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Instruments of Darkness

Written by Imogen Robertson

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Instruments of Darkness

IMOGEN
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PART I

I.1

Friday, 2 June 1780, West Sussex, England

GABRIEL CROWTHER OPENED his eyes.

'Mr Crowther, sir?'

The light in the room was weak. Morning light.

'Whoever it is, send them away,' he said.

He blinked. The maid was still there.

'She won't go, sir. It's Mrs Westerman from Caveley Park. She said she is determined, sir. And she said to give you this.'

The maid held out a piece of paper, staying as far away from the bed as she could, as if she feared her master would bite.

The intrusion was unusual. Crowther had done a good job of ignoring his neighbours since taking up residence in Hartswood, near Pulborough, the previous summer, and their visits had swiftly petered out. He did not need companions with whom to pass his time and had no intention of participating in diversions, picnics and subscription dinners of what passed for society in the county. The rest of the village never expected to have much to do with him, but after a month or two of observation, many of the local women

found the easiest way to still a child was to threaten it with Mr Crowther and his big knife. He was a student of Anatomy. He wanted to know how bodies lived, what record a man's life left on his physical remains, and he had the leisure and means to inquire.

His habits soon became known. To the educated, he was a man of science cursed with an appalling lack of manners; to everyone under ten he was a devil doctor who cut the souls from the living bodies of naughty children and ate them.

The maid still held the note out towards him; it trembled a little. He snatched it from her with a low growl and flicked it open. It was written on notepaper – taken from his own desk downstairs, he noticed – in an educated female hand. The writer had not troubled with compliments or excuses about the hour, but confined herself to some dozen words: *I have found a body on my land. His throat has been cut.*

Crowther passed the note back to his maid.

'My compliments to Mrs Westerman, and tell her I shall wait on her as soon as I am dressed. Have my horse got ready and brought round.'

The maid stared at him open-mouthed.

'Do it *now*, if you please, madam.'

The previous evening, Adams Music Shop, Tichfield Street near Soho Square, London

SUSAN ADAMS PRESSED her ear to the floor. On the first of each month her father hosted a little concert in his shop for his neighbours and friends. It was a ritual of his since he had begun, in a small way, to succeed with his business of engraving

and printing musical scores and selling them, along with collections of popular songs and airs, to London's musically inclined residents. It was a kind of offering he made in thanks for his seven rooms, workshop and yard. His children built their own rituals around it. Jonathan would come into Susan's room, claiming he wished to hear the music better, then be asleep before the first piece was over in the comfort of his older sister's bed.

'Susan?' he grumbled. 'You're supposed to be in bed too. You can hear the music from here, and it is not so hard as the floor.'

'Shush, Jonathan. I'm listening.' She heard a sigh as her brother gave up and fidgeted the bedclothes around him. The air was still heavy with the heat of the June day passed.

'Well, tell me what is happening then.' He yawned.

She smiled; one of her blond ringlets tickled her ear. She tucked it away and considered.

'Mr Paxton, Mr Whitaker and Miss Harding have all arrived. Mr Paxton has his cello, Mr Whitaker is to play my harpsichord and Miss Harding is to sing. They are all drinking punch in the shop.'

'I helped sweep it this afternoon.'

Susan had watched Jonathan's attempts to help the maid, Jane, while she tidied away the scores and parts with her father. She did not think he had been very helpful at all, but he was still only six, and should therefore be indulged by someone three years his senior such as herself. Though he could be annoying. She ignored the interruption.

'The chairs have been dragged into long rows. Mrs Service is sitting very shy in a corner, because she never buys any music,

and her dress is old. Mr and Mrs Chase from Sutton Street are here, because Mr Chase loves a little music when business is done. And Mr Graves is here, of course, frowning and trying to rub inkstains off his fingers because he's only just noticed them.'

There was a sleepy giggle from the bed, followed by: 'Is Miss Chase here?'

'Of course.' Susan leaped up suddenly and stood very straight, pointing one bare and not very clean foot in front of her. 'She is walking in right now, like this.'

The little girl bent her head to one side, adjusted the shawl over her narrow shoulders and put one hand to her waist; the other gathered a pinch of her nightdress like the full skirts of an evening gown and she moved between the imaginary chairs, smiling to left and right. The room seemed to flood with candlelight and conversation.

Jonathan sat up in bed again. 'And Mr Graves is watching her?'

'Yes, from his corner.'

She hopped into a high-backed chair by the empty fireplace and became a tangle of limbs, a young man trying hard to look at his ease, and not entirely succeeding. His mouth opens as if he would like to address someone, then he stops himself and returns to examining his fingernails.

Jonathan laughed again. Susan held up her hand. Faintly from the room below came the first low rasp of Mr Paxton's violoncello.

'They are beginning.'

Susan jumped from her chair and crouched again, her ear pressed to the gap between the floorboards. She could feel the

music from the room below entering through her hands. She could feel it on her open lips.

Crowther was not afraid of silence, but the morning seemed unnaturally bare of birdsong for early June. His visitor had already remounted when he came out of the house, and was waiting with her groom by his own chestnut bay. She had greeted him with nothing more than a nod of her head and then urged her horse forward out of the yard and into the roadway as soon as he had taken the reins. Crowther's house was the first of any significance in the town, so in moments they were among the fields and hedgerows.

He was surprised, even a little annoyed at her silence. He looked sideways at her profile. A woman in her early thirties perhaps, neatly dressed and at some expense. She could never, even in her first bloom of youth, have been very beautiful. Her face was a little too long, and a little too narrow. Her carriage and neat figure suggested good health and habits, however. Her gloved hands rested easily on the reins and her hair was a dark red, curled under the edge of her riding hat.

'Do you like it?' she asked. 'My maid Dido always rejoices when I agree to have my hair curled. I find it gets in my eyes.'

Crowther started, and faced forward at once. 'My apologies, madam. I did not mean to stare.'

She turned to him, looking at him squarely for a moment or two, then smiled. Crowther noted the dark green of her eyes, was surprised to find himself wondering briefly what she might think of him.

'No, *I* am sorry, Mr Crowther,' she said. 'And I must thank you for riding out so early. I have been wondering what to say

to you, and I'm sorry to confess that nothing that seems appropriate has occurred to me. I could ask you what you think the weather will be today and how you are enjoying Hartswood, but it hardly seems fitting, given our expedition. So I waited until I had the opportunity to be rude to you instead.'

He almost smiled. 'Perhaps you can tell me about your discovery and why you have called me rather than the Constable or the magistrate.'

She nodded at the suggestion and tilted her chin up as she chose her words. Her voice was light.

'Well, my footman has gone to the Squire, in fact, but I read your paper last spring in the *Transactions of the Royal Society*; you wrote, if you recall, about the signs murderers can leave on their victims, and when I found the body I thought you might be able to read his death like the gypsies read picture cards.' He looked at her with frank astonishment, and she frowned suddenly and looked out at the road in front of her again. 'Just because I have my hair curled doesn't render me incapable of reading, you know.'

Crowther could not decide whether to be offended at her tone, or to offer his apologies again and so did neither as they turned off the main road to Balcombe and then London and entered a narrower lane that, he guessed, must mark the boundary between the lands belonging to Caveley Park and those of the great estate of Thornleigh Hall.

'The body is in the copse at the top of the hill,' she said. 'The best path to it lies through the woods, so we must continue on foot. My man will see to the horses.'

Susan could tell by her brother's breathing that he was asleep.

The music finished in applause, and a low female voice began to introduce the next item. As Susan strained to hear, a floorboard in the passageway outside her door suddenly groaned, making her jump. She could hear people talking.

'I should have gone years ago, when Elizabeth died. She told me I should, that the past must be looked at squarely or it will chase you down. But there was always a reason to delay.'

It was her father's voice. On hearing her mother's name, Susan's heart squeezed a little in her chest, and she was lost briefly in an odd confusion of pain and comfort. Her mother had smelled of lavender, and had had very soft brown hair. She had died a week to the day after Jonathan was born. The little girl had held her hand till her father told her it was time to let go.

Another voice replied. It belonged to Mr Graves, and was nearly as familiar to her as her father's. She had heard it almost every day in the shop or at their table, ever since he had come to London. She had seldom heard it so low or so serious as now, though. She thought of how his face might look, and her own tilted down in unconscious mimicry. His collar was not always neat but his grey eyes were always sympathetic, and though he was slender as a reed he could still pick her up and swing her round the shop till she was half-sick with laughing. Miss Chase had come in once to find them playing in this way. Mr Graves had become very red and set her down a little heavily. Susan did not think Miss Chase had minded what they did, or noticed that his brown hair had got rather ruffled.

'You have spoken so little of your time before London, Alexander,' he said now. 'How can I advise you? Why has

losing the ring concerned you so? Was it valuable? I have never seen you wear it.'

'It had no great value to me, or at least I thought not.' There was a pause. 'I am surprised that losing it has caused me such upset. It has been nothing but a plaything of Jonathan's for some years – he likes the lion and dragon on the seal, and I keep it in my bureau and let him play with it whenever I wish to keep him quiet and still – but it was a last connection to my old home, and now it is gone I begin to worry again. Perhaps I owe something to the people I left there, or to the children. I have told myself I did not, but it itches at me.'

Graves spoke again. 'There must be some reason you have held back so long. Think further on the matter. You are happy now and it is a fragile and delicate thing, happiness. Jonathan will not grieve long over a ring. Why so disturb your life over a trifle that he will have forgotten in a week?' He hesitated. 'Do not attract the attention of the gods now, when you still have so much to lose.'

'You are right . . .' Her father stopped again and sighed. Susan knew from his voice that he would be rubbing his chin with his right hand, and shifting the weight off his bad leg. 'Perhaps the ring will turn up somewhere and my mind will be quiet. I'll have Jonathan search the workshop again in the morning. He was quite determined that he hadn't taken it from the bureau without my leave, however, and is rather indignant that I think he may have done so.' Susan could hear the smile in his voice and looked back towards the bed where her brother slept. He had not mentioned the ring since he had cried so on finding it gone from its little box, but she did not think he had forgotten it yet.

Silence, then the lady downstairs started singing. Susan scrambled to her feet and went to open the door. Alexander and Mr Graves jumped like guilty truants as the light spilled from the children's room across her shoulders and onto the landing.

Graves smiled at her. 'Listening to the music, Susan?'

'Yes, but what are you talking about? Is Papa going away?'

Her father looked between his friend and his daughter and knelt down.

'Come here, daughter of mine, and tell me something.' She took the hand he held out towards her. 'Are you happy, Susan? Would you like to have a maid and a carriage and a large house and a hundred pretty dresses?'

She looked at him to see if he were teasing, but his eyes remained steady and serious; his breath smelled a little of punch. She was confused.

'I like this house. And I have seven dresses.' She heard him sigh, but he pulled her to him at the same time, so she supposed the answer had pleased him.

'Well then. If you have dresses enough, I don't think I need go away at all. And I am glad you like this house. I hope we may share it a long while.'

Then he released her and said, 'Now, as you are awake I think you may be allowed to join us downstairs for a while. Mr Paxton is to give us his Concerto.'

For the rest of her life Susan would search out that music, or any that reminded her of it, not only for its elegant passions, but for the memories that it carried of the long parlour by candlelight, the profiles and shoulders of her early friends and

neighbours, and the feel of her father's chest rising and falling below her small hand, her cheek pressed against the silver threads of his waistcoat.

I.2

IT WAS A particularly handsome, particularly English summer's day, and the Sussex countryside was full of the pleasing and fruitful colours of the season. The meadow where Harriet and Crowther dismounted was glowing with tall buttercups and purple knapweed, and the morning wind that stirred them was lazy and good-humoured. Any civilised man, or woman, might be expected to pause a moment and consider the landscape and his or her place in it. A good season to be away from the city, its bustle and stink. Here the earth was preparing to offer up its gifts to its lords and their dependants. Crops grew, the animals fattened and the soil served those who had cared for it through the year. Here was England at her best, providing reward to satisfy the body, and beauty to feed the mind and soul.

Mrs Westerman and Crowther, however, were indifferent to the scenery. Neither paused to admire the picturesque swell of the valley's flanks, or philosophise on the greatness of the nation that had borne them. They disappeared into the woods without a backward glance. The groom dismounted and made his arrangements to lead the horses in his charge to their stables, and it was left to the beasts themselves to admire the view and tear up the wild flowers in their satin jaws.

The path ended in a clearing after some thirty yards of

roughish rising ground, overhung with the branches of elm and oak. The way was dry – Crowther tried to remember the last time he had heard rain from the confines of his study – and the air was heavy with the scents of the woodland uncurling into its summer wear. Wild garlic, dew. It would be a pleasant place to walk before beginning the duties of the day, he thought; no doubt that was why Mrs Westerman had happened along this path.

Crowther realised he had not noticed the year was already blooming into its height. He would have been able to tell any man who enquired that today's date was 2 June, of course, because he had written the date of the previous day in his notebook as he began work, but he never felt the shift of seasons in his bones, as so many in the country claimed to do. He knew winter because it was the best time to dissect, and summer because servants were more likely to complain then of the smells. From the world outside in its greatness, its bulk, its multitudes, he had turned away to pick apart the smallest vessels of life. He had stayed faithful now for years to the mysteries he could confine to his table-top. It had therefore been some months since he had lifted his eyes. Now he could feel the first prick of his sweat under the cotton of his shirt, felt his heart begin to labour with the climb. The sensations were oddly novel. He put his hand to his face where the sun reached it through the leaves.

Mrs Westerman came to a halt, and pointed with her riding crop.

'There. About ten yards along the track to Thornleigh. My dog noticed it first.' Her eyes dropped to the path. 'I took her back to the house before I came to you.'

Crowther glanced at her. The voice was steady enough; her face was perhaps a little flushed, but that might be only a result of the climb. He walked in the direction she had indicated, and heard almost at once a small sigh, and her own footsteps following him.

The body lay just off the track and one might have thought it a bundle of old clothing but for the arm and its waxy grey hand extended at right angles from the tumble of a dark blue cloak.

'Has the body been moved?' he asked.

'No. That is, I got close enough to see that he was dead and how – I lifted the cloak to do so – then covered him again. That is all.'

A little swarm of flies had gathered, and were walking as daintily as shop girls in Ranelagh Gardens around the edges of the cloak, and into the nooks and crannies it hid for their private business. Crowther knelt down, lifted the fold of cloth away from the corpse's face and looked into the dead eyes. The flies buzzed angrily, and he waved them away without judgement.

He had heard it discussed as a student that in death the retina was imprinted with the last image the eyes had seen. The idea had intrigued him in his younger days, and he had made experiments in his former home with a number of unfortunate dogs and two cats before he had given the idea up as impossible. The signs murder left on the body were at the same time more subtle and more commonplace, but he did believe one could often read the expression of a human corpse. Some looked at peace, others, like this face before him, looked only surprised and a little disappointed. The

man was wearing his own hair. Dark blond and thick. Crowther lifted the body a little and felt the ground below the corpse, and the back of his cloak. Both dry. And the body stiff, though perhaps not fully so. The flies settled again as he let the ground take the body's weight once more.

'There was dew on the body when I found it, and the body was not as stiff as it seems to be now,' Harriet said.

Crowther nodded, but did not look up. 'Then I imagine that he died last night.'

'That he was murdered last night,' she corrected him.

Indeed, the wound through the neck was unequivocal. Crowther waved away the flies again and bent towards it: a single, violent blow completely severing the carotid artery, leaving the man with an extra, gaping mouth. He would not have suffered long, Crowther thought. The blow had been delivered with enough force to almost sever the neck, leaving the shocking white of the man's vertebrae visible at the back of the wound. A quantity of dark staining around the collar showed where the heart had continued, briefly, to push blood through the body. Crowther looked along the man's trunk. He was wearing clean-enough looking linen and an embroidered waistcoat that was made of some richer stuff; black stains were dappled across it in ugly dark pools. He could see in his mind's eye the man caught and held from behind, the knife at its work, then the release of blood glutting out onto the soil with vivid and final force. He looked about him. Yes, there were marks on the trunks of the trees directly in front of him, and the last of the lilies of the valley had caught a little of his blood. They looked as if they were fading under the weight of it. This man lay where he had first fallen.