# Modern Gothic

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# A GLASS HOUSE FOR ESTHER
## MICHAEL BIRD

Every year, before the anniversary of the tragedy that devastated the Hampshire estate of Rackonton, I requested an interview with its reclusive owner, Mr Herbert Cardew. An heir to a cotton milling fortune, he held a disinclination towards exposure, so the public perceived that his silence regarding this disaster was a tacit admission of guilt. In my letter, I cited my experience as a reporter at *The Middlesex Oracle*, and argued that if his version of the story were to remain undocumented, many would believe he had evaded incarceration due to his high status. I added that, if he wished to choose myself as an agent for such a confession, I would be a less vicious questioner than a haughty prosecutor or a village gossip.

It was a compliment to my persistence that, in the fifth year of my entreaty, my editor presented me with a positive reply from Mr Cardew. The handwriting was jagged, and problematic to decipher, which implied he was either sick in body or mind, but not significantly deranged for this to be an inconvenience to our conversation. Without adding further details, he summoned me to his winter residence in Camberwell Grove, a leafy annex of London once known for its exclusivity.

A shaggy oak and flowering shrubs framed the tall iron gates, which fell open at my touch. Facing me was a boxy townhouse from the reign of the third King George, where each upper level hosted windows smaller than the one below, creating the illusion of magnitude.

After ringing the bell, I was ushered inside by a broad woman with a nervous temperament, dressed in the fashion of

a servant from two decades past. As she took my hat, coat and cane, I mentioned how pleased I was to make her acquaintance. In response, her narrow eyes scrutinised me with suspicion, perhaps aware that my bonhomie was not entirely sincere.

No paintings or etchings hung on the walls, and the varnish of the floors was spoiled with dents and scratches. This indifference to luxury was not an uncommon feature of our nation's richest men, some of whom understood how the retention of wealth depends on not spending on frivolity.

But this was not the reputation of Mr Herbert Cardew. Prior to the catastrophe, he was known as one of the Empire's most profligate figures – a celebrated sponsor of charity, and a consummate entertainer of princes and lords. The maidservant presented a morning room bathed in such gloom that my eyes required time to adjust. Windows should have offered a view onto the rear garden, but were replaced by a brick wall, plastered over and painted white. An oil lamp sat on a small round table, illuminating no more than the outline of two armchairs, one of which was occupied.

"Please join me," came a rasping voice.

"Thank you, sir," I took the seat opposite.

"I trust there is enough light for you to take record of this congress."

"I hope it will be sufficient."

"There will be tea shortly."

"That is very kind."

"I expect you are wondering why I reside in such bare lodgings."

"It caused me some surprise."

"I assure you that I do not lack income."

"That was not my assumption."

"Yet there is much of my former life that I have relinquished."

"It can be liberating to give up such vanities."

"Vanities? What *vanities*? I speak of ambitions."

"I did not wish to offend," I said, "and beg your indulgence as I seek to comprehend the events of which I am ignorant."

Cardew inhaled a long breath, his throat rattled, and a wheeze slipped from the pit of his lungs. But this was no impediment to his speech:

I inherited properties that stretched from the suburbs of London to the English Channel, and my family had multiplied this wealth with ventures in Canada, Africa and the Raj. Thus, I was in possession of a bank balance which was so extraordinary that my single vocation was to ensure it was exhausted.

A part of this included spoiling my only child, Esther, who was soon to be of womanly age. For many years, I had been estranged from her mother, who chose to stay in Paris, a city I found disagreeable to my moral and physical constitution. At that time, Esther was attending a radical boarding school that nurtured and developed her aspirations, so for the short periods she spent in my company, I had to ensure she was subject to rigorous stimulation.

She loved nature, and would prefer to play with the hunting dogs or ponies than with her friends or cousins. This interest extended to a fascination for the zoological gardens of caged animals that had become fashionable in our great cities. Yet she confessed that she felt these creatures to be miserable in a climate as unbecoming as that of England. So, I intended to build a refuge that better accommodated the sensitivities of such beasts.

In my instructions to the architect, I demanded a square mile of glass and iron, rising six levels and converging in a hemisphere, matching the dimensions of Il Duomo in Florence. Our home was to be no more than a trim of brick that skirted

three sides of this conservatory, leaving the southern approach exposed.

To heat such an expanse, I enlisted the best engineers from my old family firm. Below ground, railways with minecarts transported coke to boilers, which fed hot water into perforated pipes. Through grills in the basement, this network poured steam inside an enclosure that spread over six hundred acres. No feat of technological progress had ever been attempted on such a scale as Rackonton. Once the structure and mechanics were complete, the hot-house welcomed its first guest.

"Father," said Esther, her pupils widening to absorb the amplitude, "this place leaves a great impression on me."

"I am glad to win your approval."

"I rather think of it as a symphony of metal and light."

"That is very poetic."

"Yes," she said. "I am blessed with a poetic disposition."

"Then we must find more to inspire you."

The botanists were first to arrive. From West Africa, East India and the Amazon, they brought coconut, date and rubber trees. At the centre of the greenhouse, they carved out a large pool, floating with giant water lilies, strong enough to hold a child. Ferns, cacti, coffee and banana prospered alongside leaves shaped in lobster claws, and the open palms of the fly-trap. From inside the folds and roots of these plants, tiny monsters hatched. Termites rampaged through timber, and the air swarmed with huge flies, the size of a baby's fist. Their expansion encouraged spiders to stir from their hideouts – some hairy as a bearded paw and others flat, with tendrils that slithered along the earth.

Because our conservatory had no walls, all the rooms of our residence were exposed to its spectacle. A screen of glass occupied one side of the kitchen, drawing room, dining room, library and stableyard. As my staff washed linen, dusted

bookshelves, brushed the horses and polished the silver, they could not escape the backdrop of creepers and threads twisting against the windows, terrorised by scores of insects. The sounds of rustling and cutting, chopping and buzzing, warbling and chafing were a constant accompaniment to us, day and night, along with a bizarre, alien fragrance that danced between the sweet and the putrefying.

Esther sat in her bed chamber, reclining on a chaise-longue, admiring the scenery, and I was happy to find her so thoroughly engaged.

"It is extraordinary," she said, "to see plants that grow on plants, that, in turn, grow on further plants."

"Each has its own character."

"For me, there is much beauty in the vines."

"And these," I pointed to the hanging stem of a liana. "They skirt every trunk, dine on the trees, and when they are finished, strangle them."

"How very horrible," said Esther, her gaze lingering on the verdant cords.

Once I saw the garden was flourishing, the nature of my orders from abroad began to change. At the entrance to the mansion came boxes of sloths, turtles and frogs, snakes in wire cages, and wooden crates with butterflies nesting in fruit. After our new additions had settled, I sought out larger mammals and reptiles.

In the marble hall was a glass panorama, one hundred yards in length, and straddling the full height of the habitation. Two iron doors lay at its centre, necessitating a pair of manservants to unhinge its locks, before the portal opened slowly, in the manner of a medieval fortification. At their side, painted steps led to a giant chute, through which the stablehands dispatched animals into the forest.

Chimpanzees climbed to the canopy, and broke off sticks to dig out vermin from the timber, while caiman, capybara and anaconda explored the dirt until they reached the lake.

Esther was enamoured with the lemurs, who stretched out their thin arms, and glided from branch to branch. Their speech enchanted her, as they bleated, purred, croaked or wailed in a high, human-like pitch. She ran through the house, racing from ballroom to library to living room and back again, and shadowing the lemurs in the trees. It was uncertain whether she was following them, or they were in pursuit of her.

One afternoon she rushed into my study, and spoke fervently of her observations of these primates.

"They were gathered around an object of interest, at first invisible to me. Each of them picked up a stone and pounded the target of their attention with disciplined savagery. The crowd dispersed, and on the floor lay a long, black and bludgeoned corpse, which I understood to be a boa constrictor. Its mouth was open, and its tongue and fangs frozen in a cry for help."

"Was this disturbing to you?"

"My sympathy for the reptile was equal to my satisfaction at seeing the lemurs vanquish their predator."

One early Autumn morning, in front of the mansion, a carriage had abandoned a single crate on the steps. Inside flapped an angry bird, knocking its beak against the slats. Esther picked up the box, and saw that it contained a toucan. She was so amused by its orange bill, yellow breast and blue feet, that she named the bird Harlequin.

"This is too beautiful for the forest and shall take up residence in my chamber," she told me. I was reticent at first, but she insisted, and soon Harlequin was installed on a perch in her quarters, where it snapped its jaws for attention. I instructed our servants to feed the toucan a mix of fruit and insects, but

Esther quickly assumed this duty. When I knocked on her door to say good night, I found her spearing cockroaches on sharp pieces of wood, and holding them above the bird's beak.

However, Esther herself was attacked by Harlequin, who left small scars on her arms and face. In addition, the toucan expelled liquid waste, black and pinkish-red, in whatever location it so desired. I told Esther we should let the animal into the wild, but she argued that she would dedicate hours to its house-training, and, if this proved ineffective, she would find herself another bedroom.

The summer was over, and Esther returned as a boarder to her school. A trusted maidservant adopted the role of feeding the toucan. As she entered the room, the bird leapt on her, and lurched at her plate. It had a special fondness for raspberries, and loved to fling the pulp across the Chesterfield couch and the drapes of Esther's four-poster bed.

One morning the servant found the bird on the ground below the window to the conservatory. Its beak had cracked and its wings were broken. Blood was splattered on the glass. It was shivering, deeply in pain, but too damaged to plead for help.

In tears, the maid detailed to me what had happened, and said she was willing to suffer the consequences of her failure to attend to the bird. I assured her she was not to blame, and asked her to empty the creature into the chute. Its fate was now the business of the forest.

I wrote to Esther, informing her of Harlequin's misfortune. It was my belief that the bird had spent days watching the hot-house alone, and had sought its own method of entry, but in vain. I tried to break this news with sympathy, as I was concerned it might cause her turmoil.

But I was heartened when she wrote back the following:

*Dearest Father,*

*You must not fret about the sad demise of Harlequin. I will always remember his glorious beak, the vibrant colours of his plumage, and the tortured but caring eyes of this loving bird. Forever in my thoughts will be the times we spent together, with his claws gripping my shoulder, or smoothing his bill across my cheek, as though I were a fellow member of his species.*

*I have no doubt that he had frustrations with me, indicated by his habits of expelling faeces on my nightgown, or hurling pieces of mango in my face. Yet whenever I closed the drapes to my bed, and his cawing in the early hours tempered to a sleepy moan, I felt the deep sense of companionship that you hoped I would find with the animal kingdom.*

*Perhaps this is not the manner in which I – or indeed Harlequin – would have preferred him to meet his end. Yet I must come to terms with such unpleasantness, because as it is certain that all toucans must die, so it is also certain that life will offer me other toucans,*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Miss Esther Cardew*

I was so impressed by her mature response, that I rewarded her with a marvellous present for Christmas.

Passage was bought from the Congo Basin for a family of pygmies. Entering our hall, the parents were shivering in raincoats, borrowed from my driver, while their son and daughter wore ragged dresses from our serving maids. As they walked through our marbled hall, they seemed terrified by the expanse of the building, and puzzled by the furnishings. Once they viewed the sheer enormity of our garden, theirs to occupy

as they deemed fit, they uttered cries of euphoria, and removed their western clothing. The children fled to the trees, climbing on the branches as though this was an opportunity for limitless play, while their parents scouted the terrain in bare feet, and dirty linen around their waists. Within a few days, at the edge of the lake, they built a hut from thick shoots and mud.

Esther was fascinated by the new addition to the conservatory, and spent the week before New Year with a telescope in her room, following the progress of the family. The days wore on into late winter, and she returned to school, coming back to Rackonton only for weekends. But in early March she entered my study, seeking counsel on a matter of grave concern.

"I have observed the jungle people for some time," she said. "They do not move from their home, nor do they hunt in the pool or among the trees. When they venture outside, it is clear from their wasted bodies and slovenly demeanour that they are hungry."

"I, too, have noticed a degeneration."

"Father, do they not like the creatures and fruits the forest offers?"

"I fear they did not consume such a diet in the Congo."

"Then we have been mistaken."

"This does seem to be the case."

"Perhaps," said Esther, "it would not be unkind of us to provide them with some food?"

When the pygmies were passing near the kitchen, my head cook waved to them to come to the hall. Through the chute, she dispatched bread and cooked mutton, and pointed to her open mouth. Esther and I watched the family crouch on the floor, and greedily devour the meal. Mother, father and the two children attempted to chew, but spat out the roast meat, and returned to the camouflage of the trees.

*

It was summer. My daughter was in her eighteenth year. We had presented her to the Queen at court, and planned to follow this with a grand ball at our estate. I invited masters of industry, arts and science, as well as lords and parliamentarians. Each arrived with their wives and relations, including a not insignificant supply of unattached men.

The women were dressed in flared skirts, embroidered blouses and wide-brimmed hats, and the men in black suits, bow ties and tight cummerbunds. However, the heat of the conservatory caused them to perspire, and their skin to chafe against the collar and waist. Our staff served a menu of oysters au gratin, lobster bisque, duck breast, foie gras, beef terrine and Champagne, which helped dull the stultifying humidity.

Esther descended our staircase in a floor-length gown of rippling silk, her neck glowing with a chain of pearls, and her brunette locks falling about her shoulders. I was blushing with intense pride, as it is impossible for a father to recognise anything less than unimpeachable beauty in his only daughter, as she reaches womanhood.

When the meat dish was served, a stablehand brought in a large cow on a rope. For the guests, the presence of the source of their meal was an irony which prompted a simmer of amusement.

The cow was led beyond the tables to the far end of the room. Two manservants wrenched open the locks to the portal. Slowly, the gates parted. The stablehand, nervous, stepped cautiously into the balmy enclosure. Leaving the rope hanging around the cow's neck, he scurried to the hall, and the manservants shut the gates.

No pasture lay here, only a carpet of decaying leaves, ravaged by termites. The cow retained a static poise, except for the swing of her tail through a swarm of flies. Her hide was