

“Riveting! David Morrell doesn’t just delve into the world of Victorian England—he delves into the heart of evil.” —LISA GARDNER

INSPECTOR

of the

DEAD

DAVID MORRELL

AUTHOR OF MURDER AS A FINE ART

*Inspector of the
Dead*

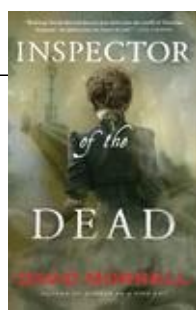
DAVID MORRELL



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*To Grevel Lindop and Robert Morrison
for guiding my journey into all things Thomas De Quincey
and to historian Judith Flanders
for leading me along dark Victorian streets*

[introduction](#)

We take strict laws controlling the sale of narcotics so much for granted that it comes as a surprise to learn that opium, from which heroin and morphine are derived, was legally available in the British Empire and the United States for much of the 1800s. Chemists, butchers, grocers, and even paperboys sold it. The liquid form was called laudanum, a mixture of powdered opium and alcohol (usually brandy). Almost every household owned a bottle in the same way that aspirin is common in medicine cabinets today. The only pain remedy available (apart from alcohol), opium was dispensed for headaches, menstrual cramps, upset stomach, hay fever, earaches, back spasms, baby colic, cancer, just about anything that could ail anybody.

Thomas De Quincey, one of the most notorious and brilliant authors of the nineteenth century, first experienced the drug when he was a young man suffering from a toothache. He described the euphoria he felt as an “abyss of divine enjoyment...a panacea for all human woes...the secret of happiness.” For eight years, he used the substance occasionally, but by the time he was twenty-eight, he lapsed into lifelong dependency. The concept of physical and mental addiction was unknown in the 1800s. People considered opium abuse simply a habit that could be broken by anyone with character and discipline. Because De Quincey couldn’t stop, he was condemned for his lack of self-control, even though the pains of attempted withdrawal left him “agitated, writhing, throbbing, palpitating, and shattered.”

In 1821, when De Quincey was thirty-six, he released *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* and sent a shock wave through England. The first book about drug dependency, it made him infamous for his candor at a time when many people shared his affliction but would never confess it because they feared the shame of exposing their private lives to public view. By then, the elixir effects of the drug had subsided, and De Quincey needed huge amounts merely to function. A tablespoon of laudanum might kill someone not accustomed to it, but at the height of his need, just to feel normal, De Quincey swallowed sixteen ounces a day while “munching opium pills out of a snuff box as another man might munch filberts,” a friend said.

The drug caused De Quincey to endure epic nightmares that seemed to last a hundred years every night. Ghosts of loved ones visited him. Every hurt and loss of his life surfaced to haunt him, and because of these nightmares, De Quincey discovered a bottomless inner world, “chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths.” Seventy years before Freud, he developed theories about the subconscious that were similar to the future great psychoanalyst’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. Indeed, De Quincey invented the term “subconscious” and described deep chambers of the mind in which “horrid alien nature” might conceal itself, unknown to outsiders and even to oneself.

De Quincey demonstrated yet another remarkable ability. He was an expert in murder.

In the murderer worthy to be called an artist, there rages some great storm of passion—jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred—which creates a hell within him.

—Thomas De Quincey
“On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*”

ONE

The Killing Zone

London, 1855

Except for excursions to a theater or a gentlemen's club, most respectable inhabitants of the large city on earth took care to be at home before the sun finished setting, which on this cold Saturday evening, the third of February, occurred at six minutes to five.

That time—synchronized with the clock at the Royal Greenwich Observatory—was displayed on a silver pocket watch that an expensively dressed, obviously distinguished gentleman examined beneath a hissing gas lamp. As harsh experiences had taught him, appearance meant everything. The vile thoughts might lurk within someone, but the external semblance of respectability was all that mattered. For fifteen years now, he couldn't recall a time when rage had not consumed him, but he had never allowed anyone to suspect, enjoying the surprise of those upon whom he unleashed his fury.

Tonight, he stood at Constitution Hill and stared across the street toward the murky walls of Buckingham Palace. Lights glowed faintly behind curtains there. Given that the British government had collapsed four days earlier because of its shocking mismanagement of the Crimean War, Queen Victoria was no doubt engaged in urgent meetings with her Privy Council. A shadow passing at one of the windows might belong to her or perhaps to her husband, Prince Albert. The gentleman wasn't certain which of them he hated more.

Approaching footsteps made him turn. A constable appeared, his helmet silhouetted against the fog. As the patrolman focused his lantern on the quality of clothing before him, the gentleman made himself look calm. His top hat, overcoat, and trousers were the finest. His beard—a disguise—would have attracted notice years earlier but was now fashionable. Even his black walking stick with its polished silver knob was the height of fashion.

“Good evening, sir. If you don't mind me saying, don't linger,” the constable warned. “It doesn't do to be out alone in the dark, even in this neighborhood.”

“Thank you, constable. I'll hurry along.”

From his hiding place, the young man at last heard a target approaching. He'd almost given up, knowing that there was little chance that someone of means would venture alone onto this fog-bound street but knowing also that the fog was his only protection from the constable who passed here every

twenty minutes.

Deciding that the footsteps didn't have the heavy, menacing impact that the constable's did, the young man prepared for the most desperate act of his life. He'd endured typhoons and fevers on three voyages back and forth from England to the Orient on a British East India Company ship, but these were nothing compared to what he now risked, the penalty for which was hanging. As his stomach growled from hunger, he prayed that its sound wouldn't betray him.

The footsteps came closer, a top hat coming into view. Despite his weakness, the young man stepped from behind a tree in Green Park. He gripped the wrought-iron fence, vaulted it, and landed in front of a gentleman whose dark beard was visible in the shrouded glow from a nearby street lamp.

The young man gestured with a club. "No need to draw you a picture, I presume, mate. Give me your purse, or it'll go nasty for you."

The gentleman studied his dirty, torn sailor's clothes.

"I said, your purse, mate," the young man ordered, listening for the sounds of the returning constable. "Be quick. I won't warn you again."

"The light isn't the best, but perhaps you can see my eyes. Look at them carefully."

"What I'll do is close them for you if you don't give me your purse."

"Do you see fear in them?"

"I will after *this*."

The young man lunged, swinging his club.

With astonishing speed, the gentleman pivoted sideways and struck with his cane, jolting the young man's wrist, knocking the club from it. With a second blow, he whacked the side of the young man's head, dropping him to the ground.

"Stay down unless you wish more of the same," the gentleman advised.

Suppressing a groan, the young man clutched his throbbing head.

"Before confronting someone, always look in his eyes. Determine if his resolve is greater than yours. Your age, please."

The polite tone so surprised the young man that he found himself answering, "Eighteen."

"What is your name?"

The young man hesitated, shivering from the cold.

"Say it. Your first name will be sufficient. It won't incriminate you."

"Ronnie."

"You mean 'Ronald.' If you wish to improve yourself, always use your formal name. Say it."

"Ronald."

"Despite the pain of my blows, you had the character not to cry out and alert the constable. Character deserves a reward. How long has it been since you've eaten, Ronald?"

"Two days."

"Your fast has now ended."

The gentleman dropped five coins onto the path. The faint glow from the nearby street lamp made it difficult for Ronald to identify them. Expecting pennies, he felt astonished when he discovered not pennies or even shillings but gold sovereigns. He stared at them in shock. One gold sovereign was more than most people earned in a week of hard labor, and here were *five* of them.

"Would you like to receive even more sovereigns, Ronald?"

He clawed at the coins. "Yes."

"Twenty-five Garner Street in Wapping." The address was in the blighted East End, as far from the majesty of Green Park as could be imagined. "Repeat it."

“Twenty-five Garner Street in Wapping.”

~~“Be there at four tomorrow afternoon. Buy warm clothes. Nothing extravagant, nothing to draw attention. You are about to join a great cause, Ronald. But if you tell anyone about Twenty-five Garner Street, to use your expression it’ll go nasty for you. Let’s see if you do indeed have character or if you throw away the greatest opportunity you will ever receive.”~~

Heavy footsteps approached.

“The constable. Go,” the bearded gentleman warned. “Don’t disappoint me, Ronald.”

His stomach growling more painfully, astonished by his luck, Ronald clutched his five precious sovereigns and raced into the fog.

As the gentleman continued up Constitution Hill, his watch now showed eight minutes past five. The watches of his associates—also synchronized with the Greenwich Royal Observatory—would display the same time. Everything remained on schedule.

At Piccadilly, he turned right toward one of London’s most respectable districts: Mayfair. He had waited what seemed an eternity for what he was about to enjoy. He had suffered unimaginably to prepare for it. Despite his fierce emotions, he kept a measured pace, determined not to blunt his satisfaction by hurrying.

Even in the fog, he had no trouble finding his way. This was a route that he had followed many times in his memory. It was the same route that he had taken fifteen years earlier when, as a desperate boy, he had raced to the right along Piccadilly, then to the left along Half Moon Street, then left again onto Curzon Street, this way and that, begging.

“Please, sir, I need your help!”

“Get away from me, you filthy vermin!”

The echoes of that hateful time reverberated in his memory as he came to the street known as Chesterfield Hill. He paused where a gas lamp showed an iron railing beyond which five stone steps led up to an oak door. The knocker had the shape of a heraldic lion’s head.

The steps were freshly scrubbed. Noting a boot scraper built into the railing, he applied his soles to it so that he wouldn’t leave evidence. He clutched his walking stick, opened the gate, and climbed the steps. The impact of the knocker echoed within the house.

He heard someone on the opposite side of the door. For a moment, his anticipation made it seem that the world outside the fog no longer existed, that he was in a closet of the universe, that time had stopped. As a hand freed a bolt and the door opened, he readied his cane with its silver knob.

A butler looked puzzled. “His Lordship isn’t expecting visitors.”

The gentleman struck with all his might, impacting the man’s head, knocking him onto a marble floor. Heartbeat thundering with satisfaction, he entered and shut the door. A few quick steps took him into a spacious hall.

A maid paused at the bottom of an ornate staircase, frowning, obviously puzzled about why the butler hadn’t accompanied the visitor. In a rage, the gentleman swung the cane, feeling its knob crack the maid’s skull. With a dying moan, she collapsed to the floor.

Without the disguise of his beard, the gentleman had been to this house on several occasions. He knew its layout and would need little time to eliminate the remaining servants. Then his satisfaction could begin as he devoted his attention to their masters. Clutching his cane, he proceeded with his great work.

Memories needed to be prodded.

Punishment needed to be inflicted.

TWO

The Curtained Pew

St. James's Church looked almost too humble to occupy the southeastern boundary of wealthy Mayfair. Designed by Sir Christopher Wren, it gave no indication that the great architect was also responsible for the magnificence of St. Paul's Cathedral, so strong was the contrast. Narrow, only three stories tall, St. James's was constructed of simple red brick. Its steeple had a clock, a brass ball, and a weather vane. That was the extent of its ornamentation.

As the bells announced the 11 A.M. Sunday service, a stream of carriages delivered the district's most powerful worshippers. Because a special visitor was expected to relieve the war-gloom, St. James's filled rapidly. The morning's sunlight gleamed through numerous tall windows and radiated off white walls, illuminating the church's interior with glory. It was a dazzling effect for which St. James's was famous.

Among those entering the church, a group of four attracted attention. Not only were they strangers, but two men in the group were exceptionally tall, nearly six feet, noteworthy at a time when most men measured only about five feet seven inches. In contrast, the third man was unusually short: under five feet.

The group's clothes attracted attention also. The tall men wore shapeless everyday street garments, hardly what one expected among the frock coats in St. James's. The short man—much older than the other two—had at least made an attempt to dress for the occasion, but his frayed cuffs and shiny elbows indicated that he belonged in another district.

The fourth member of the group, an attractive young woman of perhaps twenty-one...what was the congregation to make of *her*? Instead of a fashionable, elaborate hooped dress with voluminous satin ruffles, she wore a loosely hanging skirt with female trousers under it, a style that newspapers derisively termed "bloomers." The outline and movement of her legs were plainly visible, causing heads to turn and whispers to spread throughout the church.

The whispers increased when one of the tall men removed what seemed to be a newsboy's cap and revealed bright red hair.

"Irish," several people murmured.

The other tall man had a scar on his chin, suggesting that his background wasn't much better.

Everyone expected the motley group to remain in the standing area at the back, where servants and other commoners worshipped. Instead, the attractive young woman in the bloomer skirt—her eyes startling blue, her lustrous, light brown hair hanging in ringlets behind her bonnet—surprised everyone by approaching the chief pew-opener, Agnes Barrett.

Agnes was sixty years old, white-haired and spectacled. Over the decades, she had risen through the ranks of pew-openers until she was now the custodian of the most important keys. It was rumored that the gratuities she received from pew renters had over the years amounted to an impressive three thousand pounds, well deserved because a good pew-opener knew how to be of service, polishing the pew's oak, dusting its benches, plumping its pillows, and so forth.

Puzzled, Agnes waited for the young woman in the disgraceful bloomer skirt to state her intention. Perhaps the poor thing was lost. Perhaps she intended to ask directions to a more appropriate church.

"Please show us to Lord Palmerston's pew," the young woman requested.

Agnes's mouth hung open. Had this strange creature said "Lord Palmerston's pew"? Agnes must have misheard. Lord Palmerston was one of the most influential politicians in the land.

"Pardon me?"

"Lord Palmerston's pew, if you please." The troubling visitor gave Agnes a note.

Agnes read it with increasing perplexity. Beyond doubt, the familiar handwriting was indeed Lord Palmerston's, and the message unquestionably gave these four odd-looking strangers permission to use his pew. But why on earth would His Lordship lower himself to do that?

Agnes tried not to seem flustered. She moved her troubled gaze toward the unusually short man whose eyes were as strikingly blue as the young woman's and whose hair was the same light brown. *Father and daughter*, Agnes concluded. The tiny man clutched his hands tensely and shifted his balance from one foot to the other, walking in place. On this cold February morning, his forehead glistened with sweat. Could he be sick?

"Follow me," Agnes reluctantly replied.

She walked along the central aisle, past pews in a configuration known as "boxed." Instead of rows that stretched from one aisle to another, these pews were divided into square compartments, eight feet by eight feet, with waist-high sides, backs, and fronts. They contained benches sufficient to accommodate a gentleman and his family. Many box pews resembled sitting areas in homes, with cushions on the benches and carpeting on the floor. Some even had tables on which to set top hats, gloves, and folded coats.

Lord Palmerston's pew was at the front, to the right of the center aisle. For Agnes, the distance to it had never seemed so long. Although she kept her gaze straight ahead, she couldn't help sensing the attention that she and the astonishing group with her received. Approaching the white marble altar rail, she turned to face the congregation. Conscious of every gaze upon her, she selected a key from the ring she carried and unlocked the entrance to Lord Palmerston's pew.

"If His Lordship had notified me that he intended to have guests use his pew, I could have prepared it for you," Agnes explained. "The charcoal brazier hasn't been lit."

"Thank you," the young woman assured her, "but there's no need to give us heat. This is far more comfortable than we're accustomed to at our home church in Edinburgh. We can't afford to rent a pew there. We stand in the back."

So she's from Scotland, Agnes thought. *And one of the men is Irish. That explains a great deal.*

Lord Palmerston's box had three rows of benches with backs. The two tall men sat on the middle bench while the woman and her father occupied the front one. Even when he was seated, the little man's feet moved up and down.

With a forced nod of politeness, Agnes jangled her keys and proceeded to the back of the church where a churchwarden shifted toward her, looking as puzzled as Agnes felt.

"You know who that little man is, don't you?" the churchwarden whispered, trying to contain his astonishment.

“I haven’t the faintest. All I know is, his clothes need mending,” Agnes replied.

“The Opium-Eater.”

Again, Agnes was certain that she hadn’t heard correctly. “The Opium-Eater? *Thomas De Quincey*?”

“In December, when all the murders happened, I saw a picture of him in the *Illustrated London News*. I was so curious that I went to one of the bookshops where the newspaper said he would sign books for anyone who bought them. An undignified way to earn a living, if you ask me.”

“Don’t tell me he was signing *the* book.” Agnes lowered her voice, referring to the infamous *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*.

“If his name was on it and someone was willing to buy it, he was ready to sign it. That scandalous, overdressed woman is his daughter. At the bookshop, whenever he tried to pull a bottle from his coat, she brought him a cup of tea to distract him.”

“Mercy,” Agnes said. “Do you suppose the bottle contained laudanum?”

“What else? He must have drunk five cups of tea while I watched him. Imagine how much laudanum he would have consumed if his daughter hadn’t been there. I hope I don’t need to emphasize that I didn’t buy any of his books.”

“No need at all. Who would want to read his wretched scribblings, let alone buy them? Thomas De Quincey, the Opium-Eater, in St. James’s Church? Heaven help us.”

“That’s not the whole of it.”

Agnes listened with greater shock.

“Those two men with the Opium-Eater. One of them is a Scotland Yard detective.”

“Surely not.”

“I recognize him from the constitutional I take every morning along Piccadilly. My route leads me past Lord Palmerston’s mansion, where the younger man over there visits each day at nine. I heard the porter refer to him as ‘detective sergeant.’”

“A detective sergeant? My word.”

“I also heard the porter and the detective talk about another detective, who apparently was wounded during the murders in December. That other detective has been convalescing in Lord Palmerston’s mansion. The Opium-Eater and his daughter stay there, also.”

Agnes felt her cheeks turn pale. “What is this world coming to?”

But Agnes couldn’t permit herself to be distracted. The special visitor would soon arrive. Meanwhile, gentlemen gave her impatient looks, waiting for their pews to be unlocked. She clutched her ring of keys and approached the nearest frowning group, but as if the morning hadn’t brought enough surprises, she suddenly saw Death walk through the front door.

The mid-Victorian way of death was severe. A grieving widow, children, and close relatives were expected to seclude themselves at home and wear mourning clothes for months—in the widow’s case, for at least a year and a day.

Thus Agnes gaped at what she now encountered. Astonished churchgoers stepped away from a stern, pinch-faced man whose frock coat, waistcoat, and trousers were as black as black could be. Because Queen Victoria and Prince Albert disapproved of men who wore other than black, gray, or dark blue clothing, it was difficult to look more somber than the male attendees at St. James’s, but the stranger made the glumly dressed men in the church look festive by comparison. In addition, he wore

the blackest of gloves while he held a top hat with a mourning band and a black cloth hanging down the back.

A man whose clothing announced that extremity of grief was almost never seen in public, except at the funeral for the loved one he so keenly mourned. Dressed that way at a Sunday service, he attracted everyone's attention.

But he wasn't alone. He supported a frail woman whose stooped posture suggested that she was elderly. She wore garments intended to show the deepest of sorrow. Her dress was midnight crepe, the wrinkled surface of which could not reflect light. A black veil hung from the woman's black bonnet. With a black-gloved hand, she dabbed a black handkerchief under the veil.

"Please unlock Lady Cosgrove's pew," the solemn man told Agnes.

"Lady Cosgrove?" Agnes suddenly realized who this woman was. "My goodness, what happened?"

"Please," the man repeated.

"But Lady Cosgrove sent word that she wouldn't attend this morning's service. I haven't readied her pew."

"Lady Cosgrove has more grievous concerns than whether her pew has been dusted."

Without waiting for a reply, the man escorted the unsteady woman along the center aisle. Again Agnes heard whispers and sensed that every pair of eyes was focused on her. She reached the front of the church and turned toward the right, passing the Opium-Eater and his strangely dressed companion in Lord Palmerston's pew. The little man continued to move his feet up and down.

The next pew at the front was Lady Cosgrove's. Situated along the right wall, it was the most elaborate in the church. Over the centuries, it had acquired a post at each corner and a canopy above them. Curtains were tied to the posts so that in the event of cold drafts, Lady Cosgrove's family could draw the curtains and be sheltered on three sides while facing the altar. Even on a warm day, the occupants had been known to draw the curtains, supposedly so that they could worship without feeling observed by the other parishioners when in actuality they were probably napping.

As Agnes unlocked the pew, Lady Cosgrove lowered her black handkerchief from beneath her black veil.

"Thank you," she told the pinch-featured man.

"Anything to be of assistance, Lady Cosgrove. I'm deeply sorry."

He gave her a black envelope.

Lady Cosgrove nodded gravely, entered the pew, and sank onto the first of three benches.

Hearing a discreet cough, Agnes noticed that the vicar stood in a doorway near the altar, ready to begin the service. At once the church's organ began playing "The Son of God Goes Forth to War," the choir's voices reverberating off the arched ceiling. With a rumble, everyone stood. Followed by the funereal attendant, Agnes made her way to the back of the church, where she turned to ask about Lady Cosgrove's distress, but to her surprise, whichever way she looked, the somber man was no longer visible.

Where on earth could he possibly have gone? Agnes wondered. What she did see, however, was the scarlet coat of the special visitor who waited in the vestibule, and with so much excitement, Agnes had difficulty calming the rush of her heart.

"The Son of God goes forth to war / A kingly crown to gain."

Amid the rising chords of the majestic hymn, the Reverend Samuel Hardesty made his way to the

altar, bowed to it, and turned toward his congregation.

Proudly, he scanned his domain: the servants and commoners standing at the back, the wealthy and the noble seated in their pews. Any moment, the special visitor would appear. With a smile that he hoped hid his confusion, the vicar noticed four poorly dressed people, obviously not residents of Mayfair, who inexplicably occupied Lord Palmerston's pew.

To his farther left was Lady Cosgrove's pew. The vicar was shocked to see her wearing the blackest of bereavement garments. She unsealed a black envelope and read its contents through her veil. In despair, she rose, untied the curtain at the back of her pew, and pulled it across. She drew the other curtains forward.

Her grief now hidden from everyone except the vicar, she knelt at the front of her pew and rested her brow on its partition.

A glimpse of scarlet made the vicar swing his attention toward the back of the church.

The scarlet became larger, brighter. A fair-haired, handsome man emerged from the crowd. He wore an army officer's uniform, its brass buttons gleaming. While his erect posture conveyed discipline and resolve, his elegant features were pensive, his intelligent eyes pained, suggesting that his resolve came at a price, the most obvious sign of which was his wounded right arm, which he supported in a sling. A beautiful young woman and her parents accompanied him.

This special visitor was Colonel Anthony Trask. All of London was abuzz about his bravery in the Crimean War—how he had single-handedly dispatched thirty of the enemy at the siege of Sevastopol. After emptying his musket, he had used his bayonet to lead a victorious charge up a blood-drenched slope. He had rallied weary troops and repelled a half-dozen enemy attacks, and if that wasn't extraordinary enough, he had saved the life of the queen's cousin, the Duke of Cambridge, when the enemy surrounded the duke's unit.

Upon his return to London, Queen Victoria had knighted Trask. *The Times* reported that when she addressed him with his new title as "Sir," the colonel had asked the queen to keep calling him by his military rank "in honor of all the valiant soldiers I fought with and especially those who died in this blasted war." When the queen blanched at so vulgar a word as "blasted," Trask had quickly added, "Forgive my language, Your Majesty. It's a habit from the years I spent building railways." Trask hadn't only physically built railways, but he and his father also owned them and made a fortune from them. Rich, handsome, a hero—privately, it was said, young noblemen hated his perfection.

As the hymn reverberated, the group reached the front of the church. After Agnes hurried to unlock the pew, Colonel Trask followed his beautiful companion and her parents inside.

The organ extended the hymn's final chord. St. James's fell into a noble silence.

The Reverend Samuel Hardesty smiled broadly. "My deepest welcome to everyone, with a more-than-special welcome to Colonel Trask. His heroism inspires us all."

Some parishioners raised their hands as if to applaud but then remembered where they were.

The vicar shifted his gaze to the left, toward Lady Cosgrove. "Whenever our burdens become too great, consider the hardships that our brave soldiers endure. If they can be strong, we can also."

Flanked by curtains, Lady Cosgrove remained kneeling with her forehead against the front of her pew.

"There is no calamity with which God tests us that we cannot bear. When we have the Lord on our side..."

A glimpse of scarlet made the vicar pause. But this time it wasn't the scarlet of Colonel Trask's uniform. Instead it was liquid on the floor in front of Lady Cosgrove's pew.

The vicar's hesitation caused a few puzzled whispers.

“Indeed, with the Lord on our side...”

The scarlet liquid was spreading. Its source was the bottom of the entrance to Lady Cosgrove's pew. *Had Her Ladyship spilled something?* the vicar wondered. *Might she have brought a container of medicine that she had accidentally dropped?*

Lady Cosgrove shifted, inexplicably moving in two directions.

Her black-veiled face tilted upward while the remainder of her body slid downward.

“My God!” the vicar exclaimed.

Up and back went Lady Cosgrove's head, and now the vicar saw her mouth, but the mouth became wider and deeper—and great heaven, that wasn't Lady Cosgrove's mouth. No mouth was ever that wide and red.

Her throat was gashed from ear to ear, and her veiled face was now angled so far back that it stared impossibly toward the ceiling while the rest of her kept sinking.

“No!”

The vicar lurched from the altar. Pointing in a frenzy, he saw that the scarlet pool was spreading even wider.

The gaping slit in Lady Cosgrove's throat grew wider also, deepening as her head tilted farther back, threatening to fall from her body.

The Reverend Samuel Hardesty screamed.

From the Journal of Emily De Quincey

After last night's fog, a strong breeze cleared this morning's sky. The only thing brighter than the sun was Lord Palmerston's eager smile as he greeted us for what he clearly hoped would be the last time.

Glad to be rid of us, one of the most powerful politicians in England shook our hands heartily as we reached the ground floor of his mansion. Despite the war crisis that had caused the government to collapse, Lord Palmerston's voice was enthusiastic.

“Pressing national matters prevent me from being here when you return from church.” His aged eyes were bright next to his brown-dyed sideburns. “But be assured that your bags will be waiting for you, and my coach will most certainly be ready to transport you to the railway station.”

Following the murders in December, it had been Lord Palmerston's idea for Father and me to stay in the top-floor servants' quarters of his mansion while we recovered. He had also insisted that Inspector Ryan stay there while his wounds healed. None of us was deluded into believing that His Lordship's motive was selfless. A former war secretary and foreign secretary, he was now home secretary, the supervisor of almost everything that took place in England, particularly matters of national security and the police. I sensed his worry that, during our investigation, we might have learned secrets that could compromise him. He found frequent opportunities to ask seemingly innocent questions, the answers to which might reveal whether we knew things we shouldn't.

But the answers failed to enlighten him, and after seven weeks, I cannot blame him for urging us, in the politest way, to leave. Indeed I'm surprised that he tolerated us as long as he did, or rather that he tolerated Father, whose incessant pacing as a way of controlling his laudanum intake clearly aggravated His Lordship's nerves.

A few nights ago, as St. James's bell tolled three, I went down to the ballroom to collect Father ~~where he marched back and forth, his footsteps echoing throughout the dark mansion.~~

Pausing just outside the ballroom's entrance, I saw Lord Palmerston—in a robe, with a three-flamed candelabrum in one hand—confronting Father.

“Good God, man, doesn't the opium make you sleepy?”

“On the contrary. According to Brunonian medicine—”

“Brunonian medicine? What the devil is that?”

“John Brown developed his Brunonian system at Edinburgh University. When you studied there, My Lord, perhaps you heard of his *Elementa Medicinae*.”

“I heard nothing about Brunonianism whatsoever.”

“It maintains that physicians invent ways to make medicine seem complicated in order to delude ordinary people into believing that physicians are more learned than they truly are.”

“Not only physicians but also lawyers and politicians inflate themselves. Finally you make sense,” Lord Palmerston said.

Observing from the dark hallway outside the ballroom, I flinched when I felt someone next to me. Turning quickly, I discovered that Lady Palmerston had joined me. The light from Lord Palmerston's candelabrum reached just far enough for me to see her wrinkled, troubled features under her nightcap. I expected her to scowl at me for eavesdropping. But in fact, her look indicated that she worried about His Lordship's pensive late hours as much as I worried about Father's.

We exchanged nods and turned toward the conversation in the ballroom.

“My Lord, the Brunonian system concludes that illness comes from a lack of stimulation or else too much of it. When these polarities are in balance, good health is the consequence,” Father said.

“At the moment...” Lord Palmerston sounded exhausted as he set the candelabrum on a table, then continued, “I suffer from too much stimulation.”

“Because of the war and the collapse of the government, My Lord? Your responsibilities must be considerable.”

“Talking about the war gives me a headache. Please answer me. Some people die from a spoonful of laudanum, but you drink ounces of it, and you're not only walking around—you never stop walking. Why doesn't the opium make you tired?”

“The Brunonian system considers opium to be a stimulant, My Lord. It's the most powerful of all the agents that support life and restore health.”

“Ha.”

“That is the truth, My Lord. When I was a university student and first swallowed laudanum to remedy illness, the increase in my energy was palpable. I suddenly had the strength to wander the city for miles on end. In markets and on crowded streets, I heard the details of countless conversations all around me. When I went to concerts, I heard notes between notes and soared with unimagined crests in the melodies. The reason I pace is to reduce opium's stimulation to a beneficial level.”

“What I'd like to reduce is this confounding headache.”

In the shadows outside the ballroom, Lady Palmerston clutched my arm.

“If I may suggest...” Father pulled his laudanum bottle from his coat pocket. “This will relieve your headache.”

“The queen dislikes me so much, she'd be only too happy if she learned that I drank opium

with you.”

—“~~One sip will not create a habit, My Lord. But if you won’t accept the benefit of laudanum, I recommend that you walk with me. At best, the activity will balance your nervous congestion. At worst, it will make you sleepy.~~”

“That would be a blessing.”

In the shadows outside the ballroom, Lady Palmerston and I watched the two elderly men pace. They started at the same time, but despite Father’s short legs, he soon outdistanced the home secretary. They looked incongruous, Father’s diminutive figure as opposed to Lord Palmerston’s tall bearing and powerful chest.

“You’re speedy for an old man,” Lord Palmerston said grudgingly.

“Thank you, My Lord.” Father didn’t point out that, at seventy, Lord Palmerston was one year older than Father. “I try to walk at least twenty miles each day. Last summer, I managed sixteen hundred miles.”

“Sixteen hundred miles.” Lord Palmerston sounded exhausted just repeating the number.

Father was the first to reach the opposite side of the ballroom and turn.

“The Times has invented a new creature of the press: a war correspondent,” Lord Palmerston murmured.

“Yes, I’m familiar with William Russell’s dispatches from the Crimea,” Father said.

“Russell does not tell the truth about the war.”

“It isn’t going as badly as he describes? Expose his lies, My Lord.”

“I wish they were lies. Because of incompetence, the war is going even worse than Russell claims. More soldiers are dying from disease and starvation than from enemy bullets. Who could have imagined? A journalist with the power to create such a clamor that he toppled the government. Oh, dear. My head.”

The next morning, Lord Palmerston behaved as if the conversation, with its suggestion of a budding friendship, had not occurred. In fact, he spoke more gruffly than usual, perhaps embarrassed at having revealed weakness. It became obvious that Father and I needed to leave, even if that meant confronting our numerous debt collectors in Edinburgh.

Meanwhile, Inspector Ryan (whom I call Sean in private) had recovered from his wounds sufficiently to accompany us to church. Newly promoted Detective Sergeant Becker (I call him Joseph) joined us also. When I had first met them seven weeks earlier, their suspicion that Father was a murderer naturally made me hostile to them. But after the four of us joined forces against the danger facing not only us but London itself, I discovered a growing fondness for both of them, although in a different way for each.

At twenty-five, Joseph is only four years older than I. Our youth naturally creates a bond between us, and I confess that his features are appealing. In contrast, Sean—at forty—is almost two decades older than I. Normally, that might have created a distance, but there is something about Sean’s confidence and experience that appeals to me. I sensed a subtle competition between them, but none of us felt at liberty to speak about any of this and weren’t ever likely to, given that this was to be the last Sunday morning that we spent together, appropriately at church services, where we intended to give thanks for our lives and our friendship.

~~The Reverend Samuel Hardesty kept screaming. Among the congregation, whispers became murmurs. Had the vicar taken leave of his senses? Why in heaven was he pointing toward Lady Cosgrove's pew?~~

Adding to the shock, one of the shabbily dressed men in Lord Palmerston's pew vaulted from it and rushed toward where the vicar pointed.

A woman's screams joined those of the vicar. So did another's. At the front, Colonel Trask opened his pew. With his left hand supporting the sling on his right arm, he stepped out to determine the source of the commotion. The sight of the hero's scarlet uniform prompted other gentlemen to decide that they too could investigate.

"God save us!" one of them shouted.

"Blood! There's blood all over the floor!" another exclaimed.

Amid further outcries, the congregation hurried in two directions, toward the front to discover what was happening or else toward the escape of the rear doors. Nobleman crashed against nobleman, lady against lady. Agnes, the pew-opener, was nearly trampled until a churchwarden pulled her to the side.

"Blood!"

"Get out of my way!"

As the vicar lurched toward Lady Cosgrove, his vestment caught under one of his boots, toppling him. The shabbily dressed man who'd leaped from Lord Palmerston's pew grabbed him just in time, pulling him upright before he would have fallen into the crimson liquid spreading across the floor.

Now the second shabbily dressed man unlatched the entrance to Lord Palmerston's pew and blocked some of those charging forward. He held up a badge, shouting, "I'm a Scotland Yard detective inspector! Calm yourselves! Return to your seats!"

A Scotland Yard detective? The congregation reacted with greater shock. Here in our midst? Mayfair? In St. James's?

The panic intensified.

"You're blocking my path!" a gentleman warned another, threatening with his cane.

"Stop!" the inspector yelled, holding his badge higher. "Go back to your pews! Restrain yourselves before someone gets hurt!"

"Before someone *else* gets hurt!" a lord insisted, telling another lord, "Step out of my way!"

Colonel Trask returned to his pew and climbed onto a bench. Tall to begin with, he now towered above the congregation.

"Listen to me!" he shouted with the commanding tone that only a man who built railways and a military officer who'd just returned from the hell of the Crimea could project. "You! And that also means you, sir! All of you! Do what the inspector requests and return to your pews!"

The commotion persisted.

"Blast it all!" Colonel Trask yelled.

That caught their attention. It was as close to an obscenity as anyone had ever heard in St. James's.

"Bloody hell, do what you're told!"

The shock of *those* words struck everyone motionless. Some noble ladies had perhaps never heard those words in their lives. Mouths opened. Eyes widened. A woman collapsed.

"The sooner we establish order, the sooner we'll have answers! Don't you wish to know what happened here?"

The appeal to their curiosity, along with the impact of Colonel Trask's language, persuaded them to ease into their pews.

As tall as the colonel, the inspector followed his example and stepped onto a bench. His Irish red hair attracted as much attention as his badge.

“My name is Inspector Ryan! The man talking to the vicar is Detective Sergeant Becker!”

Another detective!

Ryan’s raised voice betrayed a hint of pain. His left hand pressed against his abdomen, appearing to subdue an injury. “Stay where you are! We need to speak to each of you, in case you noticed anything that will help us!”

Becker steadied the vicar, then pivoted toward the pool of crimson in front of the curtained pew. Its source was the bottom of the pew’s gate. Avoiding the blood, Becker returned to Lord Palmerston’s pew and again vaulted the partition. Iron rings scraped against a rail as he pulled the curtain aside and peered into the next compartment.

With so many people staring at him, Becker strained not to show a reaction. After the events of seven weeks earlier, he’d assumed that he wasn’t capable of further shock.

The black-clad woman he’d seen enter the pew was sprawled on the floor. Or rather, the woman had once been clad in black. Now her garments were soaked with the crimson that pooled around her. Her right hand clutched a black-bordered note. It and a black envelope were stained with blood also. Her head was tilted so far back that her veiled face peered almost behind her. Her throat had been sliced so deeply that Becker could see the bones at the back of her neck.

After five years as a uniformed patrolman, he almost reached for the clacker that would normally have hung on his equipment belt. He was prepared to unfold its wooden blade, run from the church and swing it. The base of the rotating blade would repeatedly hit a flap in the handle, causing a noise loud enough that constables would hear it from as far away as a quarter mile.

But of course, he no longer had a clacker or an equipment belt. He was a detective sergeant now, wearing street clothes, and it was his duty to take charge as much as to summon help.

Feeling a presence next to him, he turned toward the vicar, who had entered Lord Palmerston’s pew and whose cheeks lost their color when he saw what lay beyond the partition.

The vicar’s knees bent. Becker grabbed him, easing him onto one of the benches.

Someone else stood next to Becker: De Quincey. The little man rose on his tiptoes to peer over the partition. The grotesquely sprawled corpse, the quantity of blood—these horrors seemed to have no effect on him, except to intensify his gaze.

“Are you all right?” Becker asked.

The Opium-Eater’s blue eyes were so focused on the body that he didn’t reply. For the first time that morning, he wasn’t fidgeting.

“I don’t know why I asked. When it comes to something like this, of course you’re all right,” Becker concluded.

He turned toward Emily, who remained seated, watching her father. “And *you*, Emily? Are *you* all right?”

“What’s over there?”

“The woman in black.”

“Dead?” Emily asked.

“Yes.”

“Did she perhaps fall and strike her head? Perhaps an accident?”

“I expect it’s more than that.”

Someone other than Emily would have blurted further questions—*She was murdered? How? Why there so much blood? Are we all going to be killed?*—but Emily merely absorbed the implications of Becker’s statement and nodded resolutely.

“Do what your responsibilities require, Joseph. There’s no need to concern yourself with Father and me.”

“Yes, seven weeks ago you more than proved that you’re steady,” Becker said.

At that moment, Inspector Ryan came along the front of the pew and stopped before the blood.

Colonel Trask followed. Seeing Emily, he frowned as if something about her troubled him. Emily couldn’t help being puzzled. The colonel’s expression suggested that he had seen her somewhere before, but she had no idea when that could possibly have happened.

Immediately Trask turned toward the woman’s pew. He was tall enough to look inside without stepping in the pool, and what he saw made his cheek muscles tighten, presumably with surprise but not with shock. In the war, he had no doubt seen too many examples of violent death to be shocked.

He stood straighter. “Inspector, how can I help?”

“We need to keep people away from this area,” Ryan told him. “If they come near, someone will inevitably step in the blood. We won’t be able to tell which marks were caused by the crowd and which by the killer.”

“I guarantee that won’t happen.”

The colonel assumed a protective stance in front of the blood.

“Becker.” Ryan turned.

“I don’t understand,” the younger man said. “How did the killer get into the pew without being seen? How did he escape?”

Ryan sounded equally baffled. “Yes, there’s so much blood, the killer would have been spattered with it. Even in the commotion, he couldn’t possibly have left the church without being noticed.” A sudden thought made Ryan pause. “Unless he didn’t escape.”

“You think the killer’s still in the church, hiding somewhere?” Becker looked around sharply.

“Bring constables,” Ryan told him. “As many as possible.”

As Becker hurried along the center aisle, he saw a blur of terrified faces. He told a churchwarden, “Make a list of everyone who left! Lock the doors behind me! Don’t let anyone else go out!”

Hearing Becker race from the church, Ryan focused on the vicar.

The man was seated in Lord Palmerston’s pew, bent forward, his head between his knees.

Emily sat next to him, a comforting hand on his shoulder. “That’s right. Keep your head down. Take slow, deep breaths.”

“Vicar, are you able to answer a few questions?” Ryan asked. “The woman in the pew next to us—heard the gentleman who escorted her refer to her as Lady Cosgrove.”

“Yes, that is her name.”

“I know a *Lord* Cosgrove. He directs the committee that oversees the prison system.”

“That’s her husband,” the vicar said.

“Why is she dressed in mourning? Did Lord Cosgrove die?”

“I saw him only yesterday—in the best of health.” The vicar’s voice sounded muffled from keeping his head down. “I was extremely confused when I saw Lady Cosgrove dressed this way this morning.”

“Did you see her attacker?” Ryan asked.

“I saw no one else in the pew.” The vicar shuddered. “She was kneeling with her forehead on the front partition. Then I noticed the blood spreading across the floor. Then her body slid down. Her head tilted backward. God save us. How could it possibly have happened?”

“Take another slow, deep breath,” Emily advised.

Ryan walked to the partition between Lord Palmerston’s pew and Lady Cosgrove’s. De Quincey remained there, continuing to stare over the partition toward the corpse.

“Did you hear what he said?” Ryan asked.

The little man nodded thoughtfully.

“The attacker must have been hiding beneath a bench at the rear of the pew,” Ryan said. “Then the vicar was distracted by the procession.”

“Perhaps,” De Quincey told him.

“There’s no other way.” Ryan kept his voice low to prevent being overheard. “The killer would have attracted attention if he’d parted the curtains to enter the pew from the back or the sides. Our vantage point was such that we ourselves would have seen him climb over the front. In any of those cases, Lady Cosgrove couldn’t have helped noticing him. She’d have cried out in alarm. The only way the killer could have done this is if he crept toward her after he’d hidden beneath a bench at the back of her pew. While he struck, the procession and the music distracted everyone.”

“Perhaps,” De Quincey repeated.

“Why do you keep talking like that? Do you see a flaw in my logic?”

“Lady Cosgrove’s veil is intact.”

“Of course. To guarantee a fatal blow, the killer needed to pull her chin up in order to raise the veil and expose her throat,” Ryan explained.

“But those several motions might have given Lady Cosgrove time to struggle and scream,” De Quincey concluded. “Also, the violence of those several motions might have attracted the vicar’s attention in spite of the other distractions.”

“In fact, they did not, however,” Ryan emphasized.

“It was a puzzling risk for someone who otherwise planned carefully. In addition, we’re making a great assumption,” De Quincey said.

“Assumption?”

“Please remember Immanuel Kant, Inspector.”

“Immanuel...? Don’t tell me you’re going to talk about *him* again.”

“The great philosopher’s question proved of immeasurable help seven weeks ago. Does reality exist outside us—”

“—or only in our minds? That question will drive *me* out of *my* mind.”

“We heard this woman’s escort address her as Lady Cosgrove,” De Quincey noted.

“Yes.”

“We saw her admitted to Lady Cosgrove’s pew. The vicar referred to her as Lady Cosgrove,” De Quincey added.

“Yes, yes,” Ryan said impatiently.

“But as we discussed, she’s wearing a veil.”

When Ryan understood, he muttered an indistinct word that might have been an expression seldom heard in church.

“How do we know that this woman is in fact Lady Cosgrove?” De Quincey asked.

Ryan turned. “Vicar, how often do you see Lady Cosgrove?”

“Frequently. Yesterday she invited me for tea.”

“Thank you. Colonel Trask, may I request a favor?”

Ryan left the pew and approached the colonel. He spoke softly. “I need you to do something that only a hero can accomplish.”

“The men who died in combat next to me are the heroes,” Trask said.

“I understand, but as Mr. De Quincey often reminds me, reality is different for different people.”

“I miss your point.”

“For the moment, would you allow the vicar to see you as a hero?”

Puzzled, the colonel replied, “What do you need me to do?”

When Ryan explained, Trask’s features became solemn. “Yes, and that will require *the vicar* to be a hero.”

They returned to Lord Palmerston’s pew.

“Vicar,” Colonel Trask said, “please look at me.”

The vicar raised his head from his knees. His face was gray.

“I’m going to tell you something that I never revealed to anyone,” Colonel Trask said.

The wrinkles in the vicar’s forehead deepened.

“During the war, when the enemy charged, I was so terrified that my legs shook. I almost dropped to the mud and hid beneath corpses.”

The vicar blinked. “It’s difficult to believe that a man such as you could be afraid.”

“We want to hide. Even so, we need to do what’s required. Can *you* do what’s required, Vicar?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“In a few moments, I’m going to ask you to look over that partition.”

“But Lady Cosgrove is there,” the vicar objected.

“Indeed. You’ll soon know what I need from you,” Colonel Trask said. “Can *you* do what’s necessary? Will you be a hero for me?”

The vicar hesitated, then nodded.

“No matter the effort, for every monster, men such as the vicar and the colonel must strike the balance,” De Quincey murmured.

“Especially the vicar,” Colonel Trask said. He turned toward Ryan. “Whenever you’re ready, Inspector.”

Ryan drew a breath and lifted his right trouser cuff. The congregation inhaled audibly when he removed a knife from a scabbard that was buckled against his leg. Sunlight through the window glistened off the blade.

Ryan whispered to Colonel Trask, “The killer might be hiding under one of the benches in Lady Cosgrove’s pew.”

“If he is, I promise you, Inspector—despite my injured arm, he won’t get far should he try to run.”

“It’s good to have you here, Colonel.”

Under other circumstances, Ryan might have hesitated, but with the colonel watching, he mustered his resolve and climbed onto a bench. Stretching his long legs over the partition, he stepped onto the first bench in Lady Cosgrove’s pew.

The bench had a back that prevented him from seeing under the second and third benches. Even crouching, all he saw were shadows. Breathing rapidly, ready with his knife, he lowered his bare, healed stomach to the first bench. He tried not to think about what might confront him as he leaned his head down and peered under the first bench, seeing beneath the other two benches.

No one was under there. Feeling the thump of his heart against the bench, he looked up toward

Colonel Trask and De Quincey, shaking his head from side to side, indicating that the area was clear.

“Vicar, please stand,” the colonel requested.

Determined not to interfere with the murder area by stepping into the blood, Ryan remained flat on the bench and extended his arm. The blood’s coppery odor almost overwhelmed him as he reached the tip of his knife toward the veil that covered the dead woman’s face. Feeling his scars stretch, he strained his arm to its limit, snagged the bottom of the veil, and tugged it away, exposing the corpse’s features.

“Vicar, is that Lady Cosgrove?” Colonel Trask inquired.

“God preserve her soul, yes.”

Ryan heard a thump and assumed that the vicar had collapsed.

“Lean against me,” Emily was saying.

Forced to keep his head down near the blood, Ryan shifted his knife toward the note in the corpse’s fingers and managed to free it. After transferring the note to his other hand, he speared the envelope on the floor, much of its paper now soaked with blood.

He rose from the bench and studied the envelope. Not only was its original color black—so was the wax that had sealed it. The note had a one-inch black border that was used to express only the severest grief.

Wondering what dreadful news Lady Cosgrove had received before she was murdered, Ryan opened the crumpled note.

He discovered only two words.

In shock, he focused on them, recognizing their terrifying significance. Furious memories rushed through him.

Of fifteen years earlier.

Of shouts and panic and gunfire.

Of chaos and the unthinkable.

He jerked his head up, startled by fierce pounding on the church’s main door.

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