

The Editor  
Mr J. F. Archibald  
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Dear Sir,

I am a man of science so I like to measure and weigh things before I am convinced of their substance. Being such an empirical gentleman is rarely a quality that brings down any coals on my head. On the contrary, the reverse is true. The events that unfold in my account below may seem strange and fanciful, but they are as I witnessed them and are all the more wondrous for that. They are events that continue to haunt me for this was a rare instance when my science very nearly got me killed.

Least you fancy I am a dreamer and a scoundrel, attempting to waste your time let me hasten to inform you that I carry degrees in medicine (Edinburgh), geology (Bristol), mathematics and physics (Sydney). These are what you might say, the hard degrees, insofar as they are all directed at measureable, hard evidence as the basis for their existence. They entertain no room for debate of logic or feeling. My account is one that can be weighed and measured. Let me tell it to you without further ado.

It was the beginning of 1882 and in the middle of a South Australian summer. I was still a youngish man and very pleased to have escaped the halls of learning. I had come to Adelaide on the invitation of the University and was contracted through the Geology Department to the Department of Mines to lead a survey of the north east area of the state. The government was looking for iron ore. We were to commence our expedition in April but I thought I would ride out on my own and familiarise myself with the country. I was very fortunate to be able to purchase a steady mare and equipment from the estate of one of the professors at Flinders, for the handsome price of only twelve guineas. She was a steady and reliable beast and not likely to startle in the Australian bush.

It was January. To be precise it was the 13<sup>th</sup> and I had ridden north for five days and arrived at a small settlement of Frederickstown. The main street was wide enough that four wagons could travel abreast at once, though there were no wagons to be seen at the hour of my arrival. Houses here are all made of stone and the windows are shaded from the sun by awning, verandas or wooden shutters. Peppercorn trees struggle in the heat and offer the only hint of green among the brown stone, rusty iron, dusty street and native grasses. These days the town is nigh on deserted but in 1882 there were sixty or more buildings and a family for each one of them. People were getting excited about the mining prospects in Broken Hill and this town was a staging post for those travelling to and from the fortunes to be made up there. Mainly Cornish folk, the sort of migrant mining stock I know you would favour.

I stopped at the first inn I found. It was a large and prosperous looking building. I was attracted to the spreading veranda, the fresh paint and signage, and the flowers

hanging in pots in the shade. It was impressed on me that someone cared for the place. Lace curtains neatly hung in the dark windows. A hot wind started to lift the dust as I surveyed the inn so I urged the mare forward and made to the front door where a rail and trough would allow me to tie up. Beside the trough was a low ramp which clearly gave access to the cellar. Unloading beer from the main street – that would make sense. The first hint there might be something wrong with this place came from the mare. She suddenly behaved as if there was a striking viper at her feet. Nothing I could do could coax her to tie up at the rail. It took me a good few minutes to calm her down, and then only by allowing her away from the inn. I must have looked like a real greenhorn to those few people braving the midday heat.

I was perplexed as you can well imagine and remained until my eye caught the sight of a young man, peering around the corner of the inn and silently beckoning. Perhaps a mute, I thought. He motioned rather urgently so I heeded his direction and urged the mare around the back of the inn. Here I found a strange sight, for the young man was dressed in what Mr Gibbon would identify as a Roman toga, Roman sandals, and heavy woollen hose that encompassed his feet and vanished under the toga. You dear Sir, can well imagine my surprise, and that of the mare, startled even more so by the flapping toga and the waving arms of its wearer. She shied away from him and would not settle until I dismounted and led her into the stable myself.

“She knows” he groaned, palm pressed to his temple. “All the animals know”.

The stable-hand, for that was soon how he identified himself, was clearly not possessed of his good senses, though some, with whom I have shared this story, have suggested his toga was a sensible answer to the heat. You, and perhaps your readers too, will soon share my conviction that the toga was meant for other things. He comported himself by and by, as I would expect a responsible stable-hand to behave and left the mare and my equipment to his safe keeping.

Stepping through the front door of the inn I was received into a delicately decorated hallway, made light and airy by a clever contrivance of windows in the ceiling. Posts of aspidistra were sentinel up and down the hall. Immediately to my left was a vestibule fitted in the best mahogany, and possessed of a prosperous air. Standing behind the counter was a very pretty maiden with the most curious coloured hair. It was completely white. Not silvered and grey as if aged, but a clear and translucent white. She was pleasing to look on and pleasant in the way she treated me but there was a sadness about her, which at the time I apportioned to living in such a remote and desolate place. I was very wrong.

“You can pay your shilling for the evening now if you wish. That will include your evening meal and the use of a hot water bath after nine pm. To find your room take the first turn on the left and you will find number seven first on your right. You are a lucky man, Sir. It being Friday every room is usually booked out by now.” With that she handed me a small brass key and a cardboard token to be redeemed for the hot bath and shave.

I found the room as she had forecast. It looked out onto the back veranda and into a verdant garden of herbs and citrus trees. From my window I could see the scullery and the row of ovens which were being stoked even as I watched, preparing I assumed, for the evening meal. There were two or three cooks and maids and they all were working with an urgent air. I thought it a typical kitchen. But at the time I had less interest in observing the goings on in a kitchen and was mainly interested in buying a drink at the bar.

If I had been surprised, though not altogether unpleasantly by the first two characters I had met in Frederickstown then I was completely taken aback by the barman who did not fit the genteel air of the inn at all. He was balding, unshaven and more akin a ruffian of the drinking lanes of Edinburgh than the bar of a well kept inn, even in these remote parts. And I have to report he was formidable in size and dark of temper. All in all he was not the type to invite conversation and those in the bar area seated at small tables were silent as they sipped their drinks and waited for their meal. He offered no companionship and my own attempts to elicit conversation fell on deaf ears. Instead, he served me in silence but watched me like a hawk. The room was thoroughly intimidated by the man and I have to confess that, though he did not scare me, I was not altogether comfortable in this strange place. I ate my meal and repaired to my room for an early night.

Perhaps it was the early bedtime that made my sleep so light but in the deep darkness of a country night I woke sharply at an unknown hour. There was no glimmer of light under my door so I knew the inn had finished trading for the night. For a moment I could not identify what had woken me. Then hushed and urgent whisperings told me I had not been startled by a dream but by unquiet conversation coming from the kitchen. I lifted the heavy drapes very slightly but all I could see were shadows moving in the light of the oven fires. That the ovens should still be stoked struck me as odd but before I could think any more about it the breeze snapped up and the horses, stabled just on the other side of the kitchen started whinnying, as if in fright. That made me fear for the mare but the breeze forced the whispering conversation into tones I could now hear. You will understand that the horses quickly became a secondary concern.

“I have been telling ye that a sacrifice needs to be made. And soon. Between this hour and the same hour tomorrow night. While there is a half moon.”

“I know, I know. Your’re right. But my dear ’usband, he was never so sure.”

“Well, he ain’t about these parts no more to say, is he now? Let’s on with the sacrifice before we’re all dead men”.

“I just wish I knew where he was. He would know what to do.”

“Do? He would do nothing. It’s better ’e is not here after all, or we would all die.” The angry raised voice was that of the barman and as he spoke I could see his silhouette waving a raised finger at the unseen woman. “You wish that we end up like those you bought the inn from?”

“No, I thought not. We must do this thing. You are convinced she is still a virgin? She has...”

“No, no no, she has not.”

“Then she is our salvation. And she bears the mark of ... hush, hush!”

With that the shadow became real and the barman, with a lantern held high stepped hastily out of the kitchen and onto the back veranda. I held the curtain ajar, just a crack least the closing movement catch his eye. He waited, head cocked like a quail pointer, ready to leap at the slightest flutter. The wind scratched the peppercorn branches against the windows and he moved back to the kitchen.

I was puzzled. All this talk about sacrifices sounded like some sort of religious fervour, and I put it out of my mind, thinking these were simple mining folk and too caught up in their Cornish fairies and giants. I finally drifted off to sleep again, making plans to move out early and attempt to make another fifteen miles before it became too hot.

On the morrow I rose to find the wind had brought a heavy and hot dust storm with it. I was not to be riding anywhere. Forced to stay another night I visited the vestibule to pay another shilling but the white haired beauty was not to be seen. Finally, by mid morning, and after a number of visits I approached the barman, who compared to his previous day's performance was quite vociferous. He was also clearly deeply upset and scared of something or someone.

“I have nowt idea of her whereabouts. A terrible thing. A terrible thing.” His hands trembled, despite leaning his weight on them. “Keep the shilling, man. If she does not reappear none of us here will be needing it. Including yourself. Or these other guests. We are all dead men”.

Clearly I was the only person in the room who was not a believer. The other guests were as scared as the barman.

“Well, why don't you leave, and get away from whatever you think makes you dead men” I asked.

He shook his head. “We are bound to this place and became so when we put our gold sovereigns down in payment. Little did we know we were buying more than we knew. Our prosperity comes at a price”.

“Now that is enough silly talk, you hear me. My husband bought this place and believed in no demons possessing it. Hush your talk brother.” Her words sounded stronger than she looked. Standing in the doorway was the woman I had seen by shadow the previous evening in the kitchen. “She will turn up soon enough. Sir, my daughter is a sensible girl and has never run away. She will be caught in the dust storm some place and will be waiting for it to subside before returning”.

I nodded. “That sounds like a sensible girl indeed. I would do the same”.

She smiled an unconvinced smile, turned on her heel and vanished up the hall. Her brother returned to his silence and the other guests turned their backs on me and went back to whatever silent business had been preoccupying them before I entered.

Leaving the shilling on the counter I decided that the mare should be checked on. The disturbance of the previous night suddenly came back to mind. Cutting out the front door I put my head down and pulled my kerchief over my face and ran for the stable. Stone is a better fortress than timber slab in the defence against blowing sand and the stable, so constructed, offered a welcome reprieve for its animals. I fancy the mare, though well groomed and fed, was pleased to see me. I thought the storm kept her unsettled but every horse was jittery and game. Something was up and the animals knew it. What did the stable-hand mean by his comment yesterday? The animals knew what? It was a few minutes before I realised the stable-hand was nowhere to be seen. Not wishing to unsettle the horses any more than they were by shouting for him I climbed into the loft to see if I could find him.

The toga and sandals were indeed in the loft and I have to report a sight even more strange than the one that had greeted me yesterday. Now I was completely perplexed for this nervous boy was carefully cutting away a tight and complex Gordian knot that bound the white haired girl from neck to ankle. So busy was he in his rescue he failed to hear my approach. Only she could see me and warned him. In fright he fell away from me before composing himself, gathering his toga and picking up his knife again, with one hand and warning me to silence with the finger of the other. I watched and waited until the ropes were cut away and the white haired girl, it now being revealed that she was dressed in a white wedding dress, sat on an old wooden box next to the stable-hand and clutched his arm.

“Should I be alerting the constabulary in Adelaide?”

He shook his head.

“Should I be alerting anyone? There are folk next door who are all in a lather at this absence of this young lady”.

“And well they might. If she dies they live. If she lives, then they die.” His fervour caught my ear and I drew up a box to sit opposite him.

“There is a storm that shows no sign of abating. I have plenty of time. Tell me what is going on before I feel obliged to report all this crazy behaviour to the authorities.”

“My name is Alice and there is nothing crazy here. You signed the guest book as a ‘government scientist’ so I am imagining you have no sentiment for such things. But this is real and true and we fear for our lives. All because we have seen others lose theirs”.

“Go on. My scientist ears are listening”.

“Something demonic lives in the cellar of the building of the inn. We don’t know what it is but it is real enough. My mother and my uncle believe it to be true but my father never did. He always explained the disappearances of travellers by their falling down

the diggings, not taking enough care travelling in the desert. Some do die by such means. But once a month one dies in the cellar to keep the beast from leaving it”.

My incredulousness must have been very visible. “One a month?”

“Yes sir. That is a lot of people I know, but so many thousands move up and down this road to the diggings, many with no families or connections they are never missed”.

“And your father was one of these?” I could scarcely believe what I was hearing.

At this the stable-hand shook his head and looked at the floor. “No, he was murdered by his brother in law. I saw it with my own eyes but he does not know”. She gripped him even tighter and he seemed to draw strength from it. “There was a big argument. Her father was going to open the cellar and clear this thing up once and for all. He was not a believer. So he was killed and dumped in a mine shaft”. He hesitated. “Besides, he was not a virgin”.

“What?”

“A virgin. The sacrifice has to have a distinguishing feature and be a virgin”.

“Your mother knows this?”

She nodded, as a dreadful realisation dawned on me. “She knows this and was planning on you being the sacrifice this month?”

She nodded again. “She was the one who bound me and held me ready in the larder cupboard, to be lowered into the cellar this evening”.

Turning to the stable-hand I could scarcely frame my next question, for I already guessed the answer. “You know all this and help with the sacrifices? That is the reason for the strange garb you are wearing?”

He looked miserable as he nodded. “The locals think I am mad but I have to convince the uncle I am a true believer, and wear this when a sacrifice is bound. He thinks my toga is a sign that I am committed, and I am, for the animals know. They know”.

I stood, in utter disbelief. “You are all mad. Completely and certifiably mad. You, young man, should have spoken to the circuit constable about the murder of the landlord. And what possesses any of you to stay with those two in the inn is beyond me”. With that I left, my mind in a turmoil.

Back in the inn I found an anxious crew, agitated about the missing Alice, with some braving the weather to check other houses up and down the street, to no avail. Why they failed to discover them in the loft remains a mystery to me to this day.

That night the storm had let up a little and I was hoping for clear weather to ride out the next day. I had mentally prepared a brief I would telegraph at the earliest opportunity to the Adelaide authorities. I would refrain from describing witchcraft or lunacy but an alleged murder needed investigation. But that report was not to be, for

just before midnight the house woke me again. This time not by the noise of wind and peppercorn trees but by its utter and deep silence. The air was hot and still and I imagined the dust falling out of the air. The kitchen was in darkness but a pale hint of light crept under my door suggesting someone was still up and about. A little unnerved I very carefully let myself out the window and made my way to the stable, drawn by some inexplicable desire to test what had been told me earlier that day.

As the door creaked open I found myself staring at the stable-hand helping Alice onto a very agitated horse. They were saddled up and clearly getting ready to flee. By the light of a weak lantern I could see their bundled goods.

“Please Sir, if you know what is good for you, saddle up and leave. Right now. What happens at midnight does not bear thinking about. Anyone who has paid their money to be accommodated here tonight is in risk of their life. Leave now if you wish to keep it”. Her urgent insistence and passionate pleading nearly convinced me. Suddenly a shriek from the house turned the hair on my neck and the lantern was quickly doused. The strong smell of urine filled the air and I realised the stable-hand had loosed himself in terror. Slowly the pieces added up to convince me that I should leave, but nothing more so than the sound of terrified horses on such a calm night. In the dark I felt a lead pressed into my hand.

“Here she is”, he said. “A good mare. She is saddled. All the horses are loose. We will ride out in a stampede and put this town behind us.” The mare did not settle even with my caressing hand. The shouts from the house were becoming more and more desperate and shrill. Suddenly the doors of the stable were open and I found myself on the mare riding for my life, in a crashing stampede of a dozen or so horses. I could not explain then why I leapt into the saddle and do not intend to try and explain myself now.

The mob ran hard, turned into the main street as they rounded the corner of the inn. A half moon turned out of the light cloud, turned blood red by the dust, as we rode in a thunderous cacophony past the rail and trough I had tried to approach earlier. As we broached the trough, a crash and thunderous roar, the sound of shattering timber and the pulsing of blue light erupted from under the veranda. Shrieking and tormented cries filled the air for the briefest of moments and then all I could hear was the thunder of hooves, and the thundering of my pulse in my ears.

My mare ran for five miles with her ears down flat and another two before she stopped altogether, completely spent. Three other horses milled about as shadows, equally lost. The boy and his girl were not to be seen and I have not seen or heard of them since.

I did not sleep the rest of the night. My nerves were too fragile and the horse was too unsettled. As the first light started to filter in from the east I rode back towards town but had to walk the last two miles on my own. Some curious townsfolk were starting to make their way to the inn as I joined them but none came too close. Where there had been a cellar there was now a gaping hole in the ground, with the street collapsed into it and the veranda and some of the building blown upwards, pieces of timber shattered and splintered upwards and outwards.

“Silly fool should not have stored dynamite in there” muttered one of the men.

“No scorch marks or fire” whispered a retort, and the street fell silent again.

A number of us stood in the street not moving until I finally stepped through the frame of the front door, up past the shattered vestibule and into the bar. The barman was propped against the wall with a butchers knife in his hand, his chest ripped open and the carpet and wooden floor slats around about him chipped and dug. He had died horribly, fighting off with his knife, whatever had attacked him. The doors to each of the guest rooms were splintered apart and each guest had the appearance of having exploded in their beds, though no gore had touched the lace. In the kitchen the ovens were cold but the charred remains of an aproned woman protruded from one of them. I carefully opened room seven, only to find my goods untouched. I gathered them up, closed the window and made my way out. Something Alice had said sprang to mind and I went back to the bar. Sure enough my shilling was still on the counter, untouched. I picked it up and as I walked back to the front of the building I dropped it through the shattered floor into the remains of the cellar below. I pray each day that it remains there.

Sir, I visited the own only last year, out of idle curiosity more than scientific intrigue. You should know the inn remains as I last saw it. After twenty years the shattered floors and walls above the cellar remain as they were. Even the splinters lie cast about as they fell that evening. The flowered wall paper still clings to the walls, the ovens remain in the kitchen and the brass “seven” is still screwed to the door of my room. No one has attempted to repair the property and its once prosperous trade is clearly no more. But the town is greatly reduced as well. The rail bypasses it and only a small handful of people remain. Some at the general store told me the town is too unsafe and that is the real reason families have moved on. Too many old shafts and other mining hazards keep claiming accidental lives they said. One old timer volunteered that someone goes missing at least once a month. His fellows laughed their scepticism. I shook his hand, advised he give up his celibate life if that was still his condition, and departed. I do not plan to return.

I remain faithfully yours,

In his right mind and a faithful observer,

James McGregor Esq. MD