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Opening Extract from...

The Flowers of Evil

Written by Simon Acland

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SAINT LAZARUS' COLLEGE

Hypocrite lecteur, - mon semblable, - mon frère!

“Hypocrites! That’s what they are, those readers of ours! Just hypocrites!” The Best-Selling Author smirked. “If they were honest they’d admit all they want is action and excitement. Violence, maybe a bit of sex. Something easy to read, basically pretty unchallenging. But then they don’t want to be caught reading a low-brow piece of pulp fiction either. So the layer of pseudo-literary sophistication that you all sneaked into *The Waste Land* actually seems to have increased the book’s popularity. If I’d cottoned on to that trick in my earlier books perhaps I wouldn’t be in your clutches now.”

He bestowed a smile on the dons circled around him, their glasses of dry sherry clutched tightly in their thin fingers. His benevolent expression was awkwardly at odds with the edge to his words.

‘These people are my friends now,’ he thought. ‘I’d never have believed it. I am even beginning to talk like them. Pseudo-literary sophistication indeed!’

“So thanks to you, Master, we’ve got the title for our sequel.”

The Best-Selling Author wondered, not for the first time, whether he should start addressing the formidable head of Saint Lazarus’ College by his Christian name rather than his title. He nodded at him to cover his embarrassment and hurried on.

“The Flowers of Evil. Very nice – I did not understand the

joke at first, but thank you, Professor, for enlightening me.”

The Professor of English graciously inclined his silvery head, which also had the benefit of hiding his expression of scorn at the so-called writer’s ignorance of the obvious connection between Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot.

“But the plot is rather more problematic. We’ve got some beginnings in that document that our murderous friend had started to translate. But with him locked up, and his poor old tutor hopefully in a better place, we need someone who can decipher the rest of it.”

The Professor of English winced at the sloppy use of the word ‘hopefully’ – how could one write books and fail to understand the correct application of an adverb? In the pause, the Classics Fellow drew himself up to his full height.

“I would be more than happy to have a go at it. I am sure that with all my experience of ancient texts I could manage an accurate rendering of the medieval French. Anyway, from the quick look I have had at the document, more and more of it is in Latin as it goes on. It is almost as if the longer poor Hugh was away from his homeland, the less and less familiar he became with his native vernacular, and the more he fell back on the *lingua franca* of the age.”

The Chaplain scowled, his rubbery lips forming a sulky pout.

“If you ask me, we should have done with it. As you know, I feel utterly ashamed of my connection with a college which has served up such blasphemous tripe as *The Waste Land*. Frankly I have even been considering my position here.”

The Master’s eyes narrowed behind their spectacles. This insubordination was becoming too much. Having a Church of England Chaplain was out of date anyway. A multi-faith appointment would be so much more appropriate to a college that he was trying to drag against its will into the twenty-first century – whilst having to skip the twentieth along the way pretty much completely. He’d modernised the security service

in Whitehall. He'd achieve the same here. And appointing a multi-faith counsellor – yes, that was the right title – would give him credibility with the two left-wing members of the House of Lords Appointments Committee who were the ones least keen on his elevation to the peerage. Or so word had it.

“Sebastian,” he snapped, “we have discussed this before. None of you would have positions here were it not for *The Waste Land's* success. It is only thanks to the royalties we have received that the College has staved off bankruptcy. And our finances still remain precarious. We must capitalise on our success. A sequel is essential.”

His eyes swivelled towards the Best-Selling Author and the Classics Fellow. The encouragement his half smile intended to project towards these two unlikely collaborators was undone by the alarming distortion of his bifocal lenses.

“Go to it, my friends. *Ite, laborate*, as they say.”

“Is there anything that I can do to help, Master?”

The newest member of the Senior Common Room rubbed his hands together nervously. With a thoroughly modern crew cut and a pale off-the-peg High Street suit, the Computer Sciences Tutor looked out of place beneath the classical stucco mouldings of the SCR. He felt a long way from home in the ancient rooms overlooking the front quad, whose previous tenant had taught Modern Languages. At first he had been pleasantly surprised to be allocated such prime lodgings in college. He had thanked his new colleagues fulsomely when they had first met at High Table, and had attributed their embarrassed looks to charitable modesty. This naivety showed plainly that he was better suited to understanding the bits and bytes of his absolute discipline than the uncertain complexities of human nature. Before the tragic death by fire of the Modern Language Tutor in those rooms, any of the other dons would have given up sherry for a year to occupy them. They had been made still more desirable by the insurance-funded refurbishment and redecoration that had masked with clean

paint the smell of smoke from thousands of the former occupant's cigarettes and the flames that had killed him. But none of the other dons, knowing how the tragedy had occurred, could overcome their superstitious aversion to taking those rooms.

"Thank you so much for your kind offer." The Master sounded almost enthusiastic towards his new protégé. "But no, I think your talents are best spent teaching your undergraduates and publishing some articles to establish our college's reputation at the forefront of modern learning. Of course, if our novelist has any more problems with his IT infrastructure he will come to you for assistance."

The Best-Selling Author did his best to look amused. He was actually rather proud of the skilful use he made of technology to ease his workload and to accelerate his creative flow.

"One thing that is clear from my brief appraisal," said the Classics Fellow, "is that the documents we now have to deal with are more fragmentary – or should I say more episodic – than the period of Hugh's story covering the First Crusade. The unity of place earlier in the story certainly left a great deal to be desired, with all Hugh's travels from Cluny to Constantinople and Antioch, then back to Cluny again and on to Jerusalem and Alamut. But at least the unities of action and time were observed to some extent. In this second piece we appear to have fragments of action dispersed over a far longer period. I may need to call on my esteemed colleague from the history faculty to help me to relate the different episodes to reality."

The History Don did not really know what the Classics Fellow was banging on about; but he was not going to admit that in front of his colleagues. So he smiled knowingly and murmured, "Of course. With pleasure."

And then the gong sounded for dinner, and they all trooped to the hall to take their stations around High Table.

CHAPTER ONE

SPLEEN

*Hugues de Verdon etois,
Maintenant sez pas qui je semme.
Je sez ben que je cueille que je semme.
J'ai cueilli tous les malheurs que je peust;
Que m'importe maintenant que je semme?
J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avois mil ans.*

*Hugh de Verdon was my name;
Now I know not who I am.
I well know that I reap what I sow.
I have reaped every possible misfortune;
What does it matter to me now what I sow?
I have more memories than if I had lived a thousand years*



Here am I, alone in a poisoned prison, without hope, without belief, broken, beaten, betrayed. Anger gushes from me like water from a ceaseless spring.

My teacher - how you lied to me, how you taught me a groundless faith! The truth you tried to hide from me - even burning what you would not share. Did you truly believe? Or did you teach what you knew to be false and destroy what you knew to be true?

You called yourself a man of God! How can you be anything but false when the god you claim to worship is false himself? Falsehood feeds on falsehood.

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? What a falsehood indeed!

And you, you vile assassin. You caught me in your twisted plots. For the use you have made of me I will have my vengeance.

But you on whom I wish most to be avenged, you whom I loved more than I believed possible, you for whom I suffered torments and for whom I shattered my beliefs – you are beyond my reach for ever.

And as for me, what do they mean – those two small words for ever? I understand, I almost sympathise with the fiend who tried often and killed me once.



I do not know how long it took me to surface from my madness. And when I did, I remembered clearly what had happened, and I wanted to sink back again. Blanche was dead. Our child was dead. My faith and my belief in Blanche were dead. My love was dead. My god was dead – if death is possible for something that has never truly existed except in the mind.

From the narrow window of my cell I could see the sharp snow-covered mountains slashing up in frozen anger at the heavens. Their example I would follow, but first I had to join them outside my prison walls.

Then I moved away from the window slit towards the door and jerked to a halt, half falling forward to the floor. My fall showed me the fetters around my ankles. I saw that a stout chain trailed behind and fixed them to the wall above the couch that served me as bed. I raised heavily the hands that I had put out to break my fall and found my wrists fastened by matching cuffs. My wrists and ankles were worn and bloody, as if in my madness I had pulled over and over against the

hard steel, punishing my unfeeling flesh for its inability to tear free.

I moved back and sat on my bed. I would have patience. Patience was something I would have to learn. My garments were torn and my hair was matted. The stench in the room did not come only from the squalid slop pail in the corner. I saw that much of the floor was covered in filth – excrement, presumably mine, rotten fragments of food and shattered crockery.

I waited.

Some time later bolts behind the door grated back. Slowly it opened a few inches and I heard a voice speaking a language that I could understand.

“It seems the lunatic is quiet today. But be careful. He may be waiting. Don’t go too far in. Allah, how it stinks in there.”

Now a turbaned head came cautiously round the door.

“So crazy infidel! Out of breath today? Or have you just learnt some manners at last? There is your food.”

An arm joined the head and lobbed two pieces of flat bread towards me. They mingled with the filth on the floor.

“No water today. Learn not to smash the jugs we give you – then maybe you shall have some more.”

I found myself speaking back in the guard’s own tongue. My throat felt rough, my voice lower than it should have been, as if it had been overused to scream and shout.

“I am calm now. Take me to your master.”

“Insolent dog.” The guard laughed and took his face away behind the door. I ignored the bread lying in my filth, hungry though I was. I arranged my chains and lay down on the bed, and waited.

The rays of the dying sun bled through the slit of my window. Then, through the same hole, darkness emptied into the room. I kept my eyes open, more comfortable with the dark than with whatever I might see in my head, easier awake than in my dreams, and waited.

Daylight drifted into the room and dissipated the darkness. Later, a knife of sunlight thrust in, and I stood to allow its warmth to pierce my body. Then it moved out of the range of my chain. Now that I had stopped pulling at my shackles, the wounds that I had made by tearing them into my flesh were healing fast. My wrist and ankles itched crazily, as if ants were moving under my skin. I had had to become used to that sensation every time I was hurt, ever since my first visit to Alamut. The potion brewed by Hasan-i Sabbah in the gold grail dish to the witch Medea's recipe had given my body extraordinary power to heal itself and even to thwart death.

I sighed, trying to ignore the itching, and sat back down on my bed, and waited.

Again the bolts of my door grated back and it opened a little wider than before. The guard's head came round the door, and then the rest of his body. He carried a lance fashioned from white wood, and shook it threateningly. "Stay back. Stay there. Today we bring you better food, and water. But if you move before we tell you, we will take it away."

Another guard came behind with platter and jug, and stretched to place them where I could just reach from the edge of the arc allowed me by my shackles.

"Take me to your master. Please. And please let me clean this place up. See, I am calm now. I would wash so that I can pray."

The guards looked at each other, impressed now by this piety, as I had known they would be. But they said nothing and backed through the door, which they closed and bolted.

I reached out for what they had left. To my surprise I enjoyed the taste of the flatbread and spiced houmus paste, and the purple grapes that I had eaten there before, in what now seemed a previous life. Then I lay back down on my bed, and waited.

Another night passed and the sun's blade bisected my room once more. Later, I heard the grating of bolts again and the

door swung wide. My white-speared guard entered, circumspect still but no longer afraid, and Mohammed followed. Mohammed had once been my friend.

“Pwah.” He wrinkled his hawkish nose in disgust. “What a mess you have made, Hugh. We must get you cleaned up. Bring him some water. Warm. And some soap. I know you like our soap!” He smiled.

I had told Mohammed once that on my first visit to Alamut I had tasted the soap left for me in that cell, never having seen such a thing in my homeland before, and thinking it a sweetmeat.

“Go. Bolt the door behind you. He will not harm me. Hugh, it is good to see you more yourself again.”

I looked levelly at the man whose life I had saved. He felt my unspoken question.

“No, Hugh, I did not know. I spoke the truth when I told you outside Jerusalem that I had not been back here.”

“You knew your father, though. You knew his plans. You must have known the nature of the pleasures of paradise he showed to his *da’is*. My God, perhaps you tasted that paradise yourself.”

I felt a dangerous spark inside me. It threatened to reignite my anger. Mohammed saw it too and spoke with heavy haste.

“Yes, I know my father. I know he uses drugs and trickery dressed up as magic to transport his *da’is* to paradise. I know that once they have tasted his paradise they are drugged again and wake up in the real world. Their hardships here are at such odds with the pleasures there that they cannot wait to return. So they welcome death, even seek it out. Perhaps I should have guessed that Blanche was one of the attractions of paradise. Perhaps you could have known that Blanche was told to show you the same favours as the *da’is* in paradise.”

I shifted angrily again – how dared he suggest that our love had been false? Maybe he was right but I would hear it from nobody. Mohammed hurried on.

“False paradise and death are not what my father intends for me. After all, I am the only son left to him. He is suspicious and unforgiving but I think he still felt some sorrow when my brother’s innocence came too late to light. It must have hurt him to have ordered needlessly the execution of his first-born son. Poor Ustad Hussein.”

Mohammed sighed, and looked away from me. After a pregnant pause he turned back to me.

“When he judges that I have proved myself enough, that I am faithful to him beyond all doubt, he plans for me the same initiation that you underwent. If he were younger, if his heart were stronger, I suppose he might do it for himself, but as it is I am the last chance he has for his blood-line to carry on. And you are the living proof that Medea’s potion can work.” Mohammed shrugged. “I saw what happened to you in Count Baldwin’s camp. I am not sure I want it. Part of me does of course, but to defy death for an unnatural span...” He shrugged again. “I think I can understand why you have been sunk in madness these past months.”

He started round as the door bolts grated and the guards came back.

“Enough of that before the others. Clean yourself up. I will return when I know my father’s wishes. Unlock his hands.”

The guards looked nervous but knew better than to disobey their master’s son.

On my table they had placed a tall earthenware ewer, a shallow bowl, and a small piece of the precious soap. Alongside they had laid a white cotton robe and a woollen over-garment. I tested the water. It was warm, as Mohammed had ordered. I was suddenly eager to clear the filth from my body, to wash off my shame. But I also needed to clean the squalor of my chamber. What should I do first? If I washed and then cleaned the floor I might dirty myself again. If I cleaned the floor and then my body, the water would be cold and dirty. I shook in a spasm of anxious indecision, I who once would have given

such a simple matter not a moment's thought. What had become of me? Then, exasperated by myself, I stripped the rags roughly from my body and gave myself over to the pleasure of soap and warm water.

Still naked, I placed the bowl on the floor and fell to my knees. I splashed out the used water, refilling the bowl with all the shards of crockery and solid ordure that I could reach. I used my discarded rags to wipe the rest as best I could, fastidiously keeping the filth from my skin. In future I would take Moslem cleanliness as my example, not Christian dirt. The job done as best I could, I climbed hastily off my knees, not wanting to give even the semblance of praying in case some god took it as a sign of devotion, and pulled the new garments over my head. I breathed a sigh of pleasure at the smooth clean cotton on my skin. Then, suddenly exhausted, I lay down on my bed and slept.

I had no dreams. Or so it seemed when I woke again. I felt fresh, human, stronger. I approached the window as nearly as I could. My ankle shackles still held me back, but I came close enough to breathe deeply of the cool, clear air. I stood still, and thought, and waited.

When Mohammed came back I knew what it was that I must do.

“Are you ready to see my father?”

“I am,” I said. “Please do not tell him how you found me. Please.”

Sympathy lay liquid in Mohammed's eyes. He turned and gestured to the guards to unlock my shackles. He led the way from my cell, two white-lanced guards behind him and two more behind me. I carefully followed through the labyrinthine passageways of Alamut, and found myself once more before that ominous door whose knocker was a bronze hand hinged at the wrist.



SAINT LAZARUS' COLLEGE

The Research Assistant seethed with bitterness in his prison cell. It was comfortable enough – not much worse than his small room in the college annex, in fact, but twenty years for a murder he did not commit, eight years each for two counts of attempted murder, all to run concurrently! How could they have believed that his carefully crafted translation of Hugh de Verdon's despairing rant was a confession? That seemed to be the last piece of 'evidence' that had won over the waverers in the jury.

It would never have happened if he had been 'one of them'. Now he never would be. His academic career was over. It was not his fault that he had a face like a murderer's. His lawyer, a useless creature, probably not to be believed, but what could you expect on legal aid, said he could be out in ten if he behaved well. So behave well he would. Already he had avoided rising to the taunts of 'scarface', and when the other prisoners had been unable to get a reaction they had at last left him alone.

He'd have the last laugh though. They did not understand what they had unleashed by including the verbatim text of the Gospel of Lazarus in *The Waste Land*. Without him they would never now find the original; they probably had not even noticed that it was missing. The Society's vengeance on them would be swift and vicious. Until they had recovered the document they would be unrelenting. And the bastards thought that he was the one suffering society's vengeance. He was the only one who was safe. By the time he came out it would be over.

He broke into peals of harsh laughter. And then he suddenly stopped, wondering fearfully whether those secret tentacles might not in fact stretch even inside prison walls.

