

Jolimont Street Ghost

By Jeremy Tyrrell
Book 4 of Paranormology

Smashwords Edition

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Dedication

For my fellow engineer, zealous reader and critic, Sarah.

The Dark

If the Professor were to realise that I have written these accounts, he might well release me from employment or worse, he would have grounds to enlist the services of a solicitor to sue me! He has reiterated to the point of distraction the importance of secrecy to the future of our field of research.

Still, I cannot leave these tales untold, especially since the latest encounter.

During our research, we have experienced many strange and unworldly phenomena, from rapping on walls to apparitions, from phantom smells to disembodied voices. None of these, I came to realise, were worthy of *fear*.

Noises cannot harm. Smells cannot harm. A disembodied, floating head is repulsive, to say the least, yet it can do no more injury to you or me than a fly.

My mother told me that there was nothing to fear in the dark, for, she said, there is nothing in the dark that is not there in the light. This was my creed and, coupled with my strange but benign experiences, I had lulled myself into feeling fearless, indomitable.

The entities we had so far pursued were so innocuous that I scoffed at those who feared them, I brashly strode into every darkened room with an air of cockiness. I approached, rather than shrank from, manifestations. At times I would even resort to provocation in order to get a reaction.

This boldness was almost my undoing.

Like a warrior who fights only straw-men, I was completely unprepared for what I was to face.

I am thus compelled once more to break my promise to the Professor and record the events in this journal. The scientific nature of our observations do not convey the full effect of what transpired in Jolimont Street and, I fear, they may never see the light of day.

We had been investigating the house as part of our usual routine to make scientific observations. It had been reported as 'creepy' by neighbours, past and present, although our findings had shown the house to be decidedly sterile in nature.

In fact, we had found so little in the way of activity, that the

Professor had classified the building as a 'scientific control', a reference point for a house that is *not* haunted, a standard to which we might calibrate our equipment and compare environmental observations for similar locations and seasons.

I would not look forward to spending time in Jolimont Street. Not because of any particular feeling or unease, no, I despised our sessions there simply because they were boring. On more than one occasion, I have voiced my indignation, as on the afternoon my story begins.

“Professor, must we really spend tonight at Jolimont? In what way can one more set of observations be useful? We have a month of Sundays and more besides, and the deviation in results is nothing short of unremarkable!” I complained.

The Professor looked up from his bag, “Unremarkable? Lad, are you listening to what you are saying or are you making a habit of letting your mouth run wild? The magnetoscope needs calibration. The new vibrometer as well. Plus we've not performed observations for the start of autumn.”

“Wouldn't our time be better spent at Casings Place or North Avenue?”

“Laddie, we need to make observations whether we want to or not. It is not a decision we, as proper scientists, get to make. We must have a control. If we don't, we'll have nothing against which to compare, nothing to call standard.”

“I am thinking that the Board will not see this as useful.”

“You let me worry about the Board!” he said, eyes flashing, “Those dry-headed chin-waggers are not your concern. We've a secure funding, now, so the finances are not under threat. Don't let all that nonsense enter your head.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“You are here to perform a duty. That duty requires that you treat each investigation as seriously as the last, that you maintain a scientific attitude at all times, that you do not question my decisions!”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Will that be all?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Good, good. The air is humid tonight, and at this eleva - which reminds me, take the hygrometer. Oh, and pack up those photographic plates. And wipe that look off your face! We *will* be taking photographs tonight,” he said, “Keep them well sealed, the humidity might spoil them. *Now*, if you'd be so kind?”

I did my best to hide my disappointment. Not at taking the photographs, for that was second nature to me. Examining photograph after photograph from such inactive places as Jolimont was a thankless, mindless drudge of a chore. In a whole slab of plates, I would be lucky to find even one thing that I might classify as abnormal.

Abnormal in the usual sense, not paranormal, mind. In such photographs there might be a fleck of dust floating near the lens, or a gnat flying by just as the aperture was opened. In older, dustier, infested houses, these were more common.

In such well-kept houses such as the one on Jolimont, the most I could hope for was a corruption of the photographic plates: sometimes the salts had not been applied properly, or they were scratched or exposed prior to use.

The Professor's concern about humidity was valid. It was possible, though rare, to discover that the ambient water vapour had condensed onto the plates or the lens as the night cooled, causing curious yet annoying artefacts to appear.

All of these abnormalities had to be documented, if only as a reference for what does *not* constitute a haunting, and in order to find them I would spend the better part of the next day hunched over a pile of prints, magnifying glass in hand, scouring every corner of the image.

What was the yield? What did we have to show for our efforts? In what way did all of the hard labour, the calculations, the hours bent over photographs and observations manifest? The same way it had for every other visit to Jolimont Street, as a single line at the bottom of the Professor's report:

No paranormal activity observed. Refer to appendices for further information.

After this the report, the photographs and all supporting documentation would be placed inside an envelope and sealed, preserved and waiting to be opened after eternity has been and gone.

I guess that is partly the reason I am writing these cases. It is a selfish thing I am doing, unburdening myself by sharing my experiences, I acknowledge this, though I do claim that it is also in the Professor's interest to show that there is more to his investigations than statistics and tendencies.

The Professor's peers mock him for his efforts. No others follow in

his footsteps, none of influence consider Paranormology a valid science. The University Board barely tolerates his presence, let alone his choice of academia.

Still, he insists on keeping to his rigid methodology, despite how fruitless it appears, and it was his dogmatic enthusiasm that led me, once more, to the overly familiar door of the house in Jolimont Street.

Unassuming, it belonged to a rank of similar houses, each doing its best to remain as nondescript as the next. In fact, if it were not for the fences that separated the front yard of each property, one might think that the length of Jolimont Street was a giant wing of some obscure palace.

The population was higher, here, being so close to the heart of the city, and as a consequence the houses tended to be more vertical than horizontal.

Number thirteen had a token garden out the front, an effort to provide some vegetation to offset the solid wall of brown and cream brick, wrought iron bars and black doors. There was a little patch of ground out the back, untended and overgrown, since the owner had been overseas, and an alley to provide access for the coaler.

As one might imagine in such a closely arranged environment, with each neighbour able to hear the goings on of the other, and see, from their top floor, the movements in both the street and the backyards and alleys, gossip was rife.

The Professor avoided conversation with the folk around there. He cited that the reason was to save time; less gabbing meant more investigating. The real reason, I am sure, was to avoid the drama, scandal and speculation altogether.

I was of a different mind. I considered that by denying them the truth they would cling to any titbit of tantalising scuttlebutt and these were apt to grow into speculation and rumour if not set right.

Missus Butterfield, neighbour and infamous fat-chewer, was at the gate when we approached, holding her bonnet onto her head even though the wind was not blowing.

“Hello, Ma'am,” I called, jumping off the hansom, “How are you and how is Mister Butterfield?”

“We're both of us well, thank you for asking, young Master,” she replied, “You'll be hunting about for spooks again tonight, yes?”

“Spooks, yes,” I said, completing the ritual, “Although we would be lucky to spot but a mouse. Tell me, any news of Mister French? Has he sent any word from overseas?”

“No, young Master. I've not seen nor heard anyone around that house for a while now. Well, there have been a couple of salesmen, and the man from the census was tapping without answer. I've got some more of his mail all tied up. Here,” she said, “There's one in there from the bank, so I put that on the top of the pile so he can see it first thing. I think he will appreciate that I prioritise his mail.”

I smiled and took the bundle, “I am sure he will.”

It has always astonished me how such people are able to justify their snooping, disguising it, perhaps even fooling themselves into believing that it is an act of goodwill.

“Thank you, Missus Butterfield. I had better get these inside,” I said, holding up the cases, “The Professor, you know.”

I hoped that I did not sound impolite, ending the conversation so abruptly, only Missus Butterfield was the kind of woman who could easily talk your ear off, then get busy on the other one.

“I understand, young Master, I understand. Get along with you and don't you keep that Professor of yours waiting. Say, before you go, I've often wondered if there was any person that the he is interested in?”

“Well, that usually depends on the location we are in investigating. The activity can sometime be traced back to a former tenant,” I offered.

“Ah, no. What I mean to ask is if he is currently engaged.”

I looked over at the Professor, wagging his head, hauling in the magnetoscope box that I was supposed to be carrying

“He's currently engaged getting the boxes inside the house.”

“You misunderstand. Has your employer a particular interest outside of his work, then?”

I shrugged, “Astronomy. Biology. Most of the physical sciences.”

“A romantic interest?”

“I am sorry?”

“*Does he have a lady friend?*”

“Oh. Oh, um, no. He might, I guess, but not that I know of,” I said, “We don't really talk about such matters. I think that he has, in the past.”

“You should know these things.”

“It's not really my business. Anyway, I had better –”

“You should make it your business! Only it's not good for any man to be without a woman, especially at his age. Why, who would take care of him? You?”

“No, not me. I only assist in the investigations.”

“Then who? That's what has me worried.”

“I cannot say for certain, Missus –”

“Ah, don't you see? That's the problem with the world today, it is. Men get all wrapped up in their careers and don't consider that what they really need is a good woman. Now, a few friends of mine...”

I listened to her ramble and nodded patiently, waiting for her to take a breath before I took my leave, “Yes, Missus Butterfield. I must get to work. Good evening.”

The Professor was still taking stock of his equipment as I brought the remaining cases in and set them down on the table. We had made a map of the place some time back, and I took this out and lay it on the table, ready for the Professor to show me where he wanted me to set up.

“I want to try something a little different today,” he mused, looking over the map, “I am going to set up equipment in various rooms and go from room to room to observe their readings.”

“Forgive me, Professor. Is it not prudent to remain as still as possible during an investigation?”

“Normally, I would advocate that, yes, and I will require you to continue to observe as you have been trained. The way I figure it, if I wear these socks,” he began, taking his shoes off and putting on a pair of thick, woollen socks, “I'll not make any noise, so won't affect your readings.”

“Woollen socks? Professor, that could affect your electroscopes.”

“Hmm. Indeed they could. Thank you for bringing that up, I'll be sure to discharge myself regularly. Any further objections?”

“My ears are very sensitive, Professor,” I said, “Plus, the floorboards will shift as you tread. That will interfere with my readings.”

“Hmm. Again, you're right. In that case, you will need to observe as far away from my route as possible.”

We both looked at the map. The Professor's route took him from the upstairs bedrooms, past the study and back to the kitchen.

“Apart from the garden out the back, I cannot see anywhere that might...”

“The cellar, I should think.”

I had not even included that on the map.

“Really? Um. Really?”

He looked up at me slowly. I knew what those eyes meant.

“I mean, yes, Professor.”

We had not visited the cellar before, primarily because there were plenty of other, more comfortable rooms in the house to investigate. Cellars are cramped, smelly places that no one wants to visit, let alone sit

in to observe for hours.

And there was always the possibility of rats, a concern that I vocalised.

“Vermin are the very thing we should be looking for! Do they make noise? Do they move? Can they interact with their environment? Of course, laddie! Their actions are commonly mistaken for things unworldly and, this being a control, we can document the sounds and behaviours of these creatures, so rather than shunning them and lamenting your lot, you'll make observational notes of any creatures you come across, no matter how unsavoury!”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Now stop whining and start acting like a scientist!”

That was all there was to the discussion.

Anything further I might add or ask would only ignite his temper, “Yes, Professor.”

The sun had disappeared, the night was still. Jolimont Street was noisy during the day, what with the printing works only a few streets away. Early in the morning, even as the Professor and I would be finishing up our investigation, the boys would stream in from all around to fetch their piles of papers to sell on the city corners.

Throughout the rest of the day the constant stream of traffic, of horses and gigs and passers-by, sounded like the city was chatting to itself in some archaic, lost language.

At night, however, the patrons went home, the journalists parked their notepads and packed their cameras, and a welcome quiet replaced the buzz. The occasional chatter of a hansom passing barely penetrated the walls of Mister French's house, and unless one was in the front room, one might consider the world outside to have disappeared.

I have a hunch that the quietude was a result of the neighbours' proximity, that the threat of being the subject of Missus Butterfield's razor tongue meant windows were shuttered, conversations held at respectable levels.

That was one of the Professor's primary reasons to investigate. The level of external contamination, for any investigation, is ideally zero. Being a young, well-maintained house, it did not groan and creak as much as others, there were no gaps in the plaster to let in the wind, the heavy curtains were not moth-ridden and were more than adequate for blocking the light from the street-lamps.

“An ideal control,” the Professor had said, “Any successful

experimental campaign, be it for equipment or for observation, will require a control for calibration. One cannot make a comparison without something against which to compare, hmm?”

It was from one of his old lectures, for sure, and he never grew tired of relating it to me, and it was with this thought in my mind that I descended the stairs, arms full of equipment, into the cellar.

The Cellar

I had to make three trips, for without six arms, I could not possibly hold the hygrometer, the barometer, the thermometer, the lantern, my notepad, watch and pencil as well as the vibrometer and electroscope.

Thank Goodness the Professor did not require me to bring the magnetoscope and camera as well!

Muttering under my breath, for fear the Professor might mistake my annoyance for ingratitude – I was, and am, very grateful for the employment – I made my last trip to the bottom of the steps, made sure my lantern was full of oil, checked that the watch was wound and looked about for a place to sit.

I spied a large, rusted milk can, about the right size for a seat, wedged up in the back corner underneath a crate filled with empty bottles which, in turn, was covered by an old rag.

On top of all of this was a smooth, heavy stone, holding everything down. The whole arrangement appeared almost as a shrine, precariously and deliberately placed.

Now, I was not about to stand the whole time and while we did promise Mister French to leave his house in the same state in which we found it, I considered the removal of a stone, a crate of bottles, and an old rag to be of no great significance.

I hooked my lantern on a nail in the roof, set my notepad to one side, and lifted the stone. It was astonishingly heavy given its size, much like lead, and I struggled to lower it onto the ground.

The rag was much lighter. On closer inspection, the linen I was shifting was made of a curious cloth, very closely woven with small figures of stars, cursive shapes and symbols embroidered in intricate patterns. It was greatly aged and felt so delicate, as though it might tear under its own weight.

I set the bundle down on the floor. For all I knew, it could have been a precious heirloom for the French family, even though being left out in the open like that was only asking for rats, mice and moths to make their home within.

I lifted up the crate of bottles, hefting it against my chest, when I noticed a lump of fur in which were embedded two black orbs, shining orange in the light of the lantern. The mouse had scuttled out of one of the

bottles and was now eye-level, so close to my nose that it looked a whole lot bigger than actuality.

With a stifled shriek, my mind told my legs to run backward and my arms to thrust forwards, and before I knew what had happened, the crate, and its cargo, was shattered across the floor, and I had tangled my feet in the rags.

I danced to free myself, but only succeeded in tearing the fragile cloth. I pirouetted, clashed against a shelf of preserves, tottered like a burnt out tower and thudded to the dirt.

A few seconds later, the Professor was at the top of the stairs to the cellar, blocking the doorway. His form was only barely visible against the darkness upstairs, yet his angry face was illuminated in the lantern's amber glow.

“What have you done, laddie?” he called, peering down, “Have you broken anything?”

In truth, I still do not know if he meant bones or bottles.

“Hello, Professor. There was a mouse...” I groaned, pulling myself from the floor while avoiding the broken glass.

“A mouse? Did I not say that you were to only *observe* any vermin?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Oh, look, there's glass everywhere. Tsk! You had better clean up. There's a broom in the kitchen.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Anything that needs replacing will be coming out of your wages.”

“It was an accident,” I said, reaching the top of the stairs, “I did not mean to do it. I was startled.”

“Of course you didn't mean to do it. That's why it's called an accident,” he said.

He looked over my shoulder to the mess below.

“Really, lad, haven't you outgrown your clumsiness yet?”

“I'm not sure I ever will,” I said, searching about for the broom.

“Well, at least we have established that vermin inhabits the basement. Be sure to make a recording of everything you see and hear, once you've cleaned up of course, oh – you haven't broken any equipment, have you?”

I shook my head, “I don't know, Professor. I'll let you know as soon as I have taken stock.”

“Yes, well, do that. We've already lost enough time,” he went off shaking his head and mumbling, “*Scared of a bloody mouse...*”

Well, I knew I was clumsy, and I knew I had a lot to learn, but I was

not about to be considered a coward!

I swept and cleaned as quickly as I could, keeping watch for that little fur-ball in case it should present itself enough for me to smite with my broom.

Many of the bottles that had fallen from the crate were shattered, others were intact but had spilled their contents: white and black powders, fragments of bone, hair and feathers. The larger items I replaced into the bottles, but the powders and hairs proved too difficult and ended up adding to the confusion.

Curious as the contents were, I was more concerned with the broken glass that littered the dirt floor in irregular, tiny shards. The more I swept, the more the little shards buried themselves into the dirt, refusing to be collected.

With that sorted as best I could manage, I picked up the tangled cloth, inspected a large hole where my foot had torn it, assessing if the damage done was even repairable. My heart sank. From the age of it, I figured that any repair would be insufficient, so I would need to pay for it in full. My only hope was that it was merely a rag left in the basement by one of Mister French's servants.

Some preserves had fallen from the shelves, two of which were leaking red vinegar – yet more items to be paid for upon Mister French's return – and the mouse, that rotten mouse, was nowhere to be seen.

The stone, it seemed, was the only thing to come out unscathed.

Notepad in hand, I sat down on my hard-won drum, disconsolate, trying my best to keep my mind on the job.

Observation is an arduous task. One might consider that sitting in a room, watching, listening, feeling, with only a few hidden mice for company, might not be so taxing. In part, this is true. There is no manual lifting or bending or awkward postures to maintain, and it felt good to get off my feet after a long shift at the library, but the mind, like a muscle, gets fatigued.

Keeping regular recordings throughout the night is one way to keep myself occupied, to stop my mind from wandering too much. After a while, one looks forward to the blessing of any kind of activity to break the monotony.

Jolimont House, Basement.

Time: 10:25

Temp Delta: -0.5

Baro: 29.89

Hygro: 28

Vibro: 0.1

Electro: Flat

No sounds can be heard.

My face went red, even though no one was about. I knew what I had to do, to be thorough, to be *scientific*. Yet the thought of immortalising my clumsiness in writing for peers to laugh at was agonising. Still, I had a duty, and there was a good chance I would never meet my critics, so I did the right thing and wrote:

Saw a mouse while moving crate. Dropped crate, breaking bottles. Cleaned up. Damage is seven broken glass bottles and their contents, two preserve jars are opened, one cloth is torn, glass fragments are in the cellar floor.

With that done I put my notepad and chagrin to one side and nestled down for a long night. The Professor was operating the camera upstairs. He did not mention that he wanted photographs in the basement, which suited me just fine, since the high level of dust in the air would only make each photograph a field of specks, each of which would need to be individually investigated and dismissed.

Imagine being hunched over a pile of photographs, magnifying glass in hand, for hours, documenting the position and description of each speck, blur or haze, then categorising them as 'dust', 'insect' or 'fluff'.

It was not as if we needed more samples of what constitutes false positives. The filing cabinet is fairly brimming with them!

Still, for every hundred photographs that show nothing, we come across one that shows *something*. Something that cannot be rationally explained away. Something that ties into the history of the house we investigated, into the anomalous happenings we recorded.

One can think of it as mining, sifting through piles and piles of muck and dirt to find the few glittering specks we so crave. As the Professor labours, we do not know where or when these precious gifts might present themselves, and should be conscious, at all times, for their manifestation.

A goal of our observational approach is to define environmental trends that can increase the possibility, and therefore reliability, of detecting anomalies.

I understood this, agreed with it whole heartedly, yet I also despised the unrewarding labour that resulted in defining 'normality'. So, while the scientist in me supported the idea of taking photographs of a boring cellar, the practical side of me shuddered at the thought.

After five minutes I took my readings again:

Time: 10:30

Temp Delta: -0.7

Baro: 29.89

Hygro: 28

Vibro: 0.1

Electro: Separated

“That's odd,” I whispered, because it was.

I try not to talk to myself during an investigation, but every so often, such as on this occasion, I find myself verbalising my thoughts. It is a habit formed, perhaps, to assure me that normalcy still exists, that I am not dreaming. It is also a habit I am yet to break.

The Professor has rebuked me over this time and time again, “Your words cannot interfere if you keep them inside your mouth!”

Anyway, I was still on edge from my mishap and feeling more than a little ashamed, so seeing the electroscope leaves in such a state jolted me.

We have had instances in the past where the electroscope leaves had separated from each other due to natural occurrences. On at least two occasions it was because I had walked over long-pile carpet, which charged my body which, in turn, charged the leaves and caused them to part.

Another time the Professor postulated that the electrical activity of a thunderstorm had caused the air around the electroscope to be charged.

In the basement, there was no carpet, and the weather outside was just fine. I peered closely through the glass, just to be sure my eyes were not playing tricks.

Indeed, there was a clear gap between the leaves.

I looked about for anything magnetic or electrical in nature, not that I expected to find something like that in a residential basement, for such oddities belong in universities and laboratories. Yet I remained dutiful, made no assumptions and examined the cellar for any reason why the electroscope should have formed a reading.

Nothing can be found to excite the electroscope. No machinery, steam, electric or magnetic, can be found. There is no carpet, the floor is compacted dirt with some flags. There are no curtains, no window to the outside. The weather outside was still, not at all stormy, when I entered.

I lowered my pencil and groaned. The rag, of course. If you have ever the chance to witness it, you can perform a simple experiment with a glass rod and a rag whereby you rub the two together vigorously and all manner of small feathers and dust will be attracted to the rod. This, the Professor had explained to me, is due to an imbalance of electrical charge.

The electroscope detects the exact same charge that causes the small objects to be attracted, so with a sigh I resumed my notes.

Possible contamination of evidence: there is an aged cloth, embroidered with what seems to be silk, that I had moved prior to sitting down. It may be that this, rubbing against another surface such as the bottles, or even the electroscope itself -

I paused. Something rustled close to a green tin, a little across from me. I strained my ears to listen, searching the gloom for any sign of another mouse, perhaps even the same one that had caused me such mischief. If that poor beast showed its face, I was ready. The broom was only at arm's length, ready for action.

Duty brought me back, and I hastily jotted down:

Rustle heard. Could not see the source.

Then added, without thinking:

Possibly a mouse.

The Professor does not like me to include presumptuous explanations within my observations. He says that they can skew an audience's opinion before all of the evidence has been presented.

This was a different to the case of the electroscope, in that the rag was evident before me, a definite candidate for an explanation whereas, even though I had *previously* seen a mouse, and this certainly was the most *likely* explanation for the rustling, since I could not *directly* see the mouse, I should not have included it in my observations.

The Professor does not allow me to use an eraser, nor does he include one himself, “Only write what you see, hear and feel. If you made a mistake, correct it with another sentence.”

Even if I did have an eraser, or crossed out the words, the traces of my former recording would remain visible and perhaps compel the reader to consider that I removed a legitimate observation for my own agenda.

Such is the nature of the Professor's scientific research: Every note, every photograph, every measurement, every report must be meticulously performed, or there can be grounds for *reasonable doubt* as to the validity of the research, putting the investigation, present and prior, into jeopardy.

If you have read my previous documentations, you will understand exactly what I mean. The scientific community is necessarily a distrusting and unforgiving mob. It is in their nature, it is their *duty*, to question everything that is presented before them.

I finished up with my notes, pricked my ears and sat quietly in the dark cellar, waiting for the time to record the next observation, keeping the broom within reach.

Just in case.

The Interloper

After another few minutes I made my readings and I was concerned that the electroscope had not relaxed to its normally flat position. Simply touching the top of the electroscope is generally enough to release the charge from its confines, and this is what I did, noting in my pad that I had interfered with the instrument as a form of calibration.

The gold leaves within the glass returned to rest and I performed another reading:

Time: 10:35

Temp Delta: -1.4

Baro: 29.89

Hygro: 28

Vibro: 0.05

Electro: Flat

I wrote the last bit without looking for I made the natural assumption that the way I left it was the way it would be. I knew it was the wrong thing to do and, while the Professor would never know, *I* would know that, at one point in an investigation, I recorded without observation.

Frustrated at my nagging conscience, I yielded and inspected the electroscope, certain my recording would not need to change.

I was wrong.

I had not touched the cloth, for it was still where I had left it, and after I had discharged the electroscope the leaves were certainly fully flat.

Now they were separated.

Electro: (Flat) Correction - Parted by 1/8"

I stared for a while, watching in case they should part further or collapse, but they did not. Satisfied that this was some residual charge left from the previous episode, I discharged it once more, ensuring that it was flat, even going to the length of holding it against the light of the lantern.

As anyone knows, looking directly into the light of a lantern while sitting in a dark room ruins one's vision for a good minute. I put the electroscope down and sat there, blinking like an imbecile, thinking how

best to formulate my words.

Manually discharged electroscope again. Reading is now flat. No possible cause for the charge is evident in the immediate area. I have not moved from my station, nor interfered with the environment.

That should satisfy the Professor.

Just then my nose picked up on a rather rancid odour, not unlike the pungent smell of eggs too far gone. I had not broken wind, for certain, so I assumed that the vermin I shared the room with had perhaps burrowed into a particularly nasty portion of their stash.

My keen ears picked up the rustling once more. It sounded very much like claws picking at a hessian bag, a staccato of tiny pins making their way through old, rough cloth.

“Aha! You have returned,” I whispered, slowly reaching to get the broom, “Show yourself, vermin!”

The scratching noise paused, almost as if that wretched creature was listening to me. For a minute I sat, broom in hand, poised to strike. I had visions of myself standing proudly over the limp carcass of a mouse, demonstrating to the Professor that I was not a coward.

Really, I should have listened to the Professor and recorded what I was observing.

I remember thinking, “I will get to that in a second.”

But that second never came.

The scratching noise began again in earnest.

“Come on, then, show yourself! Come out at once! Come out, I say!”

At that instant, the flame within the lantern crackled and leapt, then sputtered out as if a wild storm had suddenly formed inside the glass, plunging the basement into an unnerving darkness. I had checked the oil level of the lantern, I know it, and there was most certainly enough for another hour at least, so I was more than a little surprised – and frustrated.

“Blast it! Everything goes wrong all at once,” I muttered.

The Professor was sure to admonish me for failing to check my equipment and, on top of everything that had happened earlier, I was in no position to argue my innocence.

The wind dropped from my sails. My situation became apparent and a flood of shame swept over me. I let go of the broom, let go of my vengeful thoughts and assessed my options.

My best bet was to get back to the kitchen where the main lantern

would be burning, check my own lantern and get back to observing before the next point of observation.

I groped above me, remembering the relative distance between myself and where I last saw the lantern, being careful not to burn myself on the hot glass.

Dust and a spider web were dislodged and fell across my face as my fingers fumbled, seeking the handle somewhere in the darkness above me. I cursed like a Jack, I am not at all proud to say, though I kept my profanities under my breath.

Eventually I found the wire and unhooked it from the nail, and brought the lantern down. With my hard-won prize in one hand, I spat and wiped my face on my sleeve in a bid to remove the web while I made my clumsy way back to the stairs.

It was as black as pitch in there. The light from the lantern in the kitchen was unable to reach under the door to the cellar, so my eyes, though wide as dishes, saw nothing. No outline, no faded silhouette, no contrast to aid my egress.

After three hesitant steps, I caught my shirt on a nail.

Vulgarity is the refuge of the ignorant. It did not aid my predicament, serving only fill the darkness with uncouth utterances. As I left off cursing, the resulting silence let my mind catch up with the situation.

I wiped the grit from my mouth, closed my eyes and resolved to calmly and slowly get back to the kitchen.

The scratching noise began anew, only it sounded less like a mouse and more like a large rat or a cat.

Composed, I muttered, "And I will deal with *you* when I get back, vermin!"

I held my hand out in front of me as I shuffled closer to where I thought the steps were. My fingers found the wall, then the shelf of preserves, then the brickwork where the stairs were.

Probing with my foot, still holding onto the wall, I made the first step without incident. Then my blood froze.

My brain, having given up getting anything interesting from my eyes, had devoted its attention to the rest of my senses. As a consequence, my hearing, ordinarily keen, was even more acute, so much that I could hear the sound of Earth if I held my breath.

And what they heard was unmistakable; feet crunching over the broken glass on the cellar floor behind me in a rhythmic pace: *crunch-scrape-crunch-scrape*. In fact, I could hear the little shards of glass

clinking against stones as they were knocked up from the dirt.

There was no other way in or out of that cellar, certainly no way anyone could have hidden in there. The walls were stacked with brick and mud, which ruled out the existence of a hidden door. None of the boxes and crates were big enough to hide a person.

My skin prickled as a rippling wave of cold swept over me. I suddenly felt naked. Naked and exposed. Anyone who has dealt with an intruder in their house knows the sensation. It arises from the knowledge that there is someone close by, someone who does not belong, someone who means to cause harm, someone who can see you even though you cannot see them.

“Hello?” I called, as bravely as I could, “Who is there?”

The pacing on the floor continued. It sounded as if the footsteps were moving in a small circle around the room. *Crunch-scrape-crunch-scrape-crunch*. The suffocating stench of sulphur and ammonia intensified. I wrinkled my nose in disgust.

Funnily enough, my thoughts were not to run. Rather I was still smarting from the mouse incident and, despite all good sense to the contrary, I wanted to prove that I was not afraid. Besides, as I have explained, my experiences with the Professor had shown me that spirits, although bizarre and scary, have little power in the physical realm.

“Who is there? Answer me!” I said.

The pacing stopped. The forcefulness of words seemed to have an effect. The hairs on my arms shot up. The air in the room felt thick and icy, as much a physical change as a perceived one. If only I had my thermometer visible, for certain I could have recorded the temperature drop!

Just then a low, guttural growl, like a dog articulating, rumbled through the cellar, uttering two long syllables. I forgot all notion of bravery and scrambled up the rest of the steps, nearly dropping the lantern in my haste. I spilled out of the cellar door.

The gloom of the house was like daylight in comparison to the thick ink of the cellar. My happy eyes revelled in shapes and contrasts as I stumbled around the hall and into the kitchen.

“Professor!” I gasped, finding my voice, “Professor!”

A few seconds later a quiet grumbling accompanied with muffled steps descended the stairs.

The Professor's brows were knitted. He had his notepad in one hand his lantern in the other.

“I was half-way through a recording, lad! What is it this time?”

Lost for words, I only stood there, gasping, pointing to the cellar.

“Yes? Yes? Boy, what is it?”

“Professor!”

“I'm here! What's gotten into you? Good Lord, you're shaking like a leaf!”

“The lantern blew out - a noise - there was -” the words simply wouldn't come.

“Laddie!”

“There's something down there!” I blurted.

“Down there – what, another mouse? Really laddie, this behaviour cannot go on!” he sighed, setting his lantern on the table, “I would have thought you'd be past all of this nonsense by now.”

“It was *not* a mouse. It growled!”

“Growled? A dog, then?”

“No, Professor. You see, the lantern - blew out.”

“Running out of oil barely constitutes -”

“It was *blown* out!” I said, finding my grasp of language once more, “My lantern was hanging. From the roof. I was performing my recordings. There was this noise, a scratching noise, and a bad smell, and the lantern was blown out. Then there were footsteps on the ground, I heard them, Professor, and as I was going up the stairs, I called out and – and it *growled* at me!”

“Growled you say?” the Professor said, suddenly very interested.

“In response. I asked who was there, and something answered!”

I could tell he was interested because he was stroking his beard, a habit I have picked up.

“I don't suppose you recorded all of this?”

“I did as much as I could before the lantern went out.”

“Yes. I am curious as to how that happened. And how much can be explained.”

“Professor!”

“Calm, laddie, calm down. Let's take this rationally, yes? Breathe. As scientists, we must address each issue in turn. I guess the easiest to analyse is your lantern.”

I took his advice, took a breath, settling my nerves. I put my scientific hat back on and inspected my lantern before lighting it.

“Look, Professor, there is still plenty of oil in my lantern. The wick is fine. The glass isn't broken.”

“I can see that, lad. That doesn't mean that it was snuffed out by unnatural means. The cellar, you see, is a closed environment. Air is very still and gases have a tendency to pool in lower areas, such as cellars,” he said, still stroking his beard, “And there you go, introducing a flame source into the middle of it all.”

“I do not understand.”

“A fire needs three things in order to burn. Fuel, fresh air and heat. The flint provides the initial heat and the oil acts as fuel, but starve a fire of a source of air and it will dwindle out. If you say there was a bad smell, that might indicate a foreign, suffocating gas that could snuff it out.”

I protested, “It didn't *dwindle* out, Professor, it was blown out.”

“I see, I see. You'll want to record that in your notes. Where are they?”

“I'm afraid I left them in the basement, Professor.”

“So? Go and get them! Bring your lantern and, on the way, observe if the flame grows brighter or duller or flickers as you enter and exit.”

The last thing I wanted to do right then was enter the basement once more. I had visions of some terrible, growling beast waiting down there for me. The Professor had given me a direct command so down I had to go.

I held my lantern aloft, doing my best to steady my shaking arm, stepping gingerly toward the gaping black maw of the cellar. I listened, but I could only hear my heart beating. I smelled, but I could only smell a waft of vinegar.

My lantern, burning happily, stretched its influence into gloom, showing the familiar bricks and dirt, the jars and cans lining the shelves, the equipment sitting waiting to be observed.

I descended the steps, keeping a close eye on the lantern's flame. It remained steady, burning without so much as a flicker, painting its bright, yellow light on the walls. My heart skipped a beat.

“Professor?” I called, “Can I trouble you to come here, please?”

“What is it? What is it?”

“Look!” I said, pointing to the ground.

Scattered about on the floor, mixed up with the dirt and glass shards, was my notebook, shredded into long strips.

“Remarkable!” he said, “I take it you didn't do this as a prank?”

“Professor!”

“Easy, laddie, easy.”

I must have looked hurt, for I was, because the Professor quickly added, “I *have* to ask. It's unscientific not to.”

He pushed past me, looking about, holding his lantern low to the ground, "The paper has been torn, not cut or pressed. We'll need to gather these up."

"What good are they now?"

"They are evidence! And you can reassemble them if you have all the pieces. And these footprints."

"Footprints?"

Indeed there were impressions in the ground, the embossing revealed as the Professor moved his lantern about.

"Yes, look, they are unmistakable. You did not make them?"

"No, Professor."

"I can see. Look, see this one here. It appears to be a naked foot, only the toes are clawed – see those divots? – and they are elongated and warped. Perhaps the owner has an instep?"

"Owner? Professor, there was just me down here, no one else."

"*Something* made this print. And it was not a mouse and, considering your testimony and the fact that you're wearing soled shoes, it was not you. There is the possibility that Mister French had made these prints beforehand, perhaps, but we cannot speculate, especially during an investigation," he said, taking out his own notepad, "To make an impression may destroy the evidence. I shall have to sketch it, to get measurements, then we can photograph it. Hold my lantern, will you?"

I took his lantern and put it on the nail in the roof as I had done before, and held mine low to the ground to give him a better view.

"I must say, that helps a bit. Hold it to the left a bit more – a bit more – there. Hold it steady, I'm just working on the heel. Say have you got a rule? Never mind, we will mark the dimensions on this piece of string and measure it when we get back to the laboratory."

Having the Professor with me there in the cellar made me feel more at ease, yet I could not help the feeling that we were being watched, scrutinised. Every little noise made me jump and look over my shoulder, and the Professor admonished me on more than one occasion.

His sketches and measurements took longer than I would like, mostly because he was being thorough, but also, I suspect, because he wanted to hear the noises and witness the lantern being blown out for himself.

"It all happened, Professor, I will swear to it," I urged.

"You do not need to convince me, Laddie, I know when I'm being lied to and I have no doubt that you witnessed something extraordinary. My concern now is what this means to our research," he said dejectedly,

“Come on. Let us call it a night. I think whatever happened here has run its course.”

Losing Control

We packed and left at just past eleven. It felt strange leaving Jolimont while the night was still young. Even Missus Butterfield was still awake. I know this because I saw the curtains jerk sharply as she gleaned a peek at us. No doubt we were to be part of her speculations tomorrow morning.

Who needs a newspaper when you have Missus Butterfield?

During the trip home I was in an excited state. What I had seen and heard was like nothing I had experienced before. Certainly it was similar to many of the ghostly happenings I had witnessed in that it was not immediately explainable, it was ethereal in nature, but there was more to it.

The sensation I felt was not so much that it was *creepy*, more that it was, if I can say, *evil*.

The stench that accompanied the presence, the clawed footprints, the growling, unearthly voice! The syllables resounding in that foreign tongue. Oh, it was nothing like the benign hauntings I was used to. Even as I write this, I am unsteady revisiting the memory.

The Professor did not seem to understand my point when I brought this up, “What you *feel* is not scientific. Can you measure fear? Can you use a ruler against anger? Can you hold a pint of happiness in a jar? No! These abstractions are internal and personal. Are not emotions merely manifestations of the mind?”

“I cannot say, Professor. Might I argue that sight, sound, taste, are these not manifestations of the mind, also?”

“Well, yes, perhaps, but they arrive as a result of an external, environmental influence.”

“A sunrise can make me happy. Is that not an environmental influence?”

“Er, yes. Yes, but that's not the same thing. You can't measure a sunrise.”

“What if we could?”

“Huh? Measure a sunrise? Don't be silly, lad.”

“Perhaps we just have not put time to thinking about how to measure abstractions. A sunrise, I can agree, is a complex scenario.”

“It's just silly. And, what's more, um, the emotion a sunrise might evoke is still subjective and internal to the perceiver!” he argued.

I pondered, “Is that not the same with balance? Say, if I am inclined I

can tell that I am not level. An incline can be measured externally with a protractor, and it will also have an effect internally, so even though the personal is subjective, the external is objective.”

“Er, yes.”

“In much the same way as I can feel if something is hot or cold, the sensation produced from an external source is palpable and detectable —”

“It's still relative to the observer.”

“Yes, yes it is, which is why we standardise and calibrate our measuring equipment, is it not?”

“Indeed.”

“Perhaps it is more than a single measurement, though. The overall comfort, if that can be a guide, of an environment relates not just to the temperature, but also the humidity.”

“And the pressure. And the quality of the air. Many factors,” the Professor rejoined.

“So could it be that that which evokes an emotional response is actually detectable in a mechanical way, such that one might be able to, scientifically, record the *creepiness* of an environment? Or the *sadness*?” I said, “And then, if standardised, we could use these recordings to determine trends, in exactly the same way as humidity or pressure.”

The Professor stroked his beard quietly until we reached the laboratory.

As the rattling of the wheels came to a stop, he shrugged, “That's an interesting proposition, it is. Not one for pondering over at midnight. You'll be here first thing tomorrow?”

I yawned, “Yes, Professor. Good night, Professor.”

My sleep was not at all restful that night. Every dream I had was plagued by an uneasy sense of something following me, *stalking* me. It did not have a form or a face, yet it felt intelligent, intellectual, a very real danger that wished to do me harm.

A few times I awoke. The room was dark and silent, warm to the point of being comfortable. There was no threat, no motion, no sound from within or without, nothing strange that should cause me to wake. Each time I fell asleep watching the shadows, fearing that at any moment an evil would come creeping upon me while I slept.

The darkness that followed me was latent when I was awake, manifesting only when my weary eyes could hold themselves open no longer.

It was a palpable malice that crept through my mind, leaving an

odorous trail in my memory, and it stayed with me until the morning broke.

I was sweating, even though the morning was cool. In the sunlight coming through my window, the memory of the evil that plagued me the previous night seemed diminished, even silly. How much difference between night and day!

I rubbed my eyes, washed, dressed, brushed my hair and raced to the laboratory, keen to get to the bottom of the mystery.

I greeted the Professor, put on a pot of tea and sat quietly by, occupied with some administration, as he performed his morning routine. Eventually he took out the Jolimont file, signalling that it was time to discuss matters.

“I have been thinking,” he began, “That I made a mistake.”

“A mistake?”

“A miscalculation, I guess. When I secured the right to investigate Jolimont from Mister French, it was after an initial investigation to determine the nature of reported strange goings-on. Things moving about. Indeterminate noises. Pungent odours. A sense of unease. I found nothing then and nothing on subsequent investigations. I declared that, based upon the lack of any evidence to the contrary, the reports relating the house were most likely exaggerated as a result of local gossip.”

He sipped he tea, looking at the case notes.

“I told him I would keep an eye on the house, in return for the right to investigate. The arrangement worked out well. I secured a control house, he secured peace of mind.”

“How is that a mistake?”

“The mistake is that I made an assumption. A lack of evidence is not, in itself, enough upon which to base such a statement,” he said.

I said, “We've investigated more than a couple of times, Professor, and there has been nothing. Even with the new equipment.”

“And that brings me to my point. How can I know if my equipment is even capable of detecting the presence of a ghost if I have nothing against which to calibrate or show a relationship? If I measure the temperature of this tea with a compass, you would laugh.”

“I think I would! Oh. I see.”

He nodded, “Therein lies the conundrum. My assumption is that physical measurements must be able to demonstrate the presence of an entity.”

“But they do or, at least, our results indicate that they do,” I said, “We've found correlations between readings and activity.”

“But not consistently and not across different sites! Who is to say a correlation between environmental factors isn't specific to a particular kind of haunting?” he said, stroking his chin, “If there is interaction with the physical realm that produces different observable quantities, like making sound, or reflecting light, or smells, or motion. Emotions! I see. I see. If we ever get enough data, we should compare relationships based upon the type of manifestation. Maybe we might even include, as separate notes, our emotional state while observing.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Every bit of evidence is worthy of consideration. Who knows what will be the key to unlock the riddle?”

“Speaking of which, Professor, I have had a question on my mind since last night,” I said.

“Which is?”

“What is it?”

He scratched his head, “What is it?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Yes!”

“*What?*”

“Professor!”

“*What is what?*”

“What are we dealing with? What happened at Jolimont? Something is in there, in the cellar, I know it! It is haunted. We thought it was not but it is, I can get over that but, *what is it?*”

“Oh. To be truthful, I – I don't know.”

“Professor, if you don't know...”

“Confound it! I don't know because that was the first time I have ever seen something so aggressive. Considering we don't have any observational data for the cellar, what with your notepad in ribbons, and only your testimony to go off, I simply cannot say – right now.”

He looked at his empty tea cup longingly. Taking the hint, I fixed another pot.

The Professor does not like to admit that he does not know something, a trait common across many scientists I have met, and worse than not knowing something is being asked a question about which he has not pondered.

At such times, I would busy myself, giving him the opportunity to ruminate and form an opinion.

I spent a little time getting some biscuits, just to be sure.

He called out, while I was wrestling with the tin, "Considering Jolimont hasn't shown a lick of activity since we've been there, and considering that this looks nothing like any other case in my experience, I am inclined to think that there is something else at play."

"Something else?"

"Yes. Something decidedly not paranormal."

"I must protest! There were no animals, apart from mice, in that basement, and certainly no other humans. What happened was other-worldly..."

"Have you forgotten Hampton Court already, Laddie?"

"That's not the same thing!"

There was no need to rebuke. He let my own nonsensical words echo in my ears.

I sighed, for he was right, "No, Professor. I have not forgotten."

"Bully for you! We should first and foremost, in *all* circumstances, look for causes natural and mundane to anything that might present itself as paranormal, for the chances are greater that they will turn out to be quite normal indeed."

"Natural causes? Professor, what sort of natural cause can tear up a notepad? What sort of natural cause can blow out a lantern? What sort of natural cause can leave footprints?"

"*I don't know!* That's what science is about. We make no assumptions, we make no conclusions until everything has been examined and tested," he said, his face going red, "No matter how tempting it may be to state as fact an explanation to a mysterious phenomenon, we must stand firm, be objective, look at all the evidence gathered."

"It is just that –"

"What's more, it's at times when something appears to be obvious that we must be extra vigilant in our observation and our analysis."

"I am sorry Professor..."

"And *I* am not! It is a long time between such challenges, laddie, and when they arrive one must be ready!"

I understood then that he was not angry, he was excited. Excited at the possibility of hard evidence. Excited that Jolimont may well have proven to be the undeniable point of evidence he was after. Excited that he had found a new kind of haunting.

Anything new promises new opportunities.

"I see, Professor. So where shall we begin?"

“What? Why, we shall approach this methodically. We shall go back to the start. Revisit our notes. The time of day, the places, the observations, the recordings. See if there is anything anomalous in there, anything that doesn't match between yours and mine, anything that might point to a third party being present,” he said.

“Like what?”

“Well, was there anyone outside the house?”

“Yes, Missus Butterfield.”

“Did you speak to her?”

“Yes, I did.”

“While you were speaking to her, was there anyone else about?”

I sat and thought, “No. I mean, I remember seeing the coalman come by. And Mister Floren with his potatoes was visiting a few doors down.”

“Any wildlife? Dogs, cats, rats, anything like that?”

“No, Professor. Apart from the horses in the street,” I said, thinking, “And there are always birds in the trees on the other side. They were settling down to roost.”

He cracked his knuckles, “Well, make a note of all you can remember, any detail whether it is necessary or not, there's a good lad, then compare our notes well. I shall ponder the harder evidences.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“And see if you cannot reassemble your old notes. We'll need your observations if we can.”

“Yes, Professor,” I said, looking glumly at the pile of shredded paper.

“Oh, and laddie?”

“Yes, Professor?”

“Brew a stronger pot of tea, would you? This might take a while.”

I sighed, “Yes, Professor.”

After the intense experience in the cellar of Jolimont and the long, fearful night I had suffered, sitting down to line up and glue torn pieces of paper was anticlimactic.

By lunch time, I had arranged all of the pieces and copied the notes meticulously onto a fresh notepad. Miss Fitzgerald came in with lunch, a more than welcome distraction. After we ate, the Professor called me over to discuss matters.

“I shall start with the footprints, since they represent the most physical and testable evidence we have, for both you and I witnessed them, and I have a sketch and measurements upon which to base any analysis. Now, from these measurements, and of the features of the print, I can

demonstrate that they appear to be human in nature.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Once I get the photographs developed, that will sure up any doubt, but even from the sketch you can see a heel here, here is the ball of the foot. These are toes.”

“Yes, Professor. It certainly is not that of a dog or mouse. A person must have made those footprints.”

“Disregarding any bizarre, convoluted way of creating such a pattern from another source, I agree. Hmm, still... Anyway, running with the assumption that these prints were made by a person, I can say with confidence that they are not from anyone around here, and they are singular in nature,” he said, holding up a book and flipping to a marked page, “For, as you can see here, the length from the heel to the first toe is extraordinarily long, a good thirteen inches, whereas the width of the foot is closer to six inches. The separation of the toes, if toes you can call them, is in a fan shape, reminiscent of a more deformed foot, like one who puts more pressure on his toes than his heel.”

I nodded at the various figures he was showing me, hoping not to appear like an idiot, while at the same time feeling very much out of my depth.

“Um. You said, 'he'.”

“Good observation! Shows you're listening.”

“Is that intentional?”

“Yes. No woman has a foot this large. Why, if we use the lateral measurement as a basis, we can estimate that our mysterious person is well over eight feet tall!”

“Could it not be an *anomalous* woman?”

“Perhaps. I'd argue against that, though. The tallest woman in the local area according to this source, which is only five years old mind, is six foot two inches. Well short of the seven and ten my calculations come out at. Whereas the tallest man is six nine, which is closer, but still off by a good foot. Besides, does gender make a difference?”

“Well, um, I only brought it up because I thought you may have a conclusion.”

“No conclusion yet, I'm afraid, only assumptions based upon the available evidence, but that's all we need so far.”

“Need?”

The Professor straightened himself up, “We need to make an educated guess as to what we're up against. If it *is* a case of natural

disturbances, we need to figure out a way to detect or eliminate each one. If we find that the phenomena are unexplainable from a reasonable standpoint, then we must look to alternate solutions.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Now, if the owner of the feet was indeed eight feet tall, then standing up inside the cellar would prove difficult. So either your observational skills are extremely wanting, or there is some kind of hiding place inside the cellar that is not apparent, or,” he said, “The beast is invisible. I would not say ethereal, since that would be in direct opposition to the corporeal nature of these prints. Did you hear, at any stage, the sound of a head hitting the top of the cellar?”

“No, Professor. Just the growling.”

The Professor leaned in, “And from where did the growling come in relation to you?”

I closed my eyes, not wanting to remember, but trying all the same, “To be perfectly frank, it sounded like it came from behind me, as I was at the stairs, so from within the room.”

“I see. Too much speculation in analysis is fraught with danger, for building the fundamentals of a case on assumptions magnifies the inherent errors of those assumptions. Let us leave that alone for a minute. What did you find with the observations?”

My mathematical skills have improved since I joined with the Professor. I am able to plot charts, derive boundaries of certainty, calculate averages and trends and even perform some rudimentary correlation analysis.

Still, each time I had to show my workings to the Professor, I would bite my lip and stumble over my sentences. It was fear of being criticised, certainly. I have come to accept that the Professor's criticism was derived from experience and wisdom, yet the sting of rebuke bites like no other.

“This, ah, this is the chart of temperatures, I mean deltas, because that's the chart axis there...”

“I can see that.”

“Yes, um. I have marked your readings in red, mine in blue. You can see that at the start they trend similarly, with the cellar remaining more constant throughout, while upstairs, ah, where you were -”

“I know where *I* was.”

“Well, they all fluctuated within half a degree of each other, which is what we've come to expect from Jolimont -”

I knew I should not have said it, but I said it anyway, as my mind was

too busy worrying about being mathematically incorrect rather than scientifically.

“Laddie! Are you performing an analysis based on a single investigation, or a series of investigations?”

“Um, single.”

“Right, so you can make no references to other investigations in this analysis. We've been over this before.”

“Yes, Professor. It just slipped out. Sorry, Professor.”

He waved his hand, “Never mind, lad. Just bear in mind that my peers are more critical than I am. Continue.”

“Right. Um.”

“And try not to say um.”

“U- Yes. Yes, Professor,” I took a breath and continued slowly, “The fluctuations of temperature and pressure between rooms upstairs were, were consistent with each other. The cellar, by reference, maintained a constant temperature, until this point here where it drops significantly.”

“It?”

“The temperature delta, Professor. The pressure and humidity remain largely unaffected...”

“*Largely* unaffected? Lad, do I need to...”

I quickly rectified, “A four percent difference in pressure and a one percent in humidity, consistent with the readings of the rest of the night.”

“So what you are saying is that only the temperature was affected?”

“Yes, Professor. And the electroscope as well.”

“Why didn't you mention this?”

I held my palms out, “I was going to, just before you asked about them, Professor.”

“Humph. Well, let that be a lesson to you: If you're performing a presentation, you *own* the presentation. Don't allow for interruptions.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Unless it's me.”

“Really, I – Yes, Professor.”

“Carry on.”

I looked back at my notes, “The, ah, electroscope. Yes. It, ah, they, that is to say, the electroscopes upstairs, showed no deflection all night, whereas mine, I mean, the one downstairs in the cellar, was shown to have a significant deflection at several recordings. The electroscope was discharged after each reading, yet continued to deflect.”

“Interesting...”

“Indeed. Without any apparent direct cause. The level of deflection ranged in each observation, from one eighth of an inch up to five eighths, implying that whatever caused the deflection was not constant as we might find with, say, a mechanical device.”

“Curious...”

“Quite. So if we put the readings together, we can see that at twenty five minutes to eleven we have reached what one might describe as an excited state, with several devices showing elevated readings. No further readings were conducted after the lantern went out, except for the final reading, in which all devices, including those previously excited, returned to their base readings.”

“Well said,” the Professor cried, clapping, “Spoken like a true scientist! Well, there are a few things I’d like to change, but that was a very good effort.”

I smiled, “Yes, Professor. Thank you, Professor.”

“Indeed. Now, from this we can rule out any kind of weather anomaly. With a well-sealed house, and no pressure, temperature or humidity fluctuation detected upstairs, and no observations of wind or rain from either of us, there is nothing to suggest that any kind of external - and by external I am talking about weather – element of interference,” he said, “Still, when we return, we will test that assumption. Should that prove unworthy of consideration, we can return to the idea that the consistent trends show that what happened was not a house-wide phenomenon. Rather, it is local to the cellar, isolated even.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“You were the only one in the cellar, so your observations are the most important.”

“Yes, Professor.”

He paused and sighed, scratching the back of his head in irritation. For a couple of minutes he just stood there, tugging at his beard, flipping through his notes. I was coming back from making yet another pot of tea, always good for thinking, even if it does increase the frequency with which one needs to excuse oneself, when he slapped the desk.

“That does it! I’ve had it up to here with the whole sodding business. Why? Why am I cursed?”

“Cursed? Professor, this kind of activity, so apparent, is exactly what we are hunting!”

“Jolimont is our control! If we lose the control, we have nothing against which to compare other investigations! If we lose the control, all of

our previous comparisons are invalidated!” he said, “Do you see? I chose Jolimont because it was the most boring, most annoyingly standard, common, uninteresting house I could find. Up to now, any reading, any trend, any derivation from Jolimont could be seen as *normal*.”

I nodded in comprehension, “Now it's *not* normal.”

“May! Now it *may* not be normal,” he said, lifting his eyes to me, “Until proven otherwise, we must run under the assumption that there is nothing paranormal about this house. If there is – why, I don't know what will happen. We need to be absolutely sure about this, one way or the other, before we do anything else, and you must be thorough about everything that you're doing.”

“I always –”

“Now more than ever! This is a critical – look at it this way. If we cannot explain the goings on, and there is a truly repeatable, paranormal phenomenon occurring, then this would be a boon for our research moving forward, but it would destroy our research retrospectively. If there is nothing abnormal, and everything can be explained with a plausible solution, then we are safe,” he said, closing his eyes, “Even though I would dearly love the former.”

I offered, “Professor, could we not find another house against which to compare base recordings?”

“I suppose. I suppose. However the validity of what constitutes *normal* will be under question.”

“Is it not already?”

“Eh? Well, I – er – why, yes. I suppose it is.”

I shrugged, “So that means that, come what may, we will need to work extra-hard to find and record another control, and revisit old cases to compare the evidences, but isn't that what we would need to do, anyway?”

The Professor appeared less despondent, “By golly, you're right. Yes. Look at me. Disheartened about a little set-back. It is a hard price to pay, truly, but it may be worth it in the end, for a find such as this – no! I am getting ahead of myself. We just need to double our efforts, is all!”

He grabbed a fist full of papers from his desk and flipped through them, muttering and nodding, sorting them into piles.

“Professor?”

“Let us be rigorous, then.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“While you were repairing your notes, I have done my best to think of all possible causes, some of which your calculations and comparisons

have already eliminated, this pile, and some of which can only be tested *in situ*, this pile.”

“I'm sorry?”

“We need to go back, now, during the day, where we can examine the evidence without the need for lanterns and the like, and when the likelihood of any paranormal interference is lowest. Get your pad and paper, and bring your equipment. We shall make recordings as we normally would,” he said, “I know, it's unconventional, but if we do not attempt to decipher the cause of these anomalies within an appropriate time, we leave ourselves open to accusations of ignoring evidence.”

The kettle protested with a shrill whistle.

“Well, I suppose it can wait a few minutes. Finish the brew, laddie. I'll sort through these some more.”

We had a one last cup, packed, then headed back to the old house.

Unwelcome

It is uncanny. Houses do have a different feel during the day than at night. Corners are illuminated. Shadows define rather than engulf. The everyday noises of humanity provides a constant reassurance that the world is tangible and rational.

At night, the dark, coupled with silence, amplifies sounds so that the real becomes surreal, the ordinary uncommon, the obvious unexplainable. At night, our minds are inclined to misinterpret events and create wild explanations so as to reconcile the irreconcilable.

I am used to investigating in the dark. My time with the Professor taught me to be comfortable sitting in the shadows. Now, poking about the house during the day time felt almost like a betrayal, like we were looking behind the magician's curtain, like we were not playing by the rules.

Our first stop was the kitchen, where we set our equipment down and took a base reading together. For five minutes we sat at the table and listened to the house, the day-time noises coming from outside, the birds chirping in the trees, the leaves rustling in response to a breeze.

My notepad filled quickly as I jotted down the flood of observations.

Satisfied that our readings were steady, we quietly ascended and examined the top rooms. I was surprised, as I thought the Professor would be inclined to look at the basement as a matter of priority.

"I'm not scared, if that is what you are implying," he said.

I was not, even though the thought did cross my mind.

"It's just that if we spend our energies in the basement, as I suspect we will, then we will be less inclined to perform a proper analysis upstairs afterwards. Hence, we must test our assumptions and perform a base reading before all else."

"Yes, Professor."

Upstairs did not take very long. After fifteen minutes, we had performed three observations, examined the window frames, the plasterwork, the curtains, the ceiling, the floorboards, the skirting and the internal doors, and found that nothing was out of the ordinary.

We did find a spider or two tucked into the corners, remnants of what could have been the beginnings of a rat's nest under the stairs, and there was a patch of damp in the ceiling of the last bedroom.

"Make good note of the position and size in case it's an ongoing

problem,” he said, taking his own notes relating to the plaster around the window frame, “If there is water coming in, Mister French will want to know about it.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“And I don't know about you, but I am detecting some kind of smell. An acrid smell.”

I sniffed, “I can too, Professor. I already noted it here, but I could not find the source.”

“The same with me. It was stronger, I think, near the stairs but I cannot be certain. Apart from that, did you note the stain on the carpet in the second bedroom? Well, that covers upstairs. I think it is time we headed to the cellar once more.”

My stomach bounced. I was not afraid, not in the truest sense, yet I definitely felt a level of consternation at the thought of revisiting that dark room.

I put on my bravest face, “Yes, Professor.”

“Are you feeling up to it?” he asked, pointedly.

I picked up my notepad and strode from the room, “Absolutely, Professor. I want to get to the bottom of this.”

“As do I, Laddie, as do I. Let us tread carefully, then. I'll remind you once again how important it is to be thorough and methodical.”

Armed with my pencil for a sword and my notepad as a shield, I reached the bottom of the stairs, ready to face whatever was in there. Instead of pushing the door open and going in, however, I froze.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Not another mouse, I hope!”

“Professor,” I said, peering carefully at the door, “When we passed the cellar, on our way upstairs, the door was closed. Latched.”

“And?”

I pointed, “It's now open!”

“So it is! Did you, perhaps, fail to close it before we left last night?”

“No, Professor. If you remember, we did our final check before we left. It was latched, I am sure.”

“I see. And I certainly did not touch it. Hmm. Note that as an observation. It could be that someone has been in here without our knowing, although why they would want to go to the cellar, I don't know,” he said, “Blow me! Is the smell coming from here?”

The odour was certainly stronger as we approached the cellar.

I peered even closer at the door, noting the scuffed paintwork where it had been repeatedly kicked closed, the buffing on the brass knob, the

slight angle of depression owing to a faulty hinge. About the latch were a collection of parallel grooves, cutting all the way down into the wood beneath the paint.

“Look at these. Do they not appear as scratch marks?”

“They certainly do. And they seem fresh. See, here is a curl, and the wood is not discoloured with age like those here and here. My, your eye is keen today. Perhaps the owner had a dog at one stage? You make a note. I shall make a rubbing. A rubbing is better than a sketch, because the measurements are more exact, you know.”

“Yes, Professor.”

He pressed a leaf of his paper against the door, marked where the handle and latch was in relation, and lightly rubbed the paper with his pencil, causing an impression of the grooves to be cast on the page.

“There. Are there any other observations you can make?”

“The frame is slightly off. See that hinge? The door hangs ever so slightly out of kilter because of it.”

I pushed the handle, letting the door open a bit. It slowly swung back to its original position. I pulled it closed, without latching it, and it did the same.

“It seems to have a natural tendency, if not latched, to rest in this position, slightly ajar,” I announced.

“Very good. But 'slightly ajar' isn't precise enough. Here,” he said passing me a rule.

I performed a series of measurements.

“The lead of the door rests at five inches from the jam,” I said as I jotted it down, “With a three eighth drop from the fulcrum side to the lead. The frame itself is true to within one sixteenth.”

“That will do nicely, laddie, just nicely. I've taken a temperature and pressure reading from out here for comparison,” he said, tucking his pencil into the sleeve of his pad, “So? Shall we enter?”

I lit my lantern, gripped the handle and opened up the door slowly, letting the daylight filter into the cellar. A waft of vinegar and pepper hit me square in the nose. I gasped.

“Professor! What has happened?”

The floor of the cellar was strewn with glass, stained with the spiced juice of preserves. Cans were dented and ruptured, smashed up against the wall, littered across the shelves and floor. The footprints that we had so carefully sketched the night before were gone, replaced with a motley jumble of food, metal and glass.

“Although I know the answer, I have to ask, is this how you left the room last night?” he said, eyes wide.

“No, Professor. There was only the small amount of broken glass, that is all. Certainly none of this. Should – should I get the broom?”

“No. No. We can clean up later. Right now we need to examine the evidence as it is. Let us proceed carefully, under the assumption that there may have been, and may still be, a burglar or wild animal in the house,” he whispered, looking furtively behind him.

I took a step into the cellar.

Nothing happened. The acidic, pungent perfume stung my nostrils and burned at my eyes.

“I can hardly breathe!” I said, holding a handkerchief over my mouth.

“My! Is this the smell you observed yesterday?”

I shook my head, “No, Professor, although I might argue that this is as bad! Are you sure we cannot clean up? A mess is a mess, after all.”

“No! And keep your voice down! I'm listening!”

“Yes, Professor.”

I went down the next step, and the next until I reached the bottom. I nudged a can of plums out of the way with my foot to make a space to stand. A few pieces of dark fruit oozed out onto the floor to add to the mess.

“What can you see?” he asked, “Is there anything obvious?”

“Aside from the disorder, no. The shelves are in the same position, still secured to the wall, the bag of flour is undisturbed, the cloth is – *oh!*”

I rubbed my eyes and held my lantern up to confirm what they had reported. The aged cloth, the one that I had stood upon and placed on the floor, was lying in exactly the same position that I had left it, undisturbed by the mayhem around it. Even the syrups and juices that had spilled were reluctant to draw near, such that there was an unnatural ring of unsullied dirt surrounding it.

“What? What is it?”

I showed him.

“Goodness. Now that *is* interesting!” he said, “Entropy implies that a system tends toward disorder, so we should have expected the cloth to be torn further, or cast aside with all the other mess in here.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“No animal could have done this, nor any natural phenomenon.”

“No, Professor.”

“This is a deliberate act, then.”

The Professor pushed past me, stepping gingerly over a cracked jar of cornichons to study the cloth. He took out his pencil and gently lifted the corners of it, as if it were some kind of sleeping snake.

“We can be certain of nothing until we have gathered and analysed. Hold your lantern closer, please, I want to examine this. Hmm, it's very old. And torn.”

“I'm afraid that was me, Professor. Last night, when I tripped. I had placed it carefully here. Everything else in the room has been stained, but not this, not one bit. *Someone* has been in here, of that we can be certain.”

He picked up the cloth, gave me one corner and held it open for inspection.

I held my lantern close, illuminating the details, the gold, embroidered patterns and the intricate weave.

“Have you ever seen such artwork? These aren't mere adornments, these are runes – wait! Did you feel that?”

He looked back over his shoulder, then up at the stairs.

“Did you feel that?” he asked again, “That cold breeze?”

“I did, Professor. Like a blast from an ice-box. Professor, what is going on?”

“Confound it, laddie, I don't know! That's why we're here!”

“Professor...”

“*What is it, lad?*”

“I can hear that growling. The same from last night!”

He paused, tilting his head.

“I don't hear -”

“And that smell! There it is!”

The door slammed shut and latched. At the same time, my lantern was jerked violently in my hand. Thankfully, I had a firm grip on the handle, preventing it from coming into contact with the cloth. The flame inside was snuffed, plunging us into darkness.

“Professor!”

“Be calm! Be calm! Get to the door!”

I stumbled toward where I could see the fissure of light, tripping up on the jagged edges of glass and rolling my ankle on a can. I turned the handle but the door would not move.

I jiggled and turned, but the door failed to budge even an inch, “It's stuck!”

A searing pain shot through my leg.

“Ya! Prof—”

My cry was cut short. I can only describe it as a giant fist that punched me in the small of my back. I collapsed forward into the door, stunned and pained.

It took a few seconds to collect my senses. I fumbled for the handle, twisted it and put my weight behind it. It swung open, letting the light spill into the cellar as I spilled out.

I collapsed onto the floor, scrambling to get a purchase, slipping on a mixture of preserves and my own blood. My leg was fairly gushing and my back was smarting. The Professor quickly followed me out, leading me away from the cellar.

I stopped to inspect the damage. There were three long scratches, not dissimilar to those found on the door, running laterally across my ankle. The lower scratch was the deepest gouge and it was bleeding strongly, staining my torn pants and running onto the floor.

I took a handkerchief from my pocket and pressed it against the wound. Scarlet clouds mushroomed on the white silk. Now that the initial excitement was over, the pain intensified.

He clicked his tongue, looking in turn from me to the cellar.

“Try and keep your head next time, laddie. Throwing yourself against the door like that...”

“I am hurt!” I blurted.

“I’m not surprised.”

“Something bit me, Professor, then hit me!”

The Professor looked genuinely concerned, “Bit you? As in...”

“*Bit* me!”

“My goodness, lad, your leg! That looks nasty! We need to get pressure on that. My, what a wound! I’m sorry, laddie, I didn’t realise! The investigation must wait. We need to get you to the doctor! Come on!”

He helped me up to my feet. I threw an arm over his shoulder and we hobbled out the door together.

Missus Butterfield met us on the way out, eyes wide, taking in as much of the scene as those orbs would allow.

“Ooh, sirs! Oh my! What’s gotten to be the matter? Is everything alright? I heard a frightful din...”

“Everything is fine, thank you, Missus Butterfield,” the Professor said quickly, “Nothing more than a spot of clumsiness on my associate’s part.”

I knew he was only saying so to avoid further questions, but the barb

still stung.

“It doesn't look fine, and it certainly did not sound fine, for there was this mighty crash – I was washing the dishes, you see – and that's when I heard yelling...”

“Missus Butterfield, if you will excuse us?”

She stood in our way.

“Hear me out, it's for your own good.”

“What in heaven?”

“This is why you need a woman in your life, you know!”

“A woman? What the blazes are you on about?”

“A good woman would stop you from getting into strife. If you ask me, it's not healthy to be spending your nights alone in a dark house...”

“My companion is wounded!”

“I see, oh, I see! My, look at your leg! You're bleeding, you are! There's blood all over your kerchief. You'll need to get that attended to.”

“Yes, Missus Butterfield, we established that back inside the house. Now, if you could please excuse us, I need to get this sorry chap to Doctor Halfpenny without delay.”

“Of course you do. How did it happen, then? He's leaving blood behind, oh my! That's serious, that is.”

The Professor snapped, “Of course it's serious. Now if you'll excuse us!”

“You'll be needing someone to mind the house while you're gone, then?”

“Thank you for the offer, but I must refuse. The cellar has broken glass in it...”

“Broken glass? See? A cellar is no place for a gentleman. I imagine you tripped and fell.”

“I did no such thing. Blow me, where is a hansom when you need one?”

“This sort of thing wouldn't happen if only you had a woman to look out for you, is all I'm saying. Now Miss Weiss, she's a friend of mine, she is on the lookout for a man like yourself –”

“*Miss Butterfield, please!* My love life is not your concern. My companion is injured. Where do you think my priorities lie right now?”

She was taken aback for only a second, before starting again with the same zeal, “How did it happen? You didn't say. Professor? Professor?”

The Professor waved down the first hansom that came along, ignoring or placating Missus Butterfield's continued meddlesome

questioning until I was loaded on.

I felt incredibly sore and ill, and it was with relief that the prattling of her voice was replaced with the rattling of the wheels on the cobbles as the driver skipped along at a solid clip. The jolting and jarring of the bumps aggravated my sores and the pain.

At least the bleeding had slowed.

Doctor Halfpenny

Within a quarter of an hour I was shivering on an examination bench, stripped to my underwear, feeling weak, sad and awfully sorry for myself.

I fought back tears as Doctor Halfpenny liberally applied a strong smelling concoction to the wound that aggravated all of the nerve endings in the raw flesh of the leg-wound.

“I'm sorry, but it has to be done. This will clean it out and speed up the healing. That's a nasty gash you've got there. Keep this dressed for the next few days, changing the bandages over each day until the scab fully forms,” he instructed, “Apply this unguent and cover it with fresh plaster each morning.”

“Yes, Doctor,” I said.

“And if you can safely track down the dog that did this to you, shave off some of its hair and add it to your brew. That will help.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Only this is the strangest dog bite I ever did see. Normally it's ragged, there is bruising about the bite, saliva, all of that. This is fresh and clean, almost surgical,” he said, looking closer, “What kind of dog did you say it was, again?”

The Professor, evidently waiting just outside the door, hurried in, “Hello, Doctor Halfpenny, good to see you, just, ah, how do you do? Just checking in on my assistant and how he might be doing, eh?”

“Hello, Professor. If you don't mind, I do like to keep my consultations *private*.”

“Of course, of course, but he doesn't mind, I'm sure, do you laddie?”

To be perfectly honest, the familiarity that came from our professional relationship had not quite extended to having him see me in my underwear. Even so, I did my best to appear nonchalant and gave a shrug and a nod.

Doctor Halfpenny looked between us, muttered something to himself, scribbled a note in his notepad and continued the examination.

“Well, if you will, Professor, please do not interrupt. I'm sure a man of your qualifications understands the necessity of uninterrupted concentration.”

“Of course, Doctor, I am an advocate and evangelist,” the Professor replied.

“Quite,” he turned back to me, “Now, have you been hurt anywhere else?”

“My back. I think it is bruised, it is so sore,” I said.

“Your back? Laddie, just how big was this dog?”

“I, um, I don't know. Does it matter?”

“Normally dog bites are accompanied with injuries to hands and arms, not one's back.”

Suddenly aware of the Professor's glare, I said, “Er, maybe it wasn't a dog.”

“Not a dog?”

“It was dark, I couldn't see very well.”

“It's the middle of the day.”

“Yes, but, um, I was in a cellar.”

“A cellar?”

The Professor interrupted, “Oh, you know these young, adventurous chaps, poking around in places they don't belong, getting into mischief in all sorts of ways. Who knows what he got up to?”

“I need to know the nature of the injury, the provenance and context, otherwise I may make a misdiagnosis.”

“I'm sure that won't be the case.”

“Professor, please,” Doctor Halfpenny chided, “If I am to properly examine the patient, I need him to answer in his own words. Now, young man, can you please describe how you obtained this injury?”

“Well, er, yes. I was in the cellar and, um, I was attacked by a dog,” I said, “At least, it must have been a dog, but it was dark.”

He took off his glasses and looked me in the eye.

“Is that the truth? Is that what happened?”

“Yes,” I said, holding my gaze as steady as I could manage, “That's what happened.”

Doctor Halfpenny turned to the Professor, “If I could please ask you wait outside. Miss Gallagher will help you to some tea.”

“Oh, no thank you, I've only -” he began, but a daggered stare from the Doctor changed his tone, “You know, maybe I will have a cup of tea. I could do with a rest.”

Forced to honour the perfectly reasonable request of the highly esteemed doctor, the Professor nodded politely, took up his bag and went back outside. Doctor Halfpenny waited until he heard the chirruping of Miss Gallagher before he turned back to me.

“Now, son, I know a dog bite when I see one, and this is not from a

dog. And this contusion on your back looks more like you've been hit with a club.”

He checked it over again, “That or someone who has a fist the size of a melon.”

I looked away. He turned my head back and looked me in the eye.

“Just what exactly happened?”

“Like I said –” I began.

“Tut tut! Look, the Professor isn't in the room. In fact, anything you say in this room I am honour bound to keep as a secret until I die. That is part of my profession, and it isn't something I treat lightly. Do you understand?”

I nodded, unsure of where he was going with it.

“I am a practitioner of medicine, a doctor, and I am under oath to serve those who need me. This includes immediate injuries, like you have sustained, and, to an extent, *future injuries*.”

“Future injuries?”

“Those you may continue to sustain, should intervention not be forthcoming.”

I shook my head, “I am afraid –”

“Of telling the truth?”

“No, that I don't understand.”

He strummed his chin, then said, “Very well, let me be blunt. Did the Professor do this to you?”

“What? No!”

“You do not need to lie for him. If he did this to you, you can tell me. In confidence.”

“No!” I assured him, “No, certainly not! The Professor is good to me. He employed me when no one else would.”

“That doesn't mean that he has the right to mistreat you.”

I held up my hands, “Oh. It's not like that, Doctor, not at all!”

“Then what *is* it like, hmm? I'm a smart man, and I know when I'm being lied to.”

“I'm not lying,” I said, conscious that my face was turning a shade of scarlet, “Well, I guess I am, perhaps, in a way, but, you see, it's complicated.”

“I can assure you that the truth is less complicated than any lie you can spin. It's also a lot safer. Without knowing what I'm dealing with, I might miss something crucial, and you'll end up being even sicker. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Now, let's start from the top, shall we? The truth, if you will.”

“Yes, Doctor,” I sighed.

I explained the Professor's line of investigation, my role as his assistant, and the story of Jolimont house up to the point where I was attacked.

Surprisingly, he did not blow through his moustache or interject with sarcastic remarks. Rather, he sat very still and listened carefully to everything I had to say, jotting down notes and prompting me for clarification every so often. When I had finished, he put his glasses away and nodded to himself.

“Doctor? It's the truth, Doctor.”

“Truth? Truth is merely fact observed from a perspective.”

“You don't believe me, do you?”

“Hmm. I believe that *you* believe what you're saying. Considering that your story I so amazing, I doubt that you could think up such a tale...”

Suddenly, there was a shout from without. Doctor Halfpenny, surprisingly nimble for his age, was out the door in a trice. Bewildered and panicked, I scrounged for my clothes, listening to the elevated voices as I wrestled with my shirt.

I am sure that it will be demonstrated one day that the difficulty of dressing oneself is proportional to the haste with which one is being attired. My sleeve garter slipped and flew across the room, letting the cuff drop down over my hand, making it impossible to fix the buttons.

I could hear the voices getting louder. I left off fiddling with the buttons on my shirt and grabbed for my pants. It was at that precise moment, when I was bent over, attempting to insert my leg into the pant, that the door burst open and two leering men tumbled in.

“He's in here! He's in here! Quick, take a shot!”

A searing, blinding flash completely disorienting me. The next thing I knew, I was toppling sideways into the Doctor's cabinet. With a thud and a crash I crowned myself as another flash preserved my blindness.

There was I, pants still not on, shirt not fully buttoned, debating whether to rub my sore eyes, rub my pounding head or put my clothes on.

I heard Doctor Halfpenny yelling, “You shall respect the sanctity of a doctor's office! Out with you! All of you!”

“The public's got a right to know,” came a nasal reply, and another blinding flash, “Specially if there's funny business going on!”

“Out, I say! The constabulary will hear of this! The examination

room is off limits. *Now get out!*”

A voice said, “No worries, guv, we're leavin'. Got what we came for, eh, Sam?”

“I'll say,” came a sneer in reply, “Front page stuff, this. Thanks, champ!”

I flopped about on the floor, forcing my bandaged leg through the pants, before stumbling up to my feet.

“My dear boy, are you alright?” asked Doctor Halfpenny.

I held my head and groaned, “I've got a whopper of a headache. What was that?”

The Professor, coming in and looking over his shoulder, answered for the Doctor, “Not what, *who*.”

Doctor Halfpenny stamped his foot, “*Do you mind?* This is my surgery, I am with a patient and you are to wait *outside!*”

“Never mind that. He's all bandaged up, aren't you Laddie? Time to go, time to go. Thank you, Doctor, for all your services, I apologise for the inconvenience – gracious, Laddie, do your buttons up, you're a mess – please forward your bill to my address,” the Professor said, bustling me out the door, “The best to you and your wife, might I add, thank you and good bye!”

The next little while was a blur. When I next came to my senses, I was slumped in a seat in the laboratory. It was dark. I was alone. My head thumped with the rhythm of my heart.

In front of me was a cup of tea, cold but stiff. I successively sipped and groaned, trying to piece together just what had happened.

With an effort I brought my empty cup to the sink and washed it out, wondering just what to do next. I was in the process of packing up my satchel when I heard the key in the door.

The Professor came in, his eyes darting about, “Ah, you're up. Good. Good. Um. How are you?”

“Huh?”

“It's a straightforward question. How are you feeling?”

“Sorry, Professor. If anything, I'm sore and disoriented,” I confessed, “I cannot remember much between seeing Doctor Halfpenny and, well, now.”

I felt awfully dizzy, and sick, so I sat back down. The Professor was looking at me strangely.

“You don't look very well.”

Oddly, a sense of intense melancholy swept over me. My mind grew

dark. Tears welled in my eyes.

"I'm not! My leg is so sore. I cannot sit properly because of my back. My head is pounding and I – I feel worthless, Professor!"

I have no doubt that whatever foul beast had caused me my injuries was responsible for the sadness that came upon me that night. The emotion was unnatural, not coming from within me, but from somewhere without.

I burst into tears, "I am so sorry, Professor."

"Don't be, Laddie, don't be," he said, "Calm down now, that's better. You are not responsible for what happened. There are forces at play here."

"Forces? What do you mean?"

"Insidious, evil forces."

"Insidious? Evil?" I asked, a chill running down my spine.

"A stain on the fabric of humanity! A malignant, maleficent curse!"

"A *curse*?"

"They are corrupt –"

I was startled, "*They*? Professor, how many are there?"

The Professor shrugged, "Oh, I don't know. At least twenty in the local area. Only, like the rats that they are, they never hold still long enough to count them."

"So you've dealt with these things before? Are they that entrenched? What – what can we do about them?" I gasped.

"Nothing, I suppose. Their corruption is a result of the desires of the populace. And, in a way, they are a necessary evil..."

"A necessary evil? Professor, how could you possibly say that something so sinister could be, in any way, *necessary*?"

He twirled his finger in the air, "Their purpose, their *original* purpose that is, is noble indeed."

I blinked. I had that sudden and, unfortunately, common feeling that the Professor and I were on two different subjects.

"Um, Professor?"

"Don't say *um*."

"To what are you referring?"

"The journalists, of course! Keep up, Laddie! They were to weed out the sinners, exalt the benevolent, bring news of progress and keep the world informed," he said, "Now they let their greed for publicity drive them toward stories of shock and scandal. Ha! It's only money-lust, now. Between a story on a new kind of piston design and the naughty antics the local elites get up to, guess which one will hit the front page?"

He plopped into a chair.

“It seems that, after our theatrics, Missus Butterfield lent her tongue to Chester Perry, one of those gossip-mongers.”

“Oh.”

“Oh, indeed. You can be sure that your picture will be in the paper first thing tomorrow morning. While I don't count us as social elites, nor our business anything but professional, they seemed quite enthused with their scoop,” he said, checking his watch, “It is probably going to print right now.”

If I felt sick before, I felt positively nauseous now.

He continued, “I don't need to say it, but I shall: we do not need this kind of publicity. Paranormology will gain approval in scientific circles first, through scientific means, with its merits weighed and tested by our peers. Unfortunately, this will be harder with Chester tailing us.”

I sat up with an effort, “Tailing us? He's not here, is he?”

“He followed me back. I know he did. Like you, I've got keen ears. He can smell a story, and, like a hound on the scent, he'll chase it up until the next one comes along. I've locked downstairs, so he can't get in, but that's not to say he isn't opposed to scaling the walls to listen in at the windows.”

I hobbled to the glass and looked out into the darkened street below. The laboratory was a decent height off the ground, at least twelve feet to the lowest window.

I opened up the window and leaned out, scanning the shadows. Rattles and hums of the evening flow of traffic echoed about. I imagined I saw movement here and there, but, in the state I was in, I could not say for sure.

“You'd best head home, Laddie. Rest up. Heal.”

I closed the window, securing the latch tightly, “Yes, Professor. Oh! What if he is out there and chases me?”

“He already has what he wants from you. However, if you are accosted on the way home, say nothing, tell them nothing, give them nothing. Better yet, let me pay for a cab. Better safe than sorry with these agents of Hades.”

“What about you, Professor?”

“Don't worry about me, thank you, I'll be fine. I've dealt with their type before. You just rest. Take tomorrow off. And the next day.”

“Yes, Professor.”

My Dark Dream

That night I literally fell into bed. I was changing the dressing and applying the ointment that Doctor Halfpenny had given me, when I slipped on one of the used bandages, toppled sideways and crashed onto the bed. Feverish, perspiring heavily and weak, I made no attempt get up.

In truth, I was so exhausted that I just lay there and let sleep have its way with me, although my night was anything but restful.

My dreams were strangely lucid, vivid to the point where I could feel everything about me, smell it, taste it even. I was sitting still and motionless on the drum in the cellar back in the Jolimont Street house, observing bottles dropping off the shelves and smashing upon the floor.

A grinding sounded, as of stones moving over each other, and the floor opened up to reveal a pit into which I fell, tumbling, rolling. I tasted the dirt from the floor as it got stuck in my mouth, felt it rubbing against my teeth. The wind whistled past me as I dropped further and further down, plunging through the blackness marked only by clumps of jagged rock reflecting a gruesome, unholy light coming up from below.

Did I not say my dream was lucid?

The sound of the wind changed to a howling, a screaming chorus of inarticulate words, jeering at me as I plunged into an enormous cavern. I thudded to the floor, uninjured yet dazed, and I took stock of my surrounds.

I tried to stand, only I found that my feet slipped upon a thin film of clear slime. Carefully I tried once more, stooping with my arms out to keep balance as I looked about.

All about was barren, dirty rock, covered alternately in dust and the same curious slime. At first it appeared that there was no order to the place, but then I saw that the uneven surface upon which I was standing was actually paved with gigantic slabs, cut sharply, with an alternating number of sides per slab.

The tessellation may have been perfectly set at one stage but now, in such a state of disrepair, the odd angles and moved earth cracked and thrust the jagged edges upward at cruel angles.

A gangrenous glow issued from lanterns carved into the rock walls, ornate with glaring, ghoulish faces that seemed to follow me as I stumbled about, slipping and rolling on the uneven surface.

Not a soul was about, yet I had the distinct notion that *something* had

brought me here, for what purpose I cannot say, and that same something was watching me, a curiosity to the realm, fumbling about in the gloom.

Unseen eyes peered at me from a ruinous structure that dominated the cavern.

I made my way toward this edifice, climbing up huge, smooth stone steps that came up to my waist, each one, and I stood at the top, covered in slime, panting to regain my wind.

Made out of gigantic slabs of rock, it was clearly made for giants. Archways rose so high that the tops were lost in the gloom toward the top of the cavern. Corridors ran so wide that ten men could march at arm's length from each other.

There were no doors, nor windows, only those enormous arches separating one chamber from another. Not a breath of air moved about the place, despite the continued howling and sighing that permeated the cavern.

I came to an atrium, the centrepiece of the monument, and passed by two pillars of black stone inscribed with heavy lines depicting strange symbols in an iconography that I have never seen. The closest I might come to is that of Egyptian hieroglyphs, only these were more convoluted, twisted and savage in nature.

I traced one with my hand, feeling the grooves, the smooth, polished stone, the embossing. With a shock I drew my hand away as I realised that what my fingers had caressed was a stylised scene of torture – a poor soul, bound hand and foot to a large slab, being speared by some monstrous curved blade.

The evil! The unspeakable horror! I screamed, yet my voice was not in my throat. It sounded from afar, joined with the mournful chorus that came from the obsidian rock.

I turned to run, to get away from that place, to leave those accursed walls with their immoral engravings, to put as much distance as I could between myself and the howling voices, only my path was arrested by a form. For a fleeting second my mind saw the beast that was stalking me through that ancient construction.

Its gruesome, unholy features have been etched into my mind so that, while I am writing this, my hands tremble and I fear I must reassure myself that it truly was just a dream. It filled the space between the pillars, holding its arms out wide, its cruel, clawed hands ready to catch me should I try to skip past it.

That gut turning stench filled my nostrils, burnt my lungs, brought

tears to my eyes. I made to run around the beast, use the wide doorway to my advantage, but it moved just as fast, its claws mere inches from me.

Giving up on that route, I wheeled and ran pell-mell across the atrium, blindly falling over skulls protruding from the masonry, heading toward the centre of the atrium in which stood, like a leering, black monolith, a stone slab, reminiscent of the sacrificial scene depicted on the wall.

With a jolt I came to my senses, sweat-soaked through my nightclothes. Even with my leg baying for my attention, it took a cold bath and a solid cup of coffee to assure me that the realm of my dreams was only a figment of my over-active imagination, inspired by my fever.

For the rest of the night I huddled at the kitchen table, shunning sleep and doing my best not to think of the nightmare I had endured.

I knew I should have been resting, the good Lord knows I was exhausted, but the coffee, the pain in my foot and my aching back prevented any further sleep, and my desire to have no more of such horrific dreams drove me from the house as soon as the sun crept over the horizon.

Walking the streets that morning was an odd experience. They were the same lanes and roads that I had taken every day, yet, perhaps it was the morning air, or my injured state, there was an unsteady vibration rocking my nerves.

Though the morning air was very cool, I was in a sweat. In spite of my injuries, I was walking as briskly as I could, avoiding the piercing glances of the pedestrians. Could it be that their eyes, like those of the offensive gargoyles from my nightmare, were following me?

The shadows were still long when I reached the library. I entered quietly, quickly, finding a desk toward the back where I would not be disturbed by the daily traffic.

Driven by a desire to understand what was going on, the bookshelves became my hunting grounds for the day.

For the morning and past lunch time, I examined documented cases, stories and even mythology, surrounding aggressive, violent spirits. I discovered a trove of legends, ancient tales passed down through cultures, one generation to the next, to finally be collected and documented in the pages I now thumbed.

My first foray led me to what is called a *Domovoi*, a benevolent house spirit that hides in the recesses and corners of a building protecting it and its inhabitants from harm. The owners of the house would welcome such a creature, not in fear, but in gratitude for its services. Considering the cuts and bruises I suffered, not to mention the mess in the cellar, such a

good-willed creature would surely not be my aggressor.

Then I came upon *fair-folk, hobs and goblins*, creatures of the Earth that make themselves known to through their actions. The stories certainly showed a more sinister side to them, yet their intentions were more mischievous than violent. Being corporeal rather than ethereal, it put them to the bottom of my list since neither the professor nor I saw any trace of a body except the enormous footprints left in the dirt.

Poltergeists, noisy ghosts that create a clamour and throw things about, was my next stop. In my time with the Professor, I have not dealt with such cases. Certainly they are rarer than the typical hauntings we are used to. Documented cases and stories show that much of their activity is localised and destructive, somewhat like an insolent child seeking attention.

The bruise on my back told me otherwise: whatever hit me wanted to hurt me, not have a chat. The being that brought me to that strange, demented realm in my dream had no benevolence to it.

I searched on. Trolls. Imps. Elementals. Familiars. Demons. The further I looked, the darker my studies became. The books I took off the shelves were older and more fragile, their yellow pages had not felt breath upon them for decades.

Late in the afternoon, after a quick bite to eat, I sat down and plopped open a large, stiff book on Kabbalah or, more precisely, a *Study in Unorthodox Esoteric Kabbalah and Its Rituals*, having found it as a bibliographical reference in a book on paganism.

The pages were torn and worm eaten, yellow like mustard. The text within was written by a rheumatic hand in faded brown-red ink. At first I thought that it was written in another language entirely, so faint was the shaky cursive.

“Lilith attempts to bring her Offspring, maleficent and foul as they be to all righteous folk, into Civilisation to respire and grow and be among us. Vigilance and Purity are our tools against her vile Descendants and their wicked Ways. Be vigilant, you, of the Signs.

Of this Evil Lilith may be guilty withal more Evils lie on the other side, in Sitra Akhra, for which she cannot be condemned, for they are themselves condemned for their crimes.

In Sitra Akhra hides Samael, wrapped in a cloak of Darkness, and from Sitra Akhra his Minions fly forth to our World, through Conjurers, Sorcerers and Necromancers, and to Sitra Akhra will they deign with the

Souls they shall devour. Be not among them, you."

I turned the page carefully, noting down my findings. When I looked down the page I gasped for at the bottom was a diagram, some kind of geometric star, with a particular rune placed at each point. The runes matched those that had been embroidered into that cloth in the cellar!

"The symbols serve as Protection against the Horde when arranged as such or when arranged so, as a Yoke to bridle the dark one's Ambition so as to serve the Conjuror. This Binding can be entwined in a Shroud, engraved permanently upon a Board or cast into a Plaque, depending upon the ritual, depending upon the Conjuror, depending upon the Entity."

"Be vigilant, you, of the Responsibilities that come with the Binding, for such an undertaking is not without Peril to your Soul."

The cloth! The cloth was the binding!

I had to get the book to the Professor and show him what I had discovered before all else! Being so old and fragile, I was concerned that it may not be allowed to leave the confines of the library.

Nevertheless, I was determined to at least ask.

Mister Blake, the head librarian, was surprised to see me. Slow and precise, he looked up from his tea, down at the book in my arms, took out his watch, flipped open the cover, closed it once more and straightened his back.

"Good afternoon, Mister Blake."

"You're about four hours too early, by my watch. And I keep it in step with the clock in the town square," he said, drooping his luscious eyebrows over his eyes, "I certainly hope you aren't playing truant from your Professor?"

I shook my head, "No, Mister Blake. I am supposed to be resting. I had, er, an accident yesterday."

"Some accident," he replied, fishing out a newspaper from underneath his tea cup, "Although I can understand if you are trying to make yourself scarce by hiding in a library."

"Hiding?"

He tapped the paper.

I picked it up and stared at a grainy image of, I am ashamed to say, me, with my pants around my ankles, shirt undone, lying on the floor of Doctor Halfpenny's surgery with a startled look in my eyes.

I read the headline:

Assistant Injured in Clandestine Opium Den!

“I – I was at the doctor's,” I stammered, “They barged straight in. How can they say this? It's a lie! Mister Blake, I have never used opium. I – I...”

For a few seconds I forgot how to breathe.

“I have never asked you what you get up to with that Professor. It's none of my business, for starters, and I'm sure I wouldn't understand a word of it if you told me,” he said as I finally exhaled, “And, luckily for you, I'm not one to put any credence in what gets printed on this mush. You may be clumsy – Lord knows how many books you've dropped – but I know you're not a patron of Chi-Su.”

“Th-thank you, Mister Blake.”

“Unluckily for you, most of the townsfolk don't share my enlightened opinion. I was late arriving today, for I was detained at every corner on the way here to engage in conversations.”

“Oh.”

“I'm a practical man, you know, and I have a reputation for being an upstanding citizen.”

“Oh.”

“Whether *this*,” he said, patting the paper, “Is the truth or not, you will need to find a way to salvage your reputation, or find yourself a new occupation. This library cannot be seen to be harbouring riff-raff.”

His words rattled around in my ears as my eyes focused on the page:

Yesterday, at a quarter past one in the afternoon, a certain 'scientist' and his assistant were seen exiting hurriedly from a house in Jolimont Street. Several witnesses claim that they were acting in a strange manner, with one limping, having sustained an obvious injury to his leg.

It has been speculated that the pair were using the house in Jolimont, owned by one Mister Gordon French, as a clandestine opium den.

“Opium den? It's nothing of the sort!” I cried.

“Hush! This is a library!”

“I'm sorry, Mister Blake, I am! How? How can they write this?”

In a fit of opium induced stupor and hallucination, a common

ailment among consumers of laudanum, it is alleged that the assistant wrecked the room in which they were partaking, injuring himself in the process.

Neighbours say the pair came often to 'chase spirits', quite possibly a euphemism for smoking or drinking narcotics.

“They can write it because they protect themselves with words like 'alleged' and 'opinion',” he replied, “Rumour can be disguised as fact with the insertion of quotes or a nameless witness. Hence my distrust of anything written on this rag.”

To test this assumption, this journalist has gained legal access to the cellar and has found, among the mess, items indicating to the positive, including powders, spilt liquids and broken bottles. All evidences will be handed to the constabulary when the matter is forwarded to their capable hands.

“The constabulary? Mister Blake, I have done nothing wrong! We have permission from Mister French to be in there.”

“And just what were you doing in there, hmm?”

“Observing. Recording. Measuring. What we *always* do!”

Mister Blake creaked forward in his chair, “Let an old man give you a word of advice: your story had better be watertight if the constabulary are indeed involved.”

“I will tell the truth. I have nothing to hide!”

He pointed to the paper, “The truth? *This* is the truth! This is what people will believe. Truth is as malleable as gold and shines just as brightly when rubbed the right way.”

I shook my head, unsure of what to say.

“Go. Go back to your Professor. Straight away. Talk to no one. If he has any sense, he will construct a story to save your reputations.”

“Yes, Mister Blake.”

“Until then,” he sighed, “I must ask that you stay away from the library. Guilty by association and all of that. I'm sorry. That is how it has to be.”

My world slipped away as my head nodded, my arms picked up the book and my lips moved on their own, “Yes, Mister Blake. Sorry, Mister Blake.”

Persona Non Grata

I was under no illusions. Heads did indeed turn and mouths whispered as I hustled back to the laboratory. Of this I am certain. My presence made the townsfolk uneasy. They would stop mid conversation as I passed, only to avert their eyes, lower their voices and continue in whispers when I was still within earshot.

Nevertheless, the urgency born from my discovery and my desire to be off the street and away from the eyes that burned through me drove me on, and I did not slow down until I reached the safety of the laboratory doors.

The sky was growing dark over the city, and there was that palpable, threatening heaviness in the air that comes before a big storm that only added to my trepidation. I opened the doors and scuttled up the stairs to the bosom of the laboratory.

Miss Fitzgerald was brewing tea in the kitchenette.

“Good afternoon, young master,” she snapped, “You appear quite flushed.”

“I was walking quickly...”

“Yes, I'll bet you were!”

“Ma'am?”

“I'm not one to mince words. What is this nonsense that you and the Professor have gotten yourselves caught up in, hmm?” she said, arms akimbo, “He won't say boo to me, only sits there cursing 'the state of affairs' and some cretin named Chester. I can't make heads nor tails of it. Tell me what is going on.”

I wiped the perspiration off my brow, “I would tell you, Ma'am, I would, but I was instructed not to say anything to anyone before I spoke to the Professor.”

“Oh, you too? I thought more highly of you! Well, go on! Go have your little secrets! Go waste money on whores and opium! Don't worry whose employment is threatened by your actions!”

“I'm sure it won't come to that, Miss Fitzgerald. We have, neither of us, committed any wrongdoing. You see, the whole situation is a lot more complicated than it seems —” I began, but a bark from behind prevented me from telling her any more.

“Not another word, lad! Didn't I tell you that Chester or his cronies

could be lurking about, listening in to your words?” the Professor said, coming in from the anteroom, “Why, Miss Fitzgerald could be in the employ of those monsters!”

“I most certainly am not!”

“And I most certainly cannot afford to take you, or anyone, at their word!”

“The very insinuation!”

He was flushed. His beard was uncombed, as was his hair.

I said, “If we just tell the truth...”

“No! They have a way of twisting the truth. Anything said is moulded to best sell more papers, not repair our reputation, and that means we sink deeper. And I'll thank you, Miss Fitzgerald, to not probe any further,” he said, “If you have no dealings with them, then that is well, but still I must be cautious. The less you know, the less they can weasel out of you.”

She brought herself up to an impressive height and thrust out her equally impressive bosom, “I am a lady of honour, *sir*, not some gossiping, dull-eyed flibbertigibbet!”

The Professor nodded, “I apologise, Miss. That wasn't what I meant. It's just that I know those snakes better than anyone in this laboratory and, believe you me, as a farmer can use water and manure to grow a crop, journalists can use facts and rumour to grow a scandal.”

“I only wish to know if I need to be looking for new work next week...”

The Professor blew through his beard, “Don't – don't be daft.”

“I resent the insult. And you haven't answered my question.”

Miss Fitzgerald and I both looked at the Professor. His mouth flapped. His arms flopped. His eyebrows jiggled.

“Professor?” I prompted, “Everything will be alright, won't it? Professor?”

“I – I don't know!” he gasped, “How could everything turn so sour?”

Miss Fitzgerald took the tea off the boil, poured some cups and shoved one under his nose.

“Well when you find out, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know, *sir*,” she said, packing up her things, “Now if you'll excuse me, I've got to head to the square to see if there's anything going for a simple, unemployed charwoman.”

The Professor let her go. I sat down next to him.

“Drink up, Professor,” I said, “Tea is good for the nerves.”

“Have you even *seen* the papers, boy?”

“Unfortunately I have, Professor, yes. I did not think they could say such stuff.”

“Stuff! That's putting it politely. I can think of more appropriate words – say? What are you doing here?”

“I went to the library.”

“You are supposed to be resting. If I were you I'd be hiding at home. Your name is mud, I tell you, as is mine.”

“Can't we plead our case? Surely the public would rather hear our side of the story,” I said.

“The public would rather not. The public loves a scandal. Offer a dog a juicy sausage or a dry bone, and guess which one he'll devour?”

“But when the truth comes out –”

He looked up at me with red, swollen eyes, “One cannot un-eat a sausage, lad. No amount of facts can dispel the suspicion of the public. It's only a matter of time until news reaches the University. And that would be grounds enough to...”

“Professor! Don't say it! Look, we have an opportunity here!”

“An opportunity? Now you're delusional.”

“We can turn this around.”

“Have some tea. Tea is good for delusions.”

I thumped the desk, spilling the cups. I only wished to snap him out of his gloom. Instead, the searing hot water on his lap brought the fire back into his throat.

“*The devil!*”

“Oops! I'm sorry, Professor, I shall get a cloth,” I said, hurrying to the kitchenette.

“You clumsy oaf! Why would you do such a thing?”

“To get your attention!” I called, rinsing out a rag, “Listen, Professor, I am, like yourself, up to my neck in it and, no, please, let me explain. You can fire me in a few minutes if you like but please let me tell you what I have found.”

I gave him the rag and let him daub at his shirt and pants while I explained.

“The press wants a story,” I said, “So, let us give them one! Let us give them the most amazing story. One that will sell papers. One that will appease their money-lust and, at the same time, clear our names. We have an active entity, very active, and aggressive. We might even get Chester to come and have him recount his words. If we can show the people what we

are really dealing with, then they will forget all about the speculation –”

The Professor stopped dabbling, held out his hand for me to stop and sat back down in thought. He sipped some of the tea remaining in his cup and thought some more.

“It won't do. Ghosts have a notorious habit of, well, playing dead,” he said, “More likely than not, we'll show him the cellar, nothing will happen and he'll report that we concocted the whole story”

“Or we could, you know,” I coughed, wondering why the words sounded so terrible in my throat, “*Summon* what is in there.”

“Summon?” his eyebrows collapsed, “Summon? That's a very dangerous word. Laddie, what do you mean, exactly?”

“I mean that I think that what inhabits the basement of Jolimont is not our every-day ghost. Perhaps we could, you know, bring it forth and put on a show.”

He blinked, “What makes you think that? You haven't been dabbling in dark arts, have you?”

“No. Not I!”

“You – you didn't summon that thing, did you?”

“Professor, no! You see, I have been reading books.”

“Books? What kind of books?” he probed.

“Well, I had this dream, only I don't think it was really a dream, not like my normal ones. I mean, I could feel and smell and taste everything, only it wasn't real,” I tried to explain, “And there was this enormous palace, only it wasn't a palace, not like something you might expect to see, and there were these voices, and an etching of an altar in stone...”

I looked over at the Professor, who was looking back with knitted eyebrows.

“You don't believe me.”

“I believe you. That's why I am concerned. For Jolimont was stagnant, and now, all of a sudden an angry entity lurks within the cellar. Just how many of these books have you read?”

“Quite a few, not all on the same topic. I had to work my way through until I found what I think might help.”

“These books are causing you these nightmares.”

“I read them *after* I had my dream.”

“And how often have you had these dreams?”

“Just once. Last night.”

The Professor did not look convinced, “Answer me truthfully. Have you read aloud any of the words in these books? Performed any

incantations? Intentionally or otherwise?”

“No, Professor.”

“You cannot fool around with these things!”

“No, Professor, believe me! Listen, please. I spent today at the library. I was supposed to be resting, yes, but please, listen. I approached this as scientifically as I could, and based upon what I have experienced, I think I found what it is that we are up against. Look.”

I took the book from my satchel and carefully placed the heavy book on the desk.

“This is dangerous reading,” he mumbled as he skimmed through, “You can forget about using this to any advantage.”

“No, don't close it just yet. Look, I have marked this page. See?”

He pushed the book back at me, “No. We are scientists, not magicians. I'll not enter into this folly.”

We sat down, the book sitting between us, unsure of what to do. He looked at me from under his cantilever brows. I avoided his gaze. I felt strange. I could not sit still. My hands fidgeted constantly. Tenebrous thoughts crept into my mind.

I broke the silence, more as a way to stop those thoughts, “I am sorry that I mentioned summoning the entity before. That was a selfish thought that, really, I would not normally entertain. Honestly, my mind has been entertaining odd ideas, and I don't like it.”

“I see.”

“I think something is wrong with me. And it has something to do with Jolimont.”

“That seems to be true.”

I pointed to the book, “I think that the author of this book knows about it, too.”

He slowly leant forward, creaking in his chair, then opened the book to my mark. He placed his spectacles carefully on his nose.

His eyebrows rose and fell like they were riding the waves of an ocean, at some points so high I could see the vessels in the whites of his eyes, other times so low I lost sight of his orbs altogether.

Suddenly, he jumped out of his chair. He had forgotten to put his cup down. Tea spilled about, which I hastily cleaned, while he swore, muttered and rummaged about through his notes. Eventually he came back with a stack of paper.

“Let me see... Let me see,” he mumbled, rifling through the leaves, “I have seen these before, yes, only it was for a sacrificial offering. Or was

the sacrifice actually a binding? Pah! No matter, no matter. The context is the same. And this isn't orthodox, no, it's an offshoot, more akin to wizardry, or even Druidism or sorcery! Sorcery!"

His eyebrows popped. His mouth hung loose.

He put his notes down, "Oh, dear."

He rummaged through his drawers, muttering and cursing in a frenzied manner.

"Darn it!" he cried, throwing his finger in the air.

"Professor? Are you feeling well?"

"Oh, dear! Where could it be?"

"Where could what be, Professor?"

He waved his arms about, "My darning kit! I always keep it handy for my socks."

It was at this point that I thought his mind had broken. Stress manifests in different ways and, looking at him empty the contents of the drawers on the floor, I supposed it was simply a matter of everything coming to a head.

"Um. You have holes in your socks?"

"*Had*. I *had* holes in my socks," he said, looking up with annoyance, "Past tense. That's why I keep a kit close by. Keep up, will you? Better yet, start looking!"

I half-heartedly searched the kitchenette while he scrounged through the cupboards. I heard a whoop as he found what he was looking for.

"Come on, laddie! Bring your gear!"

"What is it?" I asked, getting my satchel.

He glared at me incredulously, "A bloody needle and thread! What does it look like?"

"No, I meant, what..."

The bell rang downstairs.

"Oh, not now, Miss Fitzgerald!" the Professor huffed as we thumped down the stairs, "Too much is at stake! Did you forget – oh!"

Rather than finding Miss Fitzgerald standing at the door, Sergeant Hart and Constable Waverley were there with grave countenances.

"Hello, Sergeant," the Professor said as lightly as possible.

"Hello, Professor. May we have a word?"

"We're, ah, just popping out. Can it wait?"

"I am afraid not, Professor, no," he replied, "And I'm sure you know why. If you'd like to discuss this inside?"

"No. Not really."

“It wasn't really a question, if you catch my meaning.”

“I'm a bit busy.”

“Really?” the Sergeant said, “There have been some serious allegations brought against you. I would have thought a man of your position would prefer such matters to remain out of view of the public eye.”

“We're already well within the public eye!” the Professor snapped, “That's not the issue. The issue is that we could have a very serious problem on our hands if we don't act quickly.”

“I'd say you already have a serious problem...”

“Not like that. Look, Sergeant, you've known me quite a while and –

“I'm not about to perform any favours.”

“I'm not after a favour. I need you to accompany me back to Jolimont Street, if you will, after which I will be happy to follow you and answer any questions you might have,” the Professor said, “Willingly and openly.”

The Sergeant looked at his colleague who, in turn looked at the pair of us and shrugged, “Couldn't hurt, Guv. These two aren't the trouble makin' type.”

The Professor prompted, “Time is of the essence.”

“We were going to investigate the house after we locked you up. Guess we'll just do it in reverse. Alright, but no funny business. And you can explain on the way.”

The Professor did his best to explain the situation in terms that the police might understand. The Constable sat with a dumbfounded expression. Sergeant Hart only strummed his chin in, the only region of his jaw without hair, between scribbling notes onto his pad.

“Right, so let's say this phantom of yours did mess up the cellar, and there ain't nothin' fishy goin' on,” the Constable interjected at one point, “What's with the whole life-and-death thing.”

“Firstly, my young Constable, it is more likely a *demon* that we have come in contact with, an evil beast that has never roamed the Earth in human form. This, by itself, is cause for urgency,” the Professor said.

I noted the colour of the Constable's face drain.

“Secondly, the beast has most likely been summoned at some stage, through the use of an esoteric ritual, bound to this realm by sorcery.”

“Well, if 'e's bound, he can't do no 'arm.”

“Not any longer! If I am correct, and the good Lord knows I wish I wasn't, the cloth used within the ritual to bind and control the entity was

compromised by my assistant, rendering the beast free to roam in this world!”

The Sergeant and the Constable both looked at me. I held up my palms.

“It was an accident! I needed somewhere to sit!”

The Professor clicked his tongue, “You couldn't have known, laddie, and we must play the hand we're dealt. Sirs, the cloth is what binds the beast. If you will help me secure it...”

“No fear!” Constable Waverley said, “You can do your hocus-pocus by yourself!”

“Constable! The Professor may believe this tosh, but that doesn't mean that you must as well. Act like the man the city needs you to be,” the Sergeant reprimanded, “Hello? What's all this, then?”

As we pulled up at Jolimont, an ensemble was milling out the front.

The Beast

When we arrived at the house, Missus Butterfield was already out the front, excitedly exercising her God-given talent.

“... and then just like that the whole door burst out! Of course, I was out the back, minding my own business, but I heard it alright, for how loud it all was, and you can see for yourselves the damage. I had a look inside, just in case anyone was hurt, you know. Aye, and such a mess that you've never – Sergeant! Constable! You've arrived!”

The Sergeant cleared a path through the throng, nudging gently with his truncheon. While it took me a few seconds to surmise the situation, the Sergeant clued on in an instant.

“Great. You put it in the paper that an address is unoccupied and this is what you get,” he muttered, taking out his notebook, “May as well send out invitations to the local ferrets and pop the bloody key under the mat. Constable, take a statement from Missus Butterfield, and any other witnesses.”

“Aye, Guv. Right, you lot. Clear a space! Clear a space! Let's start with you, Ma'am.”

“Only those who *actually* heard or saw something, mind,” he called after, adding, “Otherwise we'll be here all day. Well, Professor, what have you got to say for yourself?”

The Professor had lost interest in the excitement out the front and was inspecting the door. It had been fairly torn off its hinges, hanging sadly on the porch.

“There was no break-in. Observe. This has been pushed from the inside, out,” the Professor said, “See? This was a *break-out*.”

“I'll be the policeman, if you don't mind, sir.”

The Professor ignored him, “See the hinges? Notice the jam? They would have to be pushed outward to be torn away so. Such enormous strength - and look! Look at these marks!”

There were distinct gouges scraped along the inside, similar to those I found on the cellar door only much deeper. Ribbons and splinters of wood were scattered upon the floor.

“Sergeant, this is the work of a very dark force, a force that, as you can see, has grown strong. Very strong indeed!”

The policeman whistled as he stared at the door, “What am I to tell

my Captain, eh? That some brutish imp summoned up from the depths of Hades is at large?"

"Precisely."

"Aw, come on, Professor. What are we really talking about here? Did a lion escape from the zoo? You don't expect me to believe all of this."

"I expect nothing. Instead I will let the evidence speak."

"And what's to say you didn't do this yourselves?"

"Not what," he said, gesturing at the loquacious onlookers, "*Who*. Interview your witnesses as thoroughly as you may. I was at my laboratory. Miss Fitzgerald, my maid, can attest. As can Mister Cumberland, and Madame Gosling."

"Alright, alright," the Sergeant said, wheeling on me, "And where were *you*?"

I was aghast, "You – you don't think I could possibly..."

"Just answer the question!"

"I was in the library, sir. Mister Blake will tell you."

He scribbled the name down, "Blake, eh? Well, we'll see."

The Professor, agitated, made to move inside. The Sergeant shook his truncheon at him and pushed past.

"Wait, let me," he said, "If there's a wild animal or burglar in there, I'll sort it."

An eager hush fell upon the crowd as the Sergeant bravely nudged the door pieces out of his way and stepped inside. Even Missus Butterfield slowed her yammering to watch his progress.

"See anything, Guv?" Constable Waverley called.

"No! Just a ruddy mess is all. Here! Mind no one follows in after me until I call it clear."

We could hear him rummaging about inside, stepping over the wreckage strewn about.

He said, coming out, "It's bedlam in there, alright. Things are smashed up. Strange, there are valuables left lying around, so it wasn't a burglar. Or if it was, it's a bloody stupid one."

The Professor poked his nose in from the door, "And see how the trail leads from the cellar to the door?"

"Yes, yes. I'll get one of the boys to look after this, now that it's a crime scene, and we'll need to get statements from you both. Now, you said there would be a cloth of some sort. You've got five minutes to find it, then we're going down to the station to sort this whole matter out. I'm going to get to the bottom of this, come Hell or high water!"

“I strongly recommend the latter over the former,” I heard the Professor mumble.

Following the Professor, my first thought when I entered the door was of how Mister French would react when he came back to find his house in such a state. Vases were smashed. Paintings were bent and torn. The carpet was ripped up and bunched to one side.

The cellar door was a pile of splinters.

We searched through the carnage, both within the cellar and without, even making a quick dash upstairs – which was pristine, mind – but we could not find that cloth anywhere!

Resigned, the Professor yielded to the Sergeant's call and we went with the police to the station, a long house with holding cells along the side, offices on the other and a smattering of desks, chairs and bookshelves. We were locked into one of the cells while the Sergeant went over the notes.

Aside from the ticking of a mantel clock, the only other sound was a drunkard snoring loudly from a cell further down and the rattling of the windows as rain and wind foretold the approaching storm.

The Sergeant sat at his desk, writing on his pad, checking statements. Constable Peters offered us some tea while we were waiting.

“Hmm. It's a lot like science, it would seem,” the Professor said.

“Sorry? What is, Professor?”

“Police work. It's a lot like science. See how they observed first, took notes without any assumptions. They asked questions and wrote down statements. Now, back at the station here, as we would in our laboratory, he has a chance to go over the observations and piece everything together,” he almost chuckled, “And here we are, exhibits for examination.”

The mind is a resilient wonderful thing. Even in such a gloomy state, he was still able to draw parallels.

“Professor, I am concerned. What happens if we cannot find the cloth?”

“I don't know, laddie.”

“And what happens if we do find the cloth?”

“I don't know! I'm a scientist, not a sorcerer. My suspicion is that the cloth is what binds the beast, and that if it is destroyed then the beast has been unbound,” he said, “Say, do you remember in the cellar, how the room was in chaos yet the cloth was untouched? Hmm. Can you hand me that book of yours?”

I produced it from my satchel and let him read. His eyebrows danced

again, wiggling excitedly as he found what he sought.

“The Binding is strong, and will continue to be so, if the Utility is maintained. The summoned Beast cannot directly break the Binding, nor the Utility. Be mindful, you, that the Being will seek other means to destroy his Yoke.”

“It cannot harm the cloth, so must do so through an agent.”

I started, “Like the lantern! It was pushed toward the cloth, to, what, set it on fire?”

“Yes. If we look at the pattern of behaviour, it appears to be growing in strength – first confined to the cellar, now breaking out of doors.”

“How strong can it get?”

“Hmm. I’m not an expert in ritualistic devices, since I mainly focus on the practical world over the esoteric, although I have a colleague,” he began, but was cut short by a thumping at the door.

“Peters! Peters!” the Sergeant yelled, his mutton-chops bristling, “Confound it! What is it now? *Peters!*”

“He certainly sounds like a scientist,” I said.

Constable Peters did not show. The thumping continued. He dropped his paper in a huff and marched over, throwing the door open.

“State your name and business!”

We peered through the bars to see an excited man, sweating heavily. He gibbered something unintelligible and sank to his knees.

“Another bloody drunkard. Must be a full Moon tonight. Constable! Put this one in with the other. Where in the blazes are you?”

“That’s not drink talking. That’s fear!” the Professor said, “Look, he’s as white as a sheet.”

The Sergeant took out his truncheon and held it underneath the man’s chin, “So you say. Well, if he’s not drunk then he can jolly well talk, or he’s going straight into the cell. Hear me? Calm yourself down and talk properly!”

The man stammered, “Th-th-there’s a g-ghost! I seen a ghost!”

“Professor, if this is one of your tricks...”

“He got hurt. Please, Guv!” he howled, clutching at the Policeman’s pants.

“Pull yourself together, man! Who hurt who?”

“The ghost!”

“Enough! If there’s a crime, then tell me what and where.”

The man calmed down enough to explain, "Chester. He's at the office. There was this ghost, big as a - a horse, only bigger! Black. It had red eyes and claws and teeth!"

"Did you say Chester?" the Professor asked, "From the paper?"

"Aye! He's bleedin'!"

"I think I know where the cloth went. Sergeant, we should go at once!"

Sergeant Hart growled, "We aren't going anywhere."

"A man's soul is in peril!"

"I'll go myself."

"We have cooperated in full, Sergeant."

"Good. Continue to do so until I get back!"

"You don't know what you're going up against!" the Professor tried one last time, "Your cudgel may work well against a thief's skull, but, I ask you, how will it work against a minion of Hell?"

The man squealed, "Hurry, Guv! He's getting bashed 'bout ev'rywhere."

The Sergeant swore, stomped on the floor, took his keys out and unlocked the cell door.

"Bah! Out with you! Come on. Any monkey business and I'll crown you myself! Constable! Oi, Waverley, where the devil is Peters?"

"Er, on the John, guv -"

"Bah! You'll do! You're coming too. Double time, all of you!"

The storm was rumbling along steadily now. The Sergeant and the Constable put on their heavy jackets, so they were alright, but the rest of us had to trail along, squinting against the heavy drops of rain that soaked through our clothes.

We followed after the whimpering fellow as he led us to the Herald Press, thankfully only a few blocks away, any more and we would have been waterlogged. Lightning flashed ominously, silhouetting the tall stacks of the printing press against the rolling black clouds as thunder clapped in time with our steps.

While Sergeant Hart marched forward, undeterred, Constable Waverley appeared hesitant, lagging behind the rest of us.

Our guide grew more and more agitated, urging us to hurry, bringing us through the wrought iron gates and around the side, past the outhouses and the furnace, over to where the offices were.

I pushed up against the cantilevered entrance, grateful to be out of the weather, which by now was roaring with wind and rain, yet with the

cessation of those pins hitting my face my mind turned to face our baleful purpose.

Inside the red-bricked building, adorned with portraits of editors past and present, we hustled up a corridor to the back offices.

Our guide hung back. Eventually he stopped altogether.

“He’s over there, Guv, you’ll find him right enough,” he said.

“Whereabouts, man?” the Sergeant cried.

“Over yon, you’ll see. I’m not taking another step.”

“Oh, for the love of Saint Peter! Constable, stay with this one and – and take a statement!”

“Right you are, Guv,” the Constable said, relieved.

Even as we approached, we could see a trail of scratches and broken fixings, getting progressively more violent as we reached a distressing scene. The office was in ruin, with every cabinet destroyed, a mighty oak desk split down the centre, and wooden splinters sprayed all about.

“Chester?” called the Sergeant.

The windows were smashed, letting the raging storm have its way with the room, blowing the blinds about and wetting everything inside.

“Help me!” croaked a feeble voice, barely audible above the din.

We poked about, listening to the cry.

“Sergeant, over here,” the Professor called, “Help me with this.”

The pair heaved an upturned chair to find Chester, beaten and bloody, cowering underneath. His eyes were wild. His hair was clumped. Bruises adorned his face. A streak of blood ran from three cuts made across his chest.

And in his white-knuckled fists was the cloth.

It had been fairly ripped to pieces, held together by the merest of threads.

“Quickly, give me the cloth,” the Professor commanded.

Chester shook his head, crying, “No! He can’t get at me while I’ve got it!”

We could not very well pull it from him or we would risk destroying it altogether. The Professor tried coaxing him, I cajoled, and the Sergeant threatened criminal charges pertaining to theft.

“It’s not your property. You know it. As an officer of the Law I insist that you hand it over immediately.”

Chester only cackled like a maniac and clutched it harder, twisting it in his misery and breaking a few more threads.

“This won’t do. Listen, man, if there’s any sense left in you. You need

to go to the doctor and get patched up. This room has been destroyed. That property needs to be returned. And I need you to make a statement!”

“No! No, I won't! It's the only thing that stops it.”

“It's not you it wants. It seeks to destroy the cloth!”

A low, thundering growl rippled from the corridor. Chester's face turned a whiter shade of pale.

“Shh! Do you hear that?” Chester said suddenly, wide eyed.

“That's just a thunderclap. Grow up,” the Sergeant said.

“No. You don't understand. Oh, no! He's coming back!”

The Sergeant took out his pencil and pad, “Now we're getting somewhere. Who is coming back?”

“The Devil!”

He wrung the cloth tighter, squeezing it until it was about to pop. The growling got louder, closer. It was not thunder, for the lightning that might have produced it was out of sequence and, besides, the thunder that was crashing about came from outside.

The roaring came from within the room, loud enough to drown out the thunder.

In a flash of comprehension, I took the Professor's needle and thread and crouched next to the prone figure.

“Excuse me. Chester, is it? If I may?”

“May what?” he said, looking at my needle and covered his chest, “You're not stitching me up!”

“Not you. This!”

“No, don't.”

“Trust me.”

My ordinarily clumsy fingers worked like magic as I threaded the needle and plunged it into a frayed edge. The growling changed to a howl, then began again in earnest.

“Stop it! You're making him angry!” Chester bawled, ripping the cloth away, “Don't make him angry!”

“You blithering idiot!” the Professor yelled, “Sergeant, restrain this buffoon before he does any more damage!”

“Don't think to tell me what to do!”

“If he destroys that cloth then everything is lost!”

“That does it! This lunacy has gone on far enough. You! Let go of that bloody cloth,” he roared, pointing with his truncheon, “You! Stitch it up! You! Stop telling me what to do! *And whoever is making that horrible din, you'd better stop it or I'll clock you royal!*”

There came a burbling grunt.

“Who's here, then? Enough of these games. Come out where I can see you! Show yourself!”

The grumble turned into a bellowing roar. Outside the lightning flashed, revealing a shadow on the opposing wall, reaching to the ceiling.

After the lightning went, it remained.

Chester cried, pointing at the shadow, “Here he is! Don't make him angry!”

All eyes turned to watch the shadow thicken, darken, until we could hardly see the wall at all.

The Professor nudged me, “Hurry, laddie!”

With Chester still gripping one end, I held on carefully to the other and pulled the needle through. The cloth was so old and thin, so soaked with rain and blood, that I might as well have been handling a wet tissue.

The beast howled with every plunge of the needle, yet, as I stole a peek over my shoulder, I could see that its presence was still forming.

The shadow was now opaque, growing into a distinct, dark form, reminiscent of the nightmarish fiend that pursued me in my dream: a torso broad across the top, supporting two long, muscular arms, each capped with terrible clawed hands.

Its head was indistinct, with any features obscured being black upon black.

Whether it had hair or horns, I cannot say, but the silhouette of its crown was as jagged as the rocks I had clambered over.

What was most fearsome were the two glowing red points where one might imagine eyes to be, and they searched about the room, looking at each of us in turn, until they settled on me.

Fear gripped me. I collapsed next to Chester, my legs refusing to support me. My fingers lost all sensation and my vision blurred.

I could hear the Sergeant blaspheme and cry all manner of curses.

“An illusion. A magician's trick! Why I'll soon put a stop to this!”

“Sergeant, no!” the Professor cried.

But it was too late. He strode forth, swinging his heavy stick high and fast.

“Cease and desist! Cease and desist! Cease –”

I did not see the blow, but I heard it right enough. There was a crunch, a scream and a monstrous utterance in a language I had never heard, and have never heard since.

Sensation came back to me. I shook my head to clear my vision and

saw that the Sergeant was slumped up against the opposite wall, head on his chest, out cold.

The beast was nowhere to be seen. Chester, seizing his chance, dropped the cloth, jumped over me and ran from the room.

“What just happened?” I asked, “Where did it go?”

“There's no telling,” the Professor replied, bending to the Sergeant's aid, “I think it has exhausted its strength. You've got the cloth, now get to work.”

With my needle poised once more, I pushed it through the linen. An unholy, sickening howl rippled through the room. My heart marched about my chest. My lungs forgot how to breathe.

I gasped, “It is still here, Professor!”

“It cannot yet manifest. It used its energy on Hart.”

“It's not gone! I can feel it, Professor!” I said, breathing quickly, “It's coming back!”

“Never mind, just sew! *Sew, laddie!*” the Professor shouted.

My fingers were trembling. More than once I stabbed myself with the tip and bled in dark dots onto the already saturated cloth. I pushed the point, I pulled, yet each thrust was more arduous until I was barely able to hold onto the needle, succeeding only in bunching the rag together into a messy ball.

“Sew!”

I was overwhelmed with a sensation of dark melancholy, a depression the likes of which I cannot describe with any accuracy. Strange thoughts, evil thoughts, rushed through my mind, distracting me further.

I resented the Professor's encouragement; I wished him ill, I wished him violence. Such was the beast's effect on me!

My veins felt like they held burning oil, not blood, searing me from my insides. I thought I could smell my flesh broiling. The walls and floors fell away, and I saw merciless shades dancing and swooping about, laughing cruelly, gnashing their wicked teeth.

Again came that cacophony from my dream, that godless choir of sighs and groans, howls and jeers, competing with the rumble of the beast.

The wound on my leg and the bruise on my back throbbed intensely, and my hands curled and seized with the pain of it all.

“Prof – Professor,” I gasped.

I heard a roar, and then a heavy chair flew through the air and knocked against my head. Dazed, confused and in utter pain and misery, I collapsed to the ground. The throbbing in my scalp barely registered

against the confusing maelstrom of agony I was in.

“Sew!”

I cried, “No. You do it!”

“I cannot, *you* must!”

The next thing I knew, I saw, through the haze over my eyes, the Professor thrown like a rag-doll against a bookshelf. The crowd cheered in a frenzy and then the unholy audience turned its attention back to me.

There was no one left to help me. The rain was lashing through the room. The lightning crackled outside, illuminating the hellish stage. The noise of the beast was growing in volume once more, furious, unearthly. His black form materialised, towering higher than before.

“Sew, laddie,” the Professor breathed, “Sew!”

Hearing my beloved employer's voice in so pathetic a state, my heart beat harder, my limbs regained their function and a renewed vigour swept through me, despite my pain and obscurity.

I recovered the cloth, the needle still poking out of it and with shaking hands I stabbed and pulled, drawing the pieces together, joining the tears as best I could, using long strokes to bind as much of the material as I could.

Behind me the monster bellowed and screamed and grunted with each stroke of my needle. The choir teased, they bayed for my attention, yet on I sewed, ignoring their faces.

The Professor called weakly, “Keep it up, laddie, he's weakening! No, don't look, sew!”

Now that I had the larger ribbons roughly sewn in place, it was easier to make finer stitches along the length of the tears, firmly holding the pieces together. With ardour I fell to my work, finding it easier and easier as each stroke came together.

The roaring petered to a whimper, and the whimper to a sorrowful cry that, as I pushed through my last stroke, sounded like nothing more than the wind whistling through the broken glass.

It was then that I looked up. The pain was gone. My blood was no longer boiling inside me. The haze lifted from my eyes. No longer were the shades of Hell dancing about me. I was sitting awkwardly on the remains of the chair that had knocked me down, holding the limp, damp cloth.

“Professor? Professor, are you alright?” I called.

“I'm over here with the Sergeant,” he replied, “Good thing he had his helmet on. He made quite an impression on the wall!”

I could hear the Professor slapping him lightly on the cheek, “I say,

Sergeant! Sergeant Hart!”

From there on, the Constable took over securing the room and Chester, who had been unwillingly giving a statement to the Constable, Sergeant Hart, the Professor and myself all piled into a carriage to pay a visit to Doctor Halfpenny.

Needless to say, he was more than a little surprised to see such a ragtag bunch at his door. The Sergeant apologised, Chester whimpered, the Professor poked curiously at the doctor's equipment and I, I fear, merely sat in a daze while I was bandaged up.

I was delivered home, by who I cannot say with certainty, and I slept a dreamless sleep, being so exhausted that I did not wake up until nine o'clock the next morning.

The Light

Looking out the window into the humming street, the Sun was shining over the roads, reflecting a brilliant orange upon the surfaces, still dark with water. The breeze was calm, barely moving the leaves, and the sky was making up its mind between amber and azure.

The memory of the pain I endured the night before was still upon me, so I barely grunted as I changed my bandages and inspected my bruises – such superficial issues were pale in comparison!

The looking-glass had never seen such a wretch. I scrubbed up, dressed and made myself as presentable as I could, wearing a low hat to cover the larger contusions on my head, and soft gloves for the pin-pricks on my fingers.

I walked slowly to the laboratory, sorting out the jumble of events from the night before. The whole matter seemed so unreal that it might as well have been a dream, and I would have entertained this were it not for the painful physical reminders that adorned my head, torso and limbs.

The door of the laboratory was locked when I arrived. There was no response to the bell, which meant that neither the Professor nor Miss Fitzgerald were in.

I had not brought the spare key, so I sat on a box out the front, content to rest and watch the people go by. The faces that looked over did not have the same countenance of suspicion and scorn as the day before, instead they wore a mask of awe mixed with intrigue.

Indeed, it was a step up from ridicule, although my preference to receive no celebrity altogether. I learned to deal with how others feel toward my line of work, considering the general attitude Paranormology attracts, still my face flushed with every sideways glance.

The box was comfortable, the morning Sun was warm, yet I wished nothing more than to be inside the laboratory, away from the eyes, away from the opinions.

“Going to sit there all day, laddie?”

Jolting upright, I looked left and right, then up to see the Professor leaning out from the window upstairs.

“Hello, Professor. The door is locked. I thought you were not in.”

“What have I told you about assumptions?”

“I, er...”

“Did you ring the bell?”

“Yes, Professor. It was not working,” I said.

“That's because I unhooked the clapper. Oh. That might explain why Miss Fitzgerald is not here – Dear me. I hope she hasn't taken that the wrong way. Well, come in, come in, hurry up! Actually, before you do, hurry to the baker and get something for breakfast. I'm famished!”

I returned promptly with a few buns. Upstairs, the Professor was rummaging through the kitchen cupboards.

“Where do you keep the blessed tea, laddie? I've spent all morning without a cup.”

I reached in front and drew out the tin, “Right here, Professor, where it as always been. Say, why is the clapper off the bell?”

He explained, “What with all the sticky-beaks, I had every Tom, Dick and Harry ringing and knocking and poking their noses in and asking the same old questions. Not that they got anything for their troubles, mind, although they've given me a frightful headache. I got sick of the bell ringing – ooh, I'd better put it back in now that you're here.”

“Me?”

“Yes. If the bell rings, just tell them that there is nothing further to add and, er, have a nice day or something, and nothing more and no further correspondence will be entertained and, you know, words to that effect.”

“Yes, Professor,” I said and, unsure about what else to do, I set about making the tea.

The silence in the laboratory was broken only by the whistling of the kettle. When I came back from the kitchenette, the Professor was at his desk, reading the newspaper.

The Professor accepted the cup, “How's that leg?”

“It is fine, thank you, Professor, mending nicely. My back is still sore. And my head. And I've done something to my ribs, maybe when I fell.”

“I am sorry to hear that. Do you want some time off?”

“Yes, Professor, but, at the same time, no.”

“You're still concussed, it would seem. Indecision and vagueness is a symptom. Have some tea. Tea is good for concussion.”

“What I mean is that I will heal just as fast here as at home.”

“You didn't really recuperate, did you? You were at the library the very next day. And you got knocked about a fair bit last night.”

I said, “I am fine, Professor, really, and thank you all the same. How is your head?”

“Better than Sergeant Hart's, for sure! He was in quite a tizz when we left Doctor Halfpenny. My, it was quite an experience, wasn't it?”

“That was something I would rather not come across again,” I said.

“Nor I,” he replied, adding “Even though it would be have been an incredible topic for research.”

I put my cup down, “Professor! You cannot possibly –”

“No, no, no. Far from it. That was too volatile a situation.”

“Volatile? Professor, that – that *thing* hurt us!”

“Yes, I suppose it did. But, oh! Did you witness how it manifested itself? A form! An actual form created from shadows! Oh, forgive me, laddie, I know you were affected by this the most.”

“Yes, Professor,” I said, taking up my cup.

I nearly dropped it.

“Professor!”

“What? What is it?” he asked, looking about.

“*The cloth!* Where is the cloth?”

“Ah. You needn't be so dramatic. It is safe.”

“And where is that?”

“Somewhere safe.”

“Professor...”

“It is best that you do not know, for your own safety,” he said, checking his watch, “Just know that it will soon be in the hands of one who is knowledgeable about such things. One who understands the dangers, and can safeguard future accidents.”

“But who?”

“An old colleague of mine. Another Paranormologist, you could say,” he said with a chuckle, “We're a breed, you know.”

“Will I meet him?”

“Her. Perhaps one day I shall introduce you. If she decides that it is safe to do so, that is.”

“Safe?”

“That curse was tied to you, you know. You tore the cloth. Your blood is on it. If you read the rest of that book, you'll find that you were unwittingly binding that beast with yourself, feeding its energy with your own life,” he said, “That's dangerous on an unfathomable level.”

“It was an accident! How was I supposed to know?”

“Accidental or not, rituals, incantations and the like are not to be taken lightly. Your actions, though unintentional, brought an ancient beast forward. Why, any more contact with – no. No. I shall say no more. It's for

the best.”

I pressed him but he would not say anything further about it. I sat back, rubbing my head, staring at my tea, feeling foolish and deflated.

“Anyway, all's well that ends well, right?” the Professor pushed the newspaper at me, “Here, read this while you drink your tea.”

“I'd rather not,” I said glumly.

“I'd rather you did. Go on, laddie. Have a read.”

Reluctantly, I turned the paper around and read the headline:

Local Journalist Caught Up In Curse

Chester Perry, well respected journalist here at the Herald, was at the centre of a violent, supernatural attack, reportedly perpetrated by an angry spectre. This comes after the journalist uncovered an investigation concerning one Gordon French, now under suspicion of practising witchcraft, conducted by a local Professor.

“Rubbish, of course,” the Professor muttered, taking out a bottle of beer, “It's not witchcraft. Not in the real sense. And it wasn't a mere spectre. It was a demon. Oh, don't listen to me. Read on!”

Chester's office was destroyed last night in a violent rampage. Credible witnesses, including the Herald's own Nathan Blight and Sergeant Hart of Collins Street Constabulary, state that a creature of incredible might assaulted Chester and demolished furniture and fittings to the value of several hundred pounds.

“It always comes down to a money figure, doesn't it?” the Professor quipped, setting up the glasses, “That's the press for you!”

The Professor in charge of the investigation into Mister French's nefarious activities attended the office and, with the help of Sergeant Hart, aided Chester in fighting off the phantom.

No activity or sighting has been seen since last night. As a precaution, Vicar Marsh will conduct an exorcism on the office.

Sergeant Hart suggests that the culprit is actually a gorilla that escaped from a travelling circus four years ago, and encourages citizens to report any strange activities to the local police without delay.

“Have you got to the bit about how brave Chester valiantly defeated the beast? Ha! He's practically a knight in armour!”

Below was an artist's impression of the beast in question. In truth, it looked nothing like what I saw. I dropped the paper.

“There is no mention of me,” I mumbled.

“A good thing, too. You don't need the attention. Or the questions. Huh. I didn't think you were the conceited type.”

“It's not that. I was hoping they might have recounted their previous story. You know, about the opium den. And that photograph of me in my, um, underwear.”

The Professor laughed, “It will be a cold day in Hell when that happens. The Press is never wrong, laddie, so the most you will get, as in this case, is a correction, no, a *redefinition* of their reporting as new evidence comes to light. The public's eye is no longer out for you, it's after some elusive, crazy gorilla-cum-ghost.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“If you're holding your breath for an apology, you'll sooner pass out.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Count your blessings.”

I sighed, “Yes, Professor.”

“And instead of sighing and worrying about getting your name in the paper, you can start thinking about where we might set up our next control. We have lost Jolimont Street. We still need somewhere that's *normal*.”

“Normal. Of course. Yes, Professor.”

He added, “And if I might suggest, the first thing we will do when ascertaining suitability, is check the damned cellar!”

“Yes, Professor. While we are on the topic, where did that cloth come from?”

“Again with the cloth!”

“I want to know why Mister French had it.”

“We shall have to ask him when he comes back,” the Professor said, “Such artefacts, from what I have learnt, are exceedingly uncommon. Perhaps he found it in his travels. More likely he is a practising Necromancer.”

“Surely not Mister French?”

He shrugged, “It would explain how such an evil thing came into his possession. You would be surprised by the quality of people who dabble in this stuff. Governors, scientists, policemen, teachers, lawyers.”

I sat and wondered about all the people in the town, in the city, across

the country and beyond, who would gather in dark corners and experiment with forbidden rituals, bringing curses down upon others, binding themselves to evil entities.

“He has to be stopped!” I said.

“Tut, tut! If we speculate without knowing the details then we are no better than Chester. No, laddie. It's not up to us. We are scientists, first and foremost.”

“I cannot believe that all we can do is investigate, Professor.”

“The *best* we can do is investigate. There are things that do not belong in our world. How they come into being, whether they grow old and die as we do, I shall never know. No one, I am sure, will ever know. For while science has a lot to say about a lot of things, there are many, many more things for which science will never be mature enough to handle,” he said, “The work we do is on the very edge of what is considered science. Paranormology keeps probing at the boundaries, testing the arbitrary rules established from experimentation and deduction. We may find, one day, that there is nothing more to find. Though...”

He looked out the window. The Sun had pushed the clouds out of the way and burning brightly against a rich, blue sky.

“We are, all of us, small fish swimming in a lake. Born in that lake, we die in that lake. We can study the plants and rocks, we can analyse the water, or speculate on how the air must feel above the surface, about how lovely it would be to fly like the birds that prey on us. We can develop complicated mathematics, predict the future based on statistics, bend machinery to our whim. We can map the world from one side to the other,” the Professor said, “Yet when the Sun goes down and the Moon comes out, we are still small fish, swimming around in a lake.”

He poured a sad, bubbling brew, dribbling a bit on the side, then poured one for me. I looked at my glass.

The Professor noted my hesitation, “Is anything wrong?”

“Something was missing. We should make a toast. It would be a waste of a brew, otherwise.”

“Hardly feels like a cheerful celebration.”

“A toast doesn't need to be cheerful.”

“What did you have in mind?” he asked.

“Well,” I said, conscious that the head was diminishing, “We are both in health and our reputations are intact, though both are battered. Our prior observations can be restored, given time to find another control. All in all, while the past few days have been trying –”

“That's putting it mildly.”

“– they have taught us valuable lessons. For instance, that not all paranormal activity is benign. And that we must be cautious, even in places we have deemed to be safe. So you see, while we may not have progressed, in the grand scheme of things, not going backwards is still worth something.”

“Very well,” he said, pausing to think, “A toast.”

He tugged at his beard while I watched the head on my beer flatten further. A smirk grew on his face.

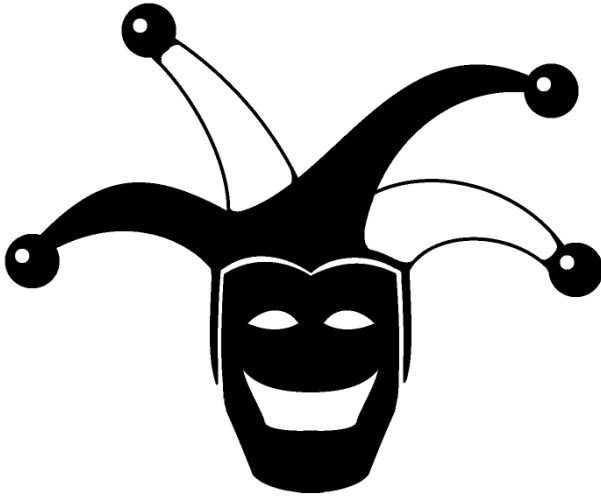
“Professor?”

He raised his glass, “To symmetry!”



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