

Dinner with Booth

Macabre Collection

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Published: 2013



Booth accompanied me to Brookwood for I desired no others to be present. They placed her beside our mother and father, beneath the soulless eyes of the marble angel who pointed hopefully to the sky. When the first spade of dirt was thrown onto her coffin I walked away; past the cold iron railings, to The Necropolis Station. I had neither the desire nor stomach to watch any longer.

The police came to my house and left without providing comfort. A lunatic called Lovett had been busy murdering and flaying in the city. He had removed their faces to make macabre masks for his entertainment. Lily was simply one more mask for his collection. This is what the police believed.

Yet, this was not the case, of that I was sure. Lily was no East End ruffian caught up in a mad man's lunacy. The leaving of her locket and hair was proof of that.

„Inspector, I urge you to reconsider. Why would he leave this? He had his prize.“ I held the singed locket before his eyes.

„Sir, you are considering this man too deeply. He is a lunatic who revels in torment and violence. He left this trinket to torture you further, nothing more.“

Lily's hair lay intact beneath the protective shield of jet. What had been beautiful in life was reduced to a clotted mass in death. I would not discard it anymore than I would abandon the memento mori in my pocket. The tips of my fingers were calloused where, in my grief, I had reached into the embers and taken it back.

Lily had scolded me for finding her jewellery so abhorrent, yet here I was, clutching it as if I were a child squeezing a favourite doll. The inspector had left at that instruction and had not returned. Why should he? The case was solved and Lovett was responsible, but I could not rest.

Booth and I stepped onto the train and into the private carriage set aside for mourners. The empty seats reminded me of the same journey I had made with my uncle at Father's funeral. Lily had cried at my side for the entire trip back to Waterloo.

„I should like you to join me for dinner this evening, Matthew. My mother and father are visiting and they will be glad to see you. I will not allow you to be alone this night.“

I opened my mouth to speak but Booth held his hand to silence my protest. „It is settled, Matthew. We shall speak of it no more.“

I had not the energy or desire to argue. I did not want to be in company but I wanted less to be alone in that house. Besides, Booth's intentions were purely sympathetic and his familiar and cheerful countenance was a welcome sight.

Booth was from a wealthy family with grand connections yet he had never sought to manipulate or use those connections for his own good. He was simply too idle and lacked the ambition which could have provided great fortune.

„We were so sorry to learn of poor Lily, Matthew. She was a fine girl and William here was very fond of her.“ Booth looked distinctly uncomfortable in his mother's presence.

„Thank you, Lady Booth.“

„I trust you have found solace in the words of our Lord.“

I had not been inside a church for many years. „I find the church to be somewhat disagreeable these days.“

„Oh my dear. You have seen too much sorrow in your life. First your mother, then...“

Lord Booth raised his hand and coughed loudly. „I'm sure Matthew scarce needs reminding of his family, especially not today. We should eat now. Come, Matthew and tell me of my son. What has he been doing with his time? I am quite unable obtain a satisfactory answer.“

Booth was not his usual ebullient self at dinner and conversation was strained and sporadic. For my own part I felt thoroughly miserable and at a loss for what to say.

„The congregation at St Mary le Strand has fallen by nearly a third this last year,“ Lady Booth broke the silence. She had been an ardent advocate of the church for many years. „Why they would turn away so readily is simply beyond me. I fail to see why our so-called middle class are so beguiled by what is nothing more than witchcraft. Two hundred years ago they would all have been burned.“

„But mother, we are not living two hundred years ago. For that we should be thankful. It is nothing more than a passing fascination and they will all come back to the church.“

„And when will you return, William?“ Booth looked away immediately.

„Of what do you speak, Lady Booth?“ I asked.

„Spiritualism. There are those who claim to be adept at conversing with the dead and they have formed a religion from it, or at least, they are attempting to. It goes against all the teachings.“

„I have heard that term once before, Lady Booth. Forgive me, but I do not wish to hear it again.“ I met her eyes with my own.

Booth spoke to break the deadlock. „Quite so. It is, as you say mother, nothing more than a passing fascination. Now, who has seen the marvels of my magic lantern?“ I blessed Booth, for in his kindly nature, he had diverted the course of the discussion.

Booth’s display with the lantern was, at least, distracting. The floating skeletons and phantoms provided unlikely entertainment and for a while my spirits were lifted. Although I felt Booth took a little too much delight in the shrieks of his frightened mother.

When, at last it was time to leave, I did so with a heavy heart. The brandy had warmed my belly but left a sour, unwelcome sensation in my mind.

„I can have a room made up for you tonight and for as many nights as you wish it is yours.“ Booth grasped my shoulders and looked earnestly into my eyes. I did not need to smell the vapours on his breath for his eyes betrayed how much brandy he had taken.

„My friend,“ I started, „you have been kind enough to invite me here tonight. I shall inflict my misery on you no longer. In any case, I feel I may have offended Lady Booth.“

He clapped my shoulders. „All the more reason to stay. They may depart sooner!“

I laughed despite my mood. „You must offer my apologies for any offence. I shall see you in the club tomorrow?“

„Yes and we shall take a pipe together again.“

The cab sped over the cobbles sending the drunks fleeing for the verge. They shambled through the streets like the phantoms on Booth’s lantern show. They cared not for the despair of others for the gin they so deeply craved besotted their minds.

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I spent the night huddled under my blankets with a bottle of brandy. I gained no solace from its warmth, for the more I drank, the deeper into the nightmares I slipped. In the shadows of my tortured mind, I swam in pools of Lily’s blood while a flame haired woman and Madame Francatelli looked on and laughed.

By the time the birds announced the arrival of another grey dawn, I languished still within the confines of my brandy induced stupor. I could not rouse myself from the cold and damp sheets of my terror stricken night, for what reason had I to leave the house?

Poor Lily was the most generous and kindly person in the world and had not deserved to die in such terrible circumstances. I should have been at home that night. She had been disturbed by that terrible fraud of a fortune teller and I should have been here to comfort her, as she would have done for me. Yet, selfishly I left her alone. I left her to die. I roared into the half-light and clenched my fists until all feeling was lost. I lay there for a while until I knew what I must do.

I threw back the sheets and dressed quickly. Today I would pay a visit to Madame Francatelli and squeeze her wretched throat until she gasped for breath. She was as responsible as Lovett for Lily's death and I would have justice.

I found a claret in the parlour and consumed it to the very last vapour before stepping onto the street. I was unshaven and unwashed but I did not need to be ready for church to commit what I had in mind. I walked with purpose and glared through the mist at the faces I passed. The stench of the city's rotting corpses filled the cold morning air and formed a sickly medley with the wine on my tongue.

I passed the church of St Mary le Strand had heard the bells toll the hour of ten. The church could rot for all I cared for I knew I would find no solace in the empty words of religious men and their sanctimonious drivel. I pressed on, mindful of the ever-growing stench of death as I descended deeper into the city.

Before much longer, I arrived on Drury Lane, where not a week earlier I had ventured with Lily. Snow fluttered from the sky like feathers from dying angels' wings and awakened the street from its gloomy slumber. Unshaven men huddled and slumped in the doorways, their faces scarred by the pox. They coughed and shivered and muttered their plea.

„A penny, sir? Me bones are chilled.“

I ignored them and kept my eyes fixed on the tableau ahead. Madame Francatelli had not fled, as I had feared. Yet as I approached the shop, I could see all was not as it should be. A crimson path cut through the snow and streaked across the road, and into her shop. Here and there, droplets formed bloody wounds in the melted snow. Had someone reached this poisonous fiend before me?

I reached the shop and stared at the tableau. The words were the same and the picture still remained. Suddenly a man appeared at the door. His apron was a vision of blood.

„Can I 'elp you, sir?“ He wiped a blood stained fist across his filthy whiskers.

„Where is Madame Francatelli?“ I pointed at the tableau for I was unable to take my eyes from him.

„Oh 'er. She left days ago. I'm the proprietor now.“ A terrible odour crept around his bulk and mingled with the already vile air. „I've just butchered a sow if you're in the market for a leg, sir?“

I turned away for I could feel the burning bile rising in my throat. „Where has she gone?“ I uttered.

„No idea. People come and go as the mood takes 'em.“

I needed to be away and across the road before my stomach betrayed me. The fumes from his shop were as poisonous as Francatelli's words had been and I had gained nothing by coming.

What sight must I must have looked as I wandered the noisy streets in my anguished state? The bustle of the throng and the chatter of their voices was a distant echo in my mind. I knew not where I was walking but to stop would have been a terrible mistake for I could not have started again.

A distant church sounded midday and I was awoken from the void of my reverie. I paused and looked about my unfamiliar surroundings. Filth was piled in the gutters with the rotting corpses of dead animals. The air was a noxious haze of human waste. If I were in hell, it could be no worse than this spectacle of decay.

I looked for a landmark to raise me from the abyss. I could see none for the buildings loomed over me and covered the sky like a heavy velvet cape.

„Who 'ave we got 'ere then?“ A feminine voice called from beyond my view. It was quickly accompanied by the sound of a footfall.

„Well, we don't see your sort round 'ere often. Not unless you want some of this?“ I turned to face the voice and was greeted with a sight to match the hellish vista of the street. Dressed in such fineries as would be found in a box at the theatre was a woman of advancing age. Were it not for the thickness of her face paint, I might have estimated her to be close on sixty years of age. She pursed her ruby lips and blew me a kiss. „I'm a pretty sight ain't I?“

I turned my back and walked on.

„Suit yerself.“

Lost in the chasm of my thoughts, I had walked many miles and into the East End of the city. It was a place of depravity and violence and I was as out of place as the prostitute would be in the streets of Belgravia.

The cruel monotony of the district was broken as I reached a gaudy display on a shop window. Bright red curtains draped across the glass, and at the bottom, upon a board, was written, *Gin*. It was not the decadent palace of the Princess Louise in Holborn but the purpose was the same and I stepped inside.

Pressed into the corner was a wooden counter behind which a dissolute hag stood watch. She found a glass and placed it on the bar. Without a word she tipped a measure of clear liquid into the glass.

„I do not believe I have made a request yet.“ I spoke with more assurance than I felt for this was unlike any place I had ever been.

„This is all there is. No one comes 'ere to talk, just to drink.“

I took the glass. It bore the greasy finger marks of the previous user yet I poured the liquor into my mouth and swallowed.

„More.“ I ordered.

„Where's yer money?“

I slammed a handful of coins onto the counter. „More!“

The afternoon passed in a debauched haze. Men came in and stood beside me, caring not whether I wore a top hat or cap for we had the same purpose. That purpose was to drink. They left while I remained, until I could no longer stand and was pushed from the room like the filthy drunk I had become.

Before me two men fought. Their savagery was appalling, as they beat and kicked each other until the weaker man was felled. His head hit the cobbles with a

terrible thump and he was clearly insensible from the impact. Yet, the other man crouched beside him and continued raining blows about his head until his blood ran into the gutter with the other offal.

I slumped beside the door and closed my eyes. Thoughts of Lily with our mother and father swam across my vision in a horrifying carousel of death. In my inebriated state I was unable to vanquish them and joined the other drunken lunatics in their howls of despair.

I do not know how long I remained there but I heard the raucous laughter of those passing by and felt their eyes upon me. The cold of the afternoon crept under my coat and spitefully pinched at my flesh. I hoped the pitiless God of my bleak life would at last show some mercy, and take me to my family.

„Stand, sir. You cannot stay here.“ I felt a tug on my sleeve.

„I will stay where I fell. I want no help.“

„Then you will be up before the magistrate in the morning. Now get up, you do not belong here.“ The voice was dissimilar to those I had encountered in this district. „Take him under the arms. We shall carry him if we must.“

I felt my body being lifted. I gave them no help, yet they lifted me as a child, and dragged my limp body across the wet cobbles; I could not look them in the eye for my shame was complete. I did not care where they took me, for I was already in hell.

„Put him in this chair, then bring him some coffee.“ I was dropped into a chair and a mug of coffee forced between my clasped hands. The heat from the drink sent a painful spasm through my arms but the warmth was a delicious pleasure. I lifted my head and for the first time looked upon him.

„Where have you brought me, sir?“ He was as old as I.

„You are safe in God’s house. Drink your coffee and I will return.“

I took a sip as instructed and looked at my surroundings. The coffee was laced with molasses and was powerfully rich. If I were truly in God’s house, it was unlike any church I had ever entered before. There were none of the familiar pews and the room was scarce any larger than my parlour. Simple wooden chairs lay scattered around the room and in the centre, a crude yet striking crucifix sat atop an altar. Wretched looking creatures filled every one of the chairs, sipping at their sweet coffee. I wondered; did I appear as they did? Abject and without hope?

I rose to my feet. The liquor still held sway over my body but I did not desire to remain in a place dedicated to an entity so pitiless and malevolent.

„You are not fit to step outside yet, sir. Please stay and get warm.“

I looked to him again. His face was creased with the expressions of kindness, not of vitriol. „I must go,“ I muttered.

He placed his hand on my shoulder. „You are not like these others, sir, I can see that, but you have one thing in common; you all possess a broken spirit. Stay and allow me to repair it.“

„With God’s help?“ I hissed the words. „He has sent me to the very abyss in which I now dwell. He does not wish to help.“

„Perhaps those who have passed can help you.“ He smiled and turned away. His answer was simply a statement of belief.

I sat back down. In truth, my legs would not carry me further than the door and the thought of appearing in court was too much to bear. I consoled myself with the coffee and watched him at work.

One by one, the bedraggled guests departed leaving me alone in the church.

„What is the name of this church, sir?“ I asked. The coffee had raised my body from the depths, although my spirits still languished in the mire.

„It is a church like any other.“ He spoke with the voice of a gentleman yet his attire closer matched those of a working man.

„Sir, I thank you for your kindness in bringing me here and away from that miserable street, but please do not seek to make a fool of me.“

He held up his hands and smiled. „I do not seek to make a fool of any man. This is the house of God and you are as welcome as any man, woman or child of this earth. If you insist on a name; this is the Spiritualist Church of Spitalfields.“

„Then I would be better served in the cell of the police station than here.“ I stood and made ready to leave.

„You do not belong in the gutter, sir. Seek guidance before it is too late.“

I raised my hand to strike him. How dare a spiritualist address me in this manner? What did he know of my situation or my pain? He did not move or flinch, although he was aware of my hand.

„Stop!“ A female voice called.

I turned. The strength of the voice belied the diminutive stature of the figure before me. The heavy, hooded cape she wore revealed only a small part of her face, yet from that glimpse I could see there was beauty. „You are forbidden to use violence in the house of God.“

I walked toward her. „This is no house of God. It is nothing more than a penny sideshow.“ I threw a penny to the floor. „Take my penny in payment for your aid.“

I brushed past her and opened the door. A gust of icy wind stung my tired eyes halting me on the threshold.

„She is with you,“ she whispered into the wind. Her words were gone in an instant; buffeted away on a wind which carried the feter of the slums. I stepped onto the street and under the gaze of an elegant church. Its spire pointed into the gloom like a needle through the dirty linen of the street. I looked to the leaden sky, „Where is your solace?“ I asked.

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When at last I reached my home again, I was exhausted. The words, *She is with you*, haunted each and every one of my steps. Without Lily, the house had been left empty and cold. No fires had been lit, and no supper prepared. It was desolate and I was alone. I collapsed in my chair in the parlour and stared at the darkened hearth. I did not care what faces might appear from the shadows nor what ghosts might crawl from beneath the boards for I had not the strength to fight them off.

I was not some naïve child upon whom parlour tricks could be played; yet her words struck home and scratched at my heart. Had I been too harsh and dismissive of the kindness imparted by that gentleman? Was my life so utterly miserable that I could no longer treat others with respect? Lily would have berated me for behaving in that manner and she would have been correct. I buried my face into my hands and wept.

