

The Curse of Limock Park

by

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It is in solitude that the mental impact of place – the impalpable *genius loci* – induces its most profound effect. The structure of a great building can act as a skeletal encasement, bearing sundry archaeological marks which, however faintly, serve to indicate where flowed the divers courses of the nervous activity of bygone days. Even a single aspect of a dwelling, like some phantom ganglion, may assume the functions of a cerebral signal box, directing one's thoughts hither and thither by virtue of the force of all those minds that once gazed upon it in varying degrees of pleasure and pain. Disinterred by solitude, these 'psychological patterns' – the remnants of past impressions – begin their play upon the sensitive mind, causing them to surface again. In suitably fertile conditions, they find it profitable to recommence their softly muttered obsequies. And thus it was that the solid and disproportionately tall corridors of Limock Park must chiefly answer for initiating that train of events upon which I can scarcely reflect to this day without believing myself again to have descended into madness, or to the infernal regions; or both.

It was the narrowness of those pressing walls which first channelled my unwary mind towards the object of an unholy passion of long ago. A single rose-shaped boss, fixed high upon the intersection of two curved beams in front of me, had, limpet-like, clamped the labyrinthine but inevitable passage of my thoughts onto the events of one ill-starred and long-forgotten day, the searing emotion of which had burnt – or so it must be thought – a scorch-mark through time. I defy anyone to have withstood being sucked into the approaching mental abyss through the all-powerful effect of that hypnotic talisman. There, like a fantastical siren, hung the meticulously carved rosette, beckoning through the portal ahead to the more ruinous parts of the mansion – doubtless acting as a lure to scores of victims before me. Answering the tacit summons of that mystic symbol, I processed in an increasingly zombie-like attitude towards a series of descending vaults: the thoughts which had so furiously raced through my skull but a moment ago were now entirely swept away, leaving my mind a numb, receptive canvas – a mere *tabula rasa*. What little strength I still retained before entering that neglected passageway instantly evaporated in the dank, debilitating atmosphere, so perfectly calculated to destroy the already delicate state of my health.

All too late it became apparent that my mental just as much as my physical constitution was in danger within these accursed walls – a circumstance which first requires some explanation.

I had not been in the country a month, and the house a day, when I was gripped by my first bout of paranoia. This increasingly disturbing illness, which had periodically afflicted me since the death of my wife, had demanded the relinquishment of my last post, often causing me such distress as to effect a temporary derangement of my senses. However, it was not so much the initial psychotic aspect of this disorder which plagued me, but rather the dread inevitability of subsequently falling prey to its concomitant and more menacing sibling: acute aboulia. For days on end I would then be laid low, possessing not the slightest will to move more than a few feet from my bed or armchair, eating little, comprehending even less. Having given up all hope of finding further gainful employment in my unstable condition, I had, in anger, disgust and bitter despair, abandoned both my medication and the conflicting opinions of countless physicians, resigning myself instead to the counsel and machinations of fate.

Seclusion was both a blessing and a trial for me. Retirement from the turbulent currents of the world provided much needed relief when my illness reached its critical phase, while in those antipathetical moods of optimism and extreme lucidity, the same isolation, if long maintained, drove me back into myself, causing the interminable process to begin over again. I was, therefore – or so I had at first supposed – most fortunate in being able to secure the only tenancy in this habitable part of the building. Having company within an easy walking distance of two miles, I felt as comfortable as any individual could reasonably be in such wearying circumstances. The local inhabitants could be reached by crossing a series of fields, where lay the remnants of the village which had grown up around that ancient manor: now consisting of just half a dozen cottages, a public house, and a sub-post office cum general store. The foremost advantage of living in this rural location, however, was in facilitating ‘the conservation of means’. My rent was one admirably suited to the needs of frugality. The economical sum to be demanded of me each month was agreed to on the single occasion I encountered the lumbering figure of my swarthy landlady, who had, I afterwards recollected, remained firmly rooted to the entrance of the drive, scrupulously avoiding the yew-lined approach to the house.

The only other person connected with Limock Park with whom I had dealings was a local handyman in the employ of my elusive landlady. He was a builder by trade, whose chief hobby lay in unearthing relics of the Roman period, which proved to be particularly abundant in the vicinity. There was, in his eyes, no greater delight to be had in the world than to light upon a memento of the *Brettanoi*, or ancient Britons. His finds consisted largely of coins and brooches, which he located by means of the most sophisticated metal detector money could buy. It was this same rustic who, not six weeks before, had uncovered the first material evidence of the curse for over eight hundred years. Ever eager to display those boxes of artefacts which contained the major items from his personal collection, one afternoon he unexpectedly produced three caskets, enthusing over their contents for the best part of an hour. The curse itself, although not deriving from his preferred historical period, had now become his chief museum-piece. On a thick lead tablet measuring just two inches by three – a small and seemingly inconsequential thing – an

unsteady hand had lightly etched a barely decipherable script in the form of a mirror image – as was the custom in olden days in matters connected with the Devil and His works. The author of the curse had wished to bring catastrophe upon the house and consign it to oblivion.

Such interruptions as that of the handyman being rare, my time was mainly spent in reading and correspondence. But if recuperation had been the primary grounds for my removal to Limock Park that winter, never did a well-intentioned plan meet with such misadventure. I refer to the bizarre events which began at the time of solstice with the abrupt abatement of a ferocious arctic gale. An unearthly calm then descended. That gigantic stillness was the prelude to the incidents which must now be related. What ensues forms a true record of all that transpired concerning the murderous intent of the animated alabaster statue with its accompanying chorus of phantom lackeys; the malevolent purpose behind the wall in which every single window had been plastered over and painted a sickly shade of pallid pink; and, finally, what I can only presume to be the ultimate instrument of the curse itself: the inexorable and destructive momentum of the ebon globe.

I had been in the midst of investigating the cellars when the tempest subsided. Passing through the first archway, I was drawn further into the silent, subterranean chambers of the house by the succession of roseate, eye-like fleurons which crowned each of the rounded arches. On either side, fat cylinders of pillars escorted me to the remnants of a timber door, the dim light between the rotten slats revealing a long-sealed spiral staircase, which, when followed up its innumerable steps, led to the dilapidated former library. Octagonal in shape, the identical bookcases of this room seemed deliberately designed to disorientate and unnerve. There was, however, one conspicuous feature: a faded, partly threadbare tapestry, depicting a youthful lady, presumably one of the beauties of her age. With a solitary flower in her hand, she seemed to be pointing to a huge antique globe which rested upon a decrepit tripod in the middle of the room, the whole contraption swaying precariously at my slightest touch.

The only light in this octagon filtered through a single lancet window overlooking part of the garden. Although the wind had dropped, supporting legions of clouds were again closing ranks all around. The red brick wall far below now wore the most haunting and surreal aspect, and appeared higher than the one I knew. I struggled to focus on its decorative brickwork, and it was then that I thought I glimpsed a line of figures forming up behind it, dressed in the habits of medieval clerics. Although I believed this to be a trick of the light, I nevertheless decided to venture outside and resolve this ocular aberration.

The old house being such a remarkable warren, I became lost during my descent to the ground floor. When at last I emerged from the bewildering complexity of its halls, I found I had exited on the far side of the main building. Not having been around the house yet, I started in wonder to see one entire wall daubed in salmon pink – windows boarded and painted over likewise – permitting the entry of not even the narrowest shaft of light. As if this were not sufficient novelty, my attention was inexplicably drawn to the imposing statue opposite, the head of which gave a brief but unmistakable twitch. As I walked warily towards the figure, an almighty thunderclap

immediately reverberated throughout the grounds. In the midst of the heavenly outburst, I was astounded to catch these strained, gravelly tones, emanating from the thing's desiccated throat: "Aroint thee! Aroint thee!" Before I could recover my wits, a lightening bolt engulfed the effigy and flames shot from its eye sockets, setting the ether crackling. It was an omen. The heavens flashed more riotously and the thunder rolled again. "Aroint thee!" the horrid rasp rejoined. "Aroint thee!"

Before this harrowing vision had faded, I collapsed into a feverish delirium. I was beset by diabolic forces on all sides and had clearly encountered the harbinger of some latent iniquity. The poisonous ambience of the place was befogging my mind, leaving me a prey to that insidious and creeping inner frost of Evil: Evil as a living, breathing thing; Evil seeping through the walls like a mould; Evil gripping the mind and body as an overwhelming sense of fear and foreboding; Evil penetrating every corner of the fetid atmosphere – suffocating reason, crushing sense.

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The denouement to this frightening episode followed one of those convalescent phases when the hyperfunction of the so-called "G proteins" in my bloodstream had temporarily stabilised. I had sought relief from my recent reclusive habits which I feared might be affecting my critical faculties, by taking a late evening stroll into the village. Contrary to my expectation, I had not to ask anything of the history of Limock Park, for an ancient map of the district and some scant details regarding the owners of the property could be found in a framed case affixed to a wall of the public house. These I examined carefully while sampling some delightful local brews of mead and cider. There also existed a separate display case devoted entirely to the history of the curse, although this hex was presumed by many to be apocryphal.

The text related how, in the thirteenth century, the entire manor came – through false means – to be held by one Roger de Mandeville, a relapsed Knight Hospitaller, whose extraordinary and unseemly motto had been (translating from the Latin): *"Better a joyous life in Hell than a miserable one in Heaven"*. De Mandeville had been a crusader, and a knowledge of the Holy Land and its inhabitants was central to the knight's intrigue. While a hideous wound prevented Roger from taking any further part in religious warfare, no such infirmity hindered his brother, the owner of the property, and newly possessed of a comely wife. The boy's father, knowing Roger's vicious character, had denied his son's primogenital right and entailed all his property upon the younger brother, leaving Roger ever after to fume and plot revenge. Roger developed an elaborate conspiracy directed at betraying his sibling into the hands of the Moors,

whereupon he laid claim to the estates. To achieve his aims, Roger was obliged to purchase the support of corrupt barons and unscrupulous churchmen. Through such means, he increased his authority, successfully suing to become Knight of the Shire in 1279, the year of King Edward's Statute of Mortmain.

Each of the conspirators had sworn their allegiance *sub rosa* – under pledge of secrecy – and sealed their pact by the overlaying of crossed hands upon a tarnished orb – the heirloom and relic of several Frankish kings – unlawfully appropriated by Roger during his continental wanderings. Thus, having effected foul murder, the unprincipled defalcator assumed all the lands intended for the younger son. Then, from the double motive of salaciousness and in a bid to lend validity to his usurpation, he compelled the grief-stricken young widow to marry him – even before the official period of her mourning had elapsed, and, moreover, in defiance of her legitimate right of refusal under Magna Carta.

In the midst of the public ceremony of the blessing of the lands and the ritual of betrothal, the inconsolable Lady de Mandeville ran into the castle, and, being pursued, flung herself from the tower rather than yield to the designs of this ignoble schemer. It was not long afterwards that the curse was said to have been inscribed by my Lady's elderly nurse: a venomous grimalkin and practitioner of the black arts. According to the symbolism of the day, in formulating her curse the nurse paid homage both to the rose and the cross, as later did the Rosicrucians. These two emblems held a special family significance, for while the younger de Mandeville's armorial bearings featured a Latin cross, the Lady's particular device was a cardinal, or blush-red rose. In later life, the brazen Roger himself took to wearing a rose – not so much as an expression of chivalric love, but rather as a mark of conquering avarice and lustful obsession.

As colourful and far-fetched as the story appeared to be, it could not but leave me feeling considerably ill at ease. Nevertheless, I was determined to set aside all thoughts of treachery and sorcery, indulging for the nonce in a glut of companionship and a cheering round of drinks. With a volatile temperament such as mine, I could only hope that this activity would at least temporarily help both to assuage my disquietude and fortify me against the gathering snowstorm outside.

Returning late that night through the gate at the back of the grounds, I perceived for the first time what a curious hotchpotch of architectural styles confronted me: Georgian edifices rose over Medieval foundations; pseudo-Gothic Victorian turrets bowed to Jacobean facades; while Elizabethan brickwork faced the remains of a Saxon chapel. Despite the inclement weather – and armed now with Dutch courage – I was minded to scrutinise the battered statue. On nearing it however, a bitter chill passed over my soul, and a second vast hush enveloped the external world.

No-one who has not felt the certain approach of doom can know the unrelenting terror of such a fearful presentiment. An instant later, the visitation returned. This time the air was transformed by a bluish hue, as if illumined by neon gas, so that the vision materialised with appalling clarity. A succession of phantasms appeared to enter single-file through the Oriental moon gate, all the while chanting *sotto voce* in picturesque archaisms. As they gathered in the

forecourt, pledging obeisance to the new lord paramount, their ominous psalmodic chanting increased, by slow degrees, from an abysmal drone to a thunderous, hungry tumult. There the monkish assembly stood, eternally condemned to play their part in the final dress rehearsal of a grotesque tragedy. Although petrified with fear, I divined that they could feel my heart thumping out a counter-rhythm to their irreligious clamour. Then, answering the ghostly soliloquies of that voracious mob, I watched the statue wrench itself off its pedestal and lurch violently forward. With a shudder I registered its malicious intent.

It was on me that its bulbous eyes of glowing coal had fixed themselves. The goading ecclesiastical crescendo rose still higher as that fierce automaton came scything through the overgrown ornamental garden. This weathered statue was surely the monument which de Mandeville had caused to be erected in his own memory – it could be none other: it wore a rose. The chiselled flower upon its heart still bore the last vestiges of its original, bloody coloration, now rendered as a long, vertical stain. In a ghastly parody of the moment when, insane with desire, the knight burst indoors to haul out his reluctant bride-to-be, this grim titan had forsaken its crumbling platform to hunt down its prey. It, like me, was a slave to the symbol of the rose.

But now it was I who had become the espoused victim of that resurrected fiend. With the glaring pupils of its loathsome visage almost upon me, I turned and fled indoors. However, at the same instant, I suffered a complete disorientation of the senses. Barely half recovered, perspiring uncontrollably and stumbling continuously, I tore down through the many passageways and up the spiral staircase in a frenzied attempt to rid myself of the abominable creature at my heels. Crashing through the library, reeling, faltering, tripping over furniture, I clawed my way to the door on the far side. Scrambling through, I ran like a fury until I found myself cut off at the dead end of one of a myriad of maze-like corridors. With all the windows sealed on this side of the building, the gloom was overwhelming. Spinning round in panic, I looked back to behold moonlight faintly shimmering through the open library door. The unsteady globe swayed back and forth, then toppled off its stand, spun by an unseen hand. An involuntary fit of shaking overtook me before the next events unfolded.

What a shocking spectacle to see that geographical orb hideously transformed into a gross and mighty bowling ball, its shrivelled skin of ink on parchment flying off in pieces as it crashed onto the floor, revealing a solid core of polished, blackened, worm-ridden wood beneath. The horrific, decorticated object began to plunge down the corridor, relentlessly gathering momentum and intensifying its onslaught by the harsh, grinding noise of its oppressive gyration on the smooth, stone slabs. Its tremendous girth grew with every revolution, until it resembled some age-old monolith, its weight surpassing that of a steamroller or colossal millstone. In the all but universal darkness, it seemed as one of the larger planets flung off its course at the hour of the apocalypse. The instant it came upon me, the awful sphere filled the entire passage – cold; hard; black. Screams assailed my brain and warfare reigned within my head: but not a sound came forth. Here was the monster's *coup de grâce*. Paralysis invaded every fibre of my being at the very moment of pulverisation, and my jaw locked up with the horror of it all. Was I then pushed, or did I leap

backwards by a reflex action? – I cannot tell. Yet an instant later, I saw the globe no more, nor heard, nor felt its massive crunching impact resounding through my bones.

I did not die; a cushion of snow broke my fall. Yet I can only speculate as to the pitiable state in which I was eventually discovered by the odd-job man and amateur detectorist. The ruby trails discharged by my veins lay gently intermingling with glass, plaster – and the thorns of the damask rose.

I am fully aware that I have no more chance of leaving the sanatorium in which I now reside than I have of convincing the authorities of the evil which occurred in that house, the name of which I tremble even now to utter. The site of my undoing has been declared unfit for human habitation and abandoned forever. It is now a theatre of decay. Strangely, no trace was ever found of the swollen, malefic globe. Nevertheless, I leave this document as a testimony to the efficacy of a curse several centuries old – and, moreover, to the havoc it may wreak, and the irreversible misfortune it may bring.

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Jonathan Little is a recipient of an Authors' Foundation / Royal Literary Fund grant for 2011 for his most recent publication – a monumental two-volume history of Orientalism in music and literature (New York: Mellen Press).