untidy, or, as Mrs. Hawtrey phrased it, *"so man-ish."*

On a side table was ranked enough liquid refreshment to have inebriated a regiment, and, in one corner, cigar-boxes and tobacco-tins were stacked from the floor some two feet up against the wall – a presence explaining, being an abstainer myself, the somewhat stale and stuffy atmosphere of my friend's hidey-hole.

And yet…

Try as I might, I could not avoid the conclusion that here, as I had found it with the rest of the dwelling, an air of what I could only describe as a kind of pervasive sensuousness hung in the ether.

Though I do recall berating myself for my fancy and telling myself – not for the first time – that my calling was making inroads upon my interior life that might not prove healthy were I to follow it for too much longer.

Putting an end to it at this point, however, after having committed to helping a friend, was *not* a consideration to someone such as myself whose sense of duty and the word he gave were things to be valued and protected rather than jettisoned upon a fancy.

My swift familiarisation of my surroundings now over, we were soon comfortably seated - the Major on a hard leather couch, and I in a deep saddle-bag chair that was a positive inducement to slumber if one were in the slightest bit sleepy.

Finally, with an awkward clearing of the throat:

"It's a damn difficult thing to explain, Carnforth," began Hawtrey, puffing away at a cigar he had just lit – knowing I did not partake, lest you find his hospitality wanting - and staring through the open window. "And yet I know I must. Because, if you're to do anything, you will want full particulars."

I nodded, having nothing of any moment to add at this point.

“Well,” the Major continued, “you’ve heard how that blackguard Hollins let me down over those shares?”

His anger was palpable and he drew upon his cigar with, perhaps, more deliberation than usual.

“Because of this… *piece of swill*,” he raged, “I had to sell the Hall. Wakeham Hall, where a Hawtrey has been since the time of James I!”

He recovered his mental balance with no small effort.

“But… But that is not the story… This place, Low Wakeham, is really part of the larger estate, and I have leased it from the new owner of the Hall. It was formerly the home farm, but since my father’s time it has not been used for that purpose. The New Farm is over the brow of the hill there, on the other side of the high road A farm my father built.”

“Why?” I asked, content to lead him into his story rather than press; knowing I should be in receipt of it soon with either approach but preferring the more… *mannerly*.

“Well…” Hawtrey shifted uneasily and a look of perplexity crossed what was, on most occasions, his jolly, red face, “there were stories. Uncomfortable stories. And, to cut one of the longer ones short, Seagram - a man named Seagram, who occupied Low Wakeham at that time when I was at Sandhurst - was found dead here of… *something*; I never was clear as to the particulars. But there was an inquiry and a lot of fuss, and, in short, no one would occupy the property.”

“Which was when,” I smiled, “your father built the New Farm.”

“Yes. You are correct.”

“So, Low Wakeham had been empty for many years before you…?”

“No,” he came in sharply. “Only for one. Field, the head gardener at the Hall, lived here up till last September.”

He took another reflective puff on his pipe.

“The old story about Seagram was dying out, you see. But Field must have got to hear about it - or I’ve always supposed so. At any rate, in September – and a damn hot September, too, almost as hot as this - Field declined to live here any longer.”

“On what grounds?”

“He told me a cock-and-bull story about his wife having seen an evil looking woman with a predatory face peering in at her bedroom window!”

“A dream, perhaps?”

I questioned the woman, of course, and she swore to it. Adamant, in fact. Especially as she had not been asleep before seeing it and was in the act of tuning down the bed.”

He had broken out in perspiration with the recall and mopped at his heated brow excitedly, before spending several matches trying to relight his suddenly dormant cigar.

“What I did discover was that the man Field had come home the worse for drink that night. This, in turn, led me to the conclusion that the contorted face was the face of her drunken husband – the same inebriate she had declined to admit to the house and who, therefore, had climbed the ivy to get in at the open window.”

“She denied this?”

“Of course she denied it; they both did; but, from evidence obtained at the Three Keys in the village, I proved that Field had returned home drunk that night.”

“And then?”

He shrugged his shoulders ponderously; defeated almost.

“I had thought my explanation would have been an end to it, but…”

His head shook as if at a great disappointment to him.

“The people declined to remain in the place, despite my assurances all was well. So what could I do? Field was a good gardener, and his drunken habits in no way interfered with his efficiency. He gained nothing out of the matter except that, instead of keeping Low Wakeham, a fine house, I sent him to live in one of the Valley Cottages. He lives there now, for he’s still head gardener at the Hall.”

I made an entry in my notebook.

“I must see Field,” I said.

“I should,” agreed the Major in his loud voice. “Though you’ll get nothing out of him. He’s the most pig-headed liar in the county!”

Adding:

“When and if you can get a word out of the taciturn bugger, that is.”

I could only concur – and not only upon the subject of Field.

As was my way, and after receiving the Major’s request for assistance, I had come to the area before taking up residence at Low Wakeham. Doing so in order that I may gauge both the area and its people before they knew of my acquaintance with the owners of Low Wakeham and, as I found folk were wont to do, clammed up.

I had stayed at the *“Three Keys”* Hawtrey had mentioned above and was in doubt that it was not Field alone who was miserly with his words – though the lodgings were at least clean and tidy and the service prompt if a little on the surly side.

Returning to the present, I could see that anger had now replaced my friend’s look of defeat.

The former emotion one I found distinctly more useful than the latter.

"...The place proved unlettable," he was telling me. "All the old stories were revived, and I'm told that people cheerfully went two miles out of their way to avoid passing Low Wakeham at night!"

His head shook violently from side to side, apoplectic that such low-grade suspicion could have caused him such problems.

"And all because a wife saw her drunken husband's face illuminated in a bedroom window!"

"So, what came next?" I asked, anxious that he may get back to the meat of his story.

"Well, when I sold the Hall I decided to lease the place long-term from the new proprietor." He allowed himself a derisive snort. "Of what moment were such cotton-headed fears to me, after all!"

I returned his smile, finding it more and more difficult to remain patient in the face of his constant deviations from the facts he was supposed to be delivering me.

"Believe me," he went on. "It was almost hidden in a wilderness of weeds and bushes which had grown up around it. I don't think a living soul had approached within a hundred yards of the house since the day that the Fields quitted it! But it suited my purpose, being inexpensive to keep up; and, by adding this new wing, I was enabled to accommodate such servants as we required and, of course, could afford."

This last, I could see, genuinely pained him, but then, in my experience, a loss of income had that effect upon people of all conditions.

And understandably so.

"The horses had to go, of course," he went on after a moment. "And with them a lot of my old people. But we brought the housekeeper and three servants with us and when a London firm had rebuilt, renovated, decorated, and so forth, it began to look habitable."

"There is no doubt at all that it is a charming place," I said with sincerity.

"You think so, do you?" snapped the Major in a sudden rage, tossing his half-smoked cigar on to a side table and selecting a fresh one from a large box at his elbow before placing a hand upon his head and apologising.

"Apologies, Stewart," he offered, deviating from his custom and using my first name for once as he placed a bottle of Sherry and a glass on the table between us. "Help yourself to a…"

His ears keened at something from outside.

"Hullo! what have we here?"

The sound of footsteps upon the gravel path immediately outside the window became audible.

The Major looked puzzled – and, it seemed to me, more than a little fearful despite all of his earlier talk.

Then, through the cluster of roses peered a handsome face, that of a dark man, whose soft-grey hat and loose tie lent him a sort of artistic appearance.

“Oh, it’s you, Ingrams!” cried the Major, but without conviviality, opening the window to address the newcomer. “See you in half an hour or so; little bit of business in hand now, Lilith’s somewhere about.”

The new arrival simply waved his hand and passed on.

“It’s young Edgar Ingrams,” explained Hawtrey, almost savagely biting the end from his cigar, “son of Sir Frederick Ingrams, and one of my neighbours. He often drops in.”

As I considered the Major’s attitude, certain rumours which had reached me – together with the youth and sexual attraction of Mrs. Hawtrey – led me to conclude that the visits of Edgar Ingrams were not too welcome to my old friend.

“Take no notice of him, Carnforth. He’s of no interest to anyone.”

His expression grew sour:

“Just a little puppy Lilith keeps around to alleviate her monotony from time to time.

He shook his head, then, almost as if to himself:

“Pathetic really.”

I was still ruminating on the young man’s arrival and the above view of him when my host resumed.

And in a louder voice than ever:

“It was last night that the fun began. I can make neither head nor tail of it. If the blessed place is haunted, why have we seen nothing of the ghost during the two months or so we have lived at Low Wakeham? The fact remains that nothing unusual happened until last night.”

“Last night?”

“Yes. It came about owing to the infernal heat.”

I waited as he steeled himself to tell me what he knew he must tell.

“Mrs. Wells, the housekeeper, came down about two o’clock, intending, so I understand, to get a glass of cider from the barrel in the cellar. She could not sleep owing to the heat, and felt extremely thirsty. Well, there’s a queer sort of bend in the stair - I’ll show you in a minute; and as she came down and reached this bend she met a woman, or a thing, who was going up! The moonlight was streaming in through the window right upon that corner of the stair, and the apparition stood fully revealed.”

He paused again, and for one impatient moment I thought he was about to digress again.

Thankfully, I was wrong.

“I gather that it was that of an almost naked woman with unnaturally pale skin. Mrs. Wells naturally, for one of her class and education, is rather reticent on the point, but I gather that the apparition was inadequately clothed to say the least.”

My interest was beginning to be tweaked.

Or, more tweaked, shall we say.

“Regarding the face of this… female apparition… she supplies more details. Carnforth.”

The Major leant forward across the table:

“It was the face of a demon, Carnforth. A contorted devilish female demon with the eyes crossed, and glaring like the eyes of a mad dog!”

I waited.

“And, believe this if you will: according to Mrs Wells, our so-called ghost was glowing purple!”

Despite myself and the Major’s scoffing, I found goose-bumps had broken out upon the back of my neck and the stiff collar of the shirt covering it.

“Of course, the poor woman fainted dead away on the spot. She might have died there if it hadn’t been for the amazing heat of the night. This certainly was the cause of her trouble, but it also saved her. About three o’clock I woke up in a perfect bath of perspiration. I never remember such a night, not even when we were in India together. Anyway, just as Mrs. Wells had done an hour earlier, I also started to find a drink.”

His head shook from side-to-side as he recalled his experience.

“I tell you, Carnforth! I nearly fell over her as she lay swooning on the stair!”

He helped himself to a liberal tot of whisky, then squirted soda into the glass and continued:

“For once in a domestic situation, I believe I did the right thing, Carnforth. Not wishing to alarm Lilith, I knocked up one of the maids, and when Mrs. Wells had somewhat recovered, gave her into the girl’s charge, informing the girl to tell Mrs. Wells when she recovered sufficiently that I would sit downstairs in this very room until she could see me. Then, after I had finally taken receipt of the particulars - which I have now given you - I wired you as soon as the office was open.”

The look he turned upon me seemed almost supplicatory.

“And now, Hawtrey, the devilry has begun again.”

Cynic or not, he now looked genuinely disturbed; though his next words assured me it was more prosaic concerns provoking the agitation.

"If Lilith gets to hear of it there'll be hell to pay," he told me, looking more terrified by this eventuality than he would have been at the prospect of the hounds of hell arriving in his drawing-room and deciding he would be their next meal. "She won't live in the place and..."

He mopped at his brow before finishing:

"…And *that* will put me in some *real* difficulty."

I assumed he was talking of his finances – and would later be proved correct.

His failed speculation on the market – with the help of the *"slime"* Hollins – having put a considerable strain on his prospects.

He stood up abruptly, as a ripple of laughter reached us from the garden; irritation creasing his aquiline features.

"The puppy is sniffing at the heels of his owner once again," he said with palpable disgust. "I'm sure youthful infatuation can be quite titillating for the wife in receipt of it, but for a husband its humorous aspects wither on the vine very quickly."

"You surely have a say in who visits your home?" I asked. "Tell him his presence here is…"

For a few moments, I found myself at a loss for a plausible explanation until hitting upon it.

"…inconvenient." I finished.

He smiled, raising his eyebrows long-sufferingly as he did so.

"And how would that look to Lilith? An insecure duffer resenting his young wife having company nearer her own age. No, though I value your advice as a rule, Stewart, I do believe I'll pass up this nugget of wisdom."

We both laughed at this and a little of the gloom about us was dispelled as we became the hale fellows we normally proved to be in each other's company.

It was left to my host to move events on.

"Suppose we had explore the scene of the trouble, eh?" he suggested, before moving toward the door – a laugh from outside restoring his earlier look of irritation; resentment of young Ingrams impossible to be missed.

Exploring in his company, however, was not what I wanted.

"Should you mind very much if I sought it out for myself?" I asked. "It is my custom in cases of the kind to be alone if possible."

He nodded and gave it some thought before acquiescing:

“My dear fellow, certainly.”

“My… *ramble*… concluded, I will re-join Mrs. Hawtrey and yourself - say on the lawn?”

“Good, good!” cried the Major, throwing open the door. “An opening has been made on the floor above corresponding with this, and communicating with the old stair. Go where you like; find out what you can; but remember—not a word to Lilith.”

Two

Filled with the liveliest curiosity, even if my natural scepticism in such matters was on full alert, I set out to explore Low Wakeham.

First, I directed my attention to the exterior, commencing my investigations from the front.

That part of the building on either side of the door was evidently of Tudor date, with a Jacobean wing to the west containing apartments overlooking the lawn - the latter a Georgian addition; whilst the new east wing, built by Major Hawtrey, carried the building out almost level with the clump of fir-trees, and into the very heart of the ferns and bushes which here grew densely.

There was no way around on this side, and not desiring to cross the lawn at present, I passed in through the house to the garden at the back. This led me through the northern part of the building and the servants' quarters, which appeared to be of even greater age than the front of the house. The fine old kitchen, in particular, was suggestive of the days when roasting was done upon a grand scale.

Beyond the flower garden lay the kitchen garden, and beyond that the orchard.

The latter showed evidences of neglect, bearing out the Major's story that the place had been unoccupied for twelve months; but it was evident, nevertheless, that the soil had been cultivated for many generations.

Thus far I had discovered nothing calculated to assist me in my peculiar investigation, so it was in the hope of a more profitable yield that I entered the house and began a room-to-room quest - which, beyond confirming most of my earlier impressions, afforded little data.

The tortuous stairway, which had been the scene of the event described by my host, occupied me for some time, and I carefully examined the time-blackened panels, and tested each separate stair, for in houses like Low Wakeham secret passages and "priest-holes" were to be looked for. However, I discovered nothing.

Descending again to the hall, however, I made a small discovery.

There were rooms in Low Wakeham which one entered by descending or ascending two or three steps. But then, this was entirely characteristic of the architectural methods of the period represented. I was surprised, however, to find that one mounted three steps in order to obtain access to the passage leading to the new wing.

I had overlooked this peculiarity hitherto, but now it struck me as worthy of attention.

Why should a modern architect introduce such a device?

It could only mean that the ground was higher on the east side of the building, and that, for some reason, it had proved more convenient to adopt the existing foundations than to level the site.

I returned to the hall-way and stood there deep in thought, when the contact of a rough tongue with my hand drew my attention to a young Airedale terrier who was anxious to make my

acquaintance. I patted his head encouragingly, and, having reviewed the notes made during my tour of inspection, determined to repeat the tour in Fielder to check them.

The Airedale accompanied me, behaving himself with admirable propriety as we passed around the house and then out through the kitchens into the garden. It was not until my journey led me back to the three steps, communicating with the new wing, that my companion seemed disposed to desert me.

At first I ascribed his attitude to mere canine caprice. But when he persistently refused to be encouraged, I began to ascribe it to something else.

Suddenly grasping him by the collar, I dragged him up the steps, along the corridor, and into the Major's study.

The result was extraordinary.

I think I have never seen a dog in quite the same condition.

He whimpered and whined most piteously. At the door, he struggled furiously, and even tried to snap at my hand. Then, as I maintained a firm grip upon him, he set out upon a series of howls which must have been audible for miles around.

Finally, I released him, having first closed the study door, and lowered the window.

What followed was truly amazing.

The Airedale hurled himself upon the closed door, scratching at it furiously, with intermittent howling; then, crouching down, he turned his eyes upon me with a look in them, not savage, but truly piteous.

Seeing that I did not move, the dog began to whimper again; when, suddenly making up his mind, as it seemed, he bounded across the room and went crashing through the glass of the closed window into the rose bushes, leaving me standing looking after him in blank wonderment.

THREE

After the excitement of the unstable Airedale had resolved itself, and a servant had boarded up the window through which he had smashed, Edgar Ingrams stayed to dinner, and since he had no opportunity of dressing, his presence afforded a welcome excuse for the other members of the party to be a little less formal.

The night was appallingly hot; the temperature being such as to preclude the slightest exertion, but the Major was an excellent host and our needs were not unattended – though it was easy for me to see that the presence of the younger man irritated him. In fact, there were many times that the conversation grew strained and there was an uncomfortable tension. So marked did it become, and regardless of my enjoyment of her svelte yet powerful figure with conical breasts and hour-glass waist, that I was not altogether sorry when Mrs. Hawtrey left the table and the quartet was broken up.

On closer acquaintance, I perceived that Ingrams was even younger than I had supposed, and therefore I was the more inclined to condone his infatuation for the society of Mrs. Hawtrey, although I felt less sympathetically disposed toward her for offering him the encouragement which rather openly she did – even if I was, hypocritically, not entirely unaware of a growing interest in her charms upon my own part.

To my utter lack of surprise, it was not long before Ingrams left Major Hawtrey and myself for the more congenial society of the hostess; though I did ask myself how such a manly character as the Major tolerated what was so entirely obvious beneath his very nose.

Apart from some rather obvious facial expressions, the military man neither said or did anything to keep them apart and this, you will be unsurprised to learn, left me mystified, given he was obviously smitten with the younger woman who was, after, *his* wife.

I was also more than aware that the woman herself – who indeed treated the younger man as if her were a lap-dog – gave me more than a passing once over whenever she thought my attention was elsewhere and could do so without being observed by either the object of her scrutiny or that of a loving husband and smitten puppy.

It was not a scrutiny – given my history with her husband and the loyalty we had more than once expressed to each other – with which I was at all comfortable.

There are men in this life who feel it is only their due to accept female affection where and when it is offered.

Even if it is from the wife of a deeply valued friend.

I, most, assuredly, am not of their number.

A little later, when the Major, who took at least as much wine as was good for him, began to doze in his chair, I found myself left to my own devices and quitted the room quietly so as not to disturbing him; determined to take the outside air – such as there was of it on this sweltering night - and turn over in my mind the matters responsible for my presence at Low Wakeham.

*****

With no definite object in view, I had wandered towards the orchard, deep in thought, when I became aware of a whispered conversation taking place somewhere near me, punctuated with little peals of laughter.

I detected the words “Edgar” and “Lilith”, but, not seeing their interaction as having anything in common with my purpose there (at least not yet) - though I confess my thoughts, for which I would feel guilt immediately upon sensing them, did turn to the prospect of myself enjoying a similar interlude with powerfully built young wife - I returned to the house, intent upon arousing the Major and terminating this, possibly innocent, tête-à-tête.

That her encouragement of young Ingrams was no more on Mrs. Hawtrey’s part than a harmless flirtation, a diversion, I did believe.

But harmless flirtations can often lead to more meaningful feelings, and, though I doubted they would in this instance, I intended to take no chance of my friend finding himself cheated and hurt after such a fashion.

For, though I considered Lilith Hawtrey’s intentions innocent, I had also taken the young man’s measure after my usual quick fashion and realised that, like many born to his privileges, he was in possession of a sense of entitlement that made him an unsafe type of man for a wife to amuse herself with in such a way.

With the above in mind, I had returned to the house.

The Major, sunk deep in his favourite chair in the study, was snoring loudly by now and, as I stood contemplating him in the dusk, I changed my mind.

That a woman such as Lilith would cheat on a man of moral and social substance such as my friend was scarcely credible to me and there was no point in stirring up suspicion on Hawtrey’s part.

Even if I was aware that feelings of the kind had already taken root in his husbandly consciousness.

Mind made up, and retracing my steps, I joined the two in the orchard, proclaiming my arrival by humming a popular melody.

“Has he fallen asleep?” asked Mrs. Hawtrey, turning laughing eyes upon me.

I studied the piquant face before replying.

Her tone and her expression had reassured me, if further assurance were necessary, that my old friend’s heart was in safe keeping; but she was young and obviously more highly sexed than her older husband which, I told myself, would make her a case for diplomatic handling.

“India leaves its mark on all men,” I replied lightly; “but I have no doubt that the Major is wide-awake enough now.”

My words were an invitation; to which, I was glad to note, she responded readily enough – though I detected a sour look transform the features of her erstwhile suitor.

“Let’s come and dig him out of that cavern of his!” she said, and linking her right arm in that of Ingrams, and her left with mine, she turned us about toward the house.

Dusk was now fallen, and lights shone out from several windows of Low Wakeham. Suddenly, an upper window became illuminated, and Mrs. Hawtrey pointed to this.

“That is my room,” she said to me; “isn’t it delightfully situated? The view from the window is glorious.”

“I consider Low Wakeham charming in every way,” I replied, unable to shake the certainty she was making to me a… *very*… deliberate point.

Clearly, unless I was badly mistaken, she knew nothing of the place’s sinister reputation, which seemed to indicate that she employed herself little with the domestic side of the household.

How could she?

Otherwise she must undoubtedly have learnt of the episode of the man with the contorted face.

If not from the housekeeper, from the maid.

It was a tribute to the reticence of the servants that the story had spread no further; but the broken study window and the sadly damaged Airedale already afforded matter for whispered debate among them, as I had noted with displeasure almost from the commencement of my visit.

It turned out that the *“digging out”* of the Major did not prove to be an entire success.

He was in one of his peculiar moods, which I knew of old, and rather surly, being pointedly rude on more than one occasion to Ingrams.
He finally told us he had some accounts to look into, or professed to have, and the three of us presently left him alone.

It was now about ten o’clock, and Edgar Ingrams made his departure, shaking me warmly by the hand and expressing the hope that we should see more of one another.

He could not foresee that when his wish was realised it would be in a… *curious*… fashion.

Mrs. Hawtrey informed me that the Major in all probability would remain immured in his study until a late hour, which I took to be an intimation that she wished to retire; though there was enough in her expression as she held my gaze to persuade my imagination otherwise.

Nonetheless, being a gentleman first and a lustful beast a very distant second, I pleaded weariness as a result of my journey, and went up to my room, although I had no intention of turning-in.

Instead, I opened the two windows widely, and the heavy perfume of what I took to be some kind of tobacco plant growing in the beds below grew almost oppressive. The heat of the night was truly phenomenal and I might have been not in an English home county but in the Sudan.

An absolute stillness reigned throughout Low Wakeham and, my hearing being peculiarly acute, I could detect the chirping of the bats which flitted restlessly past my windows.

It was difficult to decide how to act.

My experience of so-called supernatural appearances had strengthened my faith in the theory set forth in the paper *"Chemistry of Psychic Phenomena"*; which had attracted unexpected attention a year before. Therein, I classified hauntings under several headings, basing my conclusions upon the fact that such apparitions are invariably localised; often being confined, not merely to a particular room, for instance, but to a certain wall, door, or window. My paper had ensured I had been privileged to visit most of the famous haunted homes of Great Britain, but in the case of Low Wakeham I found myself nonplussed, largely owing to lack of data. I hoped on the morrow to make certain inquiries along lines suggested by oddities in the structure of the house itself and by the nature of the little valley in which it stood.

And I had *not*, in case you are wondering, dismissed as yet the possibility of a human hand – or hands – in the mystery.

When meditating I never sit still, and whilst marshalling my ideas I paced the room from end to end, stopping only when a thought of particular interest occurred to me. Both windows, and also the door, were widely opened. The amazing heat-wave which we were then experiencing promised to afford me a valuable clue, for I had proved to my own satisfaction that the apparitions variously known as *"controls"* and *"elementals,"* not infrequently coincided with abrupt climatic changes, thunder-storms, or heat waves, or with natural phenomena, such as landslides and the like.

This pacing led me from end to end of the room, then, between the open door and the large dressing-table facing it.

But it was as I returned from the door towards the dressing-table that I became aware of the presence of the contorted face.

My peculiar studies had brought me into contact with many horrible apparitions, and if familiarity had failed to breed contempt, at least it had served to train my nerves for the reception of such sudden and ghastly appearances.

I should be avoiding the truth, however, if I claimed to have been unmoved by the vision which now met me in the mirror.

I drew up short, with one sibilant breath, and then stood transfixed.

Before me, was a reflection of the open door and of part of the landing and stairs beyond it. The landing lights were extinguished, and therefore the place beyond the door lay in comparative darkness. But, crawling in, serpent-fashion, inch by inch, silently, intently, so that the head, throat, and hands were actually across the threshold, came a creature which seemed to be entirely naked! It had the form of a woman, but the face, the dreadful face which was being pushed forward slowly across the carpet with head held sideways so that one ear all but touched the floor, was the face, of no woman I had encountered to that point.

It was the face of a ghoul!

And a ghoul that glowed purple!

I clenched my teeth hard, staring into the mirror and trying to force myself to turn and confront, not the reflection, but the reality.

Yet for many seconds I was unable to accomplish this.

The baleful and grimacing, yet somehow utterly feminine, eyes glared straight into mine from the glass. The chin and lower lip of this face seemed to be drawn at corners in a snarl and above them the nostrils, part of a curved nose redolent of extreme cruelty, were distended to an incredible degree. Her skin had a sort of purple tinge unlike anything I had seen before – an effect grotesque and, to my shame, perversely enticing at the same time.

And then I did know fear.

For it was not a grimace the creature was aiming my way.

As the Lord above is my witness, it was…

I perspire at the mere thought of it.

It was… *lust*.

Nearer it came and nearer. I could hear the sinuous body being drawn across the floor and realised it was becoming more womanly and more corporeal as it neared me. The beating of my heart was so insistent I thought it must burst.

And yet, even as the horror unfolded, I suddenly heard a whispered conversation which seemed to be taking place somewhere immediately outside my room.

And, at the exact moment that I detected the voices outside, it seemed that the creature growing ever more substantial and ever more like a real woman upon my floor detected it also.

Suddenly, the wild eyes that had been fixated upon me twisted in the head, rolling around towards the sound, expression, it seemed to me on of thwarted intent.

Despite the dread which held me, I identified the whisperers and located their situation. Mrs. Hawtrey was at her open window and Edgar Ingrams was in the garden below.

The recognition crossed my mind and was gone – I did, you will agree, have matters of more moment on my mind at that point.

However, it was a recognition that left me no swifter than the creature herself – for I was now convinced the apparition was female; despite my research having shown that such revenants or elementals could sometimes switch both form and sex - vanished.

The thing which had been crawling into my room not a second or two before had disappeared without leaving a trace suddenly retired and was swallowed up in the shadows of the landing.

I turned and sprang toward the open door, the fever of research hot upon me and my nerves in hand again.

At the door, I paused and listened intently.

No sound came to guide me from the darkened stair, and when, stepping quietly forward and leaning over the rail, I peered down into the hall below, nothing stirred, no shadow of the many there moved to tell of the passage of any living thing.

I paused, irresolute, unable to doubt that I had just been in the presence of an authentic apparition.

But how to classify it?

And what to make of the look upon its still forming face as it slithered towards me, growing more defined of form with each inch it progressed towards me.

A look I could only describe to myself as sexual and predatory.

A chill almost arctic-like in the pervasive heat travelled the length of my spine and I shivered as I slowly returned to my room to stand motionless, thinking hard and all the while listening for the slightest sound from within or without the house.

It took but moments to realise the whispered conversation was continuing and I recovered enough from my fright to turn my attention to more… *prosaic*… matters.

Stealing quietly to one of the windows and leaning out, I looked in the direction of the new wing.

A light burnt in the Major's study, whereby I concluded that he was still engaged with his accounts – if the alcohol had not taken effect and he had not fallen asleep.

But, between my window and the new wing, and on a level with my eyes, was the window of Mrs. Hawtrey's room.

In the bright moonlight, I could see her leaning out with her elbows on the ledge.

Her bare arms gleamed like marble in the cold light, and she looked for a moment like some savage goddess, the flowing hair he had let down to her shoulders almost russet in the moonlight. Beauty, I had already assured myself in her regard, would never be a condition to which she could aspire. For her face, though full of character and will most people seemed to overlook upon meeting her, was not of a kind to inspire a Rossetti, or even a Singer-Sargent. But there was a quality to it that – and you will forgive my forthrightness I'm sure - simply oozed *sex*. In fact, even as I caught sight of her, I felt a disturbance at my own netheregions.

By this, in case you are wondering, I was neither shamed nor embarrassed – though, and as stated earlier, I was able to feel guilt for carrying such untoward yearnings for the wife of a close friend. I had, in fact, long been comfortable with my responses to the opposite sex. And for one's… *equipment*… to respond to an erotic woman in such a way is surely only natural.

If, and I confess, more than a little treacherous and underhand upon certain occasions.

On this *"occasion"*, though, it was not just my reaction to my hosts wife that held my interest.

From my position at the window, I could not see Ingrams – if indeed it was he; and who else would it be, after all?

A thick, square-clipped, hedge obstructed my view on that score.

But I did see something else.

A shape crawled past beneath me amongst the tangle of ivy and low plants about the foot of the fir trees. The moonlight touched it for a moment and it seemed to glow… *purple*. And then it was gone into denser shadows.

A consciousness of impending disaster came to me, but, because of its very vagueness, found me unprepared. Then suddenly I saw young Ingrams. He sprang into view above the hedge, against which, I presume, he had been crouching; he leapt high in the air as though from some menace on the ground beneath him. I have never heard a more horrifying scream than that which he uttered.

"My God!" he cried, "Lilith! Lilith!"

The again:

"Lilith! save me!"

Then he was down, still screaming horribly, and calling on the woman for aid - as though she could have been capable of aiding him.

Almost as if he were calling to his mother after a particularly frightful dream.

Of the crawling apparition that only recently vacated my own room, there came no sound, but the dreadful screams of Ingrams sank slowly into a sort of sobbing, and then into a significant panting which told of his dire extremity.

Despite the fear that had taken a hold of my entrails, I managed to race out of the room and down the dark stair into the hall; unaware of what I would do when confronted by the horror that had young Ingrams in its toils.

Everywhere I was met by locked doors.

Which baffled me almost as much as it infuriated.

I had hoped to reach the garden by way of the kitchens, but now I changed my plan and turned my attention to the front-door.

It was bolted, but I drew the bolts one after the other, and got the door open.

Outside, the landscape was bathed in glorious moonlight, and a sort of grey mist hovered over the valley like smoke. I ran around the angle of the house on to the lawn, and went plunging through flower-beds heedlessly to the scene of the incredible conflict.

I almost fell over Ingrams as he lay inert upon the gravel path.

The shadows veiled him so that I could not see his face; but when, groping with my hands, I sought to learn if his heart still pulsed, I failed to discover any evidence that it did.

With my hand thrust against his breast and my ear lowered anxiously, I listened, but he gave no sign of life, lying as still as all else around me.

Now this stillness was broken. Excited voices became audible, and doors were being unlocked here and there. First of all, the household, Mrs. Hawtrey appeared, enveloped in a lace dressing-gown.

"Edgar!" she cried tremulously, "what is it? where are you?"

"He is here, Mrs. Hawtrey," I answered, standing up, "and in a bad way, I fear."

"For Heaven's sake, what has happened to him? Did you hear his awful cries?"

"I did," I said shortly.

Standing with the moonlight fully upon her, Mrs. Hawtrey sought him in the shadows of the hedge - and I knew that by the manner of his frightened outcry the man lying unconscious at my feet had forfeited whatever of her sexual regard he had enjoyed – if, indeed, he had enjoyed any.

She… *appeared*… alarmed, but not so much on his behalf.

I have no idea where the suspicion came from, but it seemed to me she was afraid of… *discovery*.

I watched as she made a visible attempt to compose herself.

"Where is he, Mr. Carnforth?" she said firmly, eyes searching for her erstwhile paramour.

A man who proved to be a gardener, now appeared upon the scene and we hurried to the side of the prone Ingrams.

"Help me to carry him in," I said to this new arrival; "perhaps he has only fainted."

We gathered up the recumbent body and carried it through the kitchens into the breakfast-room, where there was a deep couch. All the servants were gathered at the foot of the stairs, frightened and useless. But, curiously, the outcry did not seem to have aroused Major Hawtrey.

When we had Edgar inside and sprawled out on his back upon the kitchen-table, Mrs. Hawtrey and I bent over him.

His face was frightfully congested, whilst his tongue protruded hideously.

And it was evident, from the great discoloured weals which now were coming up upon his throat, that he had been strangled, or nearly so.

I glanced at the white face of my hostess and then bent over the victim, examining him more carefully.

Then I stood upright again.

“Do you know first aid, Mrs. Hawtrey?” I asked abruptly.

She nodded, her eyes fixed intently upon me, though I swore I saw nought but disinterest in the victim upon the table – even if I was quick at this point to scold myself for such uncharitable suspicions.

“Then help to employ artificial respiration,” I said, “and let one of the girls get ammonia, if you have any. And fetch a bowl of hot water. We can patch him up, I think, without medical aid – which,” I half mumbled, “might be undesirable under the circumstances.”

Mrs. Hawtrey, despite my suspicions in regard of her, seemed fully to appreciate the point and, in business-like fashion, set to work to assist me.

It was some minutes later, after Ingrams had just opened his eyes and begun to clutch at his agonized throat, that I heard a heavy step descending from the new wing and Major Hawtrey, in his dressing-gown, joined us.

His red face was more red than usual, and his eyes were round with wonder.

“What the devil’s the matter?” he cried; “what’s everybody up for?”

“There has been an accident, Major,” I said, glancing around at the servants, who stood in a group by the door of the breakfast-room; “I can explain more fully later.”

Major Hawtrey stepped forward and looked down at Ingrams.

“Good God!” he said hoarsely, “it’s young Ingrams, by the Lord Stewart! What’s he doing here?”

Mrs. Hawtrey, standing just behind me, laid her hand upon my arm; and, unseen by the Major, I turned and pressed it reassuringly.

*****

The woman I dreamt of that night was not Lilith Hawtrey; though I would, in the unlikely event of ever being required, not have been able to swear to such in a court of law.

But it was a woman. And an incredible one at that! Such a woman with a body as to make a man forget his family, his friends, and his ideals.

I was prone upon the guest-room bed; having the most vivid dream of my life to that point; naked back to the mattress as the eyes of the intruder bore into mine from her position astride me – though her facial features defied description.

But only her facial features.

The rest of her body, as it towered above me in full and dream-like focus, was utterly magnificent!

"Yes. Gaze upon the body you are going to be serving from now on," she said, her words falling as if they were a form of euphoric poison upon my hearing, voice familiar and unfamiliar at one and the same time. "Your learning and your strength-of-will are as nothing in my presence. Soon you will be willing to smite the eyeballs from your own head if the keeping of them offended your new owner."

Her words and the pure power of a voice I still could not place, dripped over my senses in the way of lava over foliage and vanquished them in their entirety. Feelings of… submissiveness… I had not experienced in my waking life robbed me of speech. But not of a certain limited physical volition.

Suddenly, I felt a sensation either side of my pylon hard penis and realised that she had lowered her womanhood onto me.

Never, dream or no, had I experienced such a sensation of…

What?

I had no references with which to compare it.

And how could I?

I was a man, with all of a man's power. I was the seducer. The driving force. The… dominator, if you will. Women succumbed to my masculine potency.

But… this!

It was a perversion. A reversal of those roles that custom, religion, and greater physical strength, had enshrined in stone back to the antediluvian and further. Roles that, once… corrupted… could lead only to humiliation and debasement for those males unwise enough to allow it to happen.

But I was NOT allowing it to happen.

And yet still it was.

Dream or not – and even as I felt the all too real sensation of her cunt gripping my hungry cock – I realised I was being overmastered. That I was nothing beneath the vision of all-powering womanhood with the amorphous face above me.

Having always believed myself to be a man of no small substance and possessing much in the way of discipline and willpower, I felt as if I were made of straw as the goddess-like creation of Morpheus above me rode my body as if I were no more than beast of burden to whom she had purchased rights of ownership in some infernal market.

"That is my good boy," her honeyed yet commanding tones drifted down to me. "Feel the sensations your owner can provide you so long as you ALWAYS remain her utterly obedient pet."

"Owner?" my thoughts screamed, though I did not dwell on the puzzle long before a more pressing preoccupation beat it back.

I realised I was about to reach that point of the crisis from which there was no return and braced myself to lose an amount of my manly fluids such as I had never lost before – so great was my… disturbance.

It was not to be.

"No!" came the command from the lips of the dream mistress.

To my amazement, I came back from the edge.

"You will never find such a release again without my permission. Only at my command will you be able to spurt your useless male seed from this moment on."

Even more amazed, I found myself nodding an acknowledgment to this… outrage.

The back of her hand rocked my head to the side and the pain of it – despite the slenderness of the hand doing the slapping – felt all too real.

"When your master asks you a question, you do not nod at her like a beast of the field. Understood?"

As if my vocal chords had been placed under a restriction of some kind, the proviso was lifted and I heard a voice that was mine but was not mine, if this can make any sense, answer:

"No, my Goddess."

As shocked as I was to use such a description of her, she seemed enchanted.

"Why, you delightful boy," she patronised; though, if the body above me that was more defined than the still amorphous face was a guide, she was my junior by a number of years. "What a lovely respectful way for you to describe me – and so early in our acquaintance."

I felt her vaginal walls begin to suck at my captive and still enraged penis, quickly returning to that point of crisis at which she had drawn a line a few moments before and taking me to a point almost beyond reason; so great were the sensations inspired in me.

This time, however, there was to be no line drawing of any kind.

“For being so obedient and respectful, you may spurt for your goddess,” she said, adopting my earlier and unbidden form of address for her and assuring me at the same time that this was how I was to address her from now on in our nocturnal unions.

“Do say now,” she commanded in a sterner tone of voice that seemed to resonate with a corner of my soul I had scarce imagined to this point.

It was all my outrageously stimulated senses required, and no sooner had the words of command fallen from her lips than I found my cock erupting with a force powerful enough to trigger a tidal-wave in its aftermath.

When I came to in my dream within a dream, she was staring down upon me with a look I felt sure would have been one of utter triumph had her features been formed enough for me to view them.

“Now you may sleep, my slave,” were the last words I heard, until…

FOUR

"Did you manage to sleep?" asked the Major the next morning.

I grunted a response as I served myself some devilled-kidney, unable to meet his eyes given I was labouring under the absurd possibility of him somehow divining from them my shameful dream of not a few hours before.

We were breakfasting alone the two of us, Mrs. Hawtrey being absent on a visit.

Of course, it had been impossible to keep the truth from her last night - or what we knew of it; though my suspicions were that she probably had a better take on it all than us) and at present I could not quite foresee the issue of last night's affair. Young Ingrams, who had been driven home in a car sent from his place at a late hour, had not since put in an appearance; and it was sufficiently evident that Mrs. Hawtrey would not welcome him should he do so. The hysterical panic which he had exhibited on the previous night having disgusted her. She had not said so in as many words, but I did not doubt it.

"Well, Carnforth?" said the Major as I entered, "have you got the facts you were looking for?"

"Some of them," I replied, and opening my notebook I turned to the pages containing notes made that morning.

The Major watched me with intense curiosity as the servant left the room, and almost impatiently awaited my next words.

"In the first place," I began, glancing at the notes, "I have been consulting certain local records in the town, and I find that in the year 1646 a certain Dame Pryce occupied a cabin which, according to one record, *'stood close beside unto ye Lowe Wakeham'*."

"That is, close beside this house?" interjected the Major excitedly.

"Exactly," I said. "She attracted the attention of one of the many infamous wretches who disfigure the history of that period: Matthew Hopkins, the self-styled Witch-Finder General. This was a witch-ridden age, and the man Hopkins was one of those who fattened on the credulity of his fellows, receiving a fee of twenty shillings for every unhappy woman discovered and convicted of witchcraft. Poor Pryce was 'swum' in a local pond, a test whereby the villain Hopkins professed to discover if the woman were one of Satan's band, or otherwise, and burnt alive in Reigate market-place on September 23, 1646."

The Major stared at his as yet untouched lunch with distaste.

"I think we can agree that's a horrible story."

"And one of the many to the credit of Matthew Hopkins and his quest for more shillings," I replied; "but, without boring you with the details of this woman's examination and so forth, I may say that what interests me most in the case is the date.

"The date?"

“September 23.”

“But…? I don’t follow you.”

“Well,” I said, “there’s a hiatus in the history of the place after that, except that even in those early days it evidently suffered from the reputation of being haunted. But without troubling about the interval, consider the case of Seagram, which you yourself related to me. Was it not in the month of August that he was done to death here?”

The Major was thinking hard, face growing redder by the moment.

Suddenly:

“You’re right, damn it all to hell! It was in September, Carnforth. Last September was when the Fields cleared out!”

“I remember your mentioning,” I continued, smiling at his excitement, “that it was a very hot month?”

“It was.”

“From a mere word dropped by one of the witnesses at the trial of poor Pryce I have gathered that the month in which she was convicted of practising witchcraft in her cabin adjoining Low Wakeham (as it stood in those days) was a tropically hot month also.”

Major Hawtrey stared at me uncomprehendingly.

“I’m out of my depth, Carnforth. Wading hopelessly. What the devil has the heat to do with the haunting?”

“To my mind everything. I may be wrong, but I think that if the mercury were to lower tonight there would be no repetition of the trouble.”

“You mean that it’s only in very hot weather that…”

“In phenomenally hot weather, Major. The sort that we only get in England perhaps once in every ten years. For the glass to reach the altitude at which it stands at present, in two successive summers, is quite phenomenal, as you know.”

“It’s phenomenal for it to reach that point at all,” said the Major, mopping his perspiring forehead; “it’s simply Indian, simply Indian, sir, by the Lord, Stewart!”

“Another inquiry,” I continued, turning over a leaf of my book, “I have been unable to complete, since, in order to interview the people who built your new wing, I should have to run up to London; unless you can answer my enquiries?”

“I don’t see why not but… What the hell have they to do with what goes on here?”

“Nothing at all, but I should have liked to learn their reasons for raising the wing three feet above the level of the hall-way.”

Between the heat and his growing excitement, Major Hawtrey found himself at a temporary loss for words. Then:

"They told me," he shouted at the top of his voice, "they told me at the time that it was something about… that it was due to the plan… that it was…"

"I can imagine that they had some ready explanation," I said, "but it may not have been the true one."

"Then what the…? What is the true one?"

"The true one is that the new wing covers a former mound."

"Quite right; it does. What of it?"

"If my theory is correct, it was upon this mound that the cabin of Dame Pryce formerly stood."

"It's quite possible," the Major mused. "They used to allow dirty hovels to be erected alongside one's very walls in those days—quite possible."

"Moreover, from what I've learnt from Field - whom I interviewed at the Hall—and from such accounts as are obtainable of the death of Seagram, this mound, and not the interior of Low Wakeham as it then stood, was the scene of the apparitions."

"You've got me out of my depth again, Carnforth. What d'you mean?"

"Seagram was strangled outside the house, not inside."

"I believe that's true," agreed the Major, still shouting at the top of his voice, but gradually growing hoarser; "I remember they found him lying on the step, or something."

"Then again, the apparition with the contorted face which peered in at Mrs. Field…"

"Lies, all lies!"

"I don't agree with you, Major. She was trying to shield her husband, but I think she saw the contorted face right enough. At any rate, it's interesting to note that the visitant came from outside the house again."

"But," cried the Major, banging his fist upon the table, "if it is a spectre – and I'm not conceding that it is – then it wanders about inside the house, and… Damn it all! It goes outside as well!"

"Where it goes," I interrupted quietly, "is not the point. The point is, where it comes from."

"Then where do you believe it comes from?"

"I believe the trouble arises, in the strictest sense of the word, from the same spot whence it arose in the days of Matthew Hopkins, and from which it had probably arisen ages before Low Wakeham was built."

“What the…?”

“I believe it to arise from the ancient barrow, or tumulus, above which you have had your new wing erected.”

I waited, not relishing what I had to say but knowing it needed to be said.

“I also believe that, should a female occupant of the house be of a… Let us say, a receptive frame of mind. Then there is a great danger of a part, or even full, transference of spirit.”

He was looking at me askance, trying desperately to comprehend the full import of my words.

I helped him:

“And, if that spirit being transferred – in this case, a female spirit - proves malignant…”

It was enough; Major Hawtrey fell back in his chair, temporarily speechless, but breathing noisily.

There was silence; then:

“Tumulus!” he said hoarsely; “d’you mean to tell me the house is built on a damn burial ground?”

“Not the whole house,” I corrected him; “only the new wing.”

“Meaning what? Is the place haunted by the spirit of this Dame Pryce? From what you have told me, I can certainly understand if her spirit is vengeful. But why would she be vengeful towards those who live here now? We are as removed from her as we are removed from the fanatic Hopkins.”

He was shaking his head back and forth now and I knew, having seen it all too often, that denial would not be long in coming.

It was, indeed, not long.

“Hang it all, Carnforth. It just won’t wash. I’m sorry, but you can’t sell me a fairy tale like that! A ghost going back to the witch-finder is a bit too ancient for me, my boy?”

He let out a loud and scoffing laugh, but it was not convincing.

“Too hoary by half, old pal,” he assured me. “A tumulus, you say? Well, revenants and elementals aside, no man likes to know he’s sleeping in a graveyard, not even if it is two or three thousand years old. D’you think the chap who surveyed the ground for me knew of it?”

“By the fact that he planned the new wing so as to avoid excavation, I think probably he did. He was wise enough to surmise that the order might be cancelled altogether and the job lost if you learnt the history of the mound adjoining your walls.”

The Major was nodding to himself thoughtfully, more than willing to discuss the mound if it meant not addressing the more crucial concerns.

“A barrow under the study floor!” he groaned. “Damn it all! I’ll have the place pulled down. I won’t live in it.”

Fear whitened his expression, but it was of a more… *earthly*… provenance.

“If Lilith knew, I don’t know what… She would never close her eyes under the roof of Low Wakeham again. I’m sure she wouldn’t.”

He was becoming highly and uncharacteristically agitated.

“I know she wouldn’t. But… But what’s more, Carnforth…”

I waited for him and could see that he was forcing himself to address the real issue.

“This revenant… or elemental… whatever you wish to call it – if it exists… It… It’s dangerous.”

Like most people who are being gradually persuaded into the presence of light, he actually seemed to believe he was enlightening that person who had seen fit to bring him into it.

“It nearly killed young Ingrams,” he added, with a complacency which I found was both significant and a little troubling.

“It was the fright that nearly killed him,” I said shortly. “That more than anything else.”

Major Hawtrey stared across the table at me and I got the impression the young man’s passing would hardly have been a sackcloth and ashes issue for him.

“But what does it all mean, Carnforth?” he asked What unholy thing haunts Low Wakeham? You’ve studied these infernal subjects, and I rely upon you to make the place clean and good to live in again.”

“Major,” I replied, “I doubt if Low Wakeham will ever be fit to live in. At any time, an abnormal rise of temperature might produce the most dreadful results. From both outside its walls and from within.”

“You don’t mean to tell me…?”

“If you care to have the new wing pulled down and the wall bricked up again? If you care to keep all your doors and windows fastened securely whenever the thermometer begins to exhibit signs of rising? If you avoid going out on hot nights after dusk, as you would avoid the plague?... Then, yes, it may be possible to live in Low Wakeham.”

Again, the Major became speechless, but finally:

“This can’t be happening. Surely there is something to be done, Carnforth?”

He took my arm and squeezed it, just short of causing me actual pain.

“For God’s sake, man, is there nothing I can do?”

“What you have,” I replied; “is something older than the house. Older, perhaps, than the very hills, something which may never be classified, something as old as the root of all evil.

“And it can dwell in the bodies of the females who reside her with as much facility as it can reside in the Ancient British tumulus.”

FIVE

As I had hoped, for my plans were dependent upon it, the mercury towered steadily throughout that day, and showed no signs of falling at night.

The phenomenal heat-wave continued uninterruptedly.

The household itself, unsurprisingly given the difficulty in sleeping and the events it had witnessed, was late retiring. Fear had the inhabitants in its grip – though only the Major and I knew that it was the men, and the men alone, who had anything to fear. Every shadow in the rambling old building became a cavern of horrors, every sound that disturbed the ancient timbers a portent and a warning.

That the servants would proposed to leave en masse at the earliest possible moment was perfectly obvious to me, but the Major took it hard. In a word, all the dark old stories which had grown up around Low Wakeham were revived and garnished, and new ones added to them. The horror of the night before had left its mark upon everyone and the coming of dusk brought with it such a dread as could almost be felt in the very atmosphere of the place. Ghostly figures seemed to stir the hangings, ghostly sighs to sound from every nook of the old hall and stairway; baleful eyes looked in at the open windows, and the shrubberies were peopled with hosts of nameless things who whispered together in evil counsel.

Mrs. Hawtrey seemed as loath to retire as her servants, more especially since the Major and I were unable to disguise from her our intention of watching for the strange visitant that night.

And yet…

There was something in her manner, though I felt sure it was evident to none but me, that spoke more of excitement than encroaching terror. Something in her eyes whenever they rested upon me that sent tingles of erotic anticipation arrowing towards – again forgive my boldness and apparent vulgarity – my all too receptive penis. Something that aroused me in a way I could not recall feeling before and repulsed me at one and the same time.

In fact, it was a relief when the Major finally prevailed upon her to depart and she took herself off upstairs; manner in marked contrast to that of the servants who had clung fearfully to each other for moral and physical sustenance - though the sound of her closing and locking her bedroom door managed to echo all over the house.

We had told her nothing, of course, of my discoveries and theories, but nevertheless the cat was out of the bag; the affair of the night before had spoilt our scheme of secrecy.

And it was almost as if Lilith Hawtrey had been aware of matters before we had the time to draw our own conclusions.

Which led *me* to draw further conclusions.

*****

That night in the Major's study, as the rest of the house attempted sleep, we made our preparations.

The windows were widely opened, and the door was ajar.

Not a breath of wind disturbed the stillness of the unbearably close night.

And yet, although Major Hawtrey had agreed to act exactly as I might direct, he stared in almost comic surprise when he learnt the nature of these directions.

Placing two large silk handkerchiefs upon the table, I saturated them with the contents of a bottle which I had brought in my pocket, and handed one of the handkerchiefs to him.

"Tie that over your mouth and nostrils," I said, "and whatever happens don't remove it unless I tell you."

"But, Carnforth...."

"You know the compact, Major, and agreed to it. If you aren't prepared to assist I must ask you to retire. Tonight might be the last chance, perhaps, for years."

Growling beneath his breath, Major Hawtrey obeyed and stretched himself upon the couch, staring at me round-eyed as I too fastened a handkerchief about my head.

"It would perhaps be better," I said, my voice dimmed by the wet silk, "if we avoided conversation as much as possible."

Standing up, I rolled back a corner of the carpet, exposing the floor-planks, and with a brace-and-bit, which I had in my pocket, I bored a round hole in one of these. Into it I screwed the tube, attached to a little watch-like contrivance, twisting the face of the dial so that I could study it from where I proposed to sit. Then I took up my post, smothering a laugh as I noted the expression upon that part of the Major's red face which was visible to me.

Thus, began the business of that strange night.

Half an hour passed in almost complete silence, save for the audible breathing of the Major - by no means an ideal companion for such an investigation. But, having agreed to assist me, and in justice to my old friend, I must say that he did his best to stick to the bargain and to play his part in what obviously he regarded as an insane comedy.

During that thirty-minute spell, however I found myself subject to many thoughts on the subject of his young wife that, man-of-the-world that I considered myself, left me in a state of rut and bewilderment. Thoughts that were so depraved and immoral that I was forced to question everything I knew of myself as a man of breeding and decency. Images of acts between us that not only affronted my dignity as a prideful man but left me with the shameful need to actually experience them at Lilith Hawtrey's hands.

Though it was not her hands that featured most prominently in these waking visions that held me in their grip – and this as her husband and my close friend sprawled upon a couch not feet from me.

Powerless, it seemed, to either move or change the trajectory of my thought onto less… *unmanning*… subject matter.

I watched, no more than a spectator, as I lay naked below an equally unclad Lilith, her body a marvel of feminine curves and power as she rose above me with hands upon hips, gazing down upon me as if she were an Amazon of old and I a warrior she had vanquished with consummate ease.

Both my doppelganger and myself, the spectator, sporting an erection that was painful, so… *urgent*… was its need.

But it was a need the Amazon herself had no intention of satisfying in a way likely make either of us pleased with ourselves.

I watched as, balancing herself on one foot, the backs of her shapely legs and defined calves presented to my viewing eyes, she raised a foot and brought a creamy sole down to press my erection down upon my stomach, the blood red nails of her toes flexing themselves against its bulbous head above my taut foreskin.

I could almost feel her victorious eyes boring into those belonging to my facsimile and an image of her wondrous breasts filled my vision, nipples the size of ordnance and looking, to me at least, equally lethal.

The word that suggested itself to me as her vision dominated my senses was one I had used to myself in her regard before.

"Goddess."

"That is my good boy," I heard her tell my prostrate form, the impression she was actually in the room with me ensuring my eyes darted to her husband, unable to believe he was not seeing and hearing what I was seeing and hearing. "There will always be pleasures for you if you are obedient for your lady Lilith. Play your games with masks and drills as you will, but I have you now and I always shall."

I could barely discern her words as her foot began to manipulate the manhood of my doppelganger and, somehow, the sensations he was receiving transmitted themselves to me. I was having an erotic and out of body experience and I could not prevent it. Hawtrey's wife held my senses in complete thrall so that I was unsure whether I even wished to escape.

I was biting my lips by this time, unwilling to allow the degenerate pleasure I was receiving from making me groan aloud and draw attention to myself – despite the Major looking perfectly oblivious as he remained stretched upon his couch, saturated cloth still in place over his mouth.

And then, just as I knew my facsimile was about to reach his crisis and I fully expected my own to saturate my trousers…

She – and he – were gone.

There remained nobody in the room but the lightly snoring Hawtrey and myself, with only the urgency remaining at my groin to give evidence of what my senses had just witnessed.

Which was the exact moment I thought I heard a door open somewhere in the house.
Forcing my senses to become alert, I listened.

Glancing at my companion, I realised my slumbering conspirator and aide had heard nothing.

Which was when I heard another sound.

A sound as of the rustling of silk upon the stair, or in an upper corridor.

Finally, I was almost certain that the floor of the room above - the Major's bedroom - creaked very slightly.

At that I saw my companion come to his senses and glance upward, then across at me.

There was a question in his eyes but, not desiring to disturb the silence, I merely shook my head and listened with keened ears.

An hour passed.

There had been no repetition of the slight sounds to which I have referred, and the stillness of Low Wakeham was truly extraordinary. A thermometer, which I had placed upon the table near to my elbow, recorded the fact that the temperature of the room had not abated a fraction of a point since sunset, and, sitting still though I was, I found myself bathed in perspiration – much of which had accumulated during my *"out of body"* experience involving Hawtrey's wife, I felt sure. Despite the open door and windows, not a breath of air stirred in the place, though the room was laden with the oppressive perfume of those night-scented flowers which I have mentioned elsewhere, for it was faintly perceptible to me, despite the wet silk across my mouth and nostrils.

At one point, a bat flew half in at one of the windows, striking its wings upon the glass, but almost immediately flew out again. A big moth fluttered around the room, persistently banging its wings against the lamp-shade. But nothing else, apart from the occasional restless movements of the Major, stirred.

Then all at once - and not gradually as I had anticipated - the meter at my feet began to register.

Instantly, I looked to the thermometer.

It had begun to fall!

I glanced across then at Major Hawtrey.

He was staring fixedly at something which seemed to have attracted his attention in a distant corner of the room.

Glancing away from the meter, the indicator of which was still moving upward, I looked in the same direction.

There was much shadow there, but nevertheless I could not doubt that a very faint vapour was forming in that corner... rising, rising, rising.

Higher and higher.

It proceeded from some part of the floor concealed by the big saddle-bag chair, probably from a faulty floor-board, and it was rising visibly, inch upon inch, as I watched, until it touched the ceiling above.

Then, like a column of smoke, it spread out, mushroom fashion, to creep in ghostly coils along the cornices, spreading, a dim grey haze, until it obscured a great part of the ceiling.

Again, I looked across at the Major. He was fully awake now and was staring at the phenomenon with eyes which were glassy with amazement. I could see that momentarily he expected the vapour to take shape, to form into some ghoulish thing with a contorted face and clutching, outstretched fingers. And he was not alone in this conviction.

But it didn't happen.

The vapour, which was growing more fine and imperceptible, began to disperse. I glanced from corner to corner of the room, then down to the meter on the floor. The indicator was falling again.

Still I made no move, although I could hear Major Hawtrey fidgeting nervously.

But, as I looked across at him, a dreadful change had come over his face.

He was sitting upright upon the couch, the edge of which he clutched with one hand, whilst with the other he combed the air in a gesture evidently meant to attract my attention. He was trying to speak, but only a guttural sound issued from his throat. His staring eyes were set in a glare of stark horror upon the door of the study.

Swiftly I turned and saw the door slowly opening; to see, low down upon the bare floor where I had removed the carpet from that corner of the room, a familiar purple glow followed by an elongated and contorted face, held sideways with one ear almost touching the ground, and with the lower lip and the chin drawn up as though they were of rubber, almost to the tip of the nose!

The eyes glared up balefully into mine, hair hanging in a dishevelled mass about the face, and I had a glimpse of one bare shoulder pressed upon the floor.

Wider and wider opened the door; and further into the room crept the horrible apparition....

The light gleamed equally upon the contorted face and upon the rounded shoulders and slim, white arms, on one of which a heavy gold Oriental bangle was clasped.

It was a woman – but not the same version of the gender that had entered my room previously.

In a flash of inspiration at sight of the bangle, my doubts were resolved.

I suddenly understood.

Leaning across the table, I extinguished the lamp, in the same instant that Major Hawtrey, uttering an inarticulate, choking cry, sprang to his feet and toppled forward, senseless, upon the floor!

The study became plunged in darkness, but into the long corridor, beyond the open door, poured the cold illumination of the moon. Framed in the portal, uprose a slim figure, growing more corporeal and less… *purple*… by the second. Seeming, in fact, like a black silhouette upon a silvern background, or a wondrous statue in ebony. Elfin, dishevelled locks crowned the head as her body found greater definition and the pose of the form was as that of a startled dryad or a young Bacchante poised for a joyous leap....

Thus, for an instant, like some exquisite dream of Phidias visualised, the figure stood ...

Then…

Fled away down the corridor and was gone!

EPILOGUE

Close upon a month had elapsed since the horrific and unexplained events of that ghastly night at Low Wakeham and, as Major Hawtrey and I sat in his study in the flat he leased in the heart of London, surrounded by normality, it was hard to make ourselves believe what we had both witnessed.

"Young Edgar Ingrams has gone abroad," I said. "He's ashamed to show up again, I suppose."

"H'm!" growled the Major. "He may have been a little craven – calling out for Lilith in such an unmanly way – but at least he had youth as a mitigating factor. But me? I certainly have nothing to crow about in regards of valour under fire! There's courage and there is courage, sir! I've led more than one bayonet attack I never expected to return from, but…"

There was more of embarrassment than of humour in his smile.

"Let's say that I'd never qualify for the D.S.O. as a ghost-hunter! Never! Not if I lived another five centuries."

He reached out for the decanter and his habitual snifter; then withdrew his hand.

Reluctantly.

And with no small irritation.

"Doctor's orders," he muttered. "Discipline must be maintained!"

I nodded sympathetically, knowing how heavily I had been relying on similar beverages after our ordeal, glad at that moment to be dealing with the subject of young Ingrams and the Major's reaction rather than…

Knowing just the same that the subject would not allow us to ignore it.

"It was the sudden excitement which precipitated your seizure," I said, glancing at the altered face of my old friend. "I was wrong to expose you to it; but, of course, I did not know that the doctor had warned you."

"And now," said the Major, sighing loudly as he filled his tumbler with plain soda-water, bracing himself for the subject neither of us were in any great rush to discuss, "what have you to tell me?"

"In the first place," I began, "have you definitely decided to leave Low Wakeham, for good?"

"Certainly. Not a doubt on the point! We're leasing a flat in town here whilst we look around."

"Good! Because I very much doubt if the place could ever be rendered tenable...."

"Then it's really haunted?"

"Undoubtedly."

“No possibility of some elaborate practical joke or…”

“None whatsoever,” I shut him down quickly as he understandably clutched at straws. “Can you imagine how any such joke could have been realised in such a fashion? Even by the most gifted of warped jesters.”

He shook his head.

“But what was it, Carnforth? Tell me that! What?”

“A grey vapour,” I answered simply.

Major Hawtrey’s eyes began to protrude and I could see his irritation:

“Carnforth,” he said hoarsely, “don’t joke about it! It was not a grey vapour that strangled Seagram....”

“Certainly it was not,” I concurred. “Seagram was strangled by a person whose identity we shall probably never know. Someone who had fallen asleep amongst the bushes on the mound, close beside the house....”

“But man alive! I’ve seen the beastly thing, with my own eyes! You’ve seen it! Ingrams saw it! Mrs. Field saw it...”

“Mrs. Field saw her husband.”

“Ah! Then you’re coming round to my belief about the Fields!”

“Decidedly I am.”

“But what did Ingrams see, eh? And, more to the point, what did I see!”

“You saw the vapour in operation.”

The Major fell back in his chair with an expression upon his face which I cannot hope to describe.

Words failed him altogether.

“I had come prepared for something of the sort,” I continued rapidly; “for I have investigated several cases of haunting - notably in the Peak district - which have proved to be due to an emanation from the soil. A vapour. But the effect of such vapour, in the other cases, was to induce delusions of sight. This proved the case in nearly every instance - although, in two, the delusions were of hearing.”

He was concentrating hard, hanging upon my every word.

“In other words, you could say that the person affected by this vapour was drugged, and, during the drugged state, perceived certain visions. I made the mistake, at first, of supposing that Low Wakeham came within the same category. The classical analogy, of course, is that of the Sibyls,

who delivered the oracular responses from the tripod, under the afflatus of a vapour said to arise from the sacred subterranean stream called Kassotis. The theory is, therefore, by no means a new one!"

Major Hawtrey animation and interest waned and he stared ahead dully, but made no attempt to interrupt me. My resort to classic learning hardly likely, I knew, to stir the intellectual curiosity of a dyed-in-the wool military man for whom black and white must necessarily override the vast areas of grey in between. Monochrome thinking that was the both the British military's strength during war and a drawback in times of piece.

Small wonder, I smiled to myself, that so few gifted military men became able politicians and diplomats

"There are probably many spots, in England alone," I continued unabashed, "thus affected; but, fortunately, few of them have been chosen as building-sites. Barrows and tumuli of the stone and bronze age, and also Roman shrines, seem frequently to be productive of such emanations. The barrow beside Low Wakeham - and now under the new wing - is a case in point.

"Sudden atmospheric changes seem to be favourable to the formation of the vapour. The barrow in Peel Castle, Isle of Man, is peculiarly susceptible to thunder-storms, for instance, whilst that at Low Wakeham emits a vapour only after a spell of intense heat, and at the exact moment when the temperature begins to fall again. In the case of a sustained heat-wave, this would take place at some time during each night."

My friend was striving mightily to subdue a yawn and I knew I would lose him if I dwelt on the more cerebral aspects of his problem for too much longer.

And, besides, there were other, far more important issues to settle before our meeting terminated.

I began again in a different, more accessible, vein:

"And now, for the particular in which the vapour at Low Wakeham differs from other, similar emanations. It is not productive of delusions of sight; it induces a definite and unvarying form of transient insanity!"

Major Hawtrey moved slightly, interest rising, but still did not speak.

"Dame Pryce was the first recorded victim of the vapour. She was accused of witchcraft by a neighbour who testified to having seen her transform herself into a hideous and unrecognizable hag. Whereas, in her proper person, she seems to have been a comely old lady with, so my research assures me, an active and vigorous, hmm, love life."

Now he was fully engaged once again.

"A love life that was, to say the least… *degenerate*.

As is the way with men of our class brought up to certain… *standards*, and engaged as he now was, there was no ease between us when the subject of sex arose – though the lack was, I

confess, mostly on his side; as such a staple of human existence had long been a part of my research and, of course, my own passion for the opposite sex.

He rose from his seat, leaving his soda-water on the side-table between us, and stared out of the window with his back to the room, leaving me to my own dark thoughts and deeds.

Finally:

“Lack of evidence,” I told his back, “compels us to dismiss the case of Seagram, but consider that of the Fields.

“The man Field, on his own confession, had fallen asleep outside the house. He became a victim of the vapour. *And* his own wife failed to recognize him.

“To what extent the mania so produced is homicidal remains to be proved; the gas is rare and difficult to procure, so that hitherto analysis has not been attempted. My own theory is that the subject remains harmless provided, whilst under the mysterious influence, he or she does not encounter any person distasteful to them. Thus, Seagram may have met his death at the hands of some tramp who had been turned away from the house.

“As to the symptoms: they seem to be quite unvarying. The subject strips, contorts the face out of all semblance to humanity, and crawls, lizard-like upon the ground, with the head held low, in an attitude of listening. That it is possible so to contort the face as to render it unrecognizable is seen in some cases of angina pectoris, of course. Also, it is a facility possessed by a number of men and women who enter *‘gurning’* competitions, if I describe it correctly.”

“I have witnessed some of those competitions and you have the name nailed,” the Major assured me, going on to take a large draught of the soda-water substituting so inadequately for the alcohol that was *his* passion as I watched him carefully.

“The subjects,” I went on, “apparently returns to the spot from whence they started and sink into a profound sleep, as is seen in some cases of somnambulism. And, like the somnambulist, acquire incredible agility. How you yourself came, twice, under the influence of the vapour, is easily explained. The first time - when the housekeeper saw you - you had actually been in bed; and the second time, as you have told me, you had gone upstairs, undressed, and then slipped on your dressing-gown in order to complete some work in the study. Instead of completing the work, you dozed in your chair - and we know what followed!”

I paused and took a breath, having reached a delicate point.

Then:

“In the case of Mrs. Hawtrey....”

I got no further.

“God! Carnforth,” said the Major huskily, and stood up, clutching the chair-arms. “Carnforth! You are trying to tell me that what I saw was...? Was…? Lilith!”

I nodded gravely.

"Without letting her suspect my reason for making the inquiries, I learnt that on that last night at Low Wakeham, feeling at a loose end perhaps, she determined to run along to the new wing and to wait in your room until you came up. She fell asleep, and.... Though I happen to know she had been… *infected*… some time before this."

"Carnforth, are you telling me that a mere *'vapour'* could produce such...? And that Lilith…?"

"You mean," I cut in, "is the vapour directed or animated, by some discarnate and evil intelligence that seeks out souls to… *pervert?*"

He nodded, looking utterly devastated and, I could see without surprise, for I had been waiting for such a sign, hot under the collar he was endeavouring to loosen.

"I am afraid so, my dear Major," I told him, feeling a great affection for my friend I knew would not help him at this stage, this as a puzzled look rearranged his features and a hand went to his throat. "But you must take solace in the fact that the physical and emotional pain that you are now experiencing will be short of duration."

His eyes widened, as realization of what his body was telling him finally struck and shock banished puzzlement.

"You have been and remain my closest friend," I told him, "and I would not have you endure a moment's suffering than is absolutely necessary. The drug I placed in your soda-water will stop your heart in less than a minute from now and then you will be at peace? It is totally undetectable and is of a type we both encountered in India. Your death will simply be diagnosed as heart-failure – especially when your history with alcohol is taken into account."

With a massive effort, he managed to enunciate a strangled…

"Why?"

It was a question, thankfully, I had no need to answer, for at that moment the door to his room swung open and his wife, as naked as she had been on the day of her creation, strode into the room with a complete absence of shame or self-consciousness, to place herself upon my lap and gaze upon his death-throes with much amusement.

His breath was coming in ever more shallow gasps now and I could see the deep, and no doubt eternal, anger he was radiating towards us.

Anger that would have seared me to my very core had not at that moment the *"goddess"* upon my lap not taken one of my hands and brought it up to cup one of her magnificent breasts and engorged nipples.

The eyes of my dying friend blazed even more brightly in their impotent, but about to be short-lived, rage.

"I did love you, my husband," she told him – incongruously so, given she was sitting completely naked upon the lap of his closest friend and allowing him to be… *intimate*… with those same breasts he had thought were his preserve and his preserve only. "But that was before…"

She became thoughtful suddenly and pulled my hand from her breast before rising to her feet and staring deep into my eyes in a way she knew both thrilled and mastered me.

“Kneel,” she ordered, uncaring of her fading husband’s eyes upon her as she exercised the control she wielded over his former friend.

And, yes, without hesitation, I did exactly that.

Going even further than she had ordered by dipping my head to her crimson toe-nails and planting the most reverent and obsequious kisses upon them.

She returned to her husband and the interrupted thought process of a few moments before:

“But that was before I was made aware of the true power a woman such as me can – and should – exercise over a man.”

The puzzlement made a return to Hawtrey’s gasping features as his life ebbed before his wife’s eyes.

“No, my husband. I could not exercise that power over you. And for the reason I gave. That I loved you. How could I treat so loving and loyal a husband such as yourself, for whom I had developed feelings, in the way that I treat this wretch below me you once found so eminent and worthy a man?”

To underline her words, and to thrill my thoroughly subject soul further, she raised the foot not in receipt of my cur-like kisses and placed it atop my head; the warmth of her sole transmitting itself to my scalp almost in the way of an electrical current as the latent submissiveness she had cultivated in me made all else but serving her academic.

“But this… *abject*... specimen? Why would I treat him in any other way? I have mastered and subdued him so that he owns his existence is meaningless without my presence in it that I may… *rule*… him. Unlike the love and respect I had for you, I hold only contempt and a desire to torment when it comes to this impostor. A man not fit to tie your laces when it comes to those intangibles qualities that make a man a man – or at least a man to respect.”

Even as she was tearing me down, I could feel the excitement of hearing her do so quelling the ever subdued inner-voice of that man I had thought myself to be before she had taken me at Low Wakeham. Do not think I simply succumbed to her, for that is most certainly *not* the case. On many occasions after she had come to my room – upon the same night as my vigil with the Major – I had tried to fight the addiction to her she had instilled in my subconscious. Even when her husband had taken to his chamber and she had presented herself to me in my room – confident enough of my compliance that the subtext of an amorphous face within a libidinous dream was no longer a consideration – I had initially refused her attentions with the most violent language I could recall using to another human-being; let alone a woman. And all to no avail.

She had torn down my defences as if they had been but barricades of card and she in command of a tank-squadron. Taking me in the exact same way I had been taken in my dream. Astride me as I lay supine below her. And then in… *other*… ways.

“Though he is at least clever enough,” she was continuing, as her husband’s eyes begun that fluttering indicative of his end, “to have worked out that it was the gas from the burial mound having an adverse effect upon our home – though not so clever as to work out that it was not only the female forms buried there and destined to remain who would be affected.”

Taking her foot from my head, she used it to kick me over onto my back.

“Open your mouth, dog,” she ordered, smile evil as I complied instantly and she placed a blood-red toe into my mouth that I may suck upon it as if she were a mother offering an infant his pacifier.

“Yes, my husband,” she continued. “There is more than one soul occupying your wife’s body at this point, and she is adamant that she does not wish the effects of her instructions to me on the subject of men to be diluted by the presence in my life for one of their number for whom I have very strong feelings.”

As she spoke, she seemed to thrust her toe into my mouth with more force than was required, making me gag.

“The dog at my feet, however; the same Carnforth who once presented himself as the equal of most men and the master of *all* women; is not only to be allowed in my new life but welcomed.”

Withdrawing her toe from my mouth, she laughed derisively and wiped the evidence of my own servile saliva from it onto cheeks that were reddened by a mixture of humiliation and excitement; though not – immeasurably *not* – in equal amounts.

“Is it not right that all strong women should have such a servile and fawning male creature in their lives, my beloved husband?” she said, stepping from me that she might now drop herself into his lap as the colour in his cheeks waned and he began to take his final leave of the corporeal world.

“Please do not hate me, my husband,” she began, cooing softly to him and stroking the side of his labouring face gently. “I take this action against you only because I love you and have no desire for you to ever know me in the ways your grovelling animal of a former friend will endure until the end of his own worthless life.

“The power I wield over him is of a kind my finer feelings for you make impossible to employ.”

She placed a kiss upon lips turning more blue by the second and then turned her most loving look upon him:

“It is time for you to leave now, my love, but be assured my heart will always be yours and I will treasure the joys you have given me – even though they were lacking in terms of physical intimacy. Be proud also, that the estate you leave me will provide me with the security I need to enjoy the life I will now have with my new slave at my side.”

From my position upon the floor, I saw a single tear drop from a sincere and truthful eye that seemed pitiless and mendacious only in regard of her property.

Me!

“Goodbye, my love,” she told him, and once again placed scarlet lips upon his.

It was after she had held the kiss for what seemed like a minute of more, that she tore her lips from his and raised herself from his lap.

My former friend was quite dead.

As the new widow took his soda tumbler through to the kitchen and rinsed it – this before returning and filling it halfway with his final tipple - the only consolation I could take for the weakness and sheer lust and disloyalty of mine that had taken him from his misery, was the fact my own had now become permanent.

As Lilith Hawtrey stood either side of my prone body, glorious legs rising above me imperiously, the eyes that blazed down into mine were bereft of the merest scintilla of compassion and filled instead with the most unholy of lusts.

Lusts that would ensure my time remaining on earth would be a sentient nightmare!

THE END