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The Skull and the Nightingale

Written by Michael Irwin

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MICHAEL IRWIN

The Skull and the Nightingale



blue door

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There is no difference to be found between the skull of King Philip and that of another man.

Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*

1

It was a breezy day in March when I returned to London from two years of travel, my age twenty-three, my prospects uncertain. I refreshed myself with coffee at the Roebuck before making my way to Fetter Lane, and the office of my godfather's agent, Mr Ward. Conceivably, this gentleman might be about to determine the future course of my life in twenty words. I paused at the entrance to his premises to assume unconcern.

He lurched up from behind his desk as ungainly as ever, a big fellow, with a head like a horse, and a gloomy eye.

'Good afternoon, Mr Ward. I am glad to see you well.'

'Good afternoon, Mr Fenwick. I have been expecting you.'

When we sat down there was a silence. I looked to him for more, but his large face was expressionless. Apparently it was for me to lead the way.

'I hope that my godfather is in good health.'

'I have heard nothing to the contrary.'

Mr Ward had ever been a sparse talker. I tried again.

'Have you instructions for me?'

'I have. Your former lodging with Mrs Deacon has been prepared for you. I will send to Mr Gilbert tomorrow to let him know that you have returned.'

'You have nothing further to tell me?'

'Not at this time.'

It seemed that the uncertainty was to continue.

'I shall, of course, be writing to him myself.'

'I had assumed as much, Mr Fenwick.'

Old long-chops was formal as an undertaker. Determined to strike a spark from him I brightened into affability.

'Tell me, Mr Ward, do you not find me wonderfully improved by my grand tour?'

He surveyed me grudgingly till a brief gleam lit his glum face.

'I see you are elegantly dressed, Mr Fenwick. The other improvements may require a little more time to take in.'

It was a slight enough stroke, but it gratified him to the tune of a quarter-smile. I felt sufficiently rewarded: but for my question he might not have tasted such merriment all week.

'You laugh at me, Mr Ward,' said I, ruefully, as though he were a jolly dog. 'If I am to spend much time in London I shall hope to show you the progress I have made.'

He ignored my hinted question.

'You do me too much honour, Mr Fenwick. But if you speak to me in French you will receive no reply.'

This second sally gave rise to the rare full grin, uncovering his big yellow teeth. I chuckled a response to confirm that we were on friendly terms. After all he might one day prove

a useful ally. Knowing that I would learn no more, I took my leave.

At least the news had not been bad. There would be a period of suspense as messages went to and from Worcestershire: meanwhile all my possible futures still lay open. The lodgings in Cathcart Street would suit me well enough: I had stayed with Mrs Deacon before leaving for France, and found her courteous and discreet. I could lie low in her house until I heard from my godfather, adjusting myself to English ways again and tuning my tongue to my native language.



When I had exchanged courtesies with Mrs Deacon and sent for my luggage, I sat down in my parlour to write a letter.

My dear Godfather,

I returned to London this afternoon from the travels which you so generously enabled. Mr Ward advised me that I should take my former lodgings with Mrs Deacon and await your further instructions.

The last communication I received from you found me in Rouen, on the final stage of my journey home. You were at that time, you reported, in good health, and were kind enough to say that you looked forward to seeing me on my return. When we meet you will find me, I hope, better informed and a little less awkward. Your generosity would have been ill rewarded if that were not the case. In my letters to you I have attempted to convey something of what I have acquired. I can now converse fluently in French and

tolerably well in German and Italian. My knowledge of the history, politics and arts of the great European countries has been greatly enhanced.

When last in London I was still something of a young country colt. I had exuberance without discipline, curiosity without direction. I hope my two years of travel have made me more reflective and purposeful. At the very least I am improved in deportment and address.

These claims may seem idle boasts. I would hope to make them good in conversation when I have the pleasure of seeing you – the godfather whose generosity to an orphan has done so much to improve his lot and widen his prospects.

I will remain in London and await further directions. Since a defined period of education has now come to an end, you may imagine that I look forward with eagerness and some little anxiety to hearing what advice you now have for me.

I remain, &c.

The composition of this grave epistle was accompanied by a facetious mental commentary. Much of the knowledge I had acquired related to activities that I would not have cared to discuss with my godfather. I was mimicking the cadences of respectability.

But I was dissatisfied with the letter even as I wrote it. It was too priggish, too fulsome: it lacked the playful touches that I fancied Mr Gilbert relished. The two-year absence had put me out of practice: I looked to recover the appropriate tone when I saw my patron again and could adapt my

conversation to his responses. Perhaps it had been advisable, at this stage, to err on the side of seriousness. He was a formidable old gentleman in his way, not to be taken for granted.



Perversely pleased to be breathing smoky London air once more, I refused Mrs Deacon's offer to prepare me dinner and strode out through the teeming, noisy streets. The wind had strengthened, and the big shop signs were swinging and creaking overhead. My destination was Keeble's steakhouse near the Strand, which in former days I had often visited with my friend Matt Cullen. With a nod of greeting I took a seat at a table three-quarters full. It quickly struck me that my fellow-diners were talking with particular animation and vigour. I concluded, rightly as I later learned, that this was one of the regular meetings of a Conversation Club. Without attending to what was said I was content to be, once more, sitting in a haze of English words and phrases. I let the talk wash over me and fancied myself linguistically refreshed.

Whatever my future course, for the time being it was comfortable to be home. Weary from travel I drank some wine to feed my reflections, and became pleasantly bemused. What would my godfather have to say to me? Where would I be two weeks hence? Was I to be condemned to rural life? The previous morning I had been conducting my business in French: would I ever have reason to speak that language again? Hereabouts my idle stream of thought circled into an eddy. I wondered in what corner of my skull the unspoken

language would be stored. How could such multifarious knowledge, such haystacks of nouns and verbs, such ladders and bridges of number and gender, be folded away into an unseen space? I pondered the paradox until my head swam – indeed I must have been grinning at my own bewilderment, for a voice cried: 'To judge by the smile this young fellow is happy in his meditations.'

I came out of my reverie to see a dozen faces around me, chewing, drinking, talking and laughing.

'Gentlemen,' I said, 'you must excuse me. I was lost in thoughts about the mysterious operations of the human brain.'

'Beware!' cried one of the number, 'I smell a virtuoso. Keep your headpiece out of his hands, or he'll be at it with microscope and scalpel.'

'Never fear,' said I. 'I am an idle speculator under the influence of wine.'

'Then fill your glass,' said another, 'and take us with you.'

I had no great desire to converse, but it seemed churlish to stay silent.

'My thoughts were of this nature. If any one of our company were now to attempt to write down all the words he knew, he could spend the entire night in the undertaking. By the morning, with his task far from complete, the fruit of his labour would already be a thick wedge of manuscript. Yet his brain would need no replenishment. Where has he been storing this copious knowledge, now translated into a material mass? And how can he dispense it yet still retain it?'

The company seemed pleased by the problem. After a pause, someone said: 'As to the former question one might proceed by a course of elimination. To begin facetiously: my

poor uncle lost three limbs at the battle of Blenheim, yet his memory was unimpaired. It seems that the storage place you seek is to be found in the head or the torso.'

'There is no need for such questions or such reasoning,' cried another. 'We already know that the mind is the seat of reason and memory.'

'Indeed we do,' said I. 'But although I am no anatomist I believe that the contents of the skull are as unmistakably material as the limbs the gentleman referred to. How are we to account for the unique receptivity of this particular physical organ, its sponge-like capacity to contain words, concepts and images?'

Several tried to speak, but were overridden by a bony fellow with a big voice.

'We discussed such matters a year ago. I posed questions similar to your own – and was denounced as a materialist and an atheist for my pains. But I refuted the charge very simply. The Almighty works miracles with material substance. If an acorn can contain a future tree, surely a human head can contain the contents of a dictionary?'

Fired up by now I struck back: 'You explain one mystery by appealing to another. If the unfathomable powers of omnipotence are to be invoked there is an end to all debate.'

These words produced uproar, and during the heated exchanges that ensued I paid for my entertainment and slipped away.

It was a dark, boisterous night. I made my way back towards Holborn along busy thoroughfares, clutching my hat whenever I turned a corner into a gust of breeze. North of Lincoln's Inn Fields the streets were quieter and but feebly lit. I was

brought up short when a haggard girl stepped out suddenly from the end of an alley, crying: 'Come this way, sir!'

'Not tonight, I thank you,' said I, affably enough.

'No, no' – in a frantic voice – 'I need help. My child . . .'

She turned hurriedly into the alley, and I followed, willing to be of assistance if I could. But after a few yards she turned about, clutched my greatcoat and shouted 'Rape! Rape!' At once a heavy brute of a man sprang from a doorway brandishing a cudgel. Startled as I was I found myself protected, as in certain previous physical encounters, by an instant blaze of animal rage. Half avoiding the bully's blow I seized his coat and rammed him back against the wall. He raised his club again, but I checked him with a punch to the belly, and then struck him a dowse to the chops that smacked his head back against the brickwork. The intending robber staggered sideways and stumbled to his knees. The girl leaped at me, scratching with both hands, but I wrenched her away and threw her on top of her fallen protector. Without waiting for more I hastened away.

Such a fury had surged in me that I walked an extra mile, at top pace, to allow my pounding heart to settle. It had been a sordid episode, but before I reached Mrs Deacon's house I found myself recovered from it and not unsatisfied. The first evening of my return to England had called into play some of the aptitudes fostered by my travels. I had taken a lively part in impromptu discussion and then shown that I could hold my own in a street fight. It seemed that I was resourceful, a young man of parts.



Next morning I winced a little on rising. There was a stiffness in my shoulder and a handsome purple bruise on my ribs. It would take me a day or two to shake off these effects. Through the window I saw rain, which suited my mood well enough. Here was a stasis in my life, an interlude between the acts: I could make it a time for recuperation and reflection. I knew where I would be likely to find some of my former Oxford companions, but felt no inclination to seek them out. How could I answer the questions that would greet me until I knew what was purposed for my future and what sort of figure I was likely to cut? Matt Cullen I would have been glad to see, for he was a man I could laugh with, but our correspondence had lapsed, and I knew nothing of his whereabouts.

All morning I stayed within doors, completing the journal that I had kept during my travels. The parlour in which I was writing had a mirror at one end in which I several times caught my reflection. At length I rose to study myself more minutely and at full length. In figure I would pass muster, being above the common height, vigorous and well-knit, but my face seemed to me too open, too youthful, redeemed from blandness only by strong brown eyes. Given the common belief that a man's character can be deduced from the front portion of his head, this could be a disadvantage. I practised certain expressions – attentive, amused, eager – and found the case somewhat improved. I could assume a variety of responses that might make me appear an agreeable companion. In repose, however, my face seemed a *tabula rasa*, awaiting the imprint of further experience.

The rain continuing, I worked diligently at my journal,

bringing the record to a conclusion with my arrival in Dover. It was convenient that the combination of vacant time, rough weather, a bottle of ink and the wing-feathers of a goose had enabled me to capture my recollections before they were lost – I had always been quick to forget. My life being thus far in order, I was ready for what was to come.

Cathcart Street was in a quiet neighbourhood, but there was noise enough from it to bring me to the window more than once. The kennel down the middle of the road was swollen by the rain into a thick black stream, lumpy with refuse. Pedestrians in sodden clothes struggled sullenly along its edges, forced close to the walls. It was a dismal sight: there was much to be said for loitering within, warm and dry.

Later in the day, tiring of my own company, I made occasion to take tea with Mrs Deacon. Although I had lodged in the house before, I knew nothing of her beyond the fact that she was a widow, with a young daughter named Charlotte. In conversation she proved civil and shrewd, but maintained a certain reserve. It was this quality, perhaps, that caused me to see her as a handsome woman of forty, looking younger than her age, rather than as indeed a younger woman. Her composure suggested a lack of interest in any physical attraction that she might possess. I was unsure whether to play man of the world or affable young fellow. It was by chance that I found the less formal direction.

'Do you know Mr Gilbert?' I inquired.

'I knew him years ago. If he communicates with me now it is through Mr Ward.'

'Then the messages will be brief. Yesterday he offered me but fifty words.'

She smiled. 'So many? Then you can count yourself a friend.'

'Tell me, Mrs Deacon,' said I, 'how do you think this taciturn gentleman passes his evenings.'

She considered. 'He sits in an arm-chair and reads a big black book. When it grows dark he walks the streets with a big black dog.'

'But what is in the book he reads?'

'Nobody knows. It is one of his secrets.'

This time we both smiled.

I was glad to have hit on this vein of whimsy in my landlady's disposition, and to find myself easy in her company. Later that night, my imagination stirred by wine, I tried to envisage the warm body beneath the long dress. I liked what I saw with my mind's eye, but suppressed the picture as unsuitably distracting in my present situation.



After two or three days of idleness I grew restless. I was in the unsatisfied state produced when the mind teems with questions to which there are no clear answers. Having had no living relatives since the age of ten I was accustomed to a solitary existence. Reserve and self-sufficiency were almost the only qualities I had in common with my godfather. But I fretted at being becalmed. Ambition assured me that Mr Gilbert would not have paid for my education, and sent me to the great cities of Europe unless he had substantial future plans for me. But circumspection reminded me that he was an enigmatic man whose patronage had been conferred from

a distance. Although he had rescued me when I was homeless he had scarcely ever spoken of my parents, who had been his friends; and although he had countenanced occasional visits to Fork Hill House he had never encouraged me to stay for more than a few days at a time. At Oxford, therefore, I had been at pains to say nothing of my upbringing, not caring to admit that I had neither family nor home. Appearances had been preserved by bluff and evasion; but the constraint had been wearisome.

It was characteristic of Mr Gilbert to have dropped no hint as to his future intentions. For all I knew he might be planning to buy me a commission in the army or send me to the colonies. I felt no enthusiasm for either prospect. If I was to stay at home the possibilities seemed limited. I could not enter the church: neither my vagrant habits of thought nor my animal spirits would allow it. The law was hardly more inviting.

My favourite hope soared higher: perhaps too high. As far as I knew, my godfather had no living relatives. At his age he was unlikely to attempt marriage; and should he do so his thin loins would be hard put to it to originate an offspring. Surely it was time for him to proclaim me his heir and prepare me for the life of a prosperous landowner? In the country I could walk, ride and perhaps hunt. The more reflective side of my nature would find sustenance in Mr Gilbert's well-stocked library. When I needed younger company and livelier entertainment I would spend a few raucous weeks in London. Satiety achieved, I could again retreat to Worcestershire to read books and view the world philosophically.

This was my preferred narrative: a life I could freely adjust to my personal convenience. Perversely, however, I found

even this possibility uninviting as implying a premature acceptance of settled middle age. By a curious paradox my dependent condition had fostered an independence of spirit: I had become accustomed to mingling affability with reserve. It seemed to me that, unlike my Oxford companions, I would be able, if put to it, to live by my wits. I was eager for a challenge that would show me what sort of man I was.



There had been little in my childhood that I cared to remember. Even my recollections of my mother, now dead for more than ten years, were uncertain. I had turned away from the past, as by instinct, to concentrate my attentions on the present and the future. It suited my disposition to be active: if left too long to brood I tended to lose my good humour and lapse into melancholy. To avert this possibility at the present time I needed a friend in whom I could confide. It was natural, therefore, that my thoughts turned to Sarah Kinsey, the only individual who knew just how I was circumstanced. It was two years since I had last seen her, and not much less than that since she had last written to me. She had faded in my recollection as I found fresh diversion abroad; negligently I had left her letters unanswered. Since my return she was suddenly present again before my mind's eye, shyly pretty, quick to smile. For all the seeming diffidence she had been independent: her tastes and opinions were all her own. We had talked with great freedom.

One night, in sentimental mood, I strolled to Pitman Street where Sarah had been living two years previously. I found

the house in darkness, and stood to stare at it. Even as I watched, a light appeared in the window of the upstairs room where I had several times engaged in three-cornered conversation with Sarah and her aunt. Perhaps the two of them were chatting there at that very moment. I lingered for several minutes, indulging the imagined proximity and half tempted to knock at the door.

The matter was resolved when an old man emerged from a neighbouring house.

'Pardon me, friend,' I asked, 'does Mrs Catherine Kinsey live here?'

'She used to,' he said. 'A widow lady. But she left a year ago.'

I thanked him and turned away. Disappointed as I was, I knew that my quest had been an idle one. Even if I could have seen Sarah alone she would surely have reproached me for the breach in our correspondence. And with my future unknown, what had I now to offer? I was downcast as I trudged away: perhaps I would spend my life mourning Sarah as a lost love. Aware that a melancholy so hastily improvised could be of little substance, I savoured it nonetheless.



A week after my arrival in London I received a letter from my godfather:

My dear Richard,

I was pleased to receive word of your safe arrival. As you imply, there is much for us to discuss and consider. I would like to see you at Fork Hill House early next week,

and hope that you will be able to stay for some few days. However, you may leave the bulk of your effects in the safe hands of Mrs Deacon.

Your affectionate godfather,
James Gilbert

It was a characteristically tight-fisted message. I could discern but a single clue concerning my future: it seemed that I was expected to return to London after my visit to Worcestershire. Whether the hint presaged an extended stay in the city or another journey it was impossible to guess.