

The Lamb Inn

From the archives of Hugh Curwen.

A short story of 16,170 words, about the famous Elizabethan exorcist and occultist. Set in the year 1598, when Hugh's fame had spread far and wide. He'd become wealthy enough to move his wife and child into a pleasant house in one of the better areas of Oxford.

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Hugh Curwen enjoyed being famous and wealthy. He already had a sizeable personal fortune, having added to it the previous night. He was tired but happy, as he strode home through the streets of Oxford. In the leather bag which carried the essentials of his trade, there was a purse containing four times the amount of gold he'd been expecting to earn from the consultation.

"Consultation sounds so much better than exorcism Margaret." He'd once said to his wife. "It covers a wider range of ways to earn a fee and sounds like a service which commands respect. So no more use of the word exorcist in this house."

"Call it what you like my dear husband..... Just don't get hurt."

"Most of those who consult me are worried but un-haunted. I promise you though, that if I encounter a creature of the darkness who has any real power. I shall not be too proud to run away."

"Good, you have a son now Hugh. You have responsibilities."

He'd spoken the truth to his wife, he usually did. Out of every hundred people who sought his help, only one ever looked genuine. Most of those were just the odd odour of brimstone in kitchen pantries, or strange noises on nights with no wind. Hugh wasn't a charlatan, even though he did employ a few tricks in the hope of increasing his fee and spreading his fame. So far, every one of his exorcisms had resulted in the cessation of all odd smells and strange noises.

"Your reputation is well earned Hugh."

The client the night before had told him, before paying him far more than expected and handing him a signed recommendation. A secret consultation for someone with the Queen's ear. The letter in his case just said that Hugh Curwen had performed a valuable service for The Crown, but everyone would recognise the stamp on the wax seal.

The consultation the night before had proven to be nothing but needless anxiety. Not that Hugh ever told anyone their problem didn't exist. Margaret had given him a son and was now six months into a second pregnancy. He'd laid a relic of Saint Judith on his wife's enormous belly and saw the image of a girl child and Saint Judith was never wrong. A girl child meant an expensive wedding and a sizeable dowry. No, he was never going to tell any client that they were worrying about nothing.

"That is amazing; you've driven the smell of hell out of my home."

The previous night's client had told him. Hardly surprising as Hugh had sprinkled a sulphur compound inside the noble's hall cupboard. A recipe of his own invention that created just the right smell of brimstone. To the client, it smelt as though Hugh had conquered a minion of hell, a demon sent by Satan himself. Strangely enough his clients did sleep better after his visits, no longer feeling a strange atmosphere in the middle of the night. Hugh put it down to the positive effect of simple belief in his abilities and reputation.

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His son was playing in the hallway when Hugh arrived home. Barnaby, named after his own father, who'd died the year the boy had been born. The child was an energetic three year old now, constantly curious and looking for mischief.

"Have you been a good boy for your mother?"

"Yes."

Hugh doubted if he had, but that was the way with boy children. His wife was in the kitchen, with Esther their housekeeper. The middle aged spinster worked for them, though it often felt like the other way round. Esther had been an addition to their household after Barnaby had been born, someone to help his wife run the house. His wife kissed him on the cheek.

"Did everything go well? Was it who you thought?" His wife asked.

"No, it was her husband. He actually said an unknown hand had touched his cheek the previous night. All nonsense of course."

He wasn't worried about Esther telling the world his secrets. Their housekeeper had no living relatives and needed the job. Apart from being a little too familiar and occasional bouts of laziness, Esther was perfect for them. Hugh opened his bag and showed the recommendation to his wife, while dropping the bulging purse onto the kitchen table.

"This seal my dear..... Is it really hers?"

"Yes, it means I'm likely to get more consultations from the nobility."

His wife opened the purse and moved the coins about with her fingers. When they'd first been married his consultations had been mainly for the common people, sometimes a wealthy tradesperson. Hugh had nothing against working for such people, but the nobility paid far better.

"So much for a single night's work." Muttered Margaret.

"I doubt if your brother will pay such a fee." Said Esther.

"Esther!" Yelled Margaret. "I wish to speak to my husband in private."

Their housekeeper left the room and Hugh knew what was coming, another plea for help from Thomas Bullen, the bother in law he detested.

"Did Thomas pay you a visit last night?" He asked.

"No, cousin Henry brought Joan over on his cart. I know you've never got on with Thomas and I accept that you have been given good cause. You've always liked his wife though."

"Yes, Joan is a friendly woman with a pleasant temperament." Said Hugh. "I'm always surprised that she agreed to marry your brother."

"I'm sure there were plenty who said the same when I married you."

She was teasing him and he didn't mind at all. He hugged her and she hugged him back. They'd met through a matchmaker and initially there had only been a lot of mutual respect. Now though.... He loved his wife and was confident that she felt the same way about him. He'd been a local curiosity, a strange man who'd travelled the world in search of ancient books and holy relics. She was one of the much respected Oxfordshire Bullens. Margaret had rejected a few admirers and looked likely to end her days as a spinster. Hugh was still amazed at his own good luck, that Margaret had agreed to be his wife.

"How bad are things at The Lamb Inn?" He asked.

"Still no child and they've been married for two years. Joan blames the haunting and she might not be one of your worried but un-haunted. They have about five female cats at the Inn, good mousers and ratters. None of them has managed to bring a living litter of kittens into the world."

"Some people aren't destined to have children." He said. "It's not the work of Satan, or his demons, just bad luck."

“Their customers have seen things though, dreadful things. They used to take in travellers, but now no one stays there after the incident with the barley buyer. They say that all his hair went white overnight and he’d say nothing about what he saw.”

Hugh hugged his wife closer, knowing there was no way to avoid the trip to The Lamb Inn at Wheatley. It was only a few miles to the Inn his brother-in-law had bought as a golden opportunity. It was off the main road and had never brought in the money Thomas had hoped. The Lamb had provided a decent income for them though, until the hauntings had begun.

“What are the customers seeing ?” He asked.

“Something that crawls along the ground, like a huge white worm. There is the smell of sulphur too, when the abomination appears. They’re desperate..... Scared they might lose the Inn if the customers don’t come back. It’s their home as well as a business Hugh, please help them.”

He’d vowed never to help Thomas. He was the sort to blame him for every strange smell or piece of wind damage for the next twenty years, shouting his complaints to anyone who’d listen.

“It might be the ruin of us, if he tries to spread more lies about me.” He said.

“He won’t, he’s desperate and willing to pay for the exorcism.”

“Margaret.”

“Sorry, consultation.”

“Very well, I’ll rise early and go to Wheatley in the morning.”

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It was somewhere between seven and eight miles from his home to Wheatley, depending on the route taken and the time of year. So far it had been a dry autumn and Hugh didn’t have to take any detours to avoid muddy roads. His horse seemed to be in a mood for a fast trot and Hugh arrived at The Lamb Inn while the village of Wheatley was still waking up. He’d only visited the Inn once before and that had been a brief visit with his wife. Even so Wheatley was only a small village and The Lamb Inn was easy to find. Hugh dismounted though, walking his horse towards a woman brushing the area in front of her house. He sought local gossip, rather than directions.

“I’m looking for The Lamb Inn.” He told her. “I seem to be a little lost.”

“It’s over the other side of the London Road. A daft place to build an Inn, though you can just about see their sign from the road.”

“Thank you, is it a clean place ? I might stay there for a few nights.”

“They keep a clean house, but you don’t want to stay there.”

“Why is that ?” He asked.

“Things have been seen there, strange unnatural things. I’ll say no more on the matter.”

No wonder business was bad, with that kind of local reputation. Hugh rode across the London Road and could just about see the sign, with its image of a happy frolicking lamb. There was no one to look after his horse, or greet him at the door. Times were bad at The Lamb and they no longer had enough staff to carry out such tasks, or so Joan had told his wife.

“Sad, it actually looks quite a nice Inn.” He muttered.

He tied up his horse and carried both of his own bags into the main room, which was quite large and airy. The young girl who approached him did at least smile and try to make him feel welcome.

“Good morning, welcome to The Lamb at Wheatley.”

“Hello, you must be Grace.”

“I’m sorry....Have we met before ?”

“My name is Hugh Curwen and I’m here to see the owners of this establishment.”

“Really..... The Hugh Curwen ?”

It happened so often, people knew his name but didn't recognise him. Sometimes it irked him a little, but it could also be useful. Besides, he doubted if anyone would recognise good queen Bess herself, if she dressed as a commoner and walked through Wheatley.

"I am the original, though I fear there are a few imitators. I will need a room for a few nights and my horse is tied up in front of your stables."

"I'll get Peter to look after your horse and tell Mr Bullen that you're here. Will you be wanting breakfast?"

"That would be nice, I left home just after dawn."

She was blushing as she left, he was becoming used to that. Like the visiting fairs, he was a curiosity, a person of interest to liven up the local gossip. Hugh sat by the unmade fire and eventually Peter took his bags away, while Grace made the fire. Joan had told his wife that the cellar man and the young girl were the only people they could afford to employ and Grace only worked mornings. His breakfast arrived before the owner of The Lamb came up to his table, sitting without being asked.

"Thank you for coming Hugh." Said Thomas Bullen. "I'm sure you can appreciate how hard it was for me, to ask for your help."

Hard?! Hugh felt like mentioning the other half dozen times, when Thomas had sent one of his cousins to see his wife, or one of his aunts or uncles. They'd put so much pressure on Margaret, that Hugh had decided never again to set foot in The Lamb Inn. There was Joan to be considered though. "I'm only here because Margaret is worried about your wife."

"Yes, this whole business has been terrible for her. Joan now does a lot of the daily work to keep the Inn open and serving ale. Then there is the lack of a child....."

Hugh looked at the sad man sat opposite him and found it hard to picture him as the same person who'd tried to ruin him. Every occultist uses a few tricks, the clients always expected some kind of show for their fee. Hugh had even used his tricks to carry out a few consultations for the bereaved, pretending to call upon their dead loved ones. Easy money, but it crossed a moral line he hadn't even been aware existed, causing him a few sleepless night. Hugh had given up on the practise, concentrating on exorcisms. Thomas had told everyone who'd listen that Hugh was a fake, a fraud who didn't even believe in God, or the Devil.

"I never did understand why you lied about me." Said Hugh. "Was it out of pure malice?"

"I don't know Hugh, I really don't. You seemed to be making a lot of money very quickly and Margaret mentioned a few of your.... Tricks. Can we put it behind us, for the sake of our wives?"

Grace came a little too close to their table and Thomas sent her away. Their conversation was obviously something he wanted to remain a private matter.

"I will do my best to rid you of whatever haunts this place." Said Hugh. "You must give me your word that even if I fail, you won't use it as an excuse to try and ruin my reputation.... Again."

Hugh had been lucky, ridding a warehouse of a spirit which had been spoiling the barrels of ale and scaring those who worked there. The owner hadn't paid him a huge fee, but he'd told the tale in every tavern he'd visited from Shoreditch to Watford. It had been a close thing, but Hugh had kept his reputation as an infallible exorcist.

"No Hugh, you have my word. Try, that is all I ask, do your best to rid me of this curse. I don't expect you to work without receiving a fee of course. I'm not wealthy, but my father insists on seeing you after the exorcism and has every intention of paying whatever you ask, within reason."

It all sounded so reasonable and the head of the Bullen family was not only wealthy, but knew a large number of prominent citizens. Cleansing The Lamb of whatever was scaring the customers might not be such a chore after all.

"I'll need to talk to Joan too." Said Hugh. "Every tiny detail about the haunting can be potentially useful."

"Yes of course."

Thomas waved in the general direction of the kitchens. Joan must have been waiting; she walked over and joined them almost immediately. A woman a few years younger than his own wife, though she looked much older. The problems were obviously having their effect on her wellbeing.

"I am so sorry to make you talk about these hauntings." Said Hugh.

"No, thank you for coming to help us. I will admit that I was close to abandoning our home a few days ago. You're our last hope Hugh."

He'd heard similar sentiments from dozens of people and he hadn't become immune to the pressure, or empathy with those affected. Even in those cases where the apparition was due to delusions brought on by neurosis or religious fervour, the anguish in the victim was still genuine.

"Tell me everything about the times this abomination has caused actual physical harm to one of your customers?" Asked Hugh.

"The crawling thing did bite old Josh, but he healed up." Said Thomas. "Josh made a lot of trouble about it, insisting that I paid compensation."

"He caused most of the nonsense you'll hear in the village." Said Joan. "Talk of customers having their arms wither away, their hair going pure white overnight. All nonsense, but if you repeat a lie often enough, people start believing it."

"I stopped to ask for direction and was told not to stay at The Lamb." Said Hugh.

"That's mostly because of Old Josh and his stories." Said Thomas. "To add insult to injury, the Parish has forced me to pay compensation for the spiritual damage he suffered."

It was all a preamble of course, they were yet to talk about the one person who had suffered genuine serious harm in their Inn. It was how consultations usually went, clients needing to talk about the minor things, before moving onto the serious matters.

"Tell me about the barley merchant?" Asked Hugh.

"He was hurt, I saw him the next morning." Said Thomas. "Mr Willis has been coming to the area for years, always staying here. His hair really had gone pure white, though it had always been grey."

"He refused to talk about it." Said Joan. "Just paid what he owed and left, saying he'd never use The Lamb again. There was a look in his eyes though Hugh, the look of a terrified man."

"White hair that had been grey, a scared looking merchant. None of that could be called serious damage." Said Hugh.

Sometimes it was like that, like pulling teeth. Some clients did almost anything to avoid getting to the unpleasant details. He looked at them while tapping his fingers on the table.

"I saw the blood on the sheets, but Grace saw the wounds." Said Thomas. "Terrible bites she said later, as if something had been nibbling on him all night."

"Then we need Grace sitting here." Said Hugh. "What about Peter, did he see these terrible bites?"

"No, he was in the stables." Said Joan. "I'll find Grace."

Grace arrived, though she didn't look happy to be sat at the same table as her employers. Hugh decided that if he needed to talk to the girl again, he'd try to do it in private.

"Tell Mr Curwen about that morning Grace." Said Joan. "The morning when the barley merchant was hurt."

"More than hurt, I've never seen that much blood." Said Grace.

"I need to know everything you saw." Said Hugh. "The smallest detail might be important."

Grace just looked at her hands, obviously feeling awkward.

“Start from when you went up to his room Grace.” Said Hugh. “Why did you need to go to his room on that particular morning ?”

“He was a bit particular about certain things and he’s been coming here for many years. Mr Willis liked to wash in hot water, so I took a jug up to him every morning. I banged on the door and called out, but he never answered, which was unusual.”

“Was he normally awake most mornings ?” Asked Hugh.

“Yes, always, sat up in bed and asking about the weather. That morning he was still asleep in his bed, though it was the hair on the pillow that I noticed. Pure white it was, as white as fresh snow.”

The girl looked around, as if waiting to be contradicted. Hugh began to realise that times might be hard for the owners of The Lamb, but it was probably worse for those they employed.

“Every detail Grace.” Said Hugh. “Where did you put the water jug ?”

“Same place as I always do, beside the bowl on the dresser, and I checked that he had a clean washcloth. I thought he was still sleeping, until I went over to him. I saw the bite on his shoulder first and the smear of blood on his pillow.”

“Why do you call it a bite ?”

“There were teeth marks around the hole and it was still bleeding. It was all puffy, as if something had been nibbling at it all night. Mr Willis looked surprised as he woke up, as if he had no idea what had happened to him. He even asked me what I was doing.”

“Did you see other bites ?”

“Mr Willis turned towards me and I saw another bite in his chest. The sheets looks covered in blood, so much blood.”

“The sheets looked bad, but I’ve seen women lose more during childbirth.” Said Joan. “It was probably no more than a cupful.”

“He insisted that I left the room so that he could wash himself.” Said Grace. “Less than an hour later he’d packed his things and gone. He was so angry, as though I’d hurt him.”

“No one thinks that Grace.” Said Thomas.

Losing a cupful of blood wasn’t that serious and he could understand why the merchant had left in a hurry. There wasn’t a qualified medical man for miles and Mr Willis probably wanted to get home and see his own physician.

“I have decided where to perform the exorcism.” Said Hugh. “In the room used by the merchant and tomorrow before breakfast, when there aren’t likely to be any customers wanting ale.”

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Hugh needed Thomas in the room; the exorcism was being performed in his name, to remove the minions of hell from his home. Joan was there too of course, wives usually refused to desert their husbands at such a time. Grace and Peter had been told to remain downstairs, safely having breakfast in the kitchen.

“There is always a risk of injury associated with exorcisms.” Said Hugh. “Damage too, if the malevolent spirit is particular strong. Do you wish me to continue with the exorcism ?”

“Yes.” Said Joan.

Thomas merely nodded at him, though both of them looked scared. Hugh undid the brass buckles on his case and instantly felt confident and in control of the situation. His bag of relics, holy weapons and ancient texts had never failed him. He’d cleared the heavy oak dresser and pulled it away from the wall, to use it as his workbench.

“Do we need to do anything ?” Asked Thomas.

“No, just observe and bear witness to what is being done in your name.”

The candle sticks came out of his case first, the ones blessed by Saint Judith herself. There was no way of knowing if sellers on antiquities and holy relics were telling the truth. Experience was the only way of knowing for sure and the candles had worked well, their smoke helping him rid many homes of bothersome spirits. It always gave him a thrill, watching the awed look on his client's face, as he brought out the paraphernalia for the exorcism. Silver plates and goblets, a gold crucifix, a dagger with a Latin phrase etched along its blade. A huge old hand written bible of course, one written in Arabia, it had cost him a small fortune. He even placed a jar on the dresser which contained the eyeball of John of Patmos, just in case things turned nasty.

"Please remain completely quiet while I read the ritual." Said Hugh.

Hugh carefully opened the ancient bible and ignored the text he normally used. It was written in an old form of Arabic and sounded impressive. Thomas and Joan weren't clients who needed to be impressed though, they were family and genuinely at risk of spiritual harm. Hugh turned to the banned catholic text, which was inserted between two pages at the back of the bible. Hugh had a certain tone of voice he liked to use, copied in part from the style of an elderly priest he'd met in Rome.

"St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in the day of battle; be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the devil." He said.

Hugh had a bottle of holy water, blessed by the late Bishop of Oxford, John Underhill. He sprinkled a small amount over the bed where the barley merchant had been bitten.

"May God rebuke him, we humbly pray and do thou, O' Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the Power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the other evil spirits, who prowl throughout the world, seeking the ruin of souls, Amen."

The bed began to shake, the wooden legs rattling against the floorboards. A slight sulphur smell entered the room, always a good sign that a haunting was genuine.

"In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost....."

Hugh never had a chance to speak the rest of the line. He was quick on his feet for a man approaching his forty second birthday. The heavy dresser didn't fall, something pushed it over. Hugh barely avoiding having his feet crushed.

"Oh no, Lord please save us." Yelled Thomas.

Joan was stood where she had been standing throughout the ritual, but her eyes were locked onto her husband. The old bed frame was large and heavy, the sort that needed four men to move it around. It was upside down with Thomas trapped beneath it. The headboard was digging into his legs just above the knees, though Thomas was no longer yelling for help. All his attention was on the crawling thing.

"Help him Hugh, do something." Shouted Joan.

The temperature in the room was rising, a hot sticky heat and the smell of sulphur was making him cough. It wasn't a simple haunting or mischievous spirit, it was a demon from hell causing the trouble at The Lamb, Hugh was certain of it. He reverted to Latin, which always worked better than English.

"In odorem suavitatis. Tu autem effugare, diabole; appropinquabit enim iudicium Dei."

The holy water was precious and he only had the one bottle. Hugh used it liberally though, sprinkling it over the thing which was inching its way towards Thomas. The crawling thing looked like a huge slug, though it moved like a maggot. No eyes or any other features, except for two rings of nasty looking teeth. It wasn't real of course, just a manifestation created by the demon. Its teeth could do real damage though, even kill.

“The holy water is burning it.” Said Joan.

Burning but not stopping it. Hugh needed something more powerful and not everything in his collection of bottles and jars was useless. The eyeball of John of Patmos had come from a reliable source and was likely to be genuine. It had cost a lot of money, almost everything he’d earned for three months. He still didn’t really like Thomas though and he was saving the eyeball for a situation where his own life was in peril.

“It’s not stopping.” Yelled Joan. “Say another prayer Hugh, do something.”

The crawling thing’s wicked teeth were just inches away from Thomas, likely to bite him where a man most fears being bitten. Hugh had a few nails from the cross, which were probably fake, as were the numerous bones of saints. They were essential for impressing the worried but un-haunted, but useless against a demon.

“Hugh please.....” Whimpered Thomas.

There was a bottle containing the powdered right finger bone of Thomas Aquinas. Fine as face powder, the sacred bone had been covered in holy water from the Deyrulzafaran Monastery. The source was usually to be trusted, but there was no real way of knowing, until the relic had been used in battle against the forces of hell. Hugh took the top off the bottle and reverted to a far older version of the exorcism ritual, mixed in with the catholic text.

“I exorcise thee, every unclean spirit, in the name of God the Father Almighty.”

Hugh threw the opened bottle. Watching it smash as it hit the crawling thing. There was a bright flash of light and Hugh forgot where he was in the ritual. He carried on regardless, hoping the crawling thing would return to hell.

“.....that it may be made the temple of the living God, and that the Holy Spirit may dwell therein. Through the same Christ our Lord, who shall come to judge the living and the dead, and the world by fire !”

He liked that line and emphasised the word fire, shouting it out very loudly. There was a stronger smell of sulphur, but the room began to cool down. The cooling air formed a slight mist, though it didn’t hide the flames covering the crawling thing. The bone of Thomas Aquinas had been genuine, though it was always a pity to use up anything so precious.

“Get Peter and Grace.” He told Joan. “It’ll take all of us to lift the bed.”

“But the fire.....”

“The fire will return to hell, along with the remains of the abomination. Get the others.”

Hugh watched as the blackened remains of the crawling thing vanished, taking most of the fire with it. The contents of the water jug easily extinguished what remained of the fire. Thomas had finally succumbed to the pain and was unconscious.

“We heard the noise, but you told us to wait downstairs, no matter what.” Said Peter.

“Your leg Hugh, you’re bleeding.” Said Joan.

He hadn’t felt it during the battle with the manifestation of the demon, but the dresser hadn’t missed him. Something on it, maybe his own ceremonial dagger, had cut through his trousers and into his right calf. Nothing too deep, but it would probably leave a scar.

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Hugh washed and cleaned his own wound, sacrificing one of his clean shirts to use as a bandage. He’d then helped Joan to treat the numerous cuts and scrapes that Thomas had received from being crushed under the bed. Grace and Peter had been left to look after the lunchtime trade at the Inn, with instructions to tell no one what had occurred. They’d agreed to meet around the kitchen table after lunch, well away from any curious ears. Hugh had arrived early to think over what had

happened. The others were quite cheerful as they arrived; thinking that evil had been driven from The Lamb.

“Cheer up Hugh.” Said Thomas. “You did an excellent job and I’m sure my father will make sure you’re well rewarded.”

Thomas worried him a little; the bed frame had crushed his pelvis, giving him a strange gait. Hugh thought there was a good chance he’d have that odd walk for the rest of his life.

“Yes, smile Hugh..... You won.” Said Joan.

Peter was smiling but not Grace. The girl not only seemed to understand the local community better than her employers, she seemed to sense that evil still dwelt in the back bedroom of The Lamb.

“It was no victory; I merely dispelled the manifestation of a demon.” Said Hugh. “A very powerful demon. Though why it should have chosen to inhabit your Inn is a mystery.”

“So it’s not over ?” Asked Thomas.

“No, it will simply send something else, something probably far worse.” Said Hugh.

“Can you destroy this demon ?” Asked Joan.

Destroy a demon indeed. Hugh didn’t want to admit that most of his consultations were purely carried out to reassure neurotics rich enough to afford his fee. Simply dispelling the crawling thing had probably been his toughest exorcism in the last two or three years. Not that it would serve any purpose to tell them that.

“Perhaps, but we need to discover why it is here.” Said Hugh. “Demons don’t usually inhabit Inns on the outskirts of small villages. Something just doesn’t make sense.”

“The Lamb was built on the Old London Road.” Said Peter. “There were a lot of carts and carriages going by on the old road, or at least that’s what I heard. That was the best part of eighty years ago, maybe more.”

The Old London Road with an Inn built on a busy cross roads. An idea was beginning to form in Hugh’s mind and it wasn’t a pleasant idea.

“What was here before they built The Lamb ?” He asked. “This exact spot, where The Lamb now stands ?”

Quiet faces, though he sensed a little unease in the way Thomas was shifting around in his chair. Young Grace spoke the words he’d already guessed.

“There was a gallows here.” She said. “That’s why the new London Road was built further to the west. They buried suicides here too, or at least that’s what my gran used to say.”

Thomas looking awkward and stories about the crossroads being used to hang murderers and inter suicides. It suddenly all made sense.

“I expect you bought The Lamb for a good price, considering its dubious location.” Said Hugh.

“Thomas didn’t know about what was here a hundred years ago.” Said Joan.

“I think you’ll find he did.”

Hugh didn’t want to cause arguments between the couple, but he needed Thomas to admit to knowing the dark history of that particular cross roads. Deep down though, he was enjoying seeing Thomas squirm.

“We didn’t have a fortune to spend and The Lamb was going for a good price.” Said Thomas. “Who believes in these old superstitions anyway ?”

“Obviously you should have Thomas.” Said Hugh. “Now we know what holds the demon here. All that dark history, all that suffering will be attracting it like a moth to a flame.”

Gone were the smiles and happy faces. He almost felt sorry for Thomas as he saw the way Joan was looking at him.

"Everything we've been through and you knew." She snapped.

"I never..... I thought we'd be fine. All villages have stories about places with bad reputations."

"Can you cleanse the land for us Hugh?" Asked Joan. "Give us a fresh start."

"Remove the effect of centuries of hangings." Said Hugh. "I doubt if the Archbishop himself could do that and I hear Gilbert Sheldon is a good man. I may not even be able to rid you of this demon, but I will do my best. We still need to know where it came from. Think, all of you think. Something happened at The Lamb, something just before the crawling thing was first seen."

"There was nothing, just the usual local villagers buying a glass of ale." Said Joan.

"Think, there must have been something."

"No, nothing strange happened until Mr Willis was injured." Said Thomas.

"There was the man of God." Said Peter. "The clergyman on his way to Ely."

"I didn't like him." Said Grace. "I always brushed out his room with the door open."

"Nonsense girl, he was a clergyman." Said Joan.

"A man of God, but maybe not our God." Said Hugh. "There are some strange types calling Ely home since the reformation. The great cathedral turned into a parish church, radical sects living amongst the faithful. Did this man of God use the same room as Mr Willis?"

"Yes, it's our only room good enough for travelling gentry." Said Joan.

"I think this clergyman may have known or felt the darkness that lurks here." Said Hugh "He probably called up something he couldn't dispel, which happens more often than most occultist like to admit. My guess is that he performed a ritual while here, to leave the troublesome demon to be your problem."

"I knew there was something nasty about him." Said Grace.

"His horse hadn't been properly cared for." Said Peter. "The poor beast looked to have been ridden hard for days."

"A name would help." Said Hugh. "He can't have been christened as the man of God."

"I don't remember." Said Joan. "He was here for two nights, paid what he owed and left."

"I know it, he was Prebendary Gregory Grey." Said Grace. "He talked to me while I brushed out his room and brought up water. He was on his way to join some of his friends in Ely. I hope that helps?"

"Oh it does Grace, it really does." Said Hugh. "A senior clergyman, or so he claimed. That's very interesting."

"How does knowing his name help us?" Asked Thomas.

"We need to travel to Ely and seek him out Thomas, you and I." Said Hugh.

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Oxford to Ely, a journey of about a hundred and twenty miles. Travelling such a distance was not something to be undertaken without a little thought and planning. There was also the matter of leaving his pregnant wife and son for what might turn out to be several weeks.

"I will be fine Hugh; this is Oxford, not London with its cutpurses on every corner."

Margaret had told him. Hugh had hired a young girl to help Esther run the house though and left instructions on who to run for if Margaret seemed to be unwell. The parish was informed of his absence and a few coins given to the college wardens, gained the promise that a discreet watch would be kept on his house. As well as he could in a couple of days, Hugh did his best to leave his wife and child in a safe and secure home.

"You can't ride all that way." Margaret had told him. "Hire a carriage and driver."

Hugh had once ridden a horse from Northern France to the tip of Italy, but his backside had been tougher then. He was now older, heavier and unused to being in the saddle for weeks at a time. A carriage would stand out in Ely though and a cart wouldn't.

"Is your cousin Henry still keeping pigs for a living?" He'd asked his wife.

"Yes, I think so..... Why?"

"I'm thinking of hiring him and his cart."

Henry was a large man who'd once had a reputation as a bit of a ruffian. He was now older and hopefully wiser and he owned a reliable team of horses and a cart with a cover to keep the rain out. Henry hadn't been averse to leaving his wife and six grown up children to look after his pigs for a few weeks. The third morning after the exorcism at The Lamb saw Hugh and Thomas sat with Henry, as he steered his cart out of Oxford using the bridge over the river Cherwell. Hugh quite liked the fact that Henry had a large club under his seat. They might well need someone of his size and reputation if things turned nasty.

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The road had been flooded by autumn rains in a few places, but they'd first seen the tower of Ely cathedral on their eighth day of travel. For a team of two horses pulling a heavy cart, they'd covered the distance from Oxford in a reasonable time. The land was flat and the two hundred foot cathedral tower was a landmark for miles around.

"Once we find this man of God and learn what he knows, what then?" Asked Thomas. "Another exorcism Hugh? Why should that one work where the first did not?"

Over a week in each other's company, living and sleeping under the cloth cover of a pig farmer's cart, yet it was first either of them had said about the reason for their journey.

"This Prebendary Gregory Grey must know about the nature of this demon and why it was linked to him in some way. That information is key to removing it from your home."

"Its name you mean? I heard that demons can be returned to hell, if you know their name."

Oh, how often had he heard that piece of nonsense. Hugh didn't know how much to tell Thomas. His brother in law had not only betrayed his trust in the past, he was a practicing Christian. Everyone was in an England where not going to church could bring dire consequences. What Hugh had to say and do was beyond heresy and almost certainly blasphemous. For some reason he decided to trust Thomas.

"The devil has a multitude of demons Thomas. Their name matters no more than that of a soldier meeting you in battle with his sword held high. I seek to know the nature of this demon, its weaknesses and reason for being linked to this man of God. As I said before Thomas there are other Gods than ours. I have seen three of them during my practise of occult rituals."

"Damn it Hugh, you're talking blasphemy."

"I know and I will need to do far worse to cleanse your home of the evil that now lives there. I will need to use other means than exorcism, older and far darker means. I will do what needs doing on my own though, so that you and Joan aren't complicit in my blasphemy."

For the first time Thomas seemed to think deeply about the magnitude of what lay ahead of them. He simply sat for a while, his head in his hands.

"No Hugh, I will help you. I can't talk for my wife, but I will aid you in any way I can."

"I have a feeling you'd have trouble stopping Joan from joining us, when we fight the demon."

Ely wasn't the same since the reformation. Barely organised chaos surrounded them on all sides, as their cart went past the famous cathedral.

"I'd heard about this, but hadn't seen it." Said Hugh. "It's now supposed to be the people's church, but I doubt if the people ever wanted this."

"It would perhaps have been better, if they'd simply demolished the cathedral." Said Thomas. Hugh knew that most of the statues had been beheaded or destroyed, the stained glass windows smashed beyond repair. It was the hotchpotch of new buildings which gave the impression of chaos. Poorly built structures, some used as schools or alms-houses, built in amongst what had been the cathedral precincts. To add insult to injury, the new buildings had been paid for by selling off the cathedral's gold and silver plate and vestments.

"I fear the weather will finish off what remains." Said Hugh. "I begin to see why Ely has become infamous as a meeting place for strange sects and cults. There isn't much left here for those who look for a God of peace and understanding."

"I pray that future generations will treat the cathedral with greater respect." Said Thomas. Hugh let Henry drive the cart about a mile north of the cathedral, before giving his instructions where to take them.

"There Henry, the track on the right. Go right up to the large house right at the end." The house belonged to an old friend, though Hugh felt no need to give a name to Thomas. Hugh knew the owner of the house quite well, well enough to simply leave their cart at the rear of his house. He quickly knocked on a rear door and spoke to a uniformed servant before joining the others.

"The cart will be safe enough here until we come back for it." He said.

"Who lives here?" Asked Thomas.

"Best not to use names or give ours to anyone today." Said Hugh. "Gregory Grey came here to meet friends, who we might have to fight. This day may end with what many would call murder."

"Murder!" Exclaimed Thomas.

"It may come to that. If you're having second thoughts, think of your future if we don't remove the evil from The Lamb."

Thomas nodded and followed him back down the track. Henry said nothing, but the huge pig farmer had to be one of the most taciturn men Hugh had ever come across.

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There was a Lamb Tavern in Ely, quite close to the cathedral. A coaching Inn, where passengers began their journeys to places as far afield as York or London. The Lamb in Ely was a far grander establishment than the modest Inn run by Thomas and his wife. It seemed the obvious place for them to begin their search for Gregory Grey, the mysterious man of God.

"The way people speak." Said Thomas. "I recognise it as the Queen's English, but some of it is almost impossible to understand."

"Never go to Scotland old friend." Said Hugh. "I've only been there once and didn't understand a single word that was said to me."

There were a variety of people from different parts of the country in the main room, judging by their manner of dress and strange dialects. Men and women mixed together too, which was highly unusual. Hugh bought ale at a long bar, before asking questions. He hoped the man serving him might be more forthcoming, after seeing Hugh part with a few coins.

"You might be able to help us." He said. "We're looking for a clergyman, a Prebendary Gregory Grey. He was on his way to Ely a few months ago, to meet some friends."

"Are you friends of his?"

"No." Said Henry.

The huge man didn't shout, but that single word seemed to say so much about his feelings towards Gregory Grey. The 'No' was said in a deep and sonorous voice, which didn't bode well for the man of God.

"Good, I sent him on his way. Him and his three friends."

Hugh dropped a silver coin onto the counter and pushed it towards the man. It wasn't a coin of huge value, but probably enough to buy the information they needed.

"Why did you ask him to leave?" Asked Hugh.

"Look, there were four of them, all looking more like men-at-arms than clergymen. They were rowdy to the point of being a nuisance and they had a young woman with them who looked terrified. I believe in live and let live, as long as people pay for anything they damage, but there was something about those four men and that poor girl. I threw them out when they started drawing strange signs on the floor of their room."

"What sort of things did they draw?" Asked Hugh.

The man crossed himself and looked scared.

"The sort of things that can cause the parish to take an interest, the sort of things some might call the scribbling of a heretic, or a witch."

He said the word witch very quietly. Hugh pushed a second silver coin across the counter.

"Where did they go after you sent them on their way?"

"They paid what they owed and left quietly enough, so I didn't ask. They were quite friendly with my cellar man though. I'll ask him, he might know where they went."

Their host went through a door and began calling for someone known simply as Nob. There was the sound of animated chatter before the man returned.

"I'm told the four of them were at The Goat for a while, before taking up residence in what used to be the old Deacon's house. I thought it was a ruin, but Nob is sure he's seen them coming and going from there."

"Is it far from here?" Asked Thomas.

"No, less than a mile away to the west of town, just past the market."

They finished their ale, which was some of the best Hugh had tasted in a while. There was no hurry as they left, it was still a few hours before dusk. Whatever was going to happen, they all seemed to realise the best time for it to happen was during the hours of darkness.

"We can find this old Deacon's house and sleep in the cart until nightfall." Said Hugh.

"I just hope the girl is still alive." Said Thomas. "With luck we may be able to rescue her."

"It has been several months since they were staying at the Lamb here in Ely." Said Hugh. "There have been several propitious times to offer a sacrifice to whoever they might serve."

"Sacrifice." Yelled Thomas. "What kind of men are we chasing?"

Hugh looked around and they were well past the market and unlikely to be overheard.

"Men who won't hesitate to kill us, so we mustn't hesitate to kill them Thomas. Only Gregory must be taken alive. There are weapons in my bags, daggers and short swords, weapons easy to hide under our clothes. You must be prepared to use them."

"I won't hesitate." Said Henry.

"Good." Said Hugh.

"I will do what needs doing." Said Thomas. "But these men, you really think they killed that girl, and offered her up to something truly evil?"

"I do Thomas and I would point out that Christians eat the body of Christ and drink his blood. Sacrifice has deep roots in many religions."

“Only among the ungodly Hugh, the truly evil.”

Hugh hadn't wanted to insult his brother in law or cause him to question his beliefs, especially with what might be waiting for them in the ruined Deacon's house. He was a little angry though and fed up with pious hypocrisy in general.

“Let me ask you this Thomas.” He said. “Joan conceives a child and is close to giving birth, when this demon reappears and demands a price for allowing the birth to occur. He asks for the life of an infant, the soul of a new born. Any child will do Thomas, the child of a beggar or a noble. Otherwise the baby your wife is carrying will die. Would you steal a child and offer it to the demon?”

“No..... of course..... Curse you Hugh Curwen, I don't know.... Maybe.”

Hugh hugged him and wished he'd left his words unsaid. They were three against four and all of them needed to be feeling confident and prepared.

“I'm sorry Thomas, you are a good man, perhaps too good for what we may need to do tonight. Just be ready for anything and remember we're fighting against men who've probably sacrificed others to their Dark Lord. No hesitation Thomas, you must show them no mercy.”

“I won't.”

Finding the house they sought was quite easy, though most of the rooms above ground were open to the elements. It seemed the men they were looking for must have taken up residence in the basement of the building. After observing the ruin from a distance and seeing no sign of movement, they returned to Henry's cart to rest until after dark.

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They returned to the ruined Deacon's house at a time when every respectable inhabitant of Ely, should have been sleeping in their beds. They each had two wicked looking blades, as there was almost certain to be violence before the night was over. Henry had carried an unlit lamp all the way from his cart, though it would be left outside the ruined house.

“In my experience you can either carry a lamp or fight, but not both.” Hugh had told them.

They all now thought of the four men in the Deacon's house as their enemy and their enemy was certain to have their own lighting in the basement. They waited in the same group of trees they'd stood behind that afternoon, except now there was a glow, the yellow hint of an oil lamp coming from the ruins.

“Does Gregory Grey have any unusual features?” Hugh asked. “Something to mark him as different to the others, so that we don't accidentally kill him.”

“He looked like any other clergyman to me.” Said Thomas. “My memory for faces isn't that good anyway and Joan dealt with him more than me.”

“There must be something, a scar, a fighter's ragged ear, think Thomas.”

“His hair was thinning a little and bald towards the back of his head, but the other three might have bald spots too.”

Indeed they might and Hugh's original plan to sneak into the basement, now seemed to offer too many chances of killing the man of God.

“We'll light the lamp and call for him from outside the ruins.” Said Hugh. “Nob knew where they were and so will others. We'll do our best to look harmless and call for him, as though it was the most natural thing in the world.”

“You mean to fight them out in the open?” Asked Thomas. “There are four of them.”

“Those aren't good odds.” Added Henry.

“We need Gregory Grey alive, or we’ve come all the way to Ely for nothing.” Said Hugh. “The next manifestation of the demon might well kill someone at the Lamb and you’ll be forced to flee from your home. With luck Grey will be more curious than concerned and come out on his own.”

“He might not.” Said Thomas.

“If they all come with him, we will still have the benefit of surprise.” Said Hugh. “We’ll need to strike first, killing the others and capturing Grey.”

“I’m not sure if I could kill a man without challenging him first.” Said Thomas.

Henry just shrugged and Hugh was considering hiring him as a guard on some of his consultations. It might be useful to have someone of his size around, who wasn’t too bothered by things like ethics and rules of engagement.

“We had the conversation about what you’d be willing to do to save your wife and home Thomas. These are bad men, evil in the eyes of God.”

Thomas nodded at him, as Henry lit the lamp and picked it up.

“Laugh, pretend to be a little drunk.” Said Hugh. “And let me do the talking.”

There was quite a lot of noise coming from his small group, by the time they were stood by the ruined entrance to the house. It was just possible to see a set of stone steps leading down. The yellow glow was brighter down there as it flickered and occasionally waxed and waned.

“Hey, get Gregory Grey out here; his friends from The Goat have come to see him.” Yelled Hugh. Silence for far too long, for men who weren’t supposed to have been expecting trouble. Finally a voice called back from somewhere down below.

“What do friends from The Goat want with Prebendary Gregory Grey ?”

The tone was all wrong, they were wary and Hugh had a good idea why. He moved closer to the others, speaking in little above a whisper.

“I think Nob may have earned himself a few coppers.” He said. “Put the lamp down Henry, we’re going back to the original plan.”

There still had to be the appearance of a few regulars from The Goat though, just three intoxicated men who’d come to see an old friend.

“We’ve brought ale.” He shouted. “And news of a young girl who won’t be missed. Young and probably still a virgin, just the way he likes them.”

Another silence, which gave Hugh a chance to grab hold of Thomas, hard enough to bruise his arm.

“This is going to be a hard fight Thomas.” He hissed. “No hesitation, no mercy !”

“I will do what needs doing, you have my word on it.”

Hugh hadn’t expected a reply from those down the steps, he was already pulling a short sword out a scabbard on his belt.

“Come down and see us…… Friends from The Goat.” Someone yelled from below.

Hugh led with Thomas a few paces behind and Henry keeping back a little. The steps turned a corner, showing a large empty basement area, well-lit by several lamps held to the walls on brackets. There were tables and chairs and it all looked clean and tidy. The basement was a far throw from the damp hole in the ground Hugh had been expecting. There were doors leading off to the sides of the room and a corridor running off into the distance.

“No Henry, wait.” Yelled Hugh.

“I know, the bald man can’t be killed.”

Henry had obviously become tired of playing cat and mouse, especially as they seemed to have been cast in the role of the mice. The huge pig farmer ran into the room and turned to his right, before running down a side corridor. The shouting and yelling began almost immediately.

“Bless him Thomas, Henry is providing a much needed distraction to our enemies and he’ll probably even up the numbers a little.” Said Hugh. “I’ll look at the rooms on the left, you look at the rooms on the right.”

It was hard to still move around slowly and quietly, when Henry was causing mayhem somewhere not that far away. Hugh heard the scream of someone in pain, a voice at least an octave higher than Henry’s. It sounded as though it was now a fight of three against three. Hugh opened the first door he came to and quietly entered the room.

“What’s happening out there Edmund ? Are we under attack ?”

The man looked amazed that Hugh wasn’t the Edmund he’d obviously been expecting. The man in front of him was young, with a fine head of dark curly hair. After telling Thomas not to hesitate, Hugh found himself simply staring into the shocked face in front of him. Killing someone in battle was one thing, but using a short sword in cold blood was a different matter. The man’s face changed expression from shock to pain, as he began to scream.

“Go face your judgement, servant of hell.” Said Hugh.

It must have been a reflex, but Hugh’s short sword was stuck deep into the man’s chest. His enemy wasn’t going to live for very long, but he was screaming quite loudly. Hugh pulled his sword out of the man’s chest and swung it right back, almost touching the ceiling as he prepared to strike. He used the edge of the blade, striking his opponent on the side of his head, just above his jaw. There was a brief fountain of deep red blood and the man fell to the ground, finally silent.

“With luck, it’s now three against two.” He muttered.

The next two rooms were dark and empty, though the lamps in the main room showed enough for him to know they were empty bedrooms. Hugh had one room left and the door opened to reveal a store room of some kind, with a lamp at the far end. He almost closed the door and left, until he heard movement. Sword ready, he walked the length of the room, discovering the girl lying on a bed of straw and rags. He went down onto his knees, seeing the fear in her eyes. Hugh put his short sword down on the ground, but still within reach.

“I’m not with them, the ones who tied you up.” He said. “I’m here with friends and we intend to kill them all. Now let me look at you.”

Her eyes still didn’t show trust, which was hardly surprising. They’d tied and gagged the girl, doing a professional job of it. Her bonds were tight enough to keep her from moving, but without stopping her circulation. The gag kept her words to a barely audible mumble, but she wasn’t going to choke.

“Stay here for now.” He said. “I will be back once it’s safe.... I promise.”

She began to try and talk, her hands held up to him. She wanted to be freed of course, but now wasn’t the right time. Not only might she get herself killed, she might run away and he wanted whatever information she might have about Gregory Grey and his group of friends. Hugh left the girl and walked across the main room, seeing Thomas doing something to his arm. He’d been cut and was applying a tight bandage made from his own shirt sleeve.

“Damn, it was dark Hugh and he jumped me.” Said Thomas.

“Did you get him ?”

“Yes, he’s in there..... It’s messy.”

Another young man with lots of black hair was lying in the room. He’d been in bed, there was still a blanket wrapped round his right leg. A dagger was near his left hand, a dagger glinting with the blood from the wound he’d given Thomas. In return Thomas had slashed the man twice across his right cheek, before cutting his throat. A nasty ragged wound across the dead man’s throat. Hugh left the room and re-joined Thomas.

"Messy, but at least it wasn't Grey.... Too much hair." Said Hugh. "We should look for Henry. Can you still use a sword?"

"Yes, it looks worse than it is."

"I found a girl, tied up and gagged." Said Hugh. "I've left her like that until we've dealt with Grey and the others."

Nob must have been wrong about the number of men with Grey, or others had joined his group. They found two bodies as they walked along the corridor and another at the top of a set of steps leading deeper below the ground.

"We were lucky." Said Thomas. "If they'd all come out and rushed us...."

"They didn't. No use worrying about what might have been."

A sad looking Henry met them halfway down the steps. He had quite a few cuts and scratches, including a nasty gash over his right eye. None of his wounds seemed to be responsible for his mournful mood.

"He ran at me..... I'm sorry." Said Henry. "The bald man.... I stabbed him."

"Is he alive." Asked Hugh.

"Yes, but probably not for long. My blade went deep into his belly."

The steps went down for quite a while before leading into a room which looked far older than the house above. Being Ely, the room was below the water table and most of the walls were stained by running water and the fungus that always follows damp. It was well lit though and Hugh could see a man leaning against a wall, his hands covered in his own blood.

"You must be Prebendary Gregory Grey?" Asked Hugh.

"The title is now meaningless, but I am Gregory Grey. Though not for long, your large and aggressive friend has made sure of that."

"He came right at me..... Out of nowhere." Said Henry.

"Let me see your wound." Said Hugh.

He knelt in front of Grey and searched him for weapons. He found two daggers, which he threw to the other side of the room. Hugh lifted Grey's shirt out the way and found a single stab wound, which was still bleeding, but not profusely. It was a deep belly wound and beyond any doctor's ability to heal. Hugh had seen such wounds before and they were invariably fatal, usually after hours of intense pain.

"See, I'm going to die, probably quite soon." Said Grey. "Why did you and your friends decide to come here and slaughter everyone?"

"You stayed at The Lamb in Wheatley." Said Thomas. "You left a demon behind when you left. It has terrified my customers and ruined my business. The abomination has also caused everything female under our roof to be barren, including my wife."

Grey leaned back against the wall, his whole body trembling with pain. Hugh might have felt sorry for him, if he hadn't found the tied up girl, his next intended sacrifice.

"So I'm to die over something which should have been a trivial matter." Said Grey. "The demon came without being called. It happens sometimes, they see a gap in the curtain of our reality and slip through. It should have fed on all the darkness at that crossroads, all those souls buried in unhallowed ground. You must have had a guest who annoyed it. Maybe they said too many prayers before bedtime or rubbed their rosary beads with a little too much fervour."

"You call ruining my life a trivial matter." Shouted Thomas.

"It should never have happened and you can't blame me for your wife being unable to conceive. It is the location, where the Lamb Inn is built. If you wish to have children you must find another place to live. Now, if there is nothing else? Leave me to die in peace."

Grey winced again and moaned, as the initial shock of being stabbed wore off. Hugh had seen some men last for days with such wounds, but others less than an hour. There were things he needed to know.

"We came all the way from Oxford to talk to you." Said Hugh. "You know the nature of this demon, how it was summoned, even if it was unintentional. The key to sending it back to hell is probably somewhere in your memory, even if you don't realise it."

Grey actually laughed, though it was a strained laugh which obviously caused him pain.

"Why would I help those who gave me the gift of an agonising death?" He asked.

"The pain you feel is nothing, to what awaits you in hell." Said Thomas.

"I've regularly cleansed my soul. I have nothing to fear."

Hugh had heard such nonsense many times. Practitioners of the dark arts seriously believed that an omniscient and omnipotent God could be tricked into forgetting or not noticing the evil they'd committed. Not that Hugh intended to waste time by arguing about it.

"I know him Grey, the gatekeeper who guards the door to the abyss." Said Hugh. "I've sat in a circle of protection and spoken the ancient forbidden words. My soul has travelled to that place and conversed with him. The keeper of the door to the abyss will listen to my request."

Grey was trying to look unconcerned, but his forehead was beginning to show beads of sweat that weren't produced by pain.

"Any fool can claim to have travelled to such places and have the ear of anyone they choose."

Hugh leant close enough to whisper into Grey's left ear. What he had to say could never be heard by his friends or any other living soul who wasn't about to die.

"I have sat with him for many nights, talking about the days before the world existed. No one can ever call him friend, but he will listen to me and block you from crossing the abyss. Your soul will lurk in the dark places for eternity Gregory Grey. All I have to do is ask the keeper, the ancient and powerful brother of Nyarlathotep."

"You have.... You really have spoken to him." Yelled Grey.

Hugh simply nodded at the man on the floor in front of him.

"Tell me what you know of the demon and I'll leave you a dagger." Said Hugh. "It can then be your choice to end your own suffering, or wait for the inevitable."

"You can have my grimoire, it's all in there." Said Grey. "The large candlestick furthest from me....It hides a loose tile."

There was a knack to pushing the heavy brass candlestick and it took Hugh a few tries. Eventually it moved back and to one side, revealing a loose tile, about a yard across. Henry had to help him lift it, to reveal a hole in the ground which was surprisingly dry. In it was a bag quite like his own, right down to the large brass buckles. Hugh lifted the bag and carefully examined the clasps for any nasty surprises.

"There are no traps." Said Grey. "Any thought of revenge would be pointless, just another sin I wouldn't have time to cleanse from my soul."

Hugh still checked, before opening a bag with its collection of paraphernalia for performing the dark arts. There were bottles and jars alongside an upside down crucifix and several other symbols of the unholy.

“My advice is to throw away everything apart from the grimoire.” Said Grey. “You can be hung for simply being in possession of most of the contents of my bag.”

The grimoire covered everything and was even written in Latin. Everyone had their own version of English spelling and grammar, but Latin was fixed and constant. There was all the detail he could have wished for on the nature of the demon currently causing havoc at The Lamb Inn.

“I could never rid myself of the demon, but there are my notes on other ideas I had.... At the back, on the loose sheets of paper.” Said Grey. “You may have more luck.”

It was all there, the lengths Grey had gone to, before simply finding somewhere with enough darkness to lure the demon away. As Hugh read he realised that had his own researches taken a slightly different path, it might have been him lying on the ground, dying from belly wound. Hugh picked up one of Gregory Grey’s daggers and dropped it next to his hand.

“I found a girl upstairs.” Said Hugh. “Where did you abduct her from ?”

“She was to be the last..... It’s all in my notes if the idea of immortality appeals to you ?”

“Not at that price....How many girls did you sacrifice ?”

“Tied up in the store room is number seven.” Said Grey. “I was so close. Read my notes and share my obsession.”

“Where do you get the girl.”

“Immortality you fool, it’s all in my grimoire.”

Hugh picked up Grey’s bag and began to walk away. The girl was old enough to know the village she lived in and if not, he’d place her under the care of the local parish.

“Witchford is where Edmund found her.” Said Grey. “He mentioned a farm to the north of the village.”

“Thank you.”

“You may have to cross the abyss yourself to defeat this demon.”

“I know.” Said Hugh.

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It would have been nice to give the girl a night at the Lamb in Ely, with somewhere to wash and a proper bed. Hugh didn’t want to cause any talk about himself and those he travelled with though, as they were leaving seven dead men in the ruined Deacon’s house. Their new friend was called Cicely, who picked up her spirits after a meal cooked by Henry. They kept close to Henry’s cart that night, not wanting to be seen again by anyone who lived in Ely.

“No mention of us Cicely. You escaped and walked home.” Said Hugh.

“I remember, thank you.”

Witchford was only just over two miles from Ely and her parents farm had been easy to find. They waved to Cicely and waited for her to enter the farmhouse, before heading for home. The girl seemed sensible and intelligent and unlikely to name any of them, or tell anyone about the bodies in the ruins. Hugh was all too aware that they’d all be murderers in the eyes of the law, even if the deaths were more than justified.

“And now it rains.” Said Henry. “We’ll be lucky to reach Oxford in less than ten days.”

Henry’s words had been right and the weather didn’t ease up. There had been several detours to avoid flooded roads and the knife wound Thomas had suffered in the ruins became red and inflamed. They’d stopped in Buckingham to consult a physician, who’d insisted that Thomas needed a few nights on a proper bed, rather than being jostled about in the back of a cart.

“Our wives are aware we might be away for some time Thomas.” Hugh had told him. “The important thing is your health.”

After leaving Buckingham one of Henry's horses developed colic and their speed slowed down to little above walking pace. They crossed the bridge over the river Cherwell and entered Oxford, exactly three weeks after leaving Ely. The cart was muddy, their supply of clean clothing exhausted and Hugh had spent far more than his eventual fee was likely to cover. At least he had the grimoire of Prebendary Gregory Grey, which was probably priceless to those who sought arcane knowledge. "We all have our own affairs and worried wives." Said Hugh. "I suggest we meet at The Lamb in seven days time and put an end to this matter."

"So my help is needed to fight this demon?" Asked Henry. "I have no experience with such things." "You are needed Henry and so is the club you keep under your seat." Said Hugh. "Demons may be creatures born of fire and immune to such weapons, but their manifestations are created from the stuff of this world. I fear we will face something far more dangerous than a crawling worm."

Hugh arrived home to find out that Margaret hadn't been feeling well and a physician had been called to the house. Her malaise had been put down to a lack of rest and anxiety. He'd never felt quite so useless and guilty. The young girl he'd hired as temporary help became a permanent addition to their home and he asked the physician to be present during the birth, which was likely to occur in just over a month.

"I don't need so much fuss." Margaret had told him. "I just needed you to come home."

It would have been nice to simply spend time with his wife, but he needed to read the entire grimoire of Gregory Grey. Hugh had decided to leave their basement as a wine cellar and general area for storing dried goods and pieces of furniture which didn't quite fit in with their new home. His study was the highest room in the house and had a superb view of Oxford. Hugh spent hours there each day, learning some of Grey's loose notes by heart.

"Grey was right, I will need to cross the abyss." He muttered, more than once.

Hugh had kept Grey's bag, with its entire contents, though it was hidden inside a hollow space, next to fireplace. Most of the contents of the bag had been the usual noxious potions and paraphernalia of dark magic. There was one jar though, which intrigued him. It had a warmth to it and gave off an occasional dim light in the early evening. That jar was currently on a bookshelf, wedged between two of his favourite books on the flora of England. Hugh had some suspicions about what the jar contained, but currently didn't have the time to investigate it properly.

"I must be certain before I dare to break the seal."

Hugh had really needed a full seven days to study the grimoire, but Henry turned up at his front door after just five. He'd apologised to Margaret and been very polite, but the information he brought meant leaving home again.

"The trouble seems to be spreading beyond The Lamb." Henry had told him. "The widow Morton was walking past the Inn, when a creature attacked her and bit her twice on her thigh. She said it looked like a wolf, but one made of mist and she's not the sort to imagine things. Mist or not it left two nasty bites, before vanishing as she watched."

"Then we must act now Henry. Meet me at The Lamb early in the morning."

~ ~

Henry's cart was outside The Lamb Inn, when Hugh arrived about an hour after first light. It was now winter and it had been dark when he'd kissed his wife and son, before leaving home. Hugh had used the better roads, the ones least likely to flood or freeze over. He'd rode in along a section of the London Road, surprised to see a crowd gathered outside the Inn. About five people watched him dismount and give his horse to Peter, a massive crowd for somewhere like Wheatley. There were no cheers for the famous exorcist, but quite a few smiles.

“Are you here to send the beast back to hell ?” Someone called out.

“I have business with the owners of this establishment.”

Hugh rarely talked to the people who came to gawp. Not only was it unprofessional, no client wanted their problems being discussed in public. He strode into the main room of The Lamb, finding Henry by the fire and Grace ready to take his coat.

“They’ve been outside since before dawn.” Said Grace. “Thomas told them you were coming. They were there all night after the widow Morton was bitten. Some were shouting about burning down the Inn.”

Crowds rarely braved a cold winter night, things were really starting to become serious.

“They saw me arrive and should calm down. I can’t expect you to put yourself at risk Grace, but I will ask you anyway. I need everyone in that bedroom when I tackle the demon. I’m hoping you will be there.”

Grace nodded at him, with a look in her eyes that made him sure she didn’t need to be told not to hesitate or show mercy.

“Good, there is a bag of weapons on my horse. Please ask Peter to bring them inside.”

Hugh assumed the others were in the kitchen and he was right. No one was eating, but everyone had a mug of something hot and steaming to drink.

“We were waiting for you Hugh.” Said Joan. “Do we have time for a quick breakfast ?”

“After some heavy work I’m afraid. Every piece of furniture needs to be removed from that bedroom, even the rugs. All that remains must be four bare walls and floorboards.”

“Now I know why I was invited.” Said Henry.

“Not entirely.” Said Hugh as he laughed. “I’m sure we’ll have need of your skill with a cudgel before the day is over.”

It took them quite a while to empty the room of its heavy furniture and find places to leave it where it wasn’t going to be in anyone’s way. The bed frame was particularly awkward and ended up being brought downstairs and propped up near the fireplace. Hugh brushed the floor himself, while quietly chanting a ritual of protection.

“Now I must work while you all eat.” Said Hugh. “I have various markings to make on the floor, but it would be nice if someone brought my breakfast up here.”

“I’ll bring it.” Said Grace.

Hugh had Grey’s grimoire and copied the circle the dark occultist had used to hold the manifestation of the demon. The circle would eventually fail, which was why Hugh needed to fight the demon in another way. He used waxed tailor’s chalk, the best method for drawing on a wooden floor. Grace returned with breakfast, while he was adding phrases in Latin to the circle.

“Is that for us to stand inside ?” She asked.

“No, this circle is to contain whatever the demon sends to attack us. I will be inside a protection circle at the other side of the room, while you all stand in the middle.”

He had to laugh at the look on her face.

“I will look to be asleep, maybe even dead, but you must all use your weapons to keep me safe. I will be elsewhere, or at least my soul will be. I intend to attack the demon in a world where it can be hurt and killed.”

“I’ve never fought anything..... I might be no good at it.”

“Look in the bag of weapons I brought and find something light enough to carry and use. Take a few swings with it Grace, be sure you can use it when you need to.”

Salt next, Hugh sprinkled it around the edge of the circle, while picking at the plate Grace had brought him. He had a small jar of silver shavings too, which he sprinkled at intervals around the circle.

“What is that ?” Asked Grace.

“Argentum, silver. Most creatures of the darkness dislike silver. It will slow the creatures down, but I will be relying on the five of you to keep me alive.”

“Master Thomas is still having trouble with the wound he returned with.” Said Grace.

“I brought cream with me that should help, but I’m sure he can still use a blade.”

Grace took away his breakfast plate, while Hugh drew a smaller circle against the far wall. It was the circle where he’d sit propped up by cushions in a chair. He wasn’t going to appear to be dead, he really was going to die, but hopefully only a temporary death. His soul would cross the abyss, the crossing between the worlds of the living and the dead.

“It is a risk I need to take.” He muttered.

The demon was angry and becoming more aggressive. Eventually it would not only kill everyone in The Lamb, but everyone in Wheatley too. It would look like a plague of some kind and the demon would add their souls to its feast. Hugh was happy with his handiwork and returned to the kitchen, to ensure everyone had a weapon they could use and keep using during a prolonged battle.

“I will look to be asleep, but you’ll feel and see the effect of what I’m doing.” Said Hugh. “There will be disturbing sounds and smells, the sunlight may darken, there may even be lightning. There will definitely be a lot of creatures trying to tear my body apart. I am relying on you all.”

Hugh had already put himself at risk a few times, by speaking the forbidden words while his wife slept peacefully on her own. His soul had travelled to Kadath and sought the wisdom of the ancient souls who watched everything and knew everything. They had agreed to help him, by waking the one with the power to shatter a demon, to scatter its pieces across the abyss. So much of his plan relied on the promises of creatures from other worlds, who could be unreliable. Hugh took the others upstairs, picking up a wooden chair on the way.

Grace brought a few cushions from another room and Hugh made himself comfortable, while the others looked around the now empty room.

“Will it be really bad if we step on the circle ?” Asked Joan.

“Try not to, but both the circles will fail after a while.” Said Hugh. “The demon is one of the most powerful kinds and will eventually break free. I’m relying on you to keep fighting, even if some of you are injured.”

“We will Hugh, we won’t let you down.” Said Thomas.

Only Henry looked comfortable wielding his cudgel, but the others had taken a few practice swings with their chosen weapons. Most had chosen sword swords, though Grace favoured a light mace. Hugh had already blessed the weapons and cleansed them with holy water the night before. His five protectors looked determined and he wouldn’t have liked to fight them.

“We should begin.” He said.

“How long will this battle go on for ?” Asked Peter.

“As long as it takes. They won’t all come at once, so rest when you can.”

~ ~

Hugh Curwen settled back into the cushions and made sure his limp body wouldn’t topple out of the chair. It was what his mother would have called a granny chair. It was made of good solid wood and had a curved back, which supported him perfectly. Hugh spoke the forbidden words in his mind and

felt his soul leave his body. Strangely enough he could see where his soul was going, yet still see the interior of the bedroom, with the others ready for battle.

“How will we know when its beginning ?” Asked Joan.

“When something tries to bite lumps out of us.” Said Peter.

Hugh could see them all, from a point that appeared to be a few feet above where he was sat and slightly behind his limp body. Henry with his cudgel, Grace with her mace and the others, spread out and ready to fight. He ignored the bedroom as best he could and concentrated on finding his way through the dark places, which led to the doorway to the abyss. Hugh knew that world quite well; he'd been visiting it for many years. Most of the wraiths who inhabited that realm either ignored him or ran away. He didn't belong there, a living soul among those cursed to wander the dark places forever. There was always a risk though, that he'd meet a powerful entity who didn't run away.

“I seek entry; I have a need to cross the abyss.”

Hugh hadn't really needed to stop and speak to the one who guarded the doorway, the one whose true name was known to very few. He'd passed that way before and could simply have passed beyond the slightly open door. It was polite to ask though and showed respect.

“Who do you seek in the realm of the dead ?”

“I seek the one some call Mixcoatl and others call Huracán. I have come to seek the aid of one who inhabits the land of the dead, but who cannot die. I seek a God among the dead, who some call Agni, though some worship the name of Jagaubis. I have come to find the God of fire and beg for their help.”

“You may pass Hugh Curwen, from the land of the living.”

No sooner had Hugh begun to cross the bridge over the abyss, when things changed in the bedroom. It was frustrating to see it, yet not be able to physically take part in the battle. There was not one wolf inside the circle, but two. Manifestations of the demon, with rows of wicked looking teeth and sharp claws. Thomas struck one, causing it to yelp and fall back. Good, his friends had learned that the creatures could be hurt.

“You must leave them to their fate....For now.” He muttered to himself.

There was no running, moving his soul across the bridge felt like wading through treacle. The demon knew he was there of course and was almost certain to send worse than phantom wolves to attack his friends. Hugh stepped off the bridge and into the realm of the dead. His head felt as though it would explode, as he saw events in the bedroom with perfect clarity.

“Don't destroy the circle of salt.” He muttered.

No good, they couldn't hear him and even if he'd been there, they couldn't have stopped the battle from damaging the circle. Feet that needed to move quickly couldn't always be cautious feet and his friends were moving quickly. Three wolves were trying to break free of the circle now and something else was behind the wolves. If only he could hear what his friends were shouting to each other.... And poor Grace, there was a nasty looking bite on her arm. Hugh pulled all his attention back to his own task, finding the God of fire.

“Remember this place is infinite, but distance is meaningless.” He muttered to himself.

It was a strange place, a vast infinite world constantly covered in a thin mist. There were buildings of a sort, the ruins of vast cities, though no one knew who'd built them. Hugh knew that if he concentrated on the one he sought, the world around him would appear to shrink, until he was quite close to the God of fire. The trick was trying to concentrate, when all his senses wanted to watch the battle going on at The Lamb. The creature behind the wolves had so many claws and yet Hugh still

couldn't identify it. Suddenly poor Peter was struck by what looked like a tentacle and thrown against the wall. Was he dead ?

"Concentrate you fool, the demon seeks to distract you."

Hugh pictured the images that countless different religions had created. All different, but all of the same powerful deity. The God of fire could be a peaceful God of hearth and home, or an avenging God with the ability to rain white hot flames upon the minions of evil. Hugh forgot about Peter and the creature with claws and tentacles. He thought of nothing else, but Mixcoatl, God of fire.

"Who comes to disturb my thoughts ?"

For a God, the one he'd risked his life to find was quite unimpressive, though all the Gods could change their appearance. The deity looked to be a mass of arms and legs, far too many arms. Huge though, larger than any building Hugh had ever seen, including Hampton Court Palace. The God of fire had green skin, the colour of algae on a pond, though that might have been the effect of the mist.

"I have come to ask for your aid, in the destruction of a demon." Said Hugh.

"You found me just in time, the demon is here and looking for you. Move closer Hugh Curwen and you will be safe, at least for now."

Hugh moved close enough to touch the deity and noticed the God had an odour. Not an unpleasant smell, a vague scent of Jasmine. Hugh could see the demon in the mist, though it was difficult to discern details. A huge monster while in that realm, only a little smaller than the fire God. The demon moved around and began to circle round them, but wasn't daring to approach.

"Why do you wish me to destroy this demon ?" Asked the God. "I sense no selfish motive, yet I sense you are not usually so altruistic. You seem to have sinned a great deal for a man who practises a faith which abhors sinners."

"I am not a good man and have never claimed to be. Those in need are related to my wife though, they're family."

"Ahh, I see. You're not the first to put their life at risk for familial ties... Guilt is what brings you here Hugh Curwen, or the fear of guilt..... Still, you are here of your own free will. Wait while I consider this matter."

The ground was stones, millions of tiny pebbles, but they looked dry. Hugh sat and hoped the God didn't need to think about the matter for a thousand years. Events in the bedroom weren't going well, Peter was definitely dead. Hugh could see his sightless eyes, as his body lay on the floor.

Thomas had suffered a few deep bites, but was still wielding a short sword with some skill. As for the strange beast... It seemed to have at least seven heads, each armed with sharp teeth. There were too many tentacles to count and each tentacle ended in a five fingered claw. The creature of hell might have a name, but Hugh didn't know it. The monster wanted to destroy his body of course and curse him to wander the dark places forever. One of the heads struck out, almost reaching his body.

"I have made my decision." Said the God of fire. "You are not a good man, but neither are you irredeemably evil. Your motives are complex, but you are here for largely unselfish reasons. I could give you a great deal of advice regarding your future, but I sense that your need is urgent. If I do this thing, you must never seek me out again. Do you understand ?"

"I do."

"Wait here Hugh Curwen."

The God changed, taking on the shape of a man, a giant with skin the colour of polished copper. Flames covered the God of fire, as he strode in the direction of the demon.

"Blast this mist, I can see nothing." Hugh muttered.

He sat and watched fire fill the dark grey sky, as the God of fire fought the demon. There was a lot of noise, the clash of two huge creatures fighting a deadly battle. Hugh began to realise the power of the demon, that it could fight a deity. The stony ground below him began to vibrate from the sheer intensity of the mighty blows, being used on each other by the two supernatural beings.

"Defend me, please defend me." He muttered.

It wasn't their fault, his friends had been fighting for quite a while and were suffering from fatigue. The circle holding the creature was now useless and the circle protecting his body, was close to failing. A head shot forward, knocking Joan to the ground, before opening its wide jaws. It was going to bite him, the jaws aiming for his manhood.

"Oh, I need to see what happened." He yelled.

The bedroom had vanished from his mind and a pillar of fire was rising into the sky. He could just about see the God of fire, but the demon had gone, destroyed and shattered into a billion pieces, before being consumed by God's fire. Everything of that realm began to fade and Hugh found himself awake in the chair.

"Hugh moved, he's alive !" Shouted Thomas.

Hugh didn't have the strength to move. He could see Peter's body and a floor spattered with the blood of his friends. There was the head of a dead monster in his lap, its teeth embedded deep into his upper thigh, far too close to his manhood.

"Did we do it ?" Asked Grace. "Is the demon gone."

"It is gone, dead and destroyed." Said Hugh. "It will never bother you again."

~ ~

It was exactly a year later and Hugh had Prudence in his arms, his beautiful daughter. Prudence had said her first few words and was beginning to go from crawling to her first tentative steps. Not that he ever let her walk around his workshop.

"See the jar Pru, see how it glows ?"

She reached her hand out, but couldn't reach the jar. Hugh pulled it from between two of his favourite books and kept a tight hold of it in his left hand. His daughter wriggled, so he held her tighter, enjoying the chortling sound she made when she laughed.

"We'd better go back to the others. Oh, what a surprise I have for them."

It was an anniversary meal to both remember poor Peter and celebrate defeating the demon, though Hugh had never talked about the world beyond the abyss. After a year rebuilding links with the farmers of Wheatley, Thomas and Joan had a thriving business again. A business which someone from London was interested in buying. A middle aged man who didn't believe in ghosts, or any other superstitious nonsense. It seemed that Thomas and his wife would soon be moving away from that accursed set of crossroads, which was another reason to celebrate.

As for the glowing jar in his left hand ? He'd run various tests on the jar, even consulting a witch who dwelt in Enstone. He was now certain what it contained and was determined to thrill his guests with a little harmless theatricality. Hugh had to admit to himself, that he'd always be a bit of a showman.

"What will she look like Pru ? like a fairy I think, with glowing wings."

"Fairy." Repeated his daughter.

He hugged her and descended several flights of stairs, carrying his daughter into the dining room.

"I knew it." Said Margaret. "I'd just got her to go to sleep and you've woken her up."

"She said another new word." Said Hugh. "Pru said Fairy."

"Another exorcist in the making." Said Thomas.

They were all there and an empty chair had been left for Peter. Hugh handed his daughter to his wife and held up the glowing jar.

"I have something to show you, something wonderful." He said.

"Is it a magic trick?" Asked Grace. "I love those."

"So you finally found out what was in the jar?" Asked Joan.

"Yes I did, it's the trapped soul of the last girl killed by Gregory Grey."

"Oh." Said Joan.

No one looked thrilled by the news, but Hugh carried on telling them what he was about to do.

"I have no idea of her name, but tonight we shall release her soul." Said Hugh. "Now in fact and I have found no record of this being done before. I will show you something genuinely unique."

Hugh used a knife to scrape away the black wax used to seal the jar. The others were all watching, as he stood up and removed the stopper from the jar.

"She's beautiful.....And now free." Said Margaret.

"Fairy." Said his daughter, pointing.

The girl's soul had no wings, but it moved like a glowing moth, circling Hugh's head, before moving around the table, hovering for a while over each of them.

"What is she doing?" Asked Thomas.

"I have no idea, perhaps thanking us all in some way."

The soul of the nameless girl hovered over baby Prudence for a second or two, before vanishing entirely.

~ ~

~ The End ~

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