The Dark Water

David Pirie

Chapter 1

THE WAKENING
The room was in darkness. I felt that even without opening my eyes. Sometimes there were sounds, though none that meant anything. I had no sense of physical space. When proper memory threatened to drift into my consciousness, I resisted it at once, knowing how unwelcome it might prove. For the moment, I wanted only the dark.

So I slept again, I have no idea how long. Until at last, reluctantly, I opened my eyes. The room was black as I had anticipated and now I was forced to wonder where I was. As some sense of identity started to return, I guessed I had been taken ill with a fever, for the bedclothes smelt rank. But I could not be in the familiar bedroom of my house in Southsea: for one thing this place was too dark. And then I recalled the lodgings in London and my short-term position as a locum at a riverside practice.

Yet I was sure I could not be lying in the tiny bedroom I had rented from the Morland family. It was too quiet here and the bed was strange. After a time, I forced myself away from its lumpy pillow but was quite unprepared for what followed. My head throbbed with a violent pain. This was bad enough but what was worse, I suddenly recalled my last few minutes of consciousness.

Their climax was a face, the face of the only man I have ever met who deserves worse than the description 'evil'. I first knew Thomas Neill Cream in Edinburgh, indeed we had been friends until I discovered that he was a murderer. And then he murdered the woman I loved.

I swore to avenge her while my teacher at Edinburgh, Dr Joseph Bell – who had recruited me as his clerk and allowed me to help in his criminal investigations – declared a fight against the future of such crimes without motive. But in 1878, Cream disappeared into the American continent, sending only tormenting notes and, on one occasion, a lethal instrument that was designed to kill me.

Despite this, neither Bell nor I had forgotten our quest and chance had brought us together recently during a London case, when I became convinced Cream had returned to England. The Doctor disagreed. He was sure the strings were being pulled from far away and finally persuaded me he was right before he said his farewells.

I walked back to my lodgings at the Morland house, a safe haven where Sally Morland, whom I loved as a friend and greatly admired, greeted me with the news that an American uncle, whom she sometimes mentioned, had made a surprise visit.

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I thought nothing of this at the time but now, as I recalled it, I felt the hair stand on the back of my neck. Once again I saw Sally's flushed excitement, her eyes laughing in the light that flooded the hall from the candles that celebrated the uncle's visit. She had, I remembered, given me a cordial, a green drink he had prepared, which she said was part of the surprise and which tasted refreshing and bitter.

Then I had entered the living room and her children were there, laughing, with their oranges and nuts, and a figure in the rocking chair had turned around, smiling to see me. It was Cream.

Just before unconsciousness, I grasped some of it. How months earlier he must have set in train the events that led up to this moment; how he had befriended the Morlands (for the 'uncle' was only a family friend) and discreetly provided my name to a nearby practice.

All of this I saw with a kind of passive awe before losing my senses. Now, lying here in the darkness, I felt terror. Cream was an expert poisoner, indeed it was his preferred instrument of murder. If he had intended me to die, he could certainly have done it with his green cordial. Which could only mean his plans were more extensive. Was he somewhere beside me now in this black space?

The prospect was so awful I tried to gather my strength, forcing my head higher, opening my eyes as wide as I could. Still I could see nothing, only vague insubstantial shapes. There was a low noise from somewhere outside, perhaps a wind.

'Are you there?' The words came out as a whisper. My throat was parched and I began to sense body pains, no doubt masked by the poison. It occurred to me he could have done anything, even severed a limb. I tried to move my legs. They seemed to function, but then a man feels his legs long after they are amputated, so I touched them quickly. Thank God they were whole but my legs and arms were feeble. I noticed too that I was drenched in perspiration. 'Are you there?' I tried to shout. There was nothing. Absolute silence.

I knew I must try to move though I felt so weak, even the simplest movement was horrible. I forced myself up further. And for the first time I realised that I was still wearing clothes, a shirt and undergarment, and the blankets on me were heavy.

Shutting my mind to the stench of this bed, I forced myself into a sitting position. It was still dark but there was a slight movement in the shadows before me and I expected him to step forward. Again something moved, this time accompanied by a low sound. I decided it must be some kind of reflection, and when it came again I was sure. The sound was wind, the shadows were of branches. That meant somewhere behind me was a window. Perhaps I could reach it.

I summoned all my strength and pushed my left leg out from under the blankets. It found support below me but I knew it would give way if I put any weight on it. I paused, not sure how to proceed, and suddenly had to endure a violent bout of shivering. This made me swing the other leg down. But, even with both feet on the

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ground, it was obvious there was no way I could stand and I sank quickly to a kneeling position, clutching the bedclothes.

My head was facing the bed, so if I crawled to my right I should come to the window that cast the reflection. I turned my body, registering the floor was stone and cold to the touch. If Cream were here, how he would be enjoying this humiliation. In London I had felt such an overwhelming presence of the man, now I could not sense him.

I began to crawl but it was painfully slow. As a distraction, I made myself think more about that last evening. My main dread was that Sally Morland and her children had been given the poison. I was sure my glass of cordial had been poured before I got there. Obviously he wanted everything to be normal, so no harm could have come to the Morlands up to that point. This gave me hope but I had also to face the plain truth, which was that Cream would think nothing of slaughtering them all.

Here was the worst possibility for me, far worse than the fact he might be watching me now. There had been nothing improper in my friendship with Sally Morland, whose world was built around her two young children and her husband. But she was so full of transparent joy and mischievousness, and reminded me so much of my first love, that when I began to suspect Cream had returned to the capital, I made a private pledge. Namely that if Sally Morland or her family came to harm because of me, then I must be better off embracing solitude, anonymity or even death. How could I do otherwise if all I brought was misery to those I cared for?

My movement forward was still agonisingly slow. As yet I had come to no furniture but sensed a shape ahead. Meanwhile, I took some small consolation from the knowledge that even Cream could not have the slightest suspicion of my private thoughts about Sally Morland. Therefore, why should he bother with her? It was true he often killed for little reason but the wholesale slaughter of a respectable London family is not a common event. It would cause a fullscale alarm; and both of us would be key suspects. Would even Cream risk a manhunt on this scale when he merely needed to tell the Morlands I was in need of treatment and carry me anywhere he wished?

Of course I knew the answer. Yes he would happily take such a risk if he thought it would hurt me. It came down to that alone. And it was just at this point in my reflections that my hands felt cold stone blocking my way. I had reached a wall.

From above my head came the sound of wind. I succeeded in walking my hands up the wall till I was kneeling and finally, using this support, I pulled myself to my feet. At first I swayed and nearly fell but I had the wall to steady me and I leant against it, breathing heavily. There was cold air here, which cleared my head. I reached out and touched a curtain and then the ledge of a window. The material was rough and quite thick but I pushed it back. Outside there was just enough moonlight to show me I was at ground level and a dank overgrown wilderness lay beyond the window. A slight wind shook the branches of a small sycamore tree, the source of the moving shadow.

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My last conscious memory had been of night-time, but I was sure this could not possibly be the same night. It was not just my pain and hunger. The air here was only mildly cold, yet the night at the Morlands' had been frosty, indeed there was snow on the streets. How long had I been unconscious and where was I?

As I stared, it did not even seem to me that I could be sure this was London. There was no gaslight, indeed not a flicker of artificial light anywhere. Of course I might be looking out on some large garden or park, but it hardly seemed cultivated and there were no lights of any kind from other buildings.

I tried to open the window but it was nailed shut so I turned back to the room. The opposite wall looked to be bare and without openings of any kind. In fact, as I discovered later, there was a small high window on that side but nothing else. Beside the bed, I could make out an armchair and, beyond that, a table. I staggered forward and rested myself on the back of the chair, which was ancient and badly in need of upholstering. This was no smart establishment, it was a hovel and how many hovels in the heart of London could boast a large garden out of sight of any houses?

To my right, I saw an old screen of some kind. Past that I thought I could make out the outline of a door. Knowing I had to reach it, I took a pace and nearly fell but managed to keep upright. I staggered three more paces until I was there and the handle supported me. But the thing was solid oak with two huge locks and, of course, no keys. I tried a feeble tug, but I might as well have been tugging at brickwork. In my present condition there was no hope here.

From somewhere beyond the door came an evil smell and I staggered back to the armchair where it was less pronounced. As I sat, knowing my strength was nearly exhausted, a new sensation assailed me. For suddenly I smelt and then spied food on the table beside the chair. Here was a bowl of milk, a half loaf of bread, even a slice of bacon. It was not very fresh but I was ravenous and did not care. I lifted the milk with trembling hands and drank it down. Then I clawed at the bread, which was hard but otherwise good, before gnawing the bacon. I swallowed as much as I could, wondering if, now that I had some relief from my hunger, I could smash the window.

But I knew in my heart I was far too weak. Even lifting that bowl of milk had been an effort. Already, despite the food, I could feel consciousness ebbing away, and I stumbled back to my bed. A little more rest, I told myself, allowing a chance for the nourishment to do its work, and surely I could get up enough strength to break that window and get out before he returned.

But now, once again, the darkness descended upon me. It was many hours before I regained consciousness and heard what I took to be the noise of rain. Outside it seemed night but not, I was sure, the same night. My head was heavy and I felt a curious lassitude. What did it matter in the end if he came back here to torture and kill me? Ultimately, whatever happened, I would die and sink into this. What reason on earth was there then to fight the sensation of numbness in my limbs?

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It was only when I thought of my enemy that I began to distrust this feeling. Slowly I became aware there was a flickering in the room behind me. With some difficulty I turned my throbbing head around and found that someone had lit a candle, now almost extinguished.

A fear ran through me, which at least dispelled some of that hideous complacency. Yet I could see nobody. Using all my strength, I raised myself up. There was the armchair I had inspected previously, the table with the bread and milk, now replenished. And the screen. But nothing else. Was he hiding? There was no reason why he should bother and the candle had burnt a good way down.

Of course I wanted to slump back into the darkness, but the shock of knowing he had been here sharpened my senses. I had to eat and drink. So again I got my feet to the ground and now, with the benefit of light, I dragged myself to the table and slumped into the chair. Suddenly from somewhere came a sound, a soft rumbling clattering sound. I tensed, waiting for footsteps, and the turn of a key in the lock, but the noise receded. I decided it had been a cart on the road outside.

Turning back to the table, I got the milk to my lips and drank some of it down. It had been heavily sugared and I was glad of it. Then I put out a hand and pawed the bread into my mouth.

Suddenly I stopped. The bread was rough-grained and wholesome, but I had begun to recognise a taste. It was a chalky bitter undertaste I knew only too well. With fury, I spat what was left of my mouthful on to the table and lashed out with my hand in an attempt to knock the milk jug to the ground. But – fortunately as it happened – the effort only made me lose my balance and I missed the jug altogether, falling hard to the floor.

How could I have been such a fool? Only my own ravenous hunger and the weakness of my mind could possibly have blinded me to what was obvious. Here I was, meekly accepting day after day the sustenance of an accomplished poisoner. The bread was certainly saturated in laudanum and the sugared milk would have contained even more. Little wonder every time I got up, I seemed to be slipping further into the darkness. As long as I survived on this fare, I was his prisoner and he could visit me whenever he wished and do whatever he wished. The diet would only make me weaker and weaker until I was a passive craving thing, entirely in his hands. No doubt he was looking forward to that, and would arrive soon enough to enjoy it.

In a feverish burst of activity, I determined now I must get out at all costs, even if I collapsed in the rain. I forced myself to my feet.

What I needed was an implement of some kind but there was nothing that I could see. The door was hopeless. The window must be the best opportunity and I turned back in that direction. But to my dawning horror I could already feel the effects of my meal. The black waters were rising in my brain and my feet felt like blocks of wood. There was no chance of fighting this. As it stole over me, I began to wonder if even my own memories were at fault. Perhaps this nightmare of Cream's return was

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some phantom conjured up by the laudanum. Had I merely, as Bell once feared, succumbed to addiction?

But then my eye fell on the milk and the bread. What addict ever went to the trouble of lacing his food with the stuff or of hiding the precious bottles? No, this was his work and at all costs I must hold on to my reason.

The only point in my favour had to be the realisation of what he was doing to me. With the last of my strength I disposed of the bread under the bed and spilt some of the milk there too. Let him suppose I had consumed most of my meal, while in truth I had taken much less. This was my final desperate thought as I collapsed.

When I woke up, he was by my bed. And he was singing.

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