

Angel with Two Faces

Nicola Upson

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Extract

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For Hettie, with love from us both

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Death is an angel with two faces –
To us he turns
A face of terrors, blighting all things fair.
The other burns
With glory of the stars, a love is there.

T. C. Williams

The horse hit the water at a gallop, fracturing the early morning peace which hung about the lake. Still breathless from the race across the sand and the shock of what had happened, Harry ran his hand the length of Shilling's neck, trying to calm him down, but the horse was already beyond reassurance. Suddenly, the bed of the lake fell away beneath them and water swirled up to Harry's waist. Shilling twisted his head round in fear, and Harry could see the panic in his eyes and feel the tension in the powerful muscles of his back. He leaned forward in the saddle, noticing how the smell of horse sweat mixed with the dank odour of the water, and spoke gentle words of encouragement, but Shilling seemed to sense the uncertainty in his voice and grew more frightened than ever. The spirit and defiance were entirely gone from him, and the fierce joy which Harry had always found in his bond with the horse was replaced by an intense sadness: the moment to let go had come. Knowing that Shilling would stand more chance without any weight on his back, Harry loosened his feet from the stirrups and slid from the saddle for the last time.

The water was ice-cold but the shock of it brought confusion rather than clarity. Disoriented, Harry felt himself pulled downwards, separated from the dawn by a dark mass of water. The strengthening light of the day disappeared entirely, and the water stabbed at his eyes and rushed in his ears, making it

impossible to see or even to think. The pressure in his throat and chest told him to breathe but made it impossible to do so, and he tried to fight a choking sensation which threatened to overwhelm him. His whole body was a magnet for unimaginable pain and he knew that he was dying, but where was the euphoria that people spoke about? Where was the peace? He wanted to stay calm, to accept his fate, but his feet struggled desperately for a surface to kick against and the frantic search for something to hold on to became more than a physical need: without Shilling, he felt so alone.

Time expanded, turning seconds into hours, but at last he felt the bed of the lake beneath him. He thrashed wildly with his legs, but only succeeded in making the water solid with mud and tangling himself in a mass of dead branches and weed. His limbs were impossibly heavy now, and slime clung to his face. Unable to bear the suffocation any longer, Harry opened his mouth and screamed against a silent wall of water.

Chapter One

The sun beat down on Harry Pinching's coffin, and Archie Penrose shifted the weight on his shoulder in a vain attempt to alleviate his discomfort. Instead, the oak seemed to press harder against his neck, and every time he breathed in he caught a faint whiff of polish from the wood, its sweet, house-proud scent jarring sharply with the mood of the day. The heat was extreme for the time of year, and that alone would have been oppressive; combined with the other demands on his senses, it was almost unbearable and he was glad when he heard the stable clock strike noon, a signal for the small group of men to move towards the waiting hearse.

A funeral was not how he had intended to spend the first day of his holiday: this fortnight on his family's Cornish estate was supposed to be a much-needed break from the professional interest which he took in death. More importantly, he had made a promise to himself that these few days would mark a fresh start to his long, difficult and precious friendship with Josephine Tey. They had known each other now for twenty years, but eighteen of those had been clouded by secrets and guilt, and only the tragic events of the previous year had allowed them to clear the air once and for all. Since then, they had seen each other a few times in London, but this would be the first chance they had had to spend any length of time together, and to enjoy a new ease and honesty in their

friendship. Admittedly, they were supposed to have travelled down together and the fact that a corpse had already changed their plans could be seen as an ill omen but, with summer here early and Josephine due on the afternoon train, Archie was optimistic that death and sadness would soon be behind them. It wasn't possible to forget the past – and neither of them would have wanted to – but perhaps from now on it would strengthen their bond instead of creating an awkwardness that both of them had tried to avoid.

The wooden hearse which stood just a few feet away was an open, no-nonsense affair, appropriate to the young man whose body it was to carry and – in a gesture of remarkable forgiveness, Archie thought – drawn by the horse which had killed him. It had been painstakingly decorated in the glorious assortment of flowers that Cornwall offered up at this time of year, all gathered from local gardens by friends who were glad of a simple way to express their sorrow. The bearers walked slowly forward, careful to keep in step, and Archie was close enough to the man in front to see the muscles in his neck tighten with the strain of weight and responsibility. As they lowered the coffin gently onto the cart, he could see his own relief reflected in the faces of the others. They had stood for just a short time with Harry's body on their shoulders, but it had been long enough for the midday sun to soak their funeral clothes with sweat. Archie's shirt stuck uncomfortably to his back and the dark, well-cut suit felt awkward and restrictive, as alien to him as it was to those around him whose daily lives required less fastidious tailoring. There ought to be a law against burying someone in temperatures like these, he thought. When his turn came, he hoped for rain, or at least for weather which was less of an affront to grief.

The coffin was fixed securely in place, and Archie glanced round at the other bearers – five men of varying ages and professions but all, to some degree, familiar to him. He had grown up on this estate, sixteen hundred acres of stunning wood and farmland on the south coast, but he returned home rarely now that his parents were dead. His uncle, William Motley, had inherited Loe just before the war and Archie admired the resourceful and spirited way in which he had kept the land and house going ever since, but that life was not for him and, like his cousins, Lettice and Ronnie, who had quite literally fashioned themselves a successful career in theatre design, he preferred to call London his home. Holidays were one thing, but he hated these public occasions which required him to play a more formal part in his family's life. Everyone was always polite and seemed genuinely pleased to see him, but no one at Loe had any use for an inspector from Scotland Yard, and he found it hard to relinquish that role – a matter of behaviour, rather than uniform. Being out of place was not something he experienced very often, and it made him irrationally annoyed that he should feel it most strongly amongst the men and women he had known since his childhood.

Today, though, formality could not be avoided. It was a long-standing tradition at Loe that whenever a member of the estate's community died, a representative from each of the families resident there would be chosen to carry the coffin. As they took their positions, ready to escort the body to the cliff-top church, it seemed to Archie that there could hardly have been a more appropriate expression of respect: among those present, it was possible to build a picture of daily life in this part of Cornwall which had probably not changed very much in three hundred years. For a few hours, these men were

symbols of the Cornish landscape as much as they were individuals and friends, and each brought his own testament to the contribution that the dead man had made towards that whole. Archie was moved to be a part of it, whilst always questioning his right to belong.

They were ready to move off now, and the undertaker, Jago Snipe – a well-built, pleasant-looking man in his fifties, whose only stereotypical trait was a reassuring certainty in the face of grief – walked over to two young women who waited by the door of Loe House, hanging back from the scene as if reluctant to engage. Archie recognised Harry's sisters – his twin, Morwenna, and a much younger girl, Loveday, whom he supposed must be thirteen or fourteen by now. Both seemed at a loss to know what to do, Morwenna even more so than her little sister, and they were obviously grateful when Jago put an arm comfortingly around each of them and led them over to the hearse. Archie watched as Harry's only remaining family added their personal tributes to the flowers: Morwenna held his best riding boots, which she laid carefully on top of the coffin; Loveday's offering was a horseshoe – not a real one, but a replica carved from wood and beautifully decorated with long braids and flowers. Neither would have been obvious gifts for a man who had died in a riding accident, but Harry had worked with horses all his life and Archie was not surprised that these should be regarded as the things he would wish to take with him. Loveday struggled to reach the top of the coffin and Archie – standing close by – automatically stepped forward to help. As he lifted the girl up, he caught Morwenna's eye and was shocked at how pale and tired she looked, even for someone in mourning. Then he considered how long she had been living a nightmare: the lake in which Harry had drowned

had been slow to give up his body, and several weeks had passed between his death and his funeral. The relentless coupling of hope and fear must have been exhausting, particularly as the inevitable outcome would make her head of the family and responsible for a sister who was generally acknowledged to be 'difficult'. It was little wonder that Morwenna Pinching bore scant resemblance to the young woman he remembered with such affection.

The funeral party headed slowly away from the house, through thick walls of rhododendron and towards the track which would take them to the small church on the cliff. Rounding the bend of the drive, they got their first glimpse of the lake which had brought them all together, a two-mile stretch of water separated from the sea by a narrow bar of sand. On a day like this, when the sun was high and there was barely a trace of wind, it looked serene and harmless, but anyone who had lived here long enough to be familiar with its history knew to treat it with respect. Unlike many of the legends surrounding Loe Pool, the myth that it took a life every seven years had its basis in fact, and Harry's death was the latest testimony. Archie had yet to hear all the details, but it seemed that Harry had been riding his horse, Shilling, full pelt along the bar when the animal was startled by something and veered wildly into the lake. He had hung on as long as he could, but eventually horse and rider were separated: while Shilling swam to the opposite bank, traumatised but unhurt, Harry was lost in the deepest part of the water, where thick weed and darkness defied all attempts to retrieve his body until it eventually floated to the surface of its own accord. Archie had been saddened by the death of someone he had very much liked – and surprised, as well: he had always regarded Harry as a born

horseman. In years to come, strangers would no doubt put such an accident down to the lake's determination to have its way but today, as they were about to bury Harry, it seemed to Archie that the young man's memory demanded more from his friends than superstition.

Several days without rain had left the single-track lane that led to the sea hard and dry underfoot, and Archie – eyes down against the sun – noticed how quickly the dust took the shine off each carefully polished pair of shoes, how it covered the hem of Morwenna's skirt in a stubborn, powdery film, dulling the severity of the black. When he reached the thick stretch of woodland that draped the lake on two sides, he was glad of the shade. The woods were carpeted with bluebells in a profusion which seemed almost indecent, particularly today, but the estate was unusually quiet and the only noise came from the steady rhythm of the cart wheels. Even the rooks, which normally made such a cacophony in the trees overhead, were silent, and Archie was reminded of a story his father had told him as they roamed these woods together, an ancient belief that when the birds abandoned their rookery it was a sign that bereavement lay ahead. After that, every time he had taken the path round the lake, he had slowed his step when approaching that particular section, dreading the silence which might signal some disruption to an idyllic childhood; many years later, when his father was ill, he found himself avoiding that stretch of woodland altogether.

He had always marvelled at how close you could get to the sea on this path without being aware of its existence. Today, the transformation from stillness to the sea's relentless sound and motion was as sudden and miraculous as ever and, when the party left the cushioning of the trees behind, the noise of the

waves reached them so abruptly that it could easily have been a sound effect cued by their appearance. Here, at last, was the church. There were surely few more dramatic settings for worship than the precarious position held by this otherwise modest building, now sited less than fifty yards from the cliff edge and looking out to the Lizard in the east and Land's End to the west. Founded well over a millennium ago by a Breton missionary, the existing church belonged to the fifteenth century, but its three low-roofed chapels were made more striking by the presence of a detached bell tower, older than the rest of the building and – according to legend – built on the site of an ancient hermit's cell. It was known as the church of storms, a name which tended to add a somewhat Old Testament feel to the services held there. At high tide, in bad weather, when the waves threatened to engulf the whole building and claim it as their own, it did not require much of a performance from the pulpit to convince those inside of their mortality.

He had quite forgotten it was Sunday until he saw a few people leaving the church by the north side, dressed in their best clothes and with a relaxed, carefree air that could not have been more different from the mood of the party about to enter via the other door. Anyone from outside Cornwall might have found it strange that the dead should be buried on the Sabbath, but here it was common practice, Sunday being the only day that fishermen were back from the sea and able to pay their last respects to friends and colleagues. Funerals were fitted in pragmatically around the other services and, as the two congregations mingled briefly at the gate, Archie noticed that sympathy was mixed with embarrassment in the faces of those whose church business was concluded for the day,

almost as if they felt the need to apologise for being excused from grief. Dealing as often as he did with death, he knew what that conflict of emotions felt like, and he would not have blamed anyone for adding a silent amen to those that had already been said inside.

After exchanging one surplice for another, the vicar of St Winwaloe's emerged from the south porch, ready to lead the coffin into the church. Jasper Motley would not have been anyone's first choice for the link between sorrow and hope which most people look for in a minister presiding over a funeral. In fact, he seemed utterly devoid of qualities that would enable him to deliver any of the Church's teachings; humility and compassion, joy and sorrow, were entirely absent from his heart and had no place in his sermons. The fact that Jasper was his uncle could not persuade Archie to feel anything other than contempt for him. It was a sentiment which had been instilled in him from an early age. His mother had been the only girl in a family of three; her elder brother – William – she adored, and they had remained close until her death; the middle child, Jasper, had always been the odd one out in an otherwise happy family, resentful of the bond between his brother and sister and even less forgiving of parents who had been too selfish to bear him first. The only time that Archie had ever heard his mother express hatred for anyone was when she spoke of Jasper, and she did so with a spite and a bitterness which was completely out of character; he didn't doubt that her feelings were justified, but he had never really understood the depth of her resentment.

As the six men prepared to lift the coffin from the cart, Archie noticed how much older his uncle seemed to have grown in recent months. 'I am the resurrection and the life,

saith the Lord,' he began, his once strident voice now cracked and weakened with age. 'He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.' No chance for Harry, then, Archie thought drily; he had never been known for his Christian living. Like many men who had been raised on the land and who believed in their own mastery of it, Harry Pinching had worked hard, played hard and thought himself invincible. His arrogance had seemed harmless, but it would exact a high price – not from the dead man, whose troubles were over, but from those who had been left behind to carry on. What would Morwenna and Loveday do now? Archie wondered. Their grief was just the beginning.

Clean-living Harry might not have been, but popular he most certainly was. The small church was packed with mourners – people who had worked alongside him, fishermen he had shared a drink with, and young women who had fancied their chances with his charm and good looks. Harry was an estate worker like his father before him, but his warmth and affability had ensured him a welcome in the village that usually kept itself quite separate from Loe, and he had managed to bridge the gap between land and sea in a way that was rare. That his death should touch a whole community was perhaps no surprise, but Archie sensed Morwenna falter as she entered the church and he guessed that she had been taken aback by the size of the crowd and the strength of feeling for her brother. He heard someone encourage her gently to move on, and the procession passed down the central aisle towards the chancel. As they reached the altar, Christopher Snipe – a boy of sixteen or seventeen and the youngest of the bearers – missed his footing on the top step and the coffin dipped perilously at the

back, shooting one of Harry's riding boots on to the floor. Archie steadied the weight while Christopher recovered himself, and the body was delivered on to the bier without further mishap, but the mistake earned the boy a glare of reproach from his father, who clearly believed that someone born into the undertaking trade should have known better. Still frowning, the undertaker returned the boot to the top of the coffin and melted away into the congregation as only those of his profession knew how. Christopher sat down next to his father, flushed and embarrassed.

The other bearers found seats that had been saved for them, and Archie slipped into the front pew next to his cousins and his uncle William. 'Nice catch,' whispered Ronnie, while her elder sister, Lettice, leaned over to give his arm a reassuring squeeze. By now, the Reverend Motley was in full flow from the pulpit, and the words of the thirty-ninth psalm drifted over Archie's head as he glanced round the church. It must have been two years or more since he had last been in here, but he was sure it had not seemed as neglected and depressing back then. Heat made everything look tired, but the shabbiness of the interior was not just down to the wilting flowers. Many of the windows had been boarded against the storms, which gave the building a permanent air of abandonment; even those which remained uncovered were damaged and dirty, and the ledges were covered with sand which a probing wind had blown through cracks in the glass. Constant exposure to the weather had removed several slates from the roof, and a bucket – incongruously placed at the back of the altar, amid more familiar receptacles of worship – testified to the need for repair. The wood of the pews was dull and unnourished, and even the service books were faded and torn. It seemed that

Jasper's constant whining was justified: the church *did* require more money, although Archie couldn't help thinking that the vicar's appeals for generosity might be better heeded if he and his wife moderated their own standard of living and led more by example.

The lesson was over at last, and Nathaniel Shoebridge, curate of St Winwaloe's, stood to give the eulogy. Shoebridge was due to take over the living of the parish when Jasper Motley retired at the end of the year; judging by the state of the church, that was something of a poisoned chalice, but Archie had heard good reports of the young man's dedication, and his appointment was generally looked on as a welcome change to the current regime. As one of Harry's oldest friends, and part of a family which had farmed on the Loe estate for generations, there was no disputing Nathaniel's right to carry the coffin, although the friendship between the two men had apparently cooled of late. Archie wondered if they had settled their differences before the accident, and watched with interest as the curate walked nervously up to the lectern.

For Shoebridge, the pulpit was usually as reassuring as a desk to an office worker, but today he felt confined by it; the familiar, hexagonal space seemed somehow narrower, and its polished, heavily carved wood closed in on him like the sides of a coffin, making it difficult to breathe and threatening to stifle his words. Nervously, he glanced up from the lectern and saw a church full of disparate people with disparate memories turned as one towards him. The shyness of his youth came flooding back, and he felt strangely suffocated and exposed at the same time.

His first words were barely audible. 'Like most of us here, I've known Harry for many years,' he said, aware that

his audience was relying on him for an eloquent expression of sorrow which they could share in and claim as their own. 'His loss has been difficult for us all to come to terms with.' He paused, trying to control the anxiety in his voice and speak normally, but the speech ahead of him – even though it had been carefully prepared to mask his emotions – seemed an impossible mountain and he wondered how he was ever to get through it. There was some muttering from the back of the church and he pressed on, concentrating on one sentence at a time and trying to blot out the silent presence of the dead man at his side. 'Harry had an important place at the heart of our community,' he said, rushing his words but no longer caring if they were a disappointment. 'He was honest and hard-working, a loving brother to Morwenna and Loveday, and a good friend to many of us.' Even to his own ears, the tribute seemed oddly impersonal, as if he were conducting the funeral of a parishioner he had never met. The adjectives he used were inadequate, second-hand accolades for a man whose vitality had dominated a room, and, rather than making things easier for him, the banality of Nathaniel's respect stuck in his throat. As he faltered at the simplest of phrases, he could see the congregation growing increasingly bewildered at his failure to dispel the stark reality of the coffin and replace it with an image of Harry as he had been in life – warm, generous and fiercely loyal; memorable from the most casual of meetings, and impossible to forget after a lifetime of friendship.

Flicking his pale blond hair back from his eyes, Nathaniel turned gratefully to the book he had brought with him, glad to be able to take refuge in someone else's words and hoping that he might be able to give them the strength and conviction which his own had lacked. He had chosen a passage from

Tennyson to read, a section from *Idylls of the King* which he loved because it brought together everything he valued most: the stories and legends he had grown up with; the sense of community that drove him on; and the spirituality which now gave him his greatest solace. ‘And slowly answer’d Arthur from the barge,’ he began tentatively.

‘The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils himself in many ways.
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.’

The familiar lines gave him confidence and, for a second, he dared to hope that he might redeem himself after all, but his optimism was short-lived: he made the mistake of looking away from the page, long enough to see that Morwenna was staring up at him from the front row – accusing, disappointed, unforgiving. He continued hurriedly,

‘Comfort thyself; what comfort is in me?
I have lived my life, and that which I have done
May He within himself make pure! but thou,
If thou shouldst never see my face again,
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of.’

At last, it was over. Nathaniel left the pulpit quickly, making no effort to hide his relief. He glanced apologetically at Morwenna and Loveday as he walked back to his seat, acknowledging that they – and Harry – had deserved better from him.

Loveday giggled and slipped from the church, breaking the silence that followed the concluding prayers, and Archie noted

how intently Christopher Snipe watched her leave. The girl's laughter was unsettling in such close proximity to death, and the mourners – embarrassed and unsure of how to react – looked at each other across the aisle or smiled awkwardly at Morwenna. The tension that had begun with Nathaniel's eulogy was infectious, and everyone seemed thankful to follow the coffin outside, knowing that the end of the service was in sight.

Small-leaved Cornish elms clustered round the churchyard, revealing flickering glimpses of the sea beyond. The funeral party followed the line of trees round to the rear of the church, where a pile of freshly dug earth marked a new burial place. Loveday was already at the graveside. As they drew near, Archie heard a gasp from one or two of the mourners and had to hide his own surprise when he saw that Harry's grave was lined throughout with bluebells and primroses, woven carefully into moss and netting to create a living wall of colour where only darkness and soil should have been. The gesture was obviously Loveday's last gift to an elder brother who, since their parents' untimely death, had been the most important person in her world; it was an act of love, and it should have been touching – beautiful, almost – but Archie could only think of how many hours the girl must have spent in the grave to do it. Its aesthetic impact could not dispel the image in his mind of a child's hands working obsessively so close to the dead. A brief look round was enough to tell him that he was not the only one to be disturbed by it, and it was left to Morwenna to embrace her young sister and acknowledge her pride.

As the mourners gathered by the grave, Archie noticed several of them glance instinctively towards their own dead in different parts of the churchyard, remembering other funerals

and other losses. Christopher and his father threaded strips of webbing efficiently under the coffin, ready to lower it gently into the grave. ‘Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of our dear brother here departed,’ Jasper Motley continued half-heartedly, ‘we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Archie wondered how many of the people gathered here actually took any comfort from those familiar words. For him, there was a much greater resonance in the sound of a handful of earth hitting the coffin of a man who would never see thirty.

With heads bowed for the final prayer, Archie looked at his watch and realised that Josephine’s train was due to arrive in less than an hour. Because he was expected at the wake, Ronnie had volunteered to collect her from Penzance station and, if she left now, she would be almost on time. As the mourners dispersed, he caught his cousin’s eye through the crowd and signalled to her to get a move on.

‘Do you have time to come back to the cottage?’ Archie had not seen Morwenna come up behind him, and the urgency of her voice took him by surprise.

‘Of course,’ he said. He leant forward to kiss her and offer what futile words of comfort he could find, but she brushed them quickly aside and turned away from approaching well-wishers so that only Archie could hear her. ‘Good, because there’s something I need to say to you in private – something I could never tell anyone else.’ With no further explanation, she took Loveday’s hand and led her firmly away from their brother’s grave.