



English Studies in Latin America

The Legion Lost

Author: Tim Jarvis

Source: *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 3 (August 2012)

ISSN: 0719-0921

Published by: Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Your use of this work indicates your acceptance of these terms.





The Legion Lost

Timothy J. Jarvis ¹

'The Legion Lost' arrived in the post in early 2001, in a manila envelope with a London postcode. No note accompanied it; there was nothing to indicate who had authored it, or why it had been sent to me. It is written, on faint-ruled sheets torn from a pad, in a hand which begins neat, but soon ebbs to frantic scrawl.

At first I thought it a work of fiction dissembling a true account, but, as I read, waxed less and less certain of this, and more and more uneasy. Whatever it may be, it disquiets me to this day.

I

Short, paunchy, jittery – turning his head with jerky movements to look about him all the while – and dressed in threadbare, rumpled, and dun-coloured garments, the man looked a city sparrow, plump from feeding on scraps, but mangy and fraught.

'It was thirteen years ago, this very day,' he said without preamble. 'Thirteen years ago I became one of those unfortunates who can never gain...'

He, grimaced, broke off to take a swig from the bottle, concealed in a brown paper bag, he held. Choking, he sputtered, turned red. Over his shoulder, I could see a group of students throwing a frisbee around, and, uncomfortable, stared at the arcing flights of the red plastic disk until the fit had passed. Once it had, the man hawked and spat into a handkerchief taken from the breast pocket of his shirt. After peering into the cloth a moment, he balled it up and returned it to his pocket.

¹ Timothy J Jarvis is a writer and academic with an interest in the antic, the weird. He currently lives in London. He has had short fiction and critical writing, on literature and Creative Writing pedagogy, published in a number of venues. He has just finished work on a novel in the weird tradition, written as part of a PhD in Creative Writing he undertook at the University of Glasgow, which he is currently sending out to agents and editors. He maintains a blog of antic found texts at treatisesondust.wordpress.com.

‘Who can never gain a moment’s respite,’ he continued finally. ‘That is to say, the Legion Lost.’

That evening it was very warm and, after work, I had bought a four pack of lager and gone to Gordon Square in Bloomsbury to sit and drink in the sun. Back then it was rare for me to drink on my own, well, quite rare – it’s only since that time alcohol has become my sole succour – but it’d been a bad day – my manager had called me into his office to harangue me because a contract that my team had been negotiating had gone ‘tits-up’, ‘pear-shaped’ (‘up the swanny,’ I ventured, but was met with a glare).

The air was thick with the hairs of London plane seedballs, which made my eyes scratchy, but apart from that it was pleasant to lounge there drinking, and, after a little, my boss’s rebuke faded from my ears. It was about then the sparrow approached the bench I was sitting on, sat down next to me. I avoided eye contact, but with glances askance built up, piecemeal, my picture of him.

I could tell by his manner he was building up to addressing me, stoking his courage with pulls at his bottle, but the sun blazed down, I was halfway through my fourth can, was a little stupored, and didn’t feel like moving. That drowse has cost me.

Then, after a few minutes, he uttered the enigmatic pronouncement recorded above.

‘The Legion Lost?’ I echoed, after a moment’s pause.

He pinched his nose.

‘Means nothing to you?’

‘No.’

Turning to look at me, he took a long swallow from his bottle.

‘I thought I saw it in you. Why I came over. Well, you’re lucky. Sorry for bothering you.’

He got up to leave. I wish now I’d simply let him go, but my curiosity was roused. I grabbed and tugged his sleeve.

‘Wait. The Legion Lost? Tell me.’

A cloud passed before the sun, and a shadow scoured the square. The man sat down again, sighed. A park-keeper walked past, spearing discarded crisp packets and sandwich wrappers. Holding out his hand, smiling, the man introduced himself as Ralph. I gave him my name, and we shook.

‘Here,’ Ralph said. ‘The source of that terrible epithet.’

He'd a plastic carrier bag with him, and reaching into it, he produced a book bound in dull red leather. The gilt letters on its spine glistened in the sunlight, caught my eye: *Tales from the Land of Nod*. He handed it to me.

'Take a look at the title page.'

I began leafing through the volume. It was in poor condition – its pages were yellow with age and worn greasy, its binding was loose. After several blank pages, there followed a frontispiece; an etching depicting an old man, with a matted beard, dressed in a cloak. He stood, hunched, leaning on a knotty staff, amid a barren, rocky landscape. Facing this illustration was the title page; the text printed there ran as follows:

TALES FROM THE LAND OF NOD

Ten startling stories heard from the lips of men and women of the Legion Lost

By Walter Waldegrave

Beneath was an epigraph:

Him the Almighty Power
Hurd headlong flaming from th'Ethereal Skie
With hideous ruine and combustion down
To bottomless perdition.

There was no other information, no publisher's or printer's details, no publication date. I made to turn the leaf, but Ralph reached out and snatched the book away from me before I could do so.

'No good can come of you reading further, believe me.'

At that moment, I looked up and saw the park-keeper, a stout, florid man, with close-shorn dark hair, charging at us, tilting his spear. I pushed Ralph aside, leapt out of the way. Landing awkwardly, turning my ankle, I stumbled and fell. I hit my head on a rubbish bin. Careering on, the park-keeper ran full into the bench. His stick splintered in his hands. He yowled in pain, but recovered himself quickly, fell on Ralph and seized hold of the book. I sat, stunned, on the floor, watching them tussle.

A few people looked over, but most ignored the fight; London inures to such things. The park-keeper flailed at Ralph, struck him in the face. Blood guttered from his nose, and he let go of the book. Staggering backwards, the park-keeper tripped on the raised kerb around a planted bed,

wheeled his arms to regain his balance, and some pages, still held together by stitching down one side, came loose from the book and went fluttering, like a wounded bird, into the border. Neither Ralph nor the park-keeper noticed. Then the park-keeper, yielding to gravity, fell, landing heavily on his back in a patch of rose bushes. He lay winded, rolling his eyes.

Wiping his bloody nose on the cuff of his suit jacket, Ralph crossed over to the park-keeper and kicked him, hard, in the groin. He groaned. Then, after snatching up the book from his grasp and winking at me, Ralph turned and ran away.

‘Bloody shithole,’ the park-keeper yelled, his voice nasal.

He got ponderously to his feet, and, ignoring me, stomped off after Ralph.

I stood up, crossed to the bench, and, rubbing my sore skull, sat down to wait. When, after several minutes, neither Ralph, nor the park-keeper had returned, I went over, thrust my arm into the foliage of the bed, and retrieved the leaves that had become detached from *Tales from the Land of Nod*.

I left the garden, found a pub, bought a pint, and began to read. By some caprice of fate, or perhaps because the binding had been weakened at places where the book was habitually held open, the first and last pages of the section that had come loose were the first and last pages of an individual story, the final of the volume. What follows is a copy of that narrative (the original no longer exists; I burnt it, in a frenzy, thinking its baneful influence perhaps some property of the artefact itself).

II

A TALE OF PENURY, BLOODY MURDER, CARD-SHARPING SWINDLES, SHAM SÉANCES, AND THE REALMS OF THE FOUL OLDEN HORRORS THAT PROWL THE PRIMEVAL LIGHTLESS WAYS THAT RIDDLE THE EARTH

SKAGWAY, 1897

My fund of eldritch narratives is now all but exhausted; there remains only one story left to be told. However, it is the most significant of all, for it is that I heard first; that which sparked my mania for wandering the wild and barren places of the earth seeking men of that strange band, the Legion Lost, striking up acquaintances with them, and asking them to recount for me their bizarre tales of woe and hardship; the yarn that, like a drug, got me craving others of ilk. Therefore, I will give a more detailed and lengthy account of the context than I have done for the other stories related in

this volume: the frame here constitutes an interesting tale in its own right, that of the kindling of my life's obsession.

It was the autumn of '97. I was young and foolish. Lured by tales of Yukon Gold, I, along with tens of thousands of other poor venturesome sapskulls, outfitted myself in Seattle and secured a berth on a ship bound for Alaska. In doing so, I spent most of an inheritance I had been bequeathed by a rich uncle, a banker. I disembarked at Skagway, the Alaskan port from which one could most easily make one's way to the gold fields in the vicinity of Dawson City. Before the rush, Skagway had been an outpost of the fur trade, a dismal place of churned mud and clapboard shacks, inhabited by a mere handful of brutish men who bludgeoned seals to scrape a living, but by '97 it was moiling with unscrupulous provisioners, whores, and crackbrained missionaries, all there to waylay, gull, and fleece the frantic, reckless, and easily duped stampeders who passed through. I myself tarried there a deal longer than I should have, mainly due to the ministrations of a pretty young moll named Laura. It was only when I noticed the nights were waxing longer than the days, I realized I would have to light out if I was to make it over the mountains into Canada before winter set in and the notches became impassable. I paid a visit to the Tlingit camp just outside of town and took on three Indians to lug my food and equipment, then found a ferry prepared to take me over to Dyea, a small settlement at the head of the trail.

On the morning of the second day I reached the foot of the Golden Staircase – a set of steps cut into the snow and ice, by the Tlingit, long before – that snaked up a steep slope to the Chilkoot Pass. It was a cold and gray day, exceedingly cold and gray. At the foot of the steps was the Scales, a tent city, with a saloon and a couple of restaurants, that had sprung up around a Mountie checkpoint where packs were weighed to ensure all stampeders carried at least a ton of supplies, reckoned a year's worth – a measure put in place to prevent those bound for the gold fields from being driven to desperate acts of plunder against Canadian homesteaders. This stipulation meant that many, those too poor to afford to pay Indians to help them carry their load, had to make several trips between campsites lugging their provisions – the rigors of the route were too much for pack animals. The weight of my baggage was found to be sufficient, and I was allowed through the checkpoint with my bearers. There was a primitive horse-drawn tramway offering to haul loads up to the highest point of the trail, but the fees being charged were exorbitant, and besides, I preferred to trust my things to my reliable Indians, than to a ridiculous contraption.

I set out, up the staircase, clinging to the guide rope with a fierce grip, eyes narrowed against the sleet squalls that beset us, seekers of gold, guides, and pack bearers all. A great number of us,

hooded against the bitter cold, trudged up the steps. We looked pilgrims bound for a shrine containing a precious relic – in a way, I suppose, this is exactly what the prospectors among us were, though it was to gold that we pledged our devotions and made our supplications. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say we resembled an order of flagellants, for if the man in front, fatigued, slowed, many would – the way being strait, and they, frantic to cross the ridge before nightfall when temperatures would plummet – drive him on by striking out with anything to hand. Lengths of hempen cord served as makeshift lashes, walking staffs and pickaxe, mattock, and shovel handles were used as goads. Or perhaps with our clothing ragged and our belongings bundled up on our backs, we looked more like bindlestiffs or hobos.

About halfway up the staircase, at the pass's famous false summit – a ridge that appears to be the highest point of the trail until reached, when a further steep climb can be seen beyond it – there was a ledge of rock beside the path offering respite from the arduous ascent. This shelf was narrow and beetled over the void, but a large number of bone-weary stampedeers, careless of the bluff's edge, sprawled or milled about, querulously bemoaning the hardships of the trail, as if they walked it at the behest of some potentate, rather than of their own volition; the noise they made was similar to one commonly heard at dusk by the sea, that of a colony of gannets roosting. Standing in knots, talking low, the Indians looked askance at their employers, no doubt contemptuous of the bellyaching – that proud race had been climbing the trail for generations. Sitting down, I took off my hobnailed boots and thick socks, and rubbed lard into my swollen, blistered, and chilblained feet.

This done, I looked about me. A man, who, seemingly oblivious to the commotion about him, stood gazing out at the prospect of snow-tousured peaks, attracted my notice. His clothing marked him out – while we men under the spell of gold were clad alike in hooded furs and oil-slickers, and the natives were dressed in garments sewn from bearskin and deerhide, he wore a stained and torn military greatcoat, fastened with frogs of faded golden braid, a thick woolen scarf, and a beaver hat with earflaps which were tied under his chin with string. His thick matted beard and the locks of hair curling from beneath his hat were speckled with gray, and his back was bowed, though the impression this conveyed of decrepitude was at odds with the suggestion of sinewy vigor there was about him. I could not reach a firm conclusion about his age, however, for his back was to me and I could not see whether his face was that of a young or elderly man. He carried only a small satchel, seemed to have no pack bearers, and I wondered how he managed to get past the Mountie checkpoint. It appeared he found something enthralling in the scene before him; perhaps he perceived evidence of the Maker's workings even in that desolate place. I, too, looked out at the

view, but it gave me no solace: I felt no numinous awe, saw only a harsh unforgiving landscape – I had lost my faith on the death of my dear wife just over a year before.

My musings were soon disturbed – a man a little distance away took off his footwear, as I had, and, discovering several of his toes grey and shriveled, threw a conniption fit.

The afflicted stamper was a very small wiry man, with a face like the blade of a hatchet, honed to keenness by life's grind. His eyes were shrewd, his lank greasy blonde hair straggled down over his ears and nape, his incisors were prominent, and his beard was pale against his red chapped skin. In short, he was of the type of the luckless rat-like petty miscreant of innumerable popular novels. He was railing about his ill luck and cussing in gruff tones, casting about him with his gimlet eyes, fixing other wayfarers with his glare as if he blamed them for his suffering.

Standing at the rat's side, looking down, dull, agape, at his ruined feet, was another man, seemingly his traveling companion. No two more dissimilar individuals could be imagined. The frost-bitten wretch's friend was tall and hulking, had hands like ham hocks. He had thick matted hair, and a full grizzled beard. He resembled a bear. And, or so it appeared from the way his mouth was hanging open to catch the swirling flakes of snow, was something of a dolt.

After a few minutes, the rat's bawling began to roil some of the other stampedes. There were grumbles, then a brute yelled at him, calling for him to hold his tongue and keep his head. The brute's nose was squashed flat against his face, probably a legacy of a life of brawling, and that, combined with his apparent irascibility, gave him the air of a pit dog.

'I'm not taking orders from someone who looks like the kind whose sister's also his daughter,' came the rat's jeering response.

The pit dog looked bemused at first – it took him a while to unravel the insult. Then he snarled, drew a Bowie knife from a sheath at his belt.

'I'm going to cut you open from crotch to craw, you little weasel,' he said, then bounded at the rat. The bear stepped into the pit dog's path and swatted him to the ground with one of his giant paws.

What followed was reminiscent of a scene I witnessed once in a pit in southern California where they were baiting a grizzly with lions brought over from the Dark Continent. Men of the pit dog's party pulled blades and flew at the bear to avenge the insult. Most on the ledge gathered around, yawping; only the dignified Indian porters backed away, looked on the ruckus with disdain. On hearing the uproar, the man in the tattered greatcoat turned away from the outlook. My conjectures as to his age were ended then – judging by his countenance, he was, while no longer

young, only just entering his middle years. However, the hoar flecking his hair, and the stoop I had thought might betoken he was elderly, together with something I had not noticed before, that he had lost his right arm at the shoulder – his sleeve was pinned across his chest and flapped in the wind, gave him the air of one ravaged by a hard life and old beyond his span.

The scuffle ended with the big fellow still standing, panting through clenched teeth, steeped in blood running from many shallow wounds to his arms and chest. His adversaries had fared much worse, however – lay strewn about nursing cracked ribs and broken heads. The rat sat looking smugly on, his frostbite, for the moment, forgotten.

That would have been the end, had not the pit dog, recovered from the blow that had knocked him down, sneaked up behind the bear, blade in hand, meaning, it seemed, to hamstring him. At that the one-armed man took a revolver from his greatcoat, leveled it at the pit dog, and shouted, ‘Enough!’

His roar brought silence to the ledge.

‘That’s enough. Leave him be.’

Then, looking down, shaking his head, he said, as if to himself, ‘Shameful animals.’

He seemed to have some inborn sway, for the pit dog and his injured comrades melted into the throng.

After putting his gun away, the one-armed man crossed over, knelt down beside the rat, and looking askance at him, began speaking to him in a low voice. Furtive, ashamed to be eavesdropping, but too curious to repress the urge, I drew closer, hoping to catch some of what was said. I overheard their introductions, learned the one-armed man was Duncan, and the rat, Peter. Much of their subsequent conversation was lost to the wind’s howl and the tumult of the other stampeders’ complaining and talk, but I managed to make out that Duncan was attempting to get Peter to abandon his hopes of making a fortune in the Yukon, and return to the Mountie camp where he could get his feet tended to. At first Peter was reluctant, but on being told he was otherwise certain to lose toes and struggle thenceforth to walk, he seemed, suddenly, to see the good sense in the course being advised him.

Duncan then turned to the bear, sought to persuade him to help his companion back down the mountain. This loyal friend, after only a moment’s bovine pondering, agreed. His name, it transpired, was Paul; Duncan smiled on hearing that. After putting his boots back on for him, Paul helped Peter to his feet. The two men then shambled off, Paul all but carrying Peter bodily under his arm.

I had been moved and surprised by Duncan's bravery and kindness – such compassion being a rarity in those bitter climes – and went over to strike up a conversation. I expressed my admiration for the way he had acted. His stammered reply demonstrated humility, but also self-righteousness.

'I think most people would have been moved to help. That no one here was, is merely evidence of the way gold preys on their minds. I, though, do not hunger after earthly riches.'

I noticed a faint trace of Scots lingered in the man's accent, but he had clearly been in America some years, for it was almost buried.

We were having to shout to make ourselves heard above the clamor, and Duncan suggested we take shelter from the noise behind a large rock at the far end of the ledge. I turned to ask my Indians to wait for me, then followed Duncan behind the boulder. Once we were ensconced in its lee, I asked him what, if he was not a fortune seeker, he was doing out there in that hostile waste.

'I am a preacher and it's my calling to succor those in bleak circumstances. Where better to do so? I came out here to help, where I can. And, what's more, I succumbed once to the enticements of fabled wealth, and it eases me some to comfort those who've likewise fallen prey.'

My admiration and respect for Duncan was fast souring, curdled by the rennet of his priggish manner; that he was a priest only irked me further.

'That gold isn't fabled,' I said, belligerently. 'I've seen some of it with my own two eyes, back in California.'

'Was just a figure of speech is all. There is gold in some of the Klondike's creeks, as you say. Most of the claims are taken, though, and even if you were able to gang together with some others and stake yourself a place, you'd most likely be driven off by roughneck claim-jumpers before you'd even had a chance to thaw out a patch of earth to dig.'

'I can look out for myself.'

'Well, it's not just toughs you've got to look out for, there are outlandish-cruel men out there who get up to things as would freeze your blood quicker than a night out in the open at the pole.'

He struck a pose, with his arm held out before him, began declaiming:

'There are strange things done, in the midnight sun, by the men who toil for gold. The Arctic trails have their secret tales, that would make your blood run cold.'

Of course these verses are now familiar to me as the first lines of 'The Cremation of Sam McGee' by Robert W. Service, but back then they were novel, and that great poet of Yukon life, the 'Canadian Kipling', was yet to publish them. The only explanation I can think of is that Duncan must have encountered and discoursed with Service during his wanderings. Service hailed from

Glasgow, as, I was later to discover, did Duncan, and it is possible, had the two men met in the frozen Yukon, so far from the city on the banks of the Clyde, they might have struck up an acquaintance over reminiscences of that place.

‘Also,’ Duncan continued, ‘digging isn’t as easy as you’d think. It’s back-breaking labor. And even when you’ve got down to the gravel layer, chances are you’ll find it isn’t pay dirt and’ll have to try delving elsewhere.’

‘Oh, I think I’m doughty enough,’ I said, sardonically. ‘And, besides, I’ve outlaid far too much on provisions and my passage from Seattle to Skagway not to go on.’

‘You’d be better off reckoning that sum lost through ill fate and turning back now. You may have wasted money, but, as yet, you’ve risked and endured little. All the dangers and hardships lie ahead of you.’

He went on to evoke these for me, in a harangue filled with the lurid parlance of the evangelic pulpit. His description of the White Horse Rapids struck me particularly, it was so turgid, and I can recall it practically verbatim:

‘At one point the river runs through a narrow gully, the Miles Canyon, then courses down a steeply shelving rock-strewn reach, known as the White Horse Rapids. This is not far down the Yukon from the winter camps, you know. Yes, it is a right poetical name, isn’t it? It’s said they were christened by early pioneers who were reminded of the wind-tousled manes of hoary steeds by all the spume. Dangerous? Yes, perhaps the most treacherous stretch of the whole river, and it is at no point along its course a calm waterway. A large number of craft have been capsized or wrecked shooting the rapids, and this has resulted in the loss of provisions, and occasionally of life, for some have been dragged under by eddies, and smothered by roily waters. Yet, many stampeders still tempt providence in spite of this, for they are a foolish and rash breed. What’s even more astounding is that there are alternative routes, land trails that are well-known, and fairly easy-going. Impatience? Brute avarice I would call it. Fittingly the roar of the rapids sounds as the tumult of the damned in Hell must, for those that have drowned there will, for their greed, have been cast down forthwith into the infernal lake of fire.’

Once he had concluded his catalogue of risks and adversities, Duncan looked up at a skein of geese who were flying by far overhead. He continued staring into the sky long after their silhouettes had been lost against a dark high mass of cloud moving in from the east. I said nothing, a little rattled, for I realized that, if the tone of Duncan’s disquisition had been risible, in tenor it was

probably an accurate reflection of the hardships of the route. Then, after a time, his eyes still fixed on the heavens, he sighed.

‘And you would put yourself through all of this,’ he said, ‘for material gain, which God frowns upon.’

That irked me. I resented his Pharisaical stance on the, in my view, natural hankering after wealth.

‘Thanks,’ I blustered, ‘but I’ll take my chances, and go on. I’m not gutless.’

‘I’m not impugning your pluck. Just warning you, is all. Doubtless you’ll make it to Dawson City without coming to harm. But, like I say, when you get there you’ll find local miners have taken all the gold-bearing creeks.’

Most of those who reached Dawson ended up living on the settlement’s fringes in shanties built using broken-up river craft, disappointed, milling about town, biding their time while deciding how best to make the journey back south, Duncan said. Furthermore, he claimed that, due to the huge incursion, disease was rife and the city now teetered on the brink of famine.

‘Therefore, you may find you’re able to do some good, if you’re inclined to, and you insist on pressing on,’ he continued. ‘That’s why I’m bound there. If so, you’ll have the satisfaction of knowing you’re lending a hand to a community in dire need, or rather two hands, which is more useful, when all is said and done, than just the one.’

He grinned, almost diffidently, plucked at his empty sleeve.

I was disarmed by Duncan’s joke at his own expense and began to wonder whether I had allowed my prejudice against clerics to fog my judgment. After all, for all his cant, Duncan had only been trying to alert me to the trials I would face. The thawing of my opinion was attended by a sudden onset of cold. Heavy snow began to fall from the black rack overhead, which now shrouded the entire sky. I looked round the corner of the rock behind which Duncan and I had been conversing, and was perturbed to see one of my Indians sitting on the floor, clutching his head and shivering. I crossed over to find out what was wrong. It emerged he had taken very ill of a sudden. Concerned for him, the other Indians implored me to let him return immediately to Skagway. I could hardly refuse their earnest pleas, in any case it did not look like the sick man had the strength to take up his pack again. I was resigned, therefore, to abandoning some of my provisions, and was just about to sort out a pile of the least essential items to leave behind, when Duncan approached, asked what was the matter. When I explained, he said, ‘Well, as you know, I think it’s foolhardy to

go on at all, but since you're determined, and I'm going that way anyhow, I may as well help you out by toting what I can.'

I gratefully accepted this offer of aid, partly out of desperation, and partly because my glimpse of Duncan's streak of self-deprecating humor had, as I say, endeared him slightly to me, given me to think he might be more pleasant company than I had hitherto thought, though I still considered him a prig. Thus, as a consequence of the vagaries of fate and a weak jest, I heard the story that fired the great obsession of my life.

III

We went on to the end of the trail – Duncan, the two remaining Indians, and I – and, after a good day and a half's slog on from the top of the Chilkoot pass, reached Lake Bennett. During that time my dislike of Duncan fast turned to regard, and my regard quickly burgeoned into friendship; he was, in truth, a congenial fellow – I discovered a good heart lay beneath his preachy vesture.

On the shores of the frozen lake, towered over by hoar-dredged mountains and hemmed in by tenebrous pines, vast numbers of dun-colored tents, brindled here and there with snow, had sprouted up, like toadstools after heavy rain. As we walked down the path into the encampment we passed many men whipsawing logs into planks for boat-building; it looked wearisome work.

On reaching the camp, Duncan suggested we take a stroll among the tents. Everywhere we walked he pointed out brutishness and squalor: men brawling, women smoking and spitting, children suffered to run underfoot, besmirched with filth. We saw one man hack another's ear clean from his skull with a bowie knife, and a withered prostitute lifted her skirts to us.

It seemed the good were outnumbered by the low, the violent, the snarling, and the bestial. Whether I would have seen this, had Duncan not directed my gaze to it, I do not know – possibly I might still have been bleary eyed with dreams of making my fortune – but, whatever the case may be, I realized that, were there gold still in the Klondike, there would be a horrid scuffle over it, one I did not have the stomach for; scrabbling in the frozen earth with men such as the men in the camp on the shores of Lake Bennett was not for me, not even for a fortune the like of Hearst's.

Further, we learnt, from conversations overheard, that the ice had formed on the Yukon early that year, making the river impassable till the Spring thaw, at least four months off.

I decided to return to Skagway and secure passage on a boat bound for a port further down the western seaboard. When I announced this intention to Duncan, he said, if I would have him along, he would like to postpone his trip to Dawson City and accompany me. I was touched, told

him I would be glad of his company. He then asked if I had any objection to going back by way of the White Pass Trail, and trying if we could do any good there. He explained that, though the route was less severe than the Chilkoot Trail, in some ways conditions on it were worse, largely because thieves and grifters preyed on wayfarers. I assented, and, after I sold off my gear (sadly at a great loss) and dismissed my Indians, we set out.

I will not bore you with the details of that fatiguing and fretful journey. The route did not come to be known as the Dead Horse Trail for nothing – the frozen carcasses of horses, ponies, and mules strewed it; they lay on their backs, four legs stiff in the air like stovepipe hats, hides partially flayed by the wind, ribs poking through like the timbers of wrecked coracles. Our toils were, in small part, recompensed by the fact we aided some stampeders in straits, though we were unable to convince any of the idiocy of continuing into Canada.

Not long after gaining Skagway, I managed to talk the captain of a steamer, bound for Seattle, into taking me on. I tried to persuade Duncan to likewise seek a working berth, but he said he preferred to stay on in the frozen North and continue his humanitarian enterprise, meant to head back down the trail once more, make it all the way to Dawson City this time. His eyes filled with sentimental tears when he talked of this duty, which, despite the high esteem I, by that stage, held him in, still irked a mite.

We spent our last evening together in a saloon – a seamy, noisy, sawdust-and-rotgut establishment typical of that place – over a bottle of cheap whiskey (Duncan's scruples did not extend to temperance). After a few glasses of the acrid liquor, an enigmatic phrase my friend had employed when we first met, and which I had hitherto forgotten, returned to me, prompting me to ask him a question, 'You mentioned before you were led astray by the lure of riches. What did you mean by that?'

'Do you believe there are things that, though beyond the ordinary ken of man, nevertheless mould our lives, weird forces at work?'

'No, I do not.'

'Neither did I once. Back then I would have scorned such notions, but now...'

'You have your belief. I'm not a religious man.'

'It was not to God I adverted.'

Duncan was silent a moment, peering at me through the fag in that place.

'Will you permit to tell a tale? It is true, and concerns things that befell me back when I was a rash youth.'

‘Of course. I enjoy hearing a yarn spun.’

Then, as we sat there, at the counter, staring into our tumblers like crones scrying for auguries, Duncan told me a bizarre story as will shock you, and grume your blood. The version I set down here is accurate in its essentials; the narrative was so steeped in the weird it has been forever seared into my brain. However, it was long ago, and I cannot recall Duncan’s words exactly, so I have used my own. Poor though they are, it is hoped they will suffice to convey the awful air of dread with which Duncan imbued his narrative.

‘I was born in Glasgow,’ he began, ‘spent my early childhood in a tenement flat in the Gorbals. My family was right poor, real kirk mice. My father worked on the ships, shipbuilding, you know, down on the Clyde, but what he earned wasn’t really enough to keep life and limb together...’

To keep his family fed and warm, he was forced to steal bread from bins behind bakeries and fill his pockets with lumps of coke intended for the smelting furnaces down at the docks. When Duncan was five his mother found work as a maidservant – worn-out clothes and shoes were replaced, and, for a time, the larder was abundantly stocked and, every evening, coals crackled and spat cheerily in the grate. Unfortunately, this period of plenty was short-lived – the mother’s employer, a lawyer, came across her alone, below stairs, and propositioned her. She recoiled in horror, spurned the unwelcome advances, was sacked on the spot.

After that, things got worse and worse: increasing mechanisation at the docks put Duncan’s father’s job under threat and the slum landlords raised rents.

Then, one day, a few weeks after his ninth birthday, Duncan returned home from the laundry where he had been put to work to find the door forced, left hanging off its hinges, and his family butchered. His father – who had been introduced to the writings of Marx and Engels by students who drank in the whisky shop he patronized – had been agitating his fellow workers, advocating a suspension of their labor in protest over conditions. Thugs in the pay of the shipyard owners had broken in: Duncan’s parents sprawled in pools of slowly clotting blood in the living-room, skulls battered with pick-handles; his older sister, who had been taking a bath, had been brutally raped, then drowned in the tin tub; the youngest, only four, lay where she had been sleeping in her cot, smothered with her blanket.

Duncan joined a gang of homeless street urchins who slept in an abandoned hotel, the Great Eastern – a building whose respectable, foursquare exterior concealed a riot of squalid life. The children ran errands for petty criminals and snatched purses on Sauchiehall Street and in George

Square. Life was very hard for them. Most had no choice but to turn to prostitution on reaching adolescence.

An aptitude for sleight of hand provided a means of escape for Duncan.

About the time of his fourteenth birthday – he had forgotten the exact date, but knew the month in which he was born – one of the other children gave him a stolen pack of playing cards. He decided to teach himself a few simple tricks. After many weeks of diligent practice his act was good enough to take onto the streets. He set up his stall, a cardboard box draped with an old blanket, on St Enoch Square, next to the colorful tents of the fortune tellers. He rigged games of Blackjack and Find the Lady, fleecing drunks and gullible yokels in town for market day, and performed conjuring tricks for small change. His income was soon enough to enable him to leave the Great Eastern and pay rent on a tiny bedsit in Maryhill. Then, as his popularity increased, he was able to purchase a booth with a blue awning, and a costume of top hat and tails. By his twenty-third birthday he was a well-known street performer – always surrounded by a throng making fevered and ill-advised bets on the turn of the cards – and was living in relative comfort in the newly prosperous area of Kelvinbridge. He enjoyed many of the pleasures a modicum of wealth could buy, including some that were more or less illicit – opium, gambling, and women.

Eventually, though, he became too well-known, and the gamers began to shun him. He realized he would have to embark on another career, decided he would turn his hand to mediumship: a potentially lucrative trade, to which, as an accomplished showman and skilled at legerdemain, he was well-suited. Putting aside some of his earnings, he saved until he had enough to buy the tools of the profession, foremost among which were a spirit cabinet with velvet drapes, which he had specially constructed for him; a mechanism for tilting tables; and a complicated system of pulleys and fishing wire that, in an ill-lit room, would allow him to give the impression certain objects were floating in the air. He had a craftsman, who made props for the theatre, fashion for him a cunning Cartesian devil in the form of a goblin bobbing in a carboy of dusky spirit, blinking its sorrowful eyes.

In his spare time, he practiced the skills he thought would prove essential, but which he did not already possess – mimicry, ventriloquism, and escapology, the latter for use in spirit-cabinet channellings.

Most enjoyable of his preparations was that of choosing the spirit guide through whom he would pretend to channel his ghosts. He decided to invoke Jean-Paul Marat, physician turned seditionist and hero of the French Revolution, who had actually visited Scotland in 1774. Marat's

death had been appropriately bizarre and brutal. He had contracted a virulent skin disease hiding in the sewers of Paris, the worsening torment of which finally forced him, in June 1793, to retire from the Convention and spend his days at home soaking in a medicinal bath, swaddled in soothing, calamine-smearred bandages, the only course he had found to bring any relief. Then, on the 13th July, he was visited by a young woman, Charlotte Corday, who claimed to have information regarding the whereabouts of a group of Girondins who had fled to Normandy. Marat agreed to an audience and Corday was brought to where he lay in his tub. But Corday, a Girondin herself, meant vengeance, and, after a fifteen minute interview, drew a kitchen knife from her corset and slew Marat. Duncan spent many hours perfecting the nasal accent he would employ.

The extrusion of ectoplasm from the spiritualist's body was, he realized, crucial to creating the séance's atmosphere. He experimented with different substances, rejecting cheesecloth and butter-muslin as unconvincing. Eventually he decided the best solution was to have a vial of Scarab Dust, a sweet effervescent powder sold for children, concealed in his shirt-cuff, and to, at an opportune moment, surreptitiously pour its contents into his mouth; he discovered when he swilled the confection around with his tongue, it generated a pallid froth.

Duncan anticipated the fact he was known to many as a conjurer would be a hindrance, but belief in spiritualism was, at that time, so widespread and fervent in Glaswegian society, that few questioned whether his ability to make contact with the dead was genuine or feigned, or saw any connection between the uncanny things that occurred during his séances and his former occupation.

He often began sittings by passing around the Cartesian Devil in its jar, while relating the story he had concocted about it. He claimed that, having come across, in a recondite manuscript, a description of the birthing of a homunculus, he had been seized by a desire to reproduce the experiment. For this he had required a mandrake's root. Duncan described how, after a long search, he had located a patch of these plants growing on the shores of Loch Lomond, in the shadow of an olden yew. He explained that, as mandrakes emit a shriek perilous to humans on being unearthed, the alchemist who had produced the original prodigy had urged the precaution of training a dog to dig up the root, advice Duncan had followed, resulting in the death of a terrier pup. Duncan told his enthralled audience how he had then submerged the root in a bucket of mingled milk, honey, and goat's blood, and left it in a warm nook by his fire for several weeks, during which time it transmuted into the creature they saw before them.

Duncan's séances took one of two forms, depending on the circumstances, his assessment of the credulity of the gathering, and his mood. If he was feeling cautious he would make use of the

spirit cabinet. He would request the host bind his hands tightly with rope, then enter the cabinet, and have the curtain drawn behind him. Then he could communicate with the spirits out of sight of skeptical eyes. He would free his hands from their bonds and retrieve, from a concealed compartment in the heel of his right shoe, a Jew's harp of unusual design, whose eerie keening, under the heightened conditions of the séance, sounded to the sitters like the cries of the anguished dead. When bolder he would use a rite more calculated to inspire awe, would join his sitters at a table and channel in full view. When he asked all to clasp their neighbors' hands, he was able, by a wile, to keep one of his own free without anyone realizing, something easy to achieve in the half-light. This enabled him to make use of his contraptions to tip the table, snuff candles, scrape chalk down a slate, and cause ladies' gloves to dance in the air, and also allowed him to sprinkle some of the sherbet from his vial into his mouth.

But it was research that was the real key to the illusion of genuine psychomancy. Duncan paid close attention to the obituary columns and made sure he was well-informed about the deceased friends and relatives of those likely to attend his séances.

Duncan's shrewdness and skill at chicanery ensured it was not long before he had risen to a position of eminence among Glasgow's mediums and was in great demand. His choice of spirit guide also played a part in his success – there was something of a fad for rebellion among the aesthetes and decadents then. By that time his lifestyle was one of flagrant debauchery.

But the period of his success was only to last a season. A mere year after quitting his booth on St Enoch Square he conducted his last séance.

IV

Duncan's last séance was held at the town residence of a woman of noble lineage, a marchioness – one of a number of hulking buildings of reddish stone that crowned a hill, in the city's West End, which overlooked Kelvingrove Park and, beyond, the pall of smoke that hung over the Clyde Shipyards. Before ringing the bell, Duncan stood looking at this prospect a short time; felt a pang of sorrow over the cruel murders of his family.

On being shown through to the dining room by a fawning butler, Duncan found there were twenty guests at the party that evening. Seven of these had expressed cynicism on the subject of communication with the dead and, on Duncan's arrival, were politely asked, by the marchioness, to absent themselves, go through to the drawing room.

That left thirteen to take part in the channelling: the marchioness herself – a plump dowager, wearing a shapeless floral-print dress, strings of pearls around her neck, her sagging face larded with powder; Joseph Lister – whose recent innovations in sterile operating conditions were just then earning him the acclaim of the medical community; the inscrutable Mr. Lodge – whose tales of travels in the Far East and encounters with tattooed savages had caused a sensation; Douglas Kilbride – a wealthy aristocrat and fanatical collector of antiquities; Lady Alicia Hitchman – a young heiress, whose large brown eyes, set in a face of unparalleled comeliness, had been the cause of many duels between rivals for her affections; Jacob Bridges – a young man who had been discovered ten years earlier in the Trossachs by a pig farmer, apparently feral, gibbering and acting like a wild thing, and who – having been taken in, tamed, and educated by a prominent Glaswegian philanthropist – was at that time prized at dinner parties for his callow, candid observations; Claire Turner – the socialite, whose wit had snared many men and whose intricate web of blackmail would remain unexposed and provide her with a healthy income in her dotage; Alexander ‘Greek’ Thomson – the famous architect, whose favouring of the classical style had earned him his sobriquet, a courteous, slightly deaf, elderly gentleman; Heather MacLellan – widow of a wealthy mine-owner; Allan Pinkerton – the renowned founder of America’s first detective agency, who had returned to Glasgow, the city from which he hailed, for a brief sojourn following the American Civil War, a sullen, taciturn man, who wore a full, unkempt beard; Augustus Kellner – poet and petty dissident; a man calling himself John Walker – a friend of Kellner’s, who wore a tousled periwig, ill-fitting clothes, and had an alcoholic’s ruddy complexion and tumid nose; and Rebecca Graves – wife of wealthy liberal advocate Herbert Graves, who had been turned to superstition by the untimely death of her son.

The séance began in the customary way with a round of introductions, then Duncan began his patter. He explained the spirits’ reluctance to manifest themselves in bright light and the dangers of touching either the medium – once he has entered his trance – or any ectoplasmic manifestation. Afterwards, he had one of the servants turn the gas lamps low and exhorted the group to clasp hands. After requesting calm, no matter what might occur, he closed his eyes and threw back his head. Ten minutes of tense silence followed, then, at what he judged the right moment, he began moaning – a low lamentation that mutated into half-formed words in English and French. He opened his lids, stared blankly up at the crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, his eyes rolled back, like pools of albumen set in his face, and began to speak in the heavily accented voice of his control spirit.

‘It seems that in death, as in life, I am to have no peace. For what purpose have I been called forth today?’

The marchioness answered.

‘We wish to speak with the spirits of departed loved ones.’

‘Is that so? There are a number of souls here who wish to make themselves known.’

‘Yes?’ Rebecca Graves asked, slightly frantic.

‘But why should I offer you salve? I have found no unguent to soothe this infernal itching.’

The persona Duncan had created for his guide was cantankerous – he had realised pliancy would draw suspicion.

‘It would be a great comfort to us to speak with those souls,’ Heather MacLellan interjected, fighting to keep the imploring note from her tone.

‘Of that I’ve no doubt,’ Duncan replied.

In a way he enjoyed these moments of cruelty. His hard life had left him with little empathy for the rich. These people had always enjoyed every privilege and knew nothing of suffering.

‘Is there anything we can do for you in return?’ the marchioness asked.

This question allowed Duncan to indulge his subversive impulses with impunity.

‘I would ask you to pledge to do what you can to improve the plight of the worker. Many have been cozened into exchanging the fields for the factories, believing a better life was to be had. But, instead of breaking their backs tilling and sowing, they now have their backs broken for them on the wheels of the dark mills and reap none of the fruits of their labours. They toil for a pittance whilst the owners cavort with Mammon. Beware the industrialist!

‘Beware also your leaders! In the future, wars will not be fought nation against nation for political ends, but waged merely to fill the purses of the arms manufacturers, and send the poor to their deaths. Even you, rich as you are, will likely not be spared, for War in the industrial age will no longer be constrained to the battlefield, but will stalk abroad smiting indiscriminately. Only the servile scientists shall be spared, for they have placed their souls in pawn for their lives, have pledged to develop the fell, havocking weapons of which the potentates dream.

‘Beware the industrialist, beware your leaders, and give to your poor!’

Augustus Kellner sighed.

‘That’s good advice.’

‘Life is unfair. Get over it or kill yourself,’ said Jacob Bridges, in his curiously stilted, lilting intonation.

Putting her hand on the simpleton's shoulder, the marchioness said, gently, 'He's already dead, dear.'

Taking advantage of this diversion, Duncan dredged his tongue with sherbet. As his chin and chest became slavered with spume, he groaned. When he again had everyone's attention, he began to speak, 'A spirit demands to communicate with the company. A young man. With a birthmark on his upper-arm in the form of a cross.'

'Lucas, is that you?' Rebecca Graves asked, sobbing pitiably.

Duncan modulated his voice, began to speak with an adolescent boy's cadence.

'Yes, mother.'

'Oh son, son. I miss you so much.'

'I miss you too, mother. Are you well?'

'Oh Lucas, I wish that I weren't. I wish I could soon be joining you.'

'You mustn't say things like that. We'll be together when God wills it.'

'My son, how are you?'

'Things here are wonderful, mother. So many interesting people to talk to, no more pain. Do you remember those terrible headaches I used to have?'

'Yes. Have they gone?'

'Completely, it's such a relief.'

'I'm so glad. Have you seen your grandmother?'

At this point Duncan began to tip the table violently, then said, in his Marat voice, 'The young man has left us now. But there are other souls crowding in.'

Rebecca Graves wept, hunched over the table.

The séance continued and Duncan 'channelled' several further spirits – a former suitor of Lady Alicia Hitchman, killed in a duel; Charles MacLellan, Heather's plutocrat husband; Douglas Kilbride's former butler, but recently dead of consumption; and twin girls, victims of brutal murder, who were fabrications Duncan invoked to give an air of authenticity. When he felt it was time to conclude, he caused the tablecloth to float into the air with a device he operated with his knee, screamed, sat upright in his chair, then cried out in terror for the lamps to be turned up full.

The participants filed through to the drawing room, which was redolent of coffee, vintage port, and fragrant cigars, to join the sceptics. A conversation about spiritualism and the occult was struck up. After an hour, Walker, by then very drunk, perched on the arm of the chair Duncan sat in. Raising his glass and looking about the room, he proposed a toast to the medium, which some of

the other guests joined him in, then, leaning close, whispered conspiratorially, 'Impressive stuff, I must say. You had them eating out of your hand.'

Duncan's rejoinder was weak, 'It's the spirit-world that deserves the credit, I'm merely a conduit.'

'Don't worry, I don't intend to expose you. It's an artful hoax and you have my admiration. I was only wondering whether you would be interested to see real evidence of the eldritch, proof there are more things in heaven and earth, so to speak.'

'What are you talking about?'

'And if the prospect of having the scales plucked from your eyes does not strike you as its own reward, I have also discovered wealth for the taking. If you're curious, meet me tomorrow at midnight, outside the Necropolis's main entrance.'

Then the marchioness interrupted their murmured conversation, before Duncan could ask any further questions of the rum Walker:

'Mr. Walker, you appear to be monopolizing our guest. I'm sure everybody would like the opportunity to quiz him about his extraordinary gift.'

V

The Necropolis. Though conceived as a tribute to the city's esteemed dead, it had, by that time, less than half a century after its inauguration, fallen into neglect – its grounds strewn with empty liquor bottles and encroached upon by slum dwellings, its monuments graffiti-scarred; in ignorance it had been laid out on a cankered drumlin, in darker times the site of a fane consecrated to dire rites, and its atmosphere was blighted.

Duncan, unknowing, was fond of the boneyard's silence, thinking it peaceful, not dread; he had often visited it during the time he had been living in filth in the Great Eastern Hotel and knew many of the tales of those buried there. Waiting by the gate he shuddered on sighting the hotel a little distance off. Lambent orange and red, lit from within by the fires of its occupants, it seemed a rough-hewn jack-o'-lantern.

The night was cold, and clear, though a shroud of fog draped the cemetery. Elevated above the haze by the column on which it stood, the dour statue of John Knox, a leader of the Protestant Revolution, was silhouetted against a sickle moon, hectoring the city beneath with a sermon whose hard lessons were illustrated by passages drawn from the bible he held in his hand.

From the wrought iron gate where Duncan waited, the Necropolis was reached by crossing a bridge known as the Bridge of Sighs, whose masonry was starred with lichen, and cobbles were worn by the tramp of mourners' feet.

The appointed hour passed; there was no sign of the strange Mr Walker. Duncan began pacing back and forth. To the north Glasgow Cathedral loomed, its stonework soot-blackened. Once, three years before, Duncan had gone inside the cathedral and descended the stairs to the lower church where there was a tomb dedicated to Saint Kentigern, also known as Mungo, founder of Glasgow. There he had read a plaque which gave an account of one of Mungo's famous miracles; at the time he had been teaching himself his letters and had taken all opportunities to practice. The text on the panel told how an adulterous queen, Longoureth, had presented to a young lover a ring that had been given to her by her husband, King Rhydderch Hael. The king had been told about the affair by a servant, but, at first, trusting in his wife's faithfulness, refused to believe his retainer. However, a few days later, he saw the band on the lover's finger and was consumed with jealousy. He conceived a plot to force his wife to admit her infidelity. On a hunting trip with his rival, he got the younger man drunk, took the ring from his finger, and threw it in the Clyde. On his return he demanded his wife present the ring to him; when she failed to do so, he publicly denounced her and locked her in a cell. While imprisoned, Longoureth managed to persuade one of her warders, who was infatuated with her, to get a message to Bishop Mungo, pleading for forgiveness and requesting his aid. The man of God directed the besotted guard to go fishing in the Clyde and return with his first catch. When the warder reeled in his line there was a sleek pink-bellied salmon jerking on the end of it. Mungo slit this fish open from gills to gut. In its stomach was a small crab, still living, and the missing ring. It was returned to Longoureth who presented it to her mystified husband. King Rhydderch had no choice but to publicly forgive his licentious wife and offer repentance for his accusation of her. What had chiefly struck Duncan was how easily Kentigern's 'miracle' might have been accomplished by deceit and sleight of hand.

After Duncan had been waiting some time, Walker emerged from the brume wreathing the graveyard and came skipping along the Bridge of Sighs towards the gate, dressed in motley, carrying a canvas bag, and grinning obscenely, his periwig askew.

'I'm so glad you've come,' he said, his speech slurred.

Duncan suddenly realized the absurdity of the situation; the man was a soused buffoon. There were no riches to be had, no revelations.

'Sorry. It was a mistake. I think I'd rather leave.'

‘Nonsense. Don’t get chicken-hearted on me. You probably just need a drink.’

Walker held out a silver hip-flask. Shrugging, Duncan took it and sniffed its contents. Cognac, good quality. He tilted his head back and took a swig, savouring it before swallowing.

‘So, will you come with me?’ Walker asked.

‘What is it you want to show me?’

‘Did you know that the knoll on which the Necropolis stands,’ here Walker gestured languidly behind him, ‘is riddled with tunnels?’

‘I’ve heard that that was the original intention of those who built it. They never carried out their plans, though.’

‘Yes, they did. It is not widely known, but when the Necropolis was first opened there were entrances to the catacombs all over the graveyard. They were sealed up, for reasons I will explain. I’ve managed to locate one and re-open it.’

‘What’s to be found down there?’

‘Extensive vaults littered with valuable objects. Before the tunnels were closed, a number of the city’s great and good were buried beneath the knoll, some of them inhumed amid opulence, their crypts filled with luxuries to provide comfort on their journeys to the next life, for all the world like Pharaohs, as if the pull of pagan, atavistic rites was too strong, and at the last they abandoned their religious scruples.’

‘I see,’ Duncan said. He remained sceptical, but his avarice had been roused.

‘Very well. I’ll come.’

‘First, I must warn you, the place is said to be horror-ridden.’

Duncan sneered.

‘You don’t believe me,’ Walker responded. ‘Doesn’t surprise me, but hear my tale out. The catacombs proved so popular with the nobs in the years after the Necropolis’s inception they were soon full. A decision was taken to excavate more crypts. Miners, working to this purpose, digging with picks by the wan light of oil lamps, broke through into a warren of olden tunnels. A crew of six men was sent down to explore it. Only one returned, emerged blinking into the sunlight several hours later, deranged by terror, gibbering, his hair turned white as a drift of fresh snow. The foreman, fearful of losing labourers, had him committed to an asylum and put about the lie the others of the detail had blundered into a pit. Nevertheless, the miners were wary and the warren was blocked off.’

‘The works continued, but were now plagued by reports of knockers tormenting labourers and moving props, of strange howls and scrabblings, and of lamps extinguished where there was not a breath of wind. Then there was a cave-in in which thirty-seven men were killed. The tunnels were abandoned altogether after that, and all the entrances around the Necropolis stopped up.

‘These incidents have been forgotten by all but a few. Some of those who do still recall them insist the tunnels broken into were not delved by nature, but by ancient terrible beings, the Old Ones, were outerlying ways of the regions of Agartha, those primeval borings that are said to riddle the Earth.

‘I don’t know what to believe, myself, but I’ve heard scuffling and faint wordless muttering down there, and felt, at times, as if some thing were stalking me. I tell you all this to assuage my conscience, and to apprise you that we may be in danger, though I feel sure you are a brave man, and won’t be discouraged. Still, here is your opportunity to wash your hands of the venture.’

Walker folded his arms across his chest, regarded Duncan slyly, askance.

Duncan rubbed his hands together, partly to warm them, partly in anticipation of the hoard that might soon be his. He esteemed Walker’s talk of ‘Old Ones’ and ‘Agartha’, the ramblings of a sot.

‘No, no. I’m undeterred.’

Walker grinned.

‘Good. I’m glad. Follow me.’

VI

Walker turned, lurched away, Duncan close on his heels. The two men crossed the Bridge of Sighs, the Molendinar Burn running beneath. Though the trees in the cemetery had shed their leaves, grass and rampant ivy, well-watered by the recent rains, garbed the graveyard in green raiments. Taking a track that climbed the hillside obliquely, the two men first passed, on their right, a squat, ugly monument which commemorated the life of the physicist William Thomson, then, a little further on, a sculpture of Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Hope Pattison clad in military uniform and cloak. The Lieutenant-Colonel had died in Nassau, New Providence, in 1843. The right arm of the effigy had been broken off at shoulder and wrist, the severed hand nestled grotesquely in a fob pocket. Situated nearby was the cenotaph of the Lieutenant-Colonel’s brother, the anatomist Granville Sharp Pattison. This Pattison had kept a loaded brace of antique dragoons’ pistols on his desk always, for

he was a rogue and to scandal and trouble what raw meat is to blowflies. In his youth, in order to ensure a fresh supply of cadavers for his dissection table, he had consorted with Glasgow's resurrection men, and was indicted for body snatching, though a 'not-proven' verdict was given. Then, in 1816, he was forced to flee to the US after an affair with a colleague's wife became public knowledge; there he lived dissolute in Philadelphia a few months before moving to Baltimore, where he was known for toping and brawling. In 1822 he returned to Britain to take up a post at London University, but his teaching was so poor indignant students rioted in his lectures, and he was sacked. After this he sailed across the Atlantic one last time, spent a while living in a doss house in Atlantic City, playing the pipes on the boardwalk for small change. Then his fortunes were revived; a former colleague spotted him and found him work at a university in New York, and he lived out his final years, an anatomy lecturer known and beloved for his flamboyance.

Bearing left, Duncan and Walker followed a miry path towards the crest of the mound, passing an ancient oak – bark scarred by adolescents' pocket-knives – rows of stones, obelisks, and Celtic crosses, and a fresh-dug grave. At the top of the rise Duncan turned and looked down on Glasgow's sprawl. Here and there a few lights glimmered in the nefarious quarters, but it seemed most of the city's inhabitants were in bed. Near at hand there was an ostentatious mausoleum, its design modelled on a Templar church. A drinking school huddled around a fire under its porch, passing a bottle of whisky between them. Duncan knew the fortune that had built the opulent sepulchre had been obtained by deceit. The man for whom it had been constructed, a Major Monteath, had been an officer in the East India Company – a man of limited means. Then one day, while watching a Maharajah's procession, he had chased after and recovered a stampeding elephant. The animal had a howdah on its back which had contained a casket of precious stones. Monteath claimed the casket had been lost, fallen into a river, but, when he returned to Glasgow from the subcontinent, he entered the city's high society, an inexplicably wealthy man.

Walker and Duncan continued their ascent. A shaft of moonlight, shining obliquely down, illuminated a bizarre monument sculpted in the form of a proscenium arch stage, erected in honour of John Henry Alexander, a renowned theatrical entrepreneur, who died of shock after being told how a hocus cry of fire at one of his playhouses had kindled a panic during which sixty-five people were crushed to death. Duncan knew him as the inventor of the famous Great Gun Trick, in which a fearless conjurer catches a bullet in his teeth.

As they passed by the pillar on which the grim stylite Knox stood, a fawn darted by, startling them. Beyond the column lay two sepulchres next to each other. The nearest was squat and plain,

and had alcoves on either side of its entrance holding statues – on the left, the Virgin, cradling the infant Christ, and, on the right, Mary Magdalene. Inside, behind an iron gate, Duncan glimpsed sculptures of a woman wearing a crown and, flanking her, two female angels at prayer.

It was to the further tomb Walker led Duncan. It was of Moorish design, octagonal, with a domed roof; inside were interned the bones of William Rae Wilson, an early travel writer. Walker, producing a key, unlocked the padlock securing the entrance, pushed the gate open. The hinges wailed. Three cartouches adorned the walls inside; they were water-stained, their inscriptions difficult to decipher, but Duncan could just make out the abstruse phrase, ‘Thy Saints take pleasure in her stones and favour the dust thereof.’

The mausoleum floor was strewn with the paraphernalia of opium eaters and adolescent louts – empty glass vials, lewd sketches, and bottles that had once held strong cheap liquors. Sweeping this dross aside, Walker revealed a trapdoor. He lifted it and let it fall open with a crash. Taking an oil lantern from his bag, he lit its wick with a match, then held it over the hatch. By its glimmer, Duncan saw the rungs of a rusty iron ladder descending into the gloom. Then Walker spoke, the first words that had passed between the two men since their meeting at the gate.

‘We’re going to need another snifter. To steady our nerves.’

Duncan gulped the brandy down when it was passed to him. Though not generally jittery, the atmosphere of the nocturnal graveyard, and the fetor rising from the hatch, a stench like the foul breath of a ravening beast, had discomfited him. That the catacombs might be stalked by dread olden entities no longer seemed so absurd.

‘I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to go through with this.’

Walker seized Duncan’s wrist in his bony grasp.

‘Are you a coward?’ he hissed.

‘No.’

The drunk let go, was jovial again.

‘Well, in that case...’

He indicated the pit.

The two men climbed down. After a little while they reached the foot of the ladder, then started down a low dank tunnel, Walker in front, Duncan following. The high, cloying stench of decay was choking, and Duncan was forced to cover his mouth and nose with his handkerchief. Antic, gurning, the drunk capered, whistled a cracked reel, led Duncan deeper into the catacombs.

Duncan asked where the riches were to be found.

‘The upper levels have already been pillaged,’ came Walker’s response. ‘We must descend.’

It was warm and close, and Duncan was soon perspiring heavily. He paused to take off his heavy overcoat. As he was fumbling with its buttons, Walker, who was standing a little way ahead, extinguished his lamp.

When working as a card sharper, Duncan would sometimes play wearing a blindfold, claim, even blind, he could best all-comers. This was a ruse; the blindfold would be tied by a plant, and tied slightly askew, allowing Duncan sight of the cards with one eye. Once, though, the plant, drunk, missed his cue, and a genuine on-looker came up, tied the blindfold, and tied it tight. That was a smothering black, but the dark of the catacombs after the light went out was starker; it was as if Duncan’s eyes had been put out. He called out – calmly at first, then with increasing desperation – but received no response.

Then, after some time had passed, he saw a pale wash of light a little way off and made towards it. As he approached, however, it ebbed from him. Frantic, he gave chase, a stumbling half run. Filmy spiders’ webs soon shrouded his head, and sharp outcroppings of rock struck out at him. A blow laid open his brow, and blood poured into his eyes.

Blundering onto a steep scree, he lost his footing and tumbled some distance before dropping a short way and landing hard on rough clammy stone. The air was knocked from his lungs, and he lay a moment, gasping. He felt pain in his ankle, so tentatively prodded the joint. It was sprained and swelling, but, happily, not broken. He felt about him, crawled a little way in this direction and that. Then his fingers closed upon something: cloth, greasy, an oil slicker. He reached into its pockets, turned up a candle stub and a single match. He struck the match against the sole of his boot and lit the stub.

By the light of the fitful flame, Duncan saw he was at one edge of a cavern. The far side and the roof were lost to gloom. Not far off there was the entrance to a tunnel. Duncan got to his feet and began to hobble towards it. He had only gone a short way when a draught blew out the candle. He limped on. A few moments later he heard a low gurgling a little way off.

‘Who’s there?’ he called out.

The blackness dinned in his ears; a tumult of snarls, gibbers, howls, sobs. Terror choked him. He sensed some lurker close by in the dark, on instinct put out his hand to fend it off, and his fingers struck slimy flesh, slipped off, brushed a scaly hide. Retching, he backed away, then turned and, fear dulling the pang in his ankle, fled that place.

Duncan could recall only scraps of what happened after – narrow tunnels teeming with black rats, glimpses of mouldering corpses and grinning skeletons, torn fragments of manuscript scattered underfoot, and an abyssal chasm.

Then, much later, he careered out into the open, from a mausoleum at the foot of the hill, almost running into a granite monument, a memorial to nineteen firemen who perished when a blazing whisky bond they were dousing exploded. His clothes were filthy and tattered. Sitting calmly on a gravestone nearby, swinging his feet, drinking from his hipflask, was Walker.

‘Where did you go?’ he asked, winking.

Duncan hurled himself at the sot, fists flailing, but his right arm felt dull, leaden, as if corrupted by its contact with the vile creatures beneath the Earth. Walker snickered and, with a strength at odds with his scrawny build, felled Duncan with a blow.

After hopping down from the headstone, he prodded Duncan in the ribs with his boot. Duncan looked up to see Walker peering down at him, pitchy black, as if his frame swallowed the moonlight. Then, after a moment, the drunk shrugged and sauntered away, whistling a jaunty air.

Duncan waited till he had gone, got unsteadily to his feet, limped away.

Over the next few days Duncan’s arm grew weaker and began to stink of rotteness. He was eventually forced to seek medical counsel. The surgeon advised the only course was amputation, surmising some form of blood poisoning responsible for the putrefaction. The operation was duly performed, then Duncan returned to his flat, gathered together a few of his possessions, and went down to the docks. He sought a ship sailing for North America that would be prepared to hire him on, dislimbed though he was – perhaps a vessel that needed to cast off urgently, or one engaged in an illicit trade. Fate, hitherto so cruel to him, smiled upon him that day, for it was not long before he found a craft that would have him, a tea clipper whose captain was in a great hurry to be under way.

VII

Duncan’s tale concluded, he took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. Though the fire in the saloon’s grate had died right down, and a biting wind howled in through the open door, he was sweating profusely. At a loss for words, I murmured that I was sorry. He grinned and turned to me.

‘Oh, it’s not your fault.’

I had been filled with horror by what I had heard, so packed the bowl of my briar, lit the tobacco with a match taken from a pot on the bar, and took a calming draw.

‘What did you do after?’ I asked.

Duncan took his own pipe from his shirt pocket.

‘First, could I thieve some ’baccy from you?’

I assented, gladly. He took my pouch and set about filling and lighting his pipe, a deft feat one-handed.

Once he had it smoking nicely, stem clenched in his teeth at the corner of his mouth, he continued his tale.

‘After an uneventful, if rough, crossing of the Atlantic, I settled in Boston for a number of years. With only one arm, I could no longer work as a conjuror or fraudulent medium, nor could I pursue a respectable manual trade. The first few years weren’t too bad, however, I got by, took employment in a shambles, an unpleasant job few were willing to do.

‘But, one winter, I was robbed by a pickpocket and lost a week’s wages. I struggled, couldn’t afford to feed myself, and famishing, attempted to steal a side of pork. I was caught and given the boot. After that, I was several years working as a shill to a grifter who had a card-sharping swindle, the only way I could scrape a crust.

‘But then I was arrested and spent a spell in a labor camp. So I gave up that life. Some years I stravaiged about the badlands of the state where I had served my time. But I found I was not cut out for living in the wilds, was unable to fend for myself. Little knowing what else to do, I returned to Boston. Several years of terrible deprivation followed, I was living on the streets, begging and stealing what I could to keep my hunger at bay.

‘One night a gang of ruffians set upon and cruelly beat me. An aged minister, coming across my broken and wasted body in the gutter, took me in and tended to me. In his gentle care I slowly returned to full vigor. I repaid his solicitude by staying with him, and helping him in his work, his infirmity prevented him from carrying out all his duties. When he died, a few years later, it was only natural that I take over his flock. I was happy in my ministry for many years. Then I fell in love with a member of the congregation, a beautiful girl, who returned my affections in spite of my being a cripple, and we were married. I have never known such joy as the day of our wedding. Then, two years after our yoking, she ran off with a another man. I was distraught.

‘That was five years ago now, though the hurt has not paled one bit,’ Duncan concluded. ‘When I heard of the Klondike gold, and of the prospectors’ hardships, I came out here, to take on

the mantle of an itinerant preacher, hoping to provide some succor, and to bury my grief in fresh suffering.’

Again, I said how sorry I was to hear tell of his woes. Smiling, he once more brushed my expressions of sympathy aside, suggested we eat. This proposal met with my favor, I realized then I was ravenous, my composure, and appetite, restored by pipe smoke. We tucked into some poor fare brought out by the barkeep.

A skeptical expression must have fled across my face then – an outward manifestation of inner wranglings, I wished to believe my friend, but was unsure that I could, at least not entirely – for Duncan threw his fork down upon his plate, and spoke sharply, ‘It is of no consequence to me whether you choose to credit me or not.’

Then, as if regretting this spark of anger, he looked down at his food and stammered, in a tone of mollification, ‘But I am grateful to you for listening. Each time I tell my tale, its burden grows lighter.’

I could not respond straightway, as I was chewing one of the lumps of tough, gristly meat that were swimming in the stew we had been brought (it was given in the menu as lamb, but I doubted this, particularly as I had seen the proprietor of the place buying a broken-down old mule from a stamper only the day before). Once it was pappy enough to swallow, I replied, ‘I’m sorry. You can’t blame me for having my doubts, though.’

‘Of course not. I don’t expect you to believe any of it, I scarcely do myself.’

I nodded and turned the conversation to other topics, sensing it would be futile to press Duncan further. After finishing our food and sharing another bottle of whiskey, we returned to our lodgings. I slept poorly that night, apprehensive about the voyage I was to embark on the following morning, disquieted by Duncan’s ghastly tale. Lying awake, on my bunk, I gazed up at the fly-specked ceiling, wondering how flies could breed in a country so grimly cold I could not picture a rotting carcass, even at the height of summer. Instead, I imagined them pouring forth, in a droning mass, from a crevice, high up in the mountains, issuing from some vile ulterior place.

The following morning was cold and blustery, ragged scraps of white cloud scudded overhead through an ashen sky. Duncan accompanied me down to the docks. We said our farewells on the wharf, then I walked up the gangplank and boarded the steamer. As the vessel pulled out of the harbor I stood at the taffrail waving to my friend. His breath plumed in the cold air – it was as if his spirit had broken free of the hawsers mooring it to the flesh. I gazed at him until he was little more than a mote in my eye – a dark smut at the point where the yellowish daub of smoke belched

from the ship's funnels and the churned wake converged – then turned away from the shore, went to report to the boatswain. He assigned me first watch at the bow. I was to keep a lookout for ice floes. Crossing the deck, I took up my position, leaning far out over the gunwale, holding onto the bowsprit to steady myself. For several hours I watched the hatchet prow cleave the sea. At one point I glimpsed a narwhal's tusk break the surface of the water.

I have never seen Duncan again. But my encounter with him changed my life utterly. Unable to get his tale from my thoughts, barbed as it is by weird and sinister implications, I have spent a great deal of time, as this book is testament, seeking others like it. My motives are obscure, even to me. I think it is partly that I sought similar yarns in the hope that, finding them all absurd lies or delusions, I would finally be able to dismiss Duncan's as falsehood or madness. Too often, however, I found there was a shred of truth to the stories I heard, and over the course of my life I have sewed these scraps into a patchwork of uncanny horror.

It is now a year later, a year since I first read the foregoing narrative, 'A Tale of Penury...'. I've no reason to believe it a true account, but can't, somehow, dismiss it as fiction. My life is cankered – my brain festers around the barbs of its weird and sinister implications. And it is the story itself that grips me, not some weird property of the volume; burning the original has brought no release.

Given the evil it's wreaked on my life, you might wonder why I've chosen to share the tale. The charitable might think I tell my story as a warning against the dangers of obsession, or in an attempt to lessen my burden. Really, though, it's spite that drives me; I wish to swell the ranks of the Legion Lost. And now I go to drink myself into a stupor.