

Steady Hands

Monstrous chandeliers hang from the domed ceiling, their gas lamps lighting the hall like a summer's afternoon, illuminating every crease and blemish on the faces of these crumbling academics. They are dressed to a man in their Sunday best, chirping and chattering like people half their age while smooth faced waiters slip between them offering all manner of tit-bits from their silver trays. The effect is rather ghastly. In short, it is the usual nonsense that a man in my position must endure from time to time.

I stand in the doorway and sip my rather coarse whisky, longing for the candlelight of my youth. I have arrived somewhat late, and the party, as they say, is in full swing, another round of undeserved academic self-congratulation. They have made a decision, though in truth it was Gibb who made it for them, throwing a thousand guineas into the pot. From there the matter was rather straightforward. Build a new medical school or lose the money. Even an emeritus professor can work that one out.

Nevertheless, it has taken the better part of a decade to reach that rarest of moments in the academic world, the point of action. Foundations have been dug. The first stone will be laid in the morning. Durham University will have its new Medical School, though one has to smile to think that it will not be in Durham, or Whitburn, or Wingate, but half a morning's ride away, here, in Newcastle upon Tyne.

But why, you may wonder, am I here, loitering beside the footman, trying simultaneously to remain unnoticed and catch sight of an oily little red haired man. The point is this. A new medical school requires a new Dean. The appointment will be announced tonight, and it is necessary that the gentleman concerned be in attendance. That, of course, is yours truly, Dr Alexander Craig.

I have a man on the committee, Preston. I delivered both of his sons before my first trip to Egypt, and treated his wife for pleurisy on my return. Not, you understand, that I am not the best man for the job, but it is wise to be certain about such matters. I frown at my pocket watch, almost half-past eight. I gave Preston clear instructions to meet me at the entrance at eight. Damn him. There is nothing for it. I exchange my empty glass for a fresh one, and thus fortified, go in search of my oily sponsor.

I have taken no more than a three paces when I am accosted by Mrs Tilsbury who labours under the delusion that we are friends because her husband was stationed at Cairo in seventy-two. Her ancient claw grips my forearm while she insists on asking me about my work. As if she would understand.

‘The waking of the dead,’ I tell her, and her hand falls away. I smile and ease through the crowd.

‘Ah-ha.’ I spot Preston beside a table of sweetmeats, deep in conversation with Armstrong’s large and frankly rather plain daughter, though he seems quite taken with her if appearances are to be believed. His head is nodding like a wood-pecker’s, and I fear that if he pecks any more vigorously his bulbous nose will be lost forever in her décolletage. I smooth down my moustaches and force a hearty smile.

‘Mr Chairman, good evening, Sir.’ I am not above a little flattery. Let him have his moment, and I shall have mine.

At first he does not hear me, still pecking at her fleshy canyon.

‘Mr Chairman.’ My smile stiffens. For God’s sake, I am standing right beside the man. ‘Preston,’ I shout.

He jumps, rather gratifyingly, and stares at me with his mouth open. A handful of teeth remain in his head. It is as if I am looking into a small and fetid piano.

‘Good evening, Mr Chairman,’ I hold out my hand.

He has the cheek to turn his back. I take a leaf from Mrs Tilsbury and get a firm grip on his arm. I may be approaching my sixtieth year but I stand tall enough to see the dead skin between his thinning ginger hair, and I am no weakling, which is more than can be said for Preston.

‘You have news for me?’

His eyes dart over my shoulder.

‘Why have I received no letter?’ Even as I speak I realise the obvious, and curse myself for a fool.

‘Perhaps we should step outside,’ he says.

We stand like criminals in the street while he gives me his reasons.

‘I argued for you until I had no more breath to speak,’ he says, ‘but the members would not be swayed. The building will not be completed for several years. They felt a younger man...’ The words go on. He is drunk. I can hear it in the softness of his consonants. And he is lying.

‘Who? And what did he pay you?’

He bridles at that, as if he were a gentleman.

‘I am a Solicitor of the Supreme Court.’

I laugh in his face.

‘You are miller’s son. A corn grinder, and a drunk.’

‘If you must know the committee felt you lacked the necessary skills. The University needs friends not enemies, and you Sir, are adept at securing the latter.’

‘I am a doctor, not a...socialite.’

‘A doctor, but barely, losing your head over these Egyptian superstitions, this hocus-pocus.’

The phrase rankles. I know where he has picked it up. That idiot Jenkins in the Lancet. I stare at him until my eyes dull behind the thick lenses of my glasses.

‘*You question me.*’

‘The committee felt that Hardwick was the better choice.’

‘Hardwick, the bug-eyed son of a village priest.’ My anger is such that I cannot speak. That arrogant youth, always doubting, questioning in his vulgar Yorkshire accent.

‘I attended upon her Majesty in the year of her Silver Jubilee. Has Hardwick done that?’ I know I am blustering but I can not help myself.

‘It may have escaped your notice, but it is now her Majesty’s Golden year.’ He has the temerity to mock me. ‘You live in the past. Hardwick has not been your student for twenty years. He is a fine doctor, and he has a sharper eye and a steadier hand ...’

I push him away from me. He totters. I do not wait to see if he falls, but stride through the simpering crowds, and out into the night. I have heard enough. ‘A steadier hand.’ He senses my weakness like a jackal, this damn palsy that has infected my hands these last years. I hear the clatter of a saw falling on a tiled floor, the half suppressed laugh of a gawping student, and Preston’s voice echoes in mind, ‘a sharper eye and a steadier hand...a sharper eye and a steadier hand,’ rattling on to the rhythm of horses hooves.

The horse is on top of me before I see it, monstrous and black, stopping my breath in the darkness. The carriage rolls by so close I see the eyes of the lady inside, a ruby ear-ring glistening at her cheek.

‘Blind old fool,’ the driver’s voice carries through the air, an augur of the fate that awaits me.

I stare after him with my hand pressed to my chest, feeling my heart pound, two beats to every one of my pocket-watch. No. I will not be beaten so easily. Jenkins knows no more than that jackal Preston. The empiricists have no monopoly on medical knowledge. As one who was once foremost amongst them I know how very little they understand. I turn back the way the way I have come.

It seems that the hall has remained unchanged since my departure, and in truth I have only been gone a few moments. The clock has not yet struck nine as I work my way back through the odious throng, staring viciously at any who catch my eye. It does not take long to find Hardwick. He is tall and bony as I remember him, surrounded by a gaggle of fawning women.

‘Dr Hardwick, has it really been twenty years?’

There is a momentary flicker before his smile drops back into place.

‘Twenty-three, I believe, Dr Craig.’ I note the accent is gone.

‘And might you have a moment for your old teacher in the twilight of his days?’

He laughs weakly, and I see I have wrong-footed him.

‘I hardly think...’

‘Please.’ I take Hardwick’s arm and nod to the ladies. ‘You will excuse us.’

I lead him out onto the balcony beneath a gargoyle's knowing gaze. There are people around us but they are buried in their own conversations. We are, to all intents and purposes, alone.

'So, what brings you back to the university,' I ask.

'Old friends, and indeed it is a pleasure to see you, Sir.'

'Nothing else?'

'I do not wish to be vulgar,' he says, 'but we are, of course, in competition for a particular post.'

'We are? Or rather we were.'

He looks at me blankly and I find this innocence hard to believe. The street glistens twenty feet below us. The balustrade is no higher than my thigh. I am sorely tempted to give him a push. Reluctantly, I restrain myself.

'I no longer wish to be considered.'

'I see,' he smiles, laying a hand on my shoulder, testing my powers of restraint.

'The building will take years to complete and I am not as young as I once was, nor do I have your...silver tongue.'

I watch the colour rise in his cheeks. His eyes are blank and open with that strange colouration I remember, both blue, but one eye close to midnight, the other light as noon. They protrude towards me like the gargoyle's above him, as if they might take leave of his head. I hold his gaze until I am certain. He really has no idea.

'Let me be the first to congratulate you, Stephen.' I tilt my head back and offer my hand. 'May I call you Stephen?' He nods like a boy. 'As you know, the decision will be formally announced at eleven this evening, however, the committee

feels it would be best if the new Dean had a little advance warning, time to prepare a few words.'

'Well Sir,' he grins sheepishly and pats his pocket. I did make a few notes, just in case.'

'All the same, you understand that this is a position with political implications: donors, captains of industry to be thanked and encouraged.' I lead him back through the yapping herds. 'Of course this is your speech to make, but it is important to get off on the right foot. The committee would be most grateful if you would allow me to run through a few points with you.'

'Well, if the committee...'

'My rooms are only a short walk, and frankly, I think a man in your position deserves something better than this terrible whiskey.' He laughs as we step between the high arched doors, and out onto the road.

'Your old rooms, with the laboratory in the basement?'

'Oh yes. And please be assured Stephen, we shall have you back in good time.'

'Of course. I remember how much I learnt in those rooms. Indeed Sir, I never properly thanked you for all you taught me. May I do so now?' He does not wait for a response. 'Thank you, Sir, for everything.'

Sweet Lord, this sycophancy is enough to turn one bilious.

'My pleasure, Stephen.' I fight back the bile. 'I hope I have helped you in some small way. But what of you? I have heard great things these past years, yet I find it is always better to hear from the actor than the audience.'

He waves a dismissive hand, a pretence of modesty, but I can see he is bursting to tell me and he all but dances back to my rooms, to the blaring of his own

trumpet. His smile falters as we step inside. I follow his gaze to the floor boards showing through my threadbare rug, the same draughty roof as when he was last here, the same sagging armchairs and battered table, only older and duller. I see it all through his strange eyes.

Ah, but if only I could, truly see the world through those sharp eyes. I wipe once more at my misted lenses with anticipation tingling in my fingers.

‘Splendid,’ he says, and I usher him to a seat by the fire.

The evening is cool but I do not waste a match.

‘A decent sherry, perhaps?’

‘Thank you, Sir.’

‘You will excuse me a moment.’

I take the key from the bureau and walk smartly down the cellar steps. The lock is oiled and the door swings open. I pass between the desk and the slab, to the sample cabinet which runs the width of the far wall and reaches up an inch below the low ceiling. Every bottle and vial is carefully labelled behind the polished glass. I take one of a dozen identical vials from a small box and hurry back upstairs.

Hardwick has his speech unfolded in his lap, head bowed to his own vacuous words. He does not look up. The sherry is on the table directly behind him. I pour two glasses and snap the vial into the first. The crack of glass is too loud. My hand shakes, spilling a few red drops. I dare not look round. His glass is in my left hand. I must remember, my left.

‘Oloroso ’67.’ I raise an eyebrow, and his white fingers coil around the glass. ‘To the next Dean of Medicine.’ I savour a long swallow and watch him do the same. ‘Right, let’s see what you have.’ I take the papers from his hands. ‘Oh, nice, very

nice. Must make mention of Gibb, get him in good and early.’ I prattle on until I hear the glass thud on my Persian rug. He who would be Dean is asleep.

As I said, I am a strong man, and hardly new to the work. It takes only a few minutes and a little sweat to get him down onto the slab. I begin with the lighter eye, pressing the vacuum pump down across his cheek-bone, feeling the kiss of an airtight seal. I pump steadily until I hear the tell-tale “pop” and his eye looks up at me through the glass with a red trail of nerves leading back into their socket. That is when he screams. He tears at the leather straps, but they have held stronger men than him, and the walls are thick enough to contain the noise, though really, it is a horrible racket.

‘Do shut up, Stephen,’ I tell him, ‘No one can hear you,’ but he simply will not listen, and I recall that he was always that way as a student. ‘You do not listen, boy,’ I say, but he keeps on screaming. I reach for the bottle on the shelf beneath him and whisper a word of thanks to Mr Samuel Guthrie. The chloroform settles him nicely.

The darker eye pops out easy as the first, no doubt keen to get away. Of course taking his hands is harder. They shake under the saw, fingers twitching.

‘Not so steady now,’ I observe.

I let the wrists drain and then take my trophies over to my desk, leaving only the rubbish. My man comes every Tuesday night. I shall cut and bag it for him tomorrow. Unfortunately, the chloroform is wearing off and he is flapping like a salmon on the slab. I suppose I am becoming squeamish in my old age. I take the cushion from my chair and press it down across his face. I wait until the breath stops.

My heart beats harder. I am ready to begin. I feel alive, vibrant as a man of thirty, the same man who dug through the ruins of Thebes with savages eyeing me

from the hilltops, and crocodiles from the yellow river below. I open the bottom drawer of my desk, scattering papers across the floor. My finger hooks the hidden panel, pulling and lifting. The panel comes away, revealing a grey rag tight around a bottle. I untie the rag and curse my palsied hands, but it will not be long now.

The bottle is small and brown with a film of liquid in the bottom. Those few drops I have been trying to replicate for too long, while life has passed me by. This is no quackery, no act of faith. I will have sharper eyes, steadier hands. I open the bottle and draw the liquid into the pipette. It is opaque blue, thick and viscous. I let it go, a drop for each eye, two for each hand, and the alien odour rises towards me, harsh and acidic as when I first held this tincture in my hands, three decades ago.

It began with the stone at Geza, bought from a thieving peasant for a few coins. I could see the inscription was ancient, only later did I understand what it meant. I travelled alone, up the Nile to Memphis, crossing to the west, following the inscription's promise. I trekked north for three more days with little food and a few mouthfuls of water, on past Abu Rawath, to the cave on the edge of the desert.

'The western mouth of the lizard faced mountain.'

The opening was wide enough for two men, narrowing as it stretched back into the mountain. I crouched and dug with my hands through centuries of sand. Doubts churned in my belly but I dug on, down through the millennia with blood seeping from my fingers. My thumb hit something hard. The outline of a box, dry, preserved. I dug faster, and drew my prize from the earth.

The falcon-god Horus was carved on the front, claws extended for the kill. I prised the box open. There was nothing. A scorpion, dead and desiccated. I tipped the extinct arachnid onto the sand, and there in the box I found this bottle. The cork pulled easily. Not knowing what else to do I poured a little over the scorpion. It took

some time. My attention was wandering towards my empty stomach when the scorpion stretched, and scuttled off across the desert floor.

This time it is quicker. The darker eye moves first, swivelling towards me, dragging its tail of nerves. I thump the desk and cry out in joy. My voice catches. The pupil swells towards me, throbbing with a hatred that raises the flesh on my arms. The other eye too is staring into mine, veins red and cracked across a tumescent sclera.

For the second time that night I curse myself for a fool. What did I think? That his flesh would merge with my own like the cuttings from a plant. But why should it not? Lens, pupil, cornea, iris, so much soulless meat. Food for worms, if I had not saved them, given them life. I am their father, their God. Yet, like his son before the Romans, I stand despised.

‘Traitors,’ I stumble back from the desk.

I can not stand to see them, much less see through them. To put them in my sockets and forever watch what they would show. Hell’s fire, or the glory of Excelsis, or the ever creeping earth beneath which he will lie? My flesh crawls with a life of its own. I feel his presence close behind me. My breath stops. I spin, staring at the body on the slab. He is still and dead.

There is a scratch on the desk, a fingernail on the pitted wood, and another. Long fingers drag towards me. A scream rises in my throat. I tell myself that Hardwick is dead. These...things are no longer a part of him. I am a man of science, but the loathing in those eyes speaks louder than reason. I know I must act. The glass jars are lined on the shelf above me, organs pale and floating. Will a glass jar hold him, them?

I run to the shelf beneath the slab. My scalpels clatter to the floor as I pull out the cloth on which they rested. The box is square and sturdy, a craftsman's work with a catch as thick as my finger and the falcon face of Horus carved on its cedar lid. The scratching is louder at my back. I can not look. I would run from the room if I did not know with certainty that those things will not rest until they have their revenge. I have no choice. I return to my ungrateful children.

These eyes are not the dead jellies I have cut and handled so many times. They are hot and throbbing. Glowering. I throw them in the box. The hands claw at me like angry rats, but fear gives me strength. Tearing skin and breaking fingers, I slam the lid and push the latch across. What now? I can not think. A drop of sweat slides off my forehead, splashing on the falcon's outstretched claw.

Act man, act, a distant voice commands me, a General in a losing battle. I check the latch twice, three times and run with the box in my hands, falling up the stone steps. I snatch the small suitcase from my bedchamber and hurl the box inside. Closing and locking the flimsy case I escape at last into the cool night.

The scratching is muffled but I hear it as if those hands are inside my head, see those eyes swivelling and bloating in the darkness. I walk fast, unthinking. My feet take me down to the river. It would be so easy to throw the case into those oily black waters. So uncertain.

I follow the quay between shipyards and warehouses, past the keel boats and barges on the water below, with the sound of fingernails against wood, scraping and scratching at the soft tissue of my brain. I turn a bend in the river and a monster looms above me, a thing from before man ruled this earth. My legs shudder. If there were not a wall behind me I would fall.

Get a grip on yourself. It is nothing more than the half-built hull of an iron ship. I have reached Swan-Hunter's new yard at Wallsend. Again I am tempted to throw Horus to this iron devil, but I go on, beyond Hunter's mighty works and beyond the Emperor Hadrian's, up to the mouth of the Tyne. I have some notion to bury Horus in the sea, but turn back before it is reached. Perhaps it is the fresher air of the coast, but my head has cleared and I know what I must do.

It is deep night now and time is short. I retrace my steps, mile after mile towards the grey sprawl of the city, while shadows take shape around me, the ships on the river and the new Swing Bridge above. I am weary and feverish, and cold to my bones, but that ceaseless scratching drives me on, up through Grey Street as the lamps are lit and the town begins to stir. I watch the eyes of the men I pass, tired and dull and risen too early. They seem not to notice me, or my strange cargo.

I reach the site in time. There are few dignitaries to be seen, but Preston is here in close conversation with a surly looking man I take to be the builder's foreman. A dozen men await his word. The foreman turns his head between Preston and his men, eager to end his conversation and begin his work.

'Good morning, Mr Preston,' I say, and he looks at me with his rotten mouth open. I can see his tiny mind working, wondering why I am here. I hold the case behind me.

'Good morning Dr Craig,' he says, and the foreman seizes his opportunity.

'I'll best be getting on,' he mumbles.

I follow him out of Preston's earshot and take his arm. He looks at me sharply, a man who does not like to be touched. I release him.

'Excuse me,' I say. 'My friend, Mr Preston has one more request.'

His look tells me that he cares as little for Preston as I do, but I plough on.

‘It is a delicate,’ I tap my nose, ‘sentimental matter. He would have a personal item left here...for posterity.’

I do not know if the man understands me, but he understands the silver Crown I press into his palm.

I hold up the case. ‘To go into the foundations.’

He looks at the heavy coin and his blue eyes widen in a way that makes me shudder.

‘A moment, Sir.’

‘Charlie, get over here.’ He shouts across to a boy no more than ten years old, ridiculous in a man’s sagging breeches.

I can not resist a last look. I turn my back and peer into the case. It is a mistake. I see spikes of splintered wood, the tip of a bloody fingernail jutting through Horus’s claw. I clamp the case shut, and stare down at the boy in his breeches.

The foreman takes the case from my hand.

‘You are sure, Sir?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Go on then, Charlie.’

‘But...’

‘Do as you’re told, there’s a good lad.’

He hands the case to the boy who runs to the edge of the pit that will soon be Durham University’s new Medical School, at Newcastle. The boy climbs down with the agility of a monkey and lays the case in the centre of a wide rectangle of earth. I feel robbed. I want it back in my possession, but I know this is for the best.

I stand on the edge of the pit and wait. Loss gives way to fear. I hear the crack of splintering wood. Preston pulls the foreman aside once more and I curse him

to the depths of hell. Let the man do his job you idiot. I stare at the case, watching and waiting, while Preston flaps his ugly mouth.

At last he steps away and the work begins. The first layer of concrete goes down but still I can hear it, scrabbling like an animal in a cage. All through the morning I watch them pour streams of viscous concrete into the pit. It begins to set. I stretch and turn towards home. The job is done. It is a thing to cast from my mind.

I draw the curtains tight in my bedchamber and lie back on the coverlet. I close my itching eyes and I see those others watching me, those hands scratching and burrowing and I know if it takes them a hundred years they will break free and take their revenge, on someone. It will not be me. I feel another trip to Egypt may be called for. Certainly, I have no wish to be in the environs of that building.

It would seem only decent, however, to leave these papers with my Will, so that you who come after me may know why your Dean is watching you with malice burning in his odd blue eyes, and why his steady hands are clawing through the floor.