

A Memory of Time Entombed

The snow softly blanketed London as the lone figure wandered astray through the lamp-lit streets, clutching his overcoat closed and glancing over his shoulder constantly, as if a stranger might be watching. Plumes of smoke wafted from his mouth and nostrils, the chilly air gripped his lungs and numbed his face. He avoided the gaze of a young family passing, shielding a white gloved hand to his wrinkled cheek. He trod through the white snow, leaving behind vague and distant footprints. Music and voices rose up in the air, echoing through the Christmas Eve night, a haunting mixture of joy and sadness. He passed yellowed windows and doors of smoky pubs, the celebratory noises of spirited drunkenness drifting out from within them. A woman called out to him.

He turned towards an obscure, half-lit alley and stopped at the top of a set of narrow stairs. He reached out, gingerly touching the icy railing. He looked behind him. The alley was deserted; a lamp offered its lonely glow for the alley ghosted by the absence of life. He whimpered, shivered and turned and stepped down the tight stairs, clutching onto the railing for support. He rapped against a heavy wood door and waited. A tiny slot clacked open in the door revealing a pair of eyes that stared back through the small, barred window. The slot closed. He waited. The door shuddered open.

In the darkness, the warmth of the room washed over him.

“This way,” a man’s voice spoke.

He followed in the dimness, his eyes now adjusting to the room, the familiarity of it filling each of his senses. He was shown a bed. He removed his top hat and overcoat and lay down. The aches in his legs and knees slowly faded as he stretched. He sighed. The man stood above him, watching and waiting. He nodded and the man knelt down beside him and began with the preparations. The man offered him the pipe and he took it. He stared at it for a moment and then, breathing in, felt its potency flow through him instantaneously. He relaxed. His mouth hung agape and he shut his eyes and listened, aware of the sounds of others hidden in shadowed corners of the room.

“You are shaking,” the man observed.

He turned and acknowledged his host. He looked down at his gloved hands and saw that indeed, they were trembling. He nodded solemnly and carefully removed the gloves. He held out his aging hands and studied them. They gradually trembled less and less as he relaxed and took in more of the pipe. He rested a hand over his eyes.

“Does it not please you, sir?”

“Oh.” He groaned and licked his thin lips. “Forgive me. It is good. Very good. Forgive me. I have not been here in so long. Forgive me.” His voice was deep and quavered with the effort of speaking.

“I see.”

“I...I was terribly alone tonight. I did want not want to be by myself.”

“That is understandable.”

“Yes.”

The man was curious. “By yourself where, sir?”

He caught his breath. “The cathedral. In Cloisterham.” He sighed. “I am the choirmaster there. For many years now. So many years.” He turned and saw the man staring at him, an expression of concern and kindness.

“Are you alright, sir?”

His eyes widened. “I had the most frightful vision!”

“Just now?”

“No, there!”

“At the cathedral?”

He shook his head. “I could not sleep. For the life of me, oh I tried. But that constant wailing of the wind did its power to keep me awake.”

The man refilled the pipe.

He took in the potency of the pipe and, again, relaxed. The man waited, wondering if his guest would speak again. Then he opened his mouth and recounted the strange tale.

“So, many years since I thought of him.”

The man listened.

“I tried to sleep, but that cold wind kept me from me any peaceful slumber. I heard it, felt it even, as I went up to my room. I was tired from our Christmas services and I wanted to retire to my room for the night. That is all I wished. I thought surely that wailing would stop and the night would quiet. But it did not stop. It went on and on, increasing in strength. I sat in my bed and listened, hearing and thinking of nothing but that noise. The sound persisted, so I got out of bed. The floor was so cold to my bare feet. I stared down at it, listening and waiting. It was a constant wailing, like banshees floating past my window. That horrid sound seeped through the floor and the walls of my room. I listened to it for a long time, watching the dancing shadows from my candle on the wall. I was uncertain of what to do. I was so tired. I wanted so much to sleep. And then the wailing seemed to stop so suddenly and I waited to see if it would begin again. I was sure it would not and I was relieved and sleep beckoned. I lay back down, but then it came back, the wailing sound, like so.

“Now, I got out of the bed altogether and I sat there and I listened. I knew I would never sleep. Not with that constant wailing of the wind.”

He turned and looked at the man.

“And then, I heard that pounding. It was so close, yet so far away. I thought someone was trying desperately to get into the cathedral. I peeked out my window, but saw no one. The pounding and the wailing was too much, so I put on my robe and I took

my candle and went out of my room. Where I was going, I did not know. I just started walking, certain I would get sleepy and I could ignore those fearsome sounds. But, I realized as I walked, the pounding was getting louder and I heard stranger sounds still with the wailing wind. I went outside, possessed with the urgency to find out what was causing that pounding. I kept walking, a dread growing in my mind and soon, as I approached the gardens, I knew then with an almost exact certainty, where the pounding was coming from.”

He shivered. The pipe was refilled and he took it. The light of the lanterns reflected off the man’s spectacles as he stared at his guest on the bed before him. “You see, it was coming from the crypt.”

The man’s face darkened.

He nodded. “Yes, the crypt beneath the cathedral. I used to visit it. Oh, that place was so powerful, so mysterious. But, it was not a place I had wandered through as of late. I was not so sure I wanted to go back. But, that mysterious pounding compelled me so, to follow it and discover its source.

“The door to the crypt was open. Wide open! I tell you, those doors were locked always and only I had a key. But, it was surely open now. I could not understand it and I tried to understand it, standing there staring into the blackness beyond those doors. I hesitated, holding that candle in my hand, with one foot ready to turn back to my room. Somewhere close by, I heard people and horses moving about, singing and rejoicing in the spirits of the festivities. I could have gone back to my room then and suffered a sleepless night. Or, I could have joined the many others roaming safe in the streets as they harked their carols.

“But, I did neither, for I went into the crypt. I used the light of my candle to guide me. And I knew, someone was down there, waiting for me...in the crypt.”

He looked at the man and reached out and rested a hand on his host’s hand.

“It was very dearly cold outside. But down there, down there, it was even colder. Truly, I tell you, I had forgotten what it was like. I had forgotten for I had not been down there in so long.”

He coughed and took away his hand, closed his eyes.

“The cobwebs were thicker, the walls darker, the smell of death stronger. I looked around and the tombs appeared suspended, as if floating in the dark. I tried not to look at them, but I could not help it. They hold such a macabre power to them, you see. I could feel their presence – the buried souls hidden in the seamless dark of that place. I wanted to turn back, but part of me did not and I urged myself not to, begged myself not to, for I needed to end this mystery, this terrible desire to know where that pounding was coming from and it was this desire that compelled me so.

“Alas, I pressed on. I followed the candle light as it crept along the edges of the walls. Many times I looked behind me to see if anyone was watching or following me. That feeling of being watched is an eerie sensation. I did not like it.

“And then, just barely I heard it, a whispering sound – a voice. I became cautious, wary of that voice, concentrating while avoiding the wetness of the ground. I breathed through the cusp of my hand to mask the stench of the crypt. And then I stepped on

something and it shattered beneath my foot. It startled me. I had to cover my mouth with my hand to avoid waking the dead.”

“What was it?” the man asked.

He shook his head. “I saw nothing but the broken pieces of a watch. They shimmered in the light of my candle. How strange, I thought, a watch lying about in the dark of that place. I wondered what poor soul it belonged to and I cursed myself for I could not now repair it and save to keep it for my own pleasure. I thought then perhaps there really was someone else down here and maybe, just maybe, *he* had lost that watch.”

The man held the pipe, uncertain and waiting. He listened.

“The walls seemed to close in on me, the spaces between the stone blackening. I could barely see anything in front of me let alone the light of the candle that both guided and comforted me in that claustrophobic tunnel. I vaguely remembered where I was or where the tunnels led to. But, even then, I was not so sure I truly remembered the crypt at all as I once remembered it so long ago.

“Then I slipped on something along the path on the ground, nearly falling to my own death. When I tilted my candle this time, what I saw was a black, silk scarf stretched out before me like a snake. I stared at it. The whispering had quieted. It was most disturbing and I looked about again to see if anyone was standing there with me in that abysmal place. I listened, but all was quiet now. I looked at the black scarf. I didn’t know what to do or what to think. I was bewildered, crippled in a state of disbelief, trapped in a nightmare worsening each moment I lingered down there, a nightmare from which I might not awake.”

He groaned and the man asked if he wanted another. He shook his head yes. He took the pipe and continued.

“I stood there, death surrounding my living soul and that black scarf lying there in front of me, taunting me. I leaned down and very carefully picked up the scarf, I don’t know why I did, but I did. And I cradled it in my hands, feeling its silky texture between my fingers. I studied its inky sheen in the glow of my candle. The silence in the crypt became too much. I even longed for the whispering to return, just to know that I would not be alone anymore, in that awful silence. And, as if God answered my very wish, the whispering voice spoke once more. But, it was much firmer now, more demanding. And it was calling my name.

“I closed my eyes and felt my weak heart pushing its way out of my chest. I was in two minds of what to do. Should I follow or should I abandon that now very dreadful place? I truly believed it could be a nightmare from which I would not awake.”

“What did you do?” the man inquired.

He closed his eyes and continued slowly. “I followed that voice deeper into the crypt. My candle flickered and I worried I would lose my only comfort should it go out. The air became colder with each step. It was then that I think I truly would have turned back, wanting so much to believe I was only imagining things, dreaming. But, I pressed on. I pressed on.

“Then I saw where the tunnel turned a corner and the corner of the tunnel was pitch black.”

He shivered, his fingers curling. “The voice called from around the corner, from somewhere behind the curtain of that unknown space. I was so terrified, I felt frozen while yet sweat dripped from my forehead despite there was no sun and there was no heat in that place.

“Slowly, I turned the corner of that tunnel and when I did, I do think my hair turned three times whiter.”

The man noticed the shock of white hair about his guest’s head.

“I could not believe it. I have lived a long life, my friend. I have seen and heard many things, some that might even defy explanation, but nothing like what I saw tonight, down there in that crypt.”

“What did you see?” the man urged his guest.

He turned and his eyes widened. “My nephew.”

“Your nephew,” the man repeated.

He nodded. “My nephew, long dead and gone these many years.” He turned away from the man and stared at the red ceiling above him, aglow and dappled with the shadows by the lanterns of the room.

“There he was. He stood now in front of me as much as you are now beside me. I couldn’t believe my eyes. I squinted and waited for this vision to disappear, half believing myself to have gone mad. But no, he was there all the same, standing tall and beautiful and just as I remembered him so many years ago.”

He swallowed. His eyes shifted with the remembrance of things long ago. The man watched him.

“He was staring at me. There was a strange look about his face, a darkness that shadowed him. His face was pale and those eyes...those eyes were the eyes of a man haunted by his own humankind.”

His hands shook, grasping the place where his heart rested beneath his skin and bone. He swallowed, puffed on the pipe that was offered to him.

“Oh! I called to him, but he did not answer me. I looked at him so tenderly, loving him and wishing he would come forth and I could hold him once more. But, he just stood there as I pleaded like a stupid child. He never spoke. The candle flickered wildly in my hand and I was quite cold now with nothing but my robe to cover me. And I knew that no matter what happened I would not dare take my eye away from the sight of my dead nephew standing before me. He never said a word.

“Then he did something next that horrified me. He pointed to the scarf in my hand. I was afraid. I started to back away from him, away from his accusing finger jabbing the air at the scarf in my hand, at me! I was so very cold. I forced my feet to move and then, I ran!”

He turned his head towards the darker side of the room.

“I ran. I could hear his whispering voice calling after me. But, I ran, hating the crypt more than ever, a place that once so fascinated me, hating that my dead nephew stood in it, torturing me. Oh! I longed for the safety of the earthly world above me. I saw the moonlight as I ran towards the doors and I shut the doors behind me, bolting them and locking them. I ran back to my room. I heard the pounding sound still, there inside my

room. The wailing wind returned. I lay in my bed, hidden under the covers, holding my hands against my ears, crying out to God to stop the madness. But, it continued on, the pounding and my dead nephew beckoning me from the sepulchral depths below. I begged him to go away, but he would not. I knew then I could not stay there a moment longer. So, I left the cathedral at once.”

The man stared, silent. His guest continued with the pipe and said no more. The shifting shapes of others in the room stirred and then quieted again.

“Of what does your dead nephew accuse you?” the man asked, carefully.

He stared at the red ceiling above him and his eyes glazed over with wonder and terror. “He wishes to torment me, even in my death.” His eyes widened and he coughed a sickly, wet cough.

“Perhaps he seeks forgiveness,” the man said encouragingly to his guest.

He turned his head and looked at the man. There was a crazed appearance in the gleam of his eye. “No. No my friend. It is I...it is I that needs forgiveness.” He reached a quivering hand out towards his host. “I fear....”

His eyes widened and he took a gasping breath until his mouth hung open and the hand holding the pipe fell over the edge of the bed. Then he was still. The man stood up and stared for a long time at his guest, realizing his guest now lay dead. The man looked about the room, peering into the dark corners, wondering who was watching and how many had listened to the strange tale. He looked at his guest, dead and silent on the bed. He leaned down and reached out and gently closed the eyes of John Jasper, shutting them peacefully from the horrors of his earthly hell.