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Opening Extract from...

Descendants of Evil

Written by David James

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DESCENDANTS OF EVIL

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ONE

On a bright, cold day in early October after a dry spell; a gusty wind blew the dust of the London streets into the face of Sir Roger Evesham. He stood, immaculately dressed in frock-coat and silk top-hat, on a pavement outside Waterloo Station.

Seeing an unoccupied passing hansom, he stepped forward and raised his cane to hail the cab. He had an appointment to see the prime minister, William Gladstone, at eleven, and it was already ten-thirty. The trains up from East Sussex, via Edenbridge, had been awkward and, to his chagrin, he now had to face the possibility of being a little late.

When the hansom came to a standstill about twenty feet beyond the point where he stood, the cabby turned to look at him enquiringly. Roger smiled up at him, wished him a 'good-morning' walked to the cab and got in.

When he had closed the doors and gathered the skirts of his coat around his legs to his satisfaction, he rapped with his cane on the trap above his head. The cabby lifted it, asked for his destination, and when he had been given it, clucked at the horse to set it in motion.

The tide of traffic thickened as they approached Downing Street and it seemed to Roger that the number of cabs, carts, wains, wagons, vans and Thomas Tilling omnibuses got greater and greater with every successive visit to the capital.

Roger found that, as they got nearer and nearer to Downing Street, his palms became decidedly moist, despite the chill which comes with sitting motionless in an open vehicle on a cold day. He swallowed more than he usually did, too, probably in

anticipation of the prospect of speaking clearly and intelligibly to the prime minister. He didn't want to take up too much of his valuable time. He struggled to fight off a strong impulse to run his fingers through his carefully groomed hair.

At length, they drew up outside Number Ten; Roger paid the cabby and descended. He gave the policeman on duty his letter from the prime minister who, after glancing at it, knocked to alert the doorman, who, after opening the door and also glancing at the letter showed Roger to a seat in an anteroom and took his hat and gloves.

This room contained a desk at which the prime minister's private secretary sat bent over some documents; he looked briefly at Roger, and then went on with his work. Hushed voices from the inner sanctum told Roger that he had not inconvenienced the prime minister, unduly; an interview was clearly still in progress.

After about five minutes, the door to the prime minister's office opened and two rather crestfallen gentlemen came out, closing the door behind them. They passed through the anteroom without looking up and quickly disappeared.

The prime minister's door opened again almost immediately and the man himself called for Sir Roger, who got to his feet and entered. As he turned away from closing the door, to face the prime minister, he involuntarily took a deep, but silent, intake of breath.

Gladstone, standing behind his desk, shook Roger's hand and sat down, indicating a chair on the opposite side for Roger as he did so.

As a preamble, Gladstone commiserated with him about the death of his father, congratulated him on his recent graduation *summa cum laude* from Oxford and then, after clearing his throat, came to the reason for his being summoned.

"As you are no doubt aware, your late father with his

remarkable acumen and penetrating insight was often helpful to the government of the day in the solution of several difficulties which this country faced.

Not a few of these would have gravely compromised our national security, if they had not been nipped in the bud by his clever elucidation," he said.

Roger nodded, gravely.

"I realise that you are still a very young man and that perhaps it is not right to expect you to follow in his footsteps quite so soon after Oxford, but your success there has reassured me about one thing which is of paramount importance: you are your father's son and show the same promise. I shall be frank with you, Roger; I have come across a little problem of exactly the kind which would have led me to consult your father."

Gladstone leaned back slightly in his chair as if to evaluate the other's reaction to this piece of information and it seemed to Roger that a trace of anxiety fleetingly crossed the older man's face. "Is there anything you would like to tell me?" he said very softly.

Roger realised that he was being appealed to, and that a great deal rested on his response; hence Gladstone's anxiety. Roger also realised that he had two clear options: he could agree with the prime minister that he was too young, leave, and probably never be anything other than a country squire. Or he could stay, discover what the problem was, find a solution by the grace of God, and continue in his father's footsteps. It was a veritable turning point in his life, but, in the light of certain unhappy events which had occurred to him since coming down from Oxford, he did not hesitate; he badly needed something to distract him.

"I would be honoured to accept your commission whatever it might be," he said.

Gladstone became perceptibly less tense. "Very well, but if

you seem to be getting into deep waters you must tell me at once, I would excuse you and appoint someone older and more experienced, albeit less gifted. I do not want you to come to any harm whatsoever; my conscience would not stand for it."

"I am at your service."

Gladstone leaned back in his chair and tented his hands on the desk. "What I tell you now must be regarded as most secret."

"It goes without saying."

"A week ago a strange series of events took place on the south coast which culminated in a man's death. This man, who was dressed as a gentleman, was arrested by customs officials very early one morning, shortly after high tide, rolling a barrel of gunpowder up a track which led from the beach to his isolated cottage.

"When he was arrested, he did not put up any kind of fight, nor would he speak one word about his suspicious behaviour, and so he was locked up in the cells of a police station situated in a nearby town.

"Later that same day, after his cottage had been searched, the inspector and sergeant went to the cells in the hope that he might prove more talkative, but discovered him lying on the floor of his cell quite dead. A small glass phial which still bore traces of potassium cyanide lay beside the body."

"Did the police find anything in the cottage which might throw some light on the mystery?"

"Very little, apart from an additional two barrels of gunpowder. The only other item of interest was this." Gladstone unlocked a drawer next to him and placed a small, expensively-bound book on the desk.

Roger took up the book and opened it at random, what met his eye were two examples of the most appalling doggerel; yet they, and the rest of the equally bad collection, he saw as he turned the pages, were printed on good quality paper using

violet ink. No author's name appeared anywhere in the book, nor those of the publisher or printer.

He looked up with what must have been a quizzical expression on his face and saw the same sentiments reflected in the face of the prime minister.

"Yes," said Gladstone, nodding in agreement with his unasked question, "why would anyone take so much trouble and expense to publish such rubbish?"

"It must have been privately published," said Roger, "perhaps, for the sake of pure vanity or swank."

"I absolutely agree with you," said the prime minister, "but, I must leave any speculation and weighing up of facts to you, so that you can report back to me with your findings, later."

"I shall certainly do so," said Roger.

"I want you to look thoroughly into this matter, it may be that it will come to nothing, but in these troubled times one cannot afford to take any chances. Please take the book and this police report of the incident with you," he said, taking a folder out of the same drawer which had contained the book of poetry and handing it to Roger. "Please also accept this with my compliments," he went on, handing Roger a handsome black-leather briefcase which he took from somewhere behind his desk.

Roger stood and opened the briefcase to place the items which he had been given inside and saw something metal gleaming at the bottom. He looked up to see Gladstone looking at him with a smile.

"That is your gold insignia of office as an agent of this government. It entitles you to travel anywhere and into any place in the British Isles, and indeed, The Empire, without let or hindrance from any official, while carrying out secret work vital to Her Majesty's Government. You can also use the authority vested in you, by me, as a bearer of the insignia, to commandeer any personnel and resources you deem necessary

in an emergency. Your father was given one which was exactly similar. And now, I really must say good-bye and Godspeed. I am afraid that I have a pressing engagement at eleven-thirty."

They shook hands and Roger departed with a little bow.

When he had regained the street, Roger realised that Gladstone had not mentioned his erstwhile fiancée, Lady Amelia Hindthorpe. He must, then, have heard about her affair with Charles.

TWO

Roger decided to dine at the Café Royal before returning home. There were three reasons for this: he was surprisingly hungry; he loved the Café Royal because of its associations with famous and infamous people; and last but not least, he wanted to be alone for a time to mull over everything the prime minister had told him and one of the private dining rooms at the Café Royal was admirably suited to that purpose. He had to admit, however, that the private rooms were all almost invariably taken by couples of one kind or another, who had more than dining in mind. No matter.

His resolve to dine in private disappeared when he saw that Sanderson was sitting in one of the chairs set aside for those waiting for a table. He had a momentary impulse to withdraw, but before he could do so Sanderson saw him and signalled that he should join him; so that they could dine together. It was the very last thing he wanted: Sanderson knew all about Amelia and Charles and, as a recent encounter with him had shown, he was not averse to talking at length about the subject.

"Hello, my dear Evesham, how do you do?" Sanderson rose to greet him holding out his hand.

"Very well, Sanderson, thank you," said Roger, giving the standard reply.

"Would you care to join me for luncheon?"

"I would be delighted," said Roger, with a thin smile. I would not, he thought, privately.

"I am next in line for a private room," Sanderson continued.

Oh no! I don't believe it, thought Roger. He could hardly

believe his bad luck. It was pretty awful to have to dine with Sanderson, whose insensitivity to the finer feelings was legendary; it was another thing again to have to dine with him in a confined space. "How nice!" he exclaimed aloud.

At that moment the head waiter told Sanderson that his room was ready, and Roger, whose cup of misery was almost full, followed the two men to the private room.

At first, the luncheon proceeded without much conversation, both men being engrossed in their food, but, soon after they had finished their respective main courses, the topic which Roger simply did not wish to discuss with anyone was broached by Sanderson, exactly as he had feared.

"Do you see much of that nice young lady of yours, these days?" enquired Sanderson. "Decent looking gel," he went on, rubbing salt into the wound.

Roger marvelled at the ineptness of these remarks, but remembered that Sanderson was also noted for not having much in the way of a retentive memory, or for that matter, much in the way of an intellect. If it had not been for these factors and the fact that they had been at Oxford together, he would have risen from the table and walked out. Indeed, if this luncheon had been taking place a century earlier he would have taken Sanderson's remarks as an insult and challenged him to a duel. As it was, he simply replied, "no" in as colourless a tone as possible, in the hope that Sanderson would perceive his lack of interest and, like a normal person, sense his deep reluctance to discuss his erstwhile fiancée and veer sharply away from the subject, or better still become silent until the meal was concluded.

For a time, after this, Sanderson was silent and Roger's hope that that was the end of his ordeal began to rise a little.

"Oh, wait a minute," said Sanderson, looking up from his pudding and waving his spoon for emphasis, "I remember now, there was some unpleasantness or other concerning her, wasn't

there?"

Roger felt a pressure in his head and for some seconds debated with himself whether he should allow a considerable string of expletives to flow from his tongue, of which 'chump' would be about the kindest, when he realised that he was dealing with something with which he had not a great deal of experience: a congenital idiot. One must always make allowances for idiots, he thought. On the other hand, he didn't suffer fools gladly. This conflict of ideas caused the pressure in his head to increase. He removed the napkin from his lap, carefully folded it and placed it on the tablecloth next to his plate.

"I must go now. I have a headache and must get some fresh air. Thank you for the luncheon. You must allow me to be your host on another occasion. Good-bye." And with that, Roger picked up his hat, gloves and cane and departed.

The memory of Sanderson's utterly astonished stare stayed with him for some little time, as his cab weaved its way to the station. Soon, more pressing matters drove this image from his consciousness as the stopping train slowly made its way back to East Sussex and Roger's home at Evesham Meads, he pondered on the strange story of the gunpowder smuggler. The prime minister, in Roger's view, was right to be so concerned. If a man would prefer to kill himself rather than explain his actions, it seemed likely that there was much about the affair that was hidden at the present time, and it also hinted at something very dark.

Roger leant back against the cushions of the seat and lit a cigar to aid his thinking. The compartment was empty and he was glad of that, he did his best thinking when completely alone.

After turning the facts around in his mind for twenty minutes or so, without forming any real conclusions, he had to give the problem up for the moment. He would spend some time that

evening writing down everything that occurred to him.

At that moment the train left a wood and entered the river valley which ran between his estate and that of Lord Hindthorpe, the actual boundary being the meandering river, itself.

He remembered his father telling him that the building of the railway, in 1846, had caused a dispute with the railway company and a rift between the Hindthorpes and the Eveshams which had taken some years to heal.

The dispute had arisen because neither family had wanted the tracks to be laid on their land. In the end, an uneasy agreement between the two families and the company had been arrived at, whereby the line was laid more or less equally on the adjoining estates, criss-crossing the river several times; but the truth was that this pleased neither family. This agreement was reached only a few weeks before the Act of Parliament made the progress of the work on the line mandatory, it was the best that could be made of a bad job.

Eventually, in the fullness of time, both sides saw sense; the two families were not really angry with each other; rather, they were angry with a common enemy: the railway company for proposing the idea in the first place. Once this idea had been accepted, peace reigned between the families, once more, and they had remained on the best of terms ever since. Roger shook his head, smiling to himself. The whole thing seemed so silly, now, but at the time it had been deadly serious.

Soon, he was able to look out of the carriage window and see the stately pile on the other side of the valley which was the home of Lord Hindthorpe, his wife, and his only daughter Lady Amelia. Thinking of this gave him a sharp pang. Lady Amelia had, until about three months ago, been his fiancée and the thing which caused him the most pain was the fact that they had been sweethearts since childhood. He was tense, now, and sat on the edge of his seat, drawing hard at his cigar and inhaling

deeply.

It was obviously going to be some time before he got over her and her affair with the French nobleman Charles. Charles had been his best friend when they were up at Oxford together and that rankled, too, very much so.

At last, the train pulled into the village station of Hindthorpe and Roger opened the compartment door and descended onto the platform; he was very glad the journey was over and that he could soon be alone with his pain, like a wounded animal.

He had asked Jessup, his phlegmatic coachman, to meet every train down from London after midday and there he sat on the high seat of the second-best brougham like a man with a secret sorrow. He touched his cockaded hat when he saw Roger and got down to open and close the door of the carriage for him. Roger made himself comfortable and rapped on the window with his cane. There came a sudden jolt and they were off. Jessop had been taught, like the best coachmen, that it was not done to use verbal commands to his horses, and so he simply gave the horse a flick on one shoulder with his whip to start and one on the other shoulder when he wanted to stop. He had spent much time and energy teaching this trick, among others, to the horses in his care.

When they reached the foot of the steps which led to the front door, Roger's only dog, Ralphie the old Bedlington terrier, the last of several and one who had been a great favourite of his father, came slowly and painfully down the steps to greet him; his tail gently wagging. "Good boy," said Roger, after he got down from the carriage, taking off his right glove to more properly fondle his ears and pat his woolly back. "Good old Ralphie." Ralphie was unfortunately deaf and it was said in the servants' hall that the last trump, even, would not rouse him from his slumber.

Roger and the dog watched as the carriage departed for the

coach-house and then climbed up the steps together. Roger went indoors leaving the poor old dog on the top step to enjoy the last of the day's sunshine. He recalled that, when he was a boy of three, he had caused his father and mother some amusement by his insistence on calling the dogs 'bed linen terriers'.

After his valet had taken his coat, hat and gloves, Roger locked his briefcase in the safe in his study and then went upstairs to see his elderly and bedridden mother. His father had died four years before, when he had been twenty-two, and he, as his only son and heir became the twelfth baronet.

He opened her door quietly in case she was asleep. She turned her lace-capped head towards him and smiled at him when he entered her bedroom and extended her hand to him, as she always did. He took her withered and mottled hand and kissed her vellum-like cheek.

"How was your visit to town, Roger" she enquired, "did you meet any nice young ladies?"

"No Mamma I did not," he said, gently. His mother almost always asked him this question whenever he went anywhere, other than somewhere on the estate and sometimes even then, and she always slightly emphasised the word 'nice', it was her way of showing her disapproval of Amelia and her behaviour.

He was glad of her solidarity, but sometimes wondered if she would ever tire of the habit; presumably only when he actually did find a nice young lady. He was not actively seeking any at the moment; he felt much too raw and bloody, as if some part of him had been torn out by force.

That evening, Roger dined alone in the small dining room; the large dining room, better known below stairs as the Great Hall, was only used when he had several guests for dinner.

This room was haunted by the ghost of Lady Amelia, and as Roger gazed down the long table towards the mullioned lead-glass windows at the far end of the room, he could almost see

her misty silhouette seated opposite him. How often she had dined here with him! How happy they had been then! His eyes became blurry with tears.

For many weeks after the annulment of their betrothal he had not been able to dine in this room, the memories were far too painful; instead, he had dined in his private apartments.

He had even felt, in the days which followed their estrangement, that he would not be able to go on living at Evesham Meads, she was in every room of the house except his private rooms and bedroom. But, on the very morning when he had been about to announce his departure for Italy for a few months to stay with his cousin Sir Alfred Chivers, who had a villa in Florence, it occurred to him that he was being driven from his ancestral home by Lady Amelia and he rebelled against the notion and remained.

After he had dined, Roger repaired to his study to smoke a cigar or two and read the police report on the gunpowder smuggler and his suicide.

He unlocked the safe and removed the briefcase; from it he took the poetry book and the police report, which was very brief. It, very naturally, did not form any conclusions or opinions, save one, and confined itself to the few facts of the case. It listed the possessions of the dead man but these, apart from the poetry book and the barrels of gunpowder had been commonplace; some writing materials; a few unspecified newspapers; shaving tackle; pipes and tobacco; a few changes of clothing and so on. All the dead man's possessions had been of good quality and he had presented every appearance of being a gentleman when he was arrested. His accent when he spoke at all, which had been very little, had been that of a gentleman.

The dead man, who lived there under the name of William Thomas Rayleson, had only taken the cottage for three months and had been there just over two when arrested. This name and

the previous address he had given to the landlord before taking up residence had both been false.

There was one curious thing noted by the inspector—the rent for three months had been paid in advance—a very unusual circumstance. Almost certainly, this had been done so that the weekly collection of rent, with the attendant risk of his true motives being discovered, had been obviated for the whole period.

The police inspector speculated that the smuggling of powder had been going on for the whole of the time the man was a tenant and that, perhaps, a considerable quantity had passed through his hands; where this possible stockpile was now could only be a matter for conjecture, the inspector added; the sole example of anything resembling an opinion.

Nobody had seen anything suspicious in the approximately two months before the police investigation got under way; the man was seldom out and about in the locality except to buy essentials from a few local shops. He was known in the locality as an amateur historian, but no one, when questioned by police officers, knew exactly how or why this was believed. He had lived as a recluse who had not sought the acquaintance of anyone and had covered his tracks very well.

The phial which had contained the cyanide bore no label and could throw no light on the investigation. Here, the report ended.

Roger next looked at the book of poetry; if indeed, he observed, the doggerel within deserved the name. As had been noted, the book had been expensively produced and consisted of sixty-two pages and sixty-two poems, one to each page. Under the last poem in the book, someone, possibly the dead man, had drawn, using coloured inks, a bright orange horseshoe with twelve nail-holes done in red.

On another page, under a poem, Roger found two three-

figure numbers which had been written in pencil and then imperfectly erased. There was a greasiness on the page associated with these numbers which led him to believe that a makeshift eraser made from compressed bread had been used.

He noted that the vocabulary used in the construction of the poems was fairly basic with very few flowery or high-flown words, or those of more than three syllables; there was also very little repetition of nouns so that a certain amount of economy had been used in the printed matter of the book, an economy which was not reflected in the production of the book, itself.

But what, if anything, did these facts imply? Roger asked himself, but not aloud. He was a great believer in actually asking himself questions to which he required answers. He had discovered that if he did not, then very often no answers would come; this technique was as effective in his day-to-day life as it had been in the examination room, having been impressed upon him, when he was very young, by his father. He lit another cigar and leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed.

Dimly, at first, and then more clearly, he began to form the idea that the book had been, and probably still was being, used for the encoding of secret messages; in which case, there must be at least one other copy of the book and probably several. This would also explain the simplicity and economy of the words in the poems—they encompassed the basic vocabulary which was used in telegraphic communications.

He expected the messages to use, like all codes involving books, groups of three numbers to represent each word: the first number referring to the page; the second to the line; the third to the number of the word in that line.

But, if he was right, where did those messages appear? Somewhere public and easily accessible, otherwise there was no need for secrecy. In the personal column of a newspaper, then. Yes, but which paper and at what intervals of time?

He recalled seeing one or two curious numerical messages in the personal columns of at least one London paper fairly recently, but, because they had meant nothing to him at the time, he could not now remember which one, or how long ago.

Like his father before him, Roger preserved copies of three important London newspapers, on a daily basis, and then sent them, yearly, to a bookbinder in London to be bound into large volumes which were then archived in his library. Perhaps, if he looked through the piles of recent copies he would be able to find a sample of the number code in order to test his theory concerning the poetry book?

It was late, but he was determined to find at least one example of the numerical messages he recalled seeing; accordingly he made his way to the library where, luckily there was still some fire in the grate. He lit the lamps and brought the last few months' copies of *The Times*, *The Evening News* and *The Standard* to one of the reading tables, then he seated himself and began to examine the personal columns of *The Standard*, starting with the most recent editions and working back through the rest.

After the best part of an hour, he had established that no such messages had formed any part of its personal columns during the last six months. He heard the long-case clock in the front vestibule of the house strike midnight, but remained determined to press on with the search.

At length, again starting with the most recent editions, he found an example of the numerical messages in a Wednesday copy of *The Evening News* which was only two weeks old:

1,22,9,20,18,9,15,12;52,30,5;49,14,2;1,20,15,14,19.

He could hardly contain his disappointment and chagrin. The message did not consist of groups of three numbers as he

had surmised; instead, the first group consisted of eight numbers and the last contained five; assuming that the semicolons were being used to separate each word.

However, the two middle groups contained three numbers each and he looked up the appropriate pages, lines, and number of words on a line and found the words: 'arrived' and 'ten', which, fetching pen and paper, he duly jotted down. It was not much to show for his labours, thus far, he reflected, lighting yet another cigar.

He sat in one of the fireside armchairs and smoked a good half of his cigar before he realised that he had not looked at Page One to see what, if any, significance it held. He jumped up and went to the table where the newspaper still lay open at the personal column. He noted at once that Page One was quoted as the page of reference in both the first and last group of numbers. But, in the book of poems, Page One simply consisted of twenty-six lines of a child's *aide-memoire* along the lines of 'A is for apple', 'B is for ball' etc. He went back to the armchair and slumped down to finish his cigar. He was beginning to feel the first intimations of tiredness and would have to call it a day if he was to see his estate manager at eight the next morning, as he did every day save Sunday. It seemed he would have to sleep on the problem.

He got up and began to blow out the lamps until only the one on the reading table was burning; this he took up and carried to the door, it would serve to light him to his bedroom. He locked the library door so that it would not be disturbed by the servants in the morning, washed and went to bed.

He woke when it was still pitch-dark and the solution to the problem of the night before, or rather, earlier that same day, flooded into his mind. He cursed himself for not seeing it before as he leaped out of bed, lit his bedside candle, and went downstairs in his dressing gown and nightgown holding the

candle before him to light his way; it cast long, flickering shadows which reflected his anxiety and agitation. Luckily, it was still too early for the servants; otherwise he would have had to waste time by dressing fully.

It was really so very simple, if he was right; Page One was a special page which was used for words which did not appear in the text of the book. A group of numbers preceded by number one referred to the numerical order of letters in the alphabet.

A few minutes' work at the reading table confirmed this idea; the eight-number group was decoded as the word 'vitriol' and the five-letter group was decoded as the word 'tons', so that the complete message now read: 'vitriol arrived ten tons'.

The difficulty now was that the message meant nothing to him. Perhaps, the decoding of other messages might give him some clues. But, now, he had to lock the door and hasten back to his room before the servants began their morning duties; he did not want them to see him so dishevelled and improperly dressed.