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Ingenious Pain

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Extract

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FIRST

1772



On a hot, cloud-hemmed afternoon in August, three men cross a stable yard near the village of Cow in Devon. The grouping is oddly formal: the two younger men, like heralds or warders, solemnly precede their host, or, more fancifully, draw him on – his black-coated bulk, his red face – by the reins of an invisible harness. One of the guests carries in his hand a leather bag from which, as he walks to the stable door, there comes a muffled jangling.

It is the older man who, after a pause, opens the door, standing back for the others to enter. They do so, slowly against the darkness. The stable has been swept clean. The smell of horses, of hay, of leather and dung, is mixed with the smell of burnt lavender. Despite the season there is no offensive odour from the corpse. The Reverend wonders if Mary knows the secrets of preserving flesh. In old days the gods kept dead heroes sweet until the funeral games were done, the pyres lit. There are ways, no doubt, still. Ointments, spells, certain prayers. She has been sitting on a milking stool by the table. She stands when they enter, a neat, squat figure, feathered with shadows. 'Well,' says the Reverend, 'I said we should come. These gentlemen' – he indicates the younger men – 'are Dr Ross and Dr Burke. Doctors, Mary.'

She looks past the Reverend, looking not at Burke and Ross but at the bag in Dr Ross's hand.

'Doctors,' he says again, a hushed voice. He wants to call her 'lass', but though, measuring by her looks, she has less years than he has, she seems immeasurably older, and not simply older, but as if she belonged to a different age, a different order; a relative of rocks, venerable trees.

She goes, not just quietly, but with no audible sound at all. Burke looks at Ross, mouths the word 'witch'. They cross themselves discreetly, as if adjusting buttons on their waistcoats. Says Burke: 'We should make a start or we shall be riding back in a storm. Have you a lamp there, Reverend?'

There is a lamp, brought when the body was moved. The Reverend lights it from his tinder box – tac, tac; flint on steel – and passes it to Ross. Ross and Burke come up to the table where James is laid, his length in a woollen nightgown. His hair, almost white when he first came to the rectory, began, in the last year, to darken. Mary has washed it, rubbed it with pomade, brushed it and bound it with a black ribbon. He does not look like he is sleeping.

'A handsome corpse,' Burke says. 'Oh yes, there are features all right.'

Beneath James's crossed hands lies a book in scuffed leather binding. Burke snatches it, views the spine, grins, passes it to the Reverend, who has already recognised it: *Gulliver's Travels*. James borrowed it from the study only a week or two ago. Who placed it here? Sam? Mary? Sam shall have the book if he wants it. The boy should have something.

Ross strips the body, drops the gown on to the floor. From the bag he takes a knife and passes it to Burke who looks along its edge and nods. Burke places a hand on James's chin, and slashes the trunk from the top of the sternum to a point just above the pubic hair. He then cuts across below the ribs to make an inverted cross,

bloody-edged, moist. He pauses to take a spectacles case from his waistcoat pocket, fixes the spectacles on to his face, blinking. He mutters something under his breath, takes hold of a flap of skin and fat and peels it away. He uses the knife to free it, to coax it from the matter below. His hands are muscled like a sailor's. Ross holds the lamp aloft. He has a short stick he swooped up on their way over from the house. He uses it to prod at James's guts.

'Would you care for a more intimate view, Reverend? You can see little from there, I think.'

The Reverend shuffles forward. Burke disgusts him.

Dr Ross says: 'The Reverend's interest is in the invisible tenant of the house rather than in the house itself. Heh?'

The Reverend Lestrade says: 'Just so, sir.'

'Now for the heart,' Burke says.

They begin to tear at the chest, working at the ribs with a handsaw, then using the knife to worry through the great vessels. The doctors are visibly excited, bright as eggs. There shall be a paper in this, societies addressed, circles of illuminati: 'Some Thoughts, hm, upon the Case of the Late Jm Dyer. An Enquiry into . . . the Curious and Remarkable . . . who until his twenty-something year was insensible to . . . knew not . . . entirely without all sensation . . . feeling . . . knowledge of . . . pain. With proofs, illustrations, exhibits and so forth.'

The Reverend turns away, looks out at the yard where two birds peck grain from a cake of dung. Beyond, in the wall where he grows sweet-william, a green door leads into the garden. He associates the door with James; James coming through and examining the pears or simply standing in the yard, frowning as if he could not remember what he was about.

Noises, like a boot stepping in mud, disturb him. Ross has got it in his hands, the broken muscle of James Dyer's heart. He looks, thinks the Reverend, as if he might like to eat it, and only some very little shame is keeping him from it. Burke wipes his hands

on a rag and takes a folded newspaper from his coat pocket. He opens the paper, spreading it over James's thighs, then takes the heart from Ross and lays it in the paper. 'If you have no objection, Reverend . . .' He wraps the heart, stows it in the bag.

'None, sir.' Dead hearts are not sacred. Let them search it. And he remembers, as he remembers so often, that other searching, Mary standing above James in his chamber in the house on Millionaya, glancing round at the sound of the Reverend's breathing as he stood, motionless in the doorway with the serving girl. Then, knowing he would not, could not interfere, Mary looking back at James, sleeping – drugged? – unbuttoning his shirt, uncovering his breast. The room was dark enough, one small candle by the window. And yet he *did* see something: her hand, seeming to wound James, yet leaving no mark, no more than had she dipped her hand through a skin of milk.

'Reverend?'

'Sir?'

'You are missing some fine things. Here now is the gall bladder.'

'I beg pardon. I was . . . recollecting. A memory of Dr Dyer. We were in Russia together.'

'You have mentioned it, sir. Several times. It is very natural you should think of him, sir, though memory tends a man to sentiment and sentiment, admirable in one of your calling, is a luxury in ours. You must think of these remains not as your former . . . not as a man you once knew, but as the raw material of a legitimate philosophical investigation.'

'A fleshly casket,' chimes Ross, whose breath throws out, astonishing through all the other smells in the place, the unmistakable odour of port and onions, 'containing conundrums.'

The Reverend stares at them. They have shed their coats, rolled their sleeves and are gored up to their elbows, like figures in some absurd Senecan tragedy. Ross takes the knife from Burke and goes

round to James's head, cuts swiftly round the back by the hairline and, before the Reverend can guess his purpose, jerks the scalp away from the bones of the skull and lays it over the corpse's face in an obscene, bloody pile. A hot, acidy liquid floods the Reverend's throat. He swallows it and walks quickly out of the stable, across the yard and through the green door into the garden. He shuts the door behind him.

Ahead, the land rises in a smooth sweep to the edge of ancient woods. Sheep are grazing there and a boy is walking by the cool fringe of the wood. In his present mood it appears to the Reverend a delightful lie, but he is grateful for it. It serves him like the little painted screens Italian priests are said to hold before the eyes of condemned men to hide the approaching scaffold. He wonders how it is they gulled him, Burke and Ross, yet they seemed credible, men with reputations, letters. And he too was curious to see if James's body might be made to explain something of the mystery of his life. He had imagined something dry, respectful. Instead he has given his friend into the hands of butchers, lunatics. What if *she* were to see it? She is about the house, doing God knows what, for he has never been sure how she passes her time. The other servants, from fearing her, now take a pride in having her among them. She helps them with their pains. She has, for example, the ability to calm a headache by simply pressing on the sufferer's face.

The door sounds on its hinges. He looks round. Mary is there, standing under the weather-stone, holding out a wooden box. Her coming out just then, as if drawn by the scent of his thinking of her, disturbs him. Worse, he sees there is blood on his fingers and he clasps his hands behind his back, asking: 'Is something the matter? Is there some trouble?'

She unfastens the catch on the box and opens the lid. He says: 'Ah, yes, the device.' He would like it for himself. He, after all, brought it home from Petersburg with the rest of James's dunnage when James disappeared. They thought he was dead.

'It is yours now, Mary.'

She looks at him a while, nods slowly, closes the box and goes back into the house.

There is a faint noise of sawing. When it stops, the Reverend returns to the stable, praying that it will be over, that Burke and Ross can be sent on their road. He will not have them inside. They may take water in a bucket from one of the rain-butts and wash in the yard. James they must patch up as decently as they can – vandals! Killick will coffin him. Tomorrow at noon they will bury him. Clarke is perhaps digging the grave even now, a spot by the wall next to Makin's orchard.

'You have discovered something, gentlemen? Anything?' He tries to infuse his voice with disdain but it emerges weakly. An edge of petulance.

Burke looks up at him. A dozen flies are busy about the mouth of a bucket by the end of the table under James's opened head.

'Nothing,' says Burke, 'I could explain to one not acquainted with the art of anatomy.'

'But the heat, and the vermin . . . He was of your own profession. Surely you have done?'

Says Burke: 'You are exciting yourself, my dear Reverend. Come now. This closeness oppresses you. You are not easy. It were better you retire, yes, and avail yourself of some agreeable eccoprotic. Rhubarb, say.'

'Or pulp of colocynth,' says Ross, openly amused.

'Colocynth is good,' says Burke. 'Or a little of the root bark – *euonymus atropurpureus*. Should you have it by. A man of your physiognomy can never purge himself too frequently. You agree, Dr Ross?'

'A very cleansing measure, Dr Burke. I'm sure poor Dyer would have advised it.'

'We shall inform you of our findings.'

A speck of light on Burke's spectacles wavers in the air like an

angry spark. The Reverend hesitates, then says: 'I shall be in my study.' He shuffles out, too fatigued to feel much shame.



The yard glimmers: starlight on the backs of the puddles left by the storm. The Reverend closes the stable door, crosses the yard. In the stable, Mary is sitting up with James. Burke and Ross left the body tolerably sealed and the Reverend, with Mr Killick, placed it in the box at dusk, nailing the lid. Killick, a good man, helped sluice and scrub the stable and scatter fresh straw and handfuls of dry herbs. By the time Mary appeared the air was breathable, the horror of the afternoon eradicated but for a few tea-brown stains on the table. They hid these beneath a cloth.

Weary, yet at ease for the first time that day, the Reverend loiters in his garden. It is nothing more than a cottage garden, nothing one might boast of, yet it is one of the things of his life that he loves, solidly and without reserve. Of what else can he say so? His sister Dido perhaps, on most occasions other than when she harasses him to have the panelling changed for something more modern, or lectures him on his dress and habits, which it pleases her to liken to a poor country curate who keeps a drinking-shop.

His patroness, Lady Hallam? She has aged. How vast her bosom has become, what a weight for her! But still the sweetest disposition, the sweetest intelligence. Worth every sonnet he scratched for her, all the hours poring over blotched sheets struggling to make the things scan, to force out a rhyme not utterly devoid of sense. Half a dozen might be good, that out

of more than a hundred, two hundred. He must burn them, of course, next year or the year after, and certainly should his health fail. Intolerable they should be read by strangers – the fat vicar at Cow who wished to play bull with Lady H.

He walks to his pond, claps his hands and a dozen ripples break over the surface, threads of light circling out to the banks. Good, clean-fleshed creatures. With Mrs Cole to sauce them one would look in vain for better food on a gold plate in any bishop's palace. He must expect a summons to the palace in Exeter before long. A polite pressing to put Mary out. Her being there while James was alive was part of the Reverend's charity towards the doctor. But such a woman, such a very irregular woman in the house of an unmarried servant of the Church . . .

Leaning down, he dips his fingers in the water, intrigued by the dark bowl of his reflected head. A light moves in the parlour window. He stands and goes closer. The curtains are undrawn. Tabitha is lighting the candles in the sconces. A great, strong, heavy girl, a hoyden, not pretty, her face distinguished only by youth, health. The first month she was in the house she suffered with nightmares, pissed her bed and moped red-eyed about the house, dropping glasses, incapable of following the simplest orders. There was a difficult interview between the Reverend and his housekeeper, Mrs Cole, Mrs Cole threatening to go to her sister in Taunton if Tabitha remained in the house. She had repeated it several times – 'Taunton, Reverend, Taunton' – as if the town lay on the far side of the Bosphorus. But the nightmares passed, the girl became handy, and in the winters Tabitha and Mrs Cole share a bed, the housekeeper curled behind the girl like moss on a warm stone. It has crossed the Reverend's mind he might enjoy that himself.

He takes a last draught of night air, goes into the house, shoots the bolts and turns into the parlour. Tabitha, who has in her hands a tray of his second-best long-stemmed glasses, starts as if he were the devil, come to snack on her. It is a nervous habit that never

fails to irritate him. They stare at each other a moment and then he remembers how very naturally she cried at James's death. A generous heart.

He says: 'Are you going to your bed now, Tabitha? Are you tired?'

'Middlin', sir, but if you fancied a posset or what not. Gran'father allus had a posset before bed.'

'Does he thrive still?'

'No, sir.' She smiles happily. 'He fell in the fire one time an' died of it. He were a cheerful make of man, though. Before, like.'

The Reverend sees it: an old man in the fire, a pair of bandy legs, truly bandy, like the metal knacks for taking off the top of an egg. Like something out of Bosch. 'I won't have anything now, my dear. I shall sit up a while. Perhaps I shall read.'

She curtseys; he notes her cleavage, fears again for his glasses. At the door she says: 'An' I can come to the burying tomorrow, mayn't I? Mrs Cole said as I should ask.'

'Surely. I should like to see you there. You were fond of him?'

'Lor', sir, I misses him already. Don' you miss 'im, sir?'

'Very much.'

'I misses him.' She pauses, wets her lips. 'I were gonna ask you summat, only Mrs Cole said I should not.'

'Well, you must ask it now.'

'Whether it were a miracle when Dr James . . . I means, sir, Dr Dyer, when he saved that Negro?'

'I fear, Tabitha, that this is not the age of miracles.'

She gawps at him as if he has said something wildly important, shocking. 'What were it, then, if weren't a miracle?'

'The doctor's skill.'

''E calls 'imself Lazarus now, sir, the black fellow.'

'What did he call himself before?'

'John Amazement.'

'I like that better.'

Alone, he peels off his wig and scratches vigorously at his scalp. A moth, which he vaguely remembers having flown in the previous evening, begins to fly about one of the candles, then settles on the mirror. Its wings are coloured like wood grain and on each there are marks like staring eyes. Nature's cunning.

From a cabinet he takes a decanter and glass, fills the glass with smuggled brandy, drains it with a single gulp. He sets the glass on the mantelpiece, takes up one of the candles there and goes out into the passage, guarding the light with his hand. His study, a small, tightly furnished room looking out from the other side of the house, has scents of ink, sweet tobacco, books. He sets the candle on the edge of his writing desk, his 'escritoire', as Dido has it. The surface is entirely hidden by papers. Letters formal and informal, bills: £1 18s to the wheelwright; a monstrous £10 for silver spoons from London. Of money in, only a note for ten shillings and sixpence from the parish officer for marrying a man in custody to a woman carrying his child. Beside these, some notes for a sermon, three goose-feather quills, a sand tray, a blade, a stoppered bottle of ink.

He holds up the candle and runs its light over the backs of books, pausing at old favourites to tap softly on the spines. His tattered, grammar-school Homer, his father's Collier edition of Marcus Aurelius. *Pilgrim's Progress*, illustrated, bought in Bow Lane on his first trip to London. Ovid, deliciously louche, given him by a friend at the University who hanged himself the following year. Two volumes of Milton in stiff black leather, another gift, these from Lady Hallam on his first being appointed to his living, and valued by him more for the lovely swirls of her dedication than for anything of Milton's. Voltaire's *Candide*, bringing instantly to the Reverend's mind the small, dark, intelligent face of Monsieur About. Fielding, Defoe. A much-unread volume of Allestree's *Whole Duty of Man*. Tillotson's sermons.

Turning from the shelves, he opens a chest beside his desk and

pulls from it a canvas sack, lodges the sack beneath his arm and hurries back to the parlour, just as the clock shudders through ten. He sets down the bag, strips off his coat and drops it over a chair. With his back to the empty grate, he finds himself, as usual, face to face with his father, the Reverend John Lestrade of Lune in Lancashire. A very middling sort of portrait, his father's face a shiny, one-dimensional oval against a background of brown varnish, like the reflection of the moon in a muddy pond. They exchange their silent, nightly greeting.

The Reverend endeavours to recall what he knows of James's father. A farmer, of that he is reasonably certain, though whether great or small he does not know. Of the mother he knows, if possible, rather less. Some slim reference to her having died young. What did such reticence conceal? The elusiveness of a self-invented man? Some doubt, some niggle concerning his true progenitor? Ah, what questions he should like to put to that poor, cut-about head in the stable! Mary must know a great bundle of things. He has long considered setting down the Petersburg stuff. The rest might be uncovered, somehow.

He eases himself down a little way, breaks wind into the fireplace. Immediately he experiences the pleasant urge to shit, which, after enjoying the sensation a while, he acts upon, dragging over his close-stool, a noble piece of furniture, solid as a pulpit, and setting it with its back to the candles. With a kind of flourish he debreeches himself, removes the padded seat and settles on the wooden O. The canvas sack is to hand; he leans and draws it up to his feet. The mouth of the sack is closed by a length of cord. He unties it, slips in his hand. The first thing he touches is a smaller bag, this also of oiled canvas, rolled like a small log. He draws it out and sets it on his hairless thighs.

Unrolling it, the implements seem to wake as they catch the light. Knives, scissors, a handsaw, needles and other objects whose name and purpose he can only guess at and which might expressly

have been made the better to terrify a patient. He draws out the longest of the knives, double-edged, sharp still as a sack of limes. This surely is the knife James used on the unfortunate postillion, though without it, its very adequate bite, they would have buried the fellow at the monastery. And this curved mirror about the size of a child's palm he first saw the night of their arrival at the monastery when James used it, fixed to a candle, to sew up his own head. None of the implements has been used since then, though when James came to the house, when it seemed he had regained the better part of his senses, the Reverend offered them back. James had not wanted them.

The Reverend rolls the bag neatly and sets it down. He dips again into the sack and withdraws a sheaf of documents, stashed willy-nilly from the last time he examined them. Indeed, he has been through the sack several times, but with James's death the contents have assumed a new and important character. Tomorrow, when the body is in the ground, these will number among the very few proofs of James's existence. The papers he now examines, holding each one up six inches from his face – his spectacles are in his coat pocket and he is loath to disturb the delicate business of making a stool – are mostly certificates, some of which, perhaps all, are forgeries.

The first and prettiest purports to be from the Hôtel Dieu in Paris. Three black seals on it, a half-yard of ribbon and a frantic, indecipherable signature. The Reverend is tolerably sure that James never studied in France. Next, and more credible, is a certificate from St George's hospital in London, stating that James Dyer attended classes in anatomy and *materia medica*. A third is from the Surgeon's Hall, rating James as fit to serve as surgeon's mate on a sixth-rate of His Majesty's Navy. Dated 1756. James would have been barely more than a boy. There is a companion piece to this; the Reverend fishes it out of the sack. A snuff-box, ivory-topped, and inscribed on its base: *A*

MUNRO 'H.M.S. Aquilon'. He opens it, sniffs. Though empty so many years it yet retains a pungency which, rising through the Reverend's nose to his brain, so stimulates it that Munro momentarily looms, hesitant and ectoplasmic in the shadows beside the window.

He snaps it shut, drops it in the sack, farts tinnily into the enamelled pot. Another sheet; not a certificate but a reference, a most impressive one, for this signature is legible – John Hunter, that Alexander among surgeons, who finds James to be '*most excellent in the treatment of Fractures simple and compound, the management of Contusions and Amputations and the proper use of Bandages*'. It is, thinks the Reverend, as if the Archbishop of York were to write that he finds me particularly devout, an exemplary pastor of my flock.

The last, a fine vellum though much beat up, is in French. A neat, even hand; its carefully flourished Fs and Ys are the work of a secretary at the Russian embassy. It is signed by the ambassador and stamped with the imperial birds. It is James's letter of safe conduct, introducing him as '*Un membre distingué de la fraternité de médecine anglaise*'.

Now there is only the little book. The book that promised so much when he saw it first and which now taunts him more than ever. Surely it is some manner of diary? Yet the entire book is written in a code or shorthand that the Reverend, despite some attempts, cannot make out. Even the diagrams are cryptic; impossible to say if they are maps or visual notes for a surgical procedure, or nothing at all, merely lines without the least significance. The single legible word comes on the very last page – 'Liza'. An old love? Did he have old loves? Liza. That too must remain a mystery. Drowsily, the Reverend wonders if his own life will appear like this, a book in a language no one can understand. He thinks: Who shall sit by the fire for me, puzzling it out?

His evacuation is not progressing well. The matter, though

noisily presaged, will not emerge. The effort of it wearies him and he fears a strain. It would not do to end like unlamented George Secundus. Sleep crowds him; he closes his eyes. The faces of Burke and Ross briefly form like faces in a tobacco cloud. Other faces follow: Mary, Tabitha, Dido; not James. The clock taps out the progress of the night. He wonders: What shall I say tomorrow, what shall I say, what shall I say . . . ?

From his uncurling fist, from the smooth, uncertain surface of his thighs, the papers of James Dyer tumble to the floor. The moth scorches its wings; the Reverend gently snores. From the stable, just loud enough to pierce the open window of Dido's room, where Dido stands, streaming tears, comes a voice, a song, husky and monotonous, utterly foreign, impenetrably sad.