

Nightclub of the Demon

after "Night of the Demon",

based on "Casting the Runes" by MR James.

By Ben Curthoys

DEATH BECOMES THEM – The Daily Record

14 FOUND DEAD – The Times

"Did you know any of them?" inquired Beatrice. She was sitting with Andy Walker in an unpretentious cafe in Camden, just far enough from the market for the locals to outnumber the tourists. Along every other unpretentious cafe in the city it offered "The Biggest Breakfast in London", but its relative size was irrelevant: neither of them were eating. The eggs congealed on the plates in front of them as they sipped instant coffee, puffed on cigarettes, and tried to grasp whatever it was that had happened last night, whatever it was that had caused these shocking headlines.

"No. Well, I knew their faces. But I'd never spoken with them. And now I never will..." he replied, trailing off at the end of the sentence to stare vacantly into space for a moment before recalling himself enough to inhale some more nicotine and take another mouthful of the thin but irritatingly expensive coffee.

"It must have been drugs." he continued. "What else would have killed so many people so suddenly? A virus couldn't have left such an unimaginably dreadful face of fear on them, and the newspaper said they had all been seen out and about and fine just hours before. Not even Ebola works that fast."

"But what dealer would want to kill their own customers?"

"I don't know. The dealer might not even know."

"Of course they'd know. If they didn't test the drugs they'd end up with people selling them fake rubbish."

"Very expensive bags of powdered aspirin... Ok, you're right. But whether they know or not, if it's happened twice now it'll happen again next week. Someone's either innocently or deliberately poisoning people."

"Of course," he said, with a wry expression on his face, "dealers do that anyway. People pay them to. Just more slowly."

"Stop it" Beatrice snapped. "It's not funny. And the police aren't getting anywhere."

"If they were any good at tracking down dealers there wouldn't be so many of them around. I especially wish they'd get the fuckers who try to sell me skunk when I'm on the way to Sainsbury's to buy toilet roll."

"Well if you're on such good terms with them and you're so fucking clever perhaps you should find the bastard who's doing this" she hissed, as she scraped her chair back, knocked what was left of her coffee into the breakfast, and stalked off in the general direction of the Stables.

This much is in the way of prologue. On an evening rather later in the same week, Mr Andy Walker was sitting in an internet cafe near the British Museum, where he was engaged in research. In particular, he was tracing his way through the blogs, livejournals, deadjournals, and general online detritus left behind the departed goths, trying to correlate their movements and work out when they had all been in the same place at the same time in order to come into contact with whatever had caused their sudden and simultaneous deaths.

With the help of a friend of a friend he had made some progress towards reading and annotating the bulk of the entries and accessing the friends lists, but aside from an air of paranoia unusually pronounced even for a group of people who had crafted an identity and way of life out of making damned sure they were being watched all the time, he had made no real progress. Every last uninteresting event of their social lives was there, but there was nothing that brought all of them together at once. His eyes tired from the effort of reading text in murky grey on black colour schemes, he allowed his gaze to wander over the screen, which as was usual was covered in banner and popup advertisements. With the possible exception of the brilliant and convincing dialogue between Mr Lamplough and an eminent K.C. on the subject of Cialis and Viagra, none of them afforded much scope to his imagination. I am wrong: there was one at the corner of the screen which did not seem familiar. It was in blue letters on a yellow ground, and all that he could read of it was a name – John Harrington – and a date. It could be of no interest to him to know more; but for all that, he was just curious enough to move the smaller popups that were covering it until he could read it well. It ran thus: "In memory of John Harrington, of Church Hill, Walthamstow Central. Died 16th July. Three months were allowed."

The name leapt out at him, and he jerked his hand away from the mouse with such surprise and force that he dashed his tall, skinny latté over his keyboard. It was one of the names of the victims - but why was it on a popup advertisement, and what did it mean? He sat in shock until a bored staff member sauntered over trailing a replacement keyboard. "I beg your pardon," Andy said, "I was surprised by that advertisement, it's a very odd one, isn't it?" The staff member read it slowly. "Well, I never saw that one before, but I don't see why you had to ruin a perfectly good new keyboard either." She right clicked on the advert and inspected the properties for a while. "It's supposed to be for 12" monster vibrators. Someone's been playing silly buggers with the proxy server, I expect. Either that or the ad company has been Own3d by hackers." She plugged in the replacement keyboard, pressed f5, and the mysterious advertisement vanished, to be replaced by a truly alarming mechanised dildo. She smiled salaciously and wandered off.

"Three months" he said to himself. "Three months?"

Hesitantly, he reached for the mouse again. Clicking on the calendar, he scrolled down to three months before 16th July, and clicked, and read. The entry was unexceptional, but it offered a shred of hope – it mentioned a new club night that he had not read about anywhere in his other research. Holding his breath, he switched to the next journal on his list, and went back to the same date. He exhaled softly, partly surprise, partly a sigh, partly relief.

"The same club. Finally, something in common. "

“So they all went to the same place at the same time? How can that kill them all at the same time, in their beds, scattered all over London, three months later? Even if they had all bought bad drugs from someone they wouldn’t have all waited to the precise moment three months later to take them.”

As usual, Beatrice’s inquiring mind had found the flaw at the heart of the otherwise elegant hypothesis, and a neatly placed blow left it shattered. They were sitting on top of Primrose Hill, all of London spread out at their feet, with only the occasional blow from a stray football or frisby to break the tranquility.

“How am I supposed to know? It doesn’t make any sense, but it’s the only thing I’ve found, it’s the only thing I’ve got to go on, and I haven’t read anything in the paper about the great progress the police have been making. So I’m going to check it out anyway.”

Beatrice shook her head.

“Any excuse. I’ll believe you’re serious if you don’t come back pissed. Where is it, anyway?”

So it was that that Friday night they found themselves outside “Oblivion”. Not without a degree of trepidation they stepped through the door and past the bouncer, accepted a handful flyers from a diffident door whore, handed over some money and had a smudged screaming skull stamped on their hand in return, and entered into the club. Almost at once their brittle cheerfulness vanished. There was nothing wrong as such, but it seemed as if some ill-defined and impalpable presence had cast a pall over the proceedings, standing between them and their fellow club-goers. As the evening proceeded the music warmed them up, and the cider, lager and blackcurrant were jointly and severally tested for dangerous impurities, and a few familiar faces appeared, and the evening passed pleasantly enough, until at 2:30am the floodlights came on and the doors opened to let the night air in and the night people out.

The usual drama of the night bus has no place in this story; suffice it to say that their routes diverged, they kissed goodnight, and Andy returned to his lonely home at about 3:15am. The night he passed was not one on which he looks back with any satisfaction. He was in bed with the lights out when he heard the unmistakable sound of his kitchen door opening. No step followed it on the passage floor, but the sound must mean mischief, for he knew that he had shut that door that evening after taking a long drink of water as a preventative against hangovers. It was Dutch courage that induced him to slip out into the hallway, shivering and naked, listening. No light was visible, no further sounds came: only a gust of warm, or even hot air played for a moment around his shins. He went back and decided to lock himself into his room. There was more unpleasantness, however. Either an economical electricity company had decided that their services would not be required in the small hours of the morning, and had stopped working, or there was something wrong with the meter; the effect was in any case that the electric light was not working. The obvious course was to find a lighter, and also to consult his watch: he might as well know how many hours of discomfort awaited him. So he put his hand into the well-known nook under the pillow: only, it did not get so far. What he touched was, according to his account, a mouth, with teeth, and with hair about it, and, he declares, not the mouth of a human being. I do not think it is any use to guess what he said or did; but he was in the toilet with the door locked and his ear to it before he was clearly conscious again. And there he spent the rest of a most miserable night, looking every moment for some fumbling at the door: but nothing came.

When the pale grey light of dawn marked the end of his lonely night watch, he dragged himself up

out of the bathtub and, grimacing at his cramped and aching muscles, returned to his bedroom. He tried the light switch: it worked faultlessly. The pillow was on the floor where he had flung it in his horror and haste to get away from the tooth filled maw he had felt, but apart from that everything looked entirely ordinary, as if nothing had ever been amiss. As he sunk gratefully onto his bed to snatch a brief hour or two of wholesome slumber before his day began, his eye lighted on something that banished his tiredness and made all thought of sleep impossible.

His ridiculously tight black jeans lay crumpled on the floor where they had been discarded the previous evening. Poking out of the top of the back pocket of was one of the flyers he had been handed on the way into the club. Along the top of the flier was a line of runes, printed in purple. Andy was no expert, but he knew enough to recognize that this was no random selection of rune chosen to look pretty and add a touch of the mystic to an otherwise poorly designed flyer. They weren't even a pretentious English quotation transliterated into the runic alphabet. This was a runic fragment of altogether more sinister purpose. As he snatched the flier from the pocket he revealed the yew tree that made up the rest of the design of the flier. The appearance of death symbols is usually nothing to worry about, and more often than not refers to some symbolic or metaphorical death, but unreliable as it was his translation of the runes made it perfectly clear that the death indicated here was to be taken literally. He had found the common thread that tied together the terrified corpses that had been found the previous week, and in doing so become a victim of the curse himself.

Beatrice arrived to find him sitting on the edge of his bed, his head nearly touching his knees, his hand still tightly grasping the shiny cardboard.

“What is it? Why did you call? Why couldn't it wait until a civilized hour? What's wrong with you?”

He lifted his head, and then held up the flier for her.

“What do you make of this?”

As she reached out for it to study it more closely he snatched it suddenly away. She was about to berate him for playing childish games, but something in his eyes stopped her.

“No, don't take it. For heaven's sake, don't take it. But look at it. See here – these runes. You can't read them, I can't get much, but it's enough to know that there's a terrible curse laid upon whoever accepts ownership of the piece of paper with them written on. This is what killed those people last week – this is a flier that was being handed out outside the club they all went to.”

She stared at him. She looked away for a moment, and then stared at him again. His pupils seemed normal size.

“Don't you think it's a bit early in the day for mushrooms?”

“You don't believe me? Haven't you seen the papers today? Haven't you heard the news?”

“What news?”

“More deaths. Another batch, the same as before. We can ask around, find out if they all went to that club for the first time precisely three months ago yesterday, the second week after it opened. But I'm certain they did.”

“Hi. Is that... um... er... DJ Draven of Sorrows?” said Andy, hesitantly, peering at the almost illegible contact name and number on the bottom of the flier. “It is? Good. I can call you Jeremy? Thank you. That’s much better. I was calling about the flier for your club. I was handed it the other day, and I really really liked the design. Yes, really. Anyway, I’m about to start promoting a club night myself, and I wondered whether you could tell me how you came up with the design, what designer you used”. He listened for a minute, and then covered the mouthpiece and turned to Beatrice.

“Shit. The design came from some anonymous email address... He held an internet ‘design a flier’ competition for the club, but due to a server crash right before the deadline, this was the only design he had on hand, and he had to go with it.”

Andy turned back to the phone. “And you have no idea who this person is? That’s such a shame. I really wanted to use them for my club. I don’t... I don’t suppose you still have the email, do you? Could you forward it to me? Forward it as an attachment, if you could. I’ll try emailing them, see if they accept a commission. That’s great. Thank you. Bye.”

“Even supposing for one moment that I believe you” said Beatrice, “which I would like to make quite clear I don’t, if receiving this accursed flier is the cause of some horrible death three months later, how come that guy isn’t dead?”

“The curse can be passed on to someone else. All it takes is for them to accept the paper. It doesn’t work if it’s thrown away or lost, but if it can be passed on to someone else then it falls on him or her instead.”

“So, playing along with your insane fantasy, you aren’t doomed after all. You just need to give the flier to someone else?”

“Yes. But I can’t just palm it off on some innocent passer by. And I don’t care that you don’t believe in it, I’m not giving it to you. The only thing to do is find the bastard who created it, and give it back to him – if possible, without him noticing. So. Let’s get over to John’s and see if he can work out who this email really came from.”

The true source of the email had been disguised using powerful, commercial grade spamming software, and it had been routed through a confusing series open relay mail servers, but with his friend’s expert assistance and patience, some careful cross checking of IP addresses, and a minor breach of the Computer Misuse Act 1990, the source of the email was tracked down to smtp.abdulalazred.com – a domain which quick whois search revealed to be the property of one Heathcliffe Dagher, of New Jersey. A noted black magician and maker of enemies, he appeared to have created the cursed design out of nothing more than a brooding of malice and a perverse delight in his own skill.

Andy spent the next two days tracking down as many previous visitors to the club as possible, and gathering together any fliers that had been given to them on a variety of pretexts. With flights arranged and preparations all in place, he awoke at the crack of dawn and dragged himself from his bed onto the Kentish Town Thameslink, and from there traveled to Gatwick and on to Newark Airport.

Arriving, he settled himself in at the small hostel he had arranged and then wasted no time in tracking down Heathcliffe’s residence. His target still lived in his parent’s house, conducting his

occult investigations from the attic and relying on their advancing years and arthritic joints to prevent them from ascending the narrow ladder and discovering his horrific practices.

Acutely aware that unless he acted soon, another wave of people would be found dead in their beds the next Saturday morning, Andy watched over the house. He was in luck. It soon became apparent that Heathcliffe regularly ordered all kinds of products online, and it was a rare day that did not see a delivery man at his door. He formulated a plan.

Late Friday afternoon, near midnight UK time, wearing as official looking a uniform as could be rented from the local fancy dress shop at short notice, Andy rang the doorbell. He had with him a large cardboard box containing all of the fliers that he had managed to recover from the club goers. When the door opened he concealed the pounding of his heart and affected the testy manner of an overstretched delivery man, thrusting a clipboard into Heathcliffe's face and demanding a signature in return for the package. Keeping one piece of paper and handing the hastily prepared "delivery note" to Heathcliffe, he waited until the door was closed and retreated to his vantage point as quickly as he could, and waited for events to unfold.

He did not have long to wait. Within minutes the door was flung open, and the palid, terrified countenance of Heathcliffe could be seen hurriedly looking this way and that, obviously searching for the person who had so recently passed on to him the box filled with fliers whose deadly meaning he clearly recognized.

Returning back inside and emerging again sweating from both the fear and the unaccustomed exertion, and struggling under the weight of the box, Heathcliffe began walking as fast as he could down the street. He was obviously determined to pass the box and its curse on to someone as soon as he could. Andy followed and watched, horrified, as a passing addict was easily persuaded to take the box and its contents along with a \$100 bill. Unable to think of any way of rescuing the poor unfortunate without sacrificing his own life, and appalled and guilty at the turn events had taken, he returned to his hostel with a heavy heart. He left for England the next day, late enough to pick up a newspaper on the way to the airport and read about the strange death of a homeless drug addict the night before – strange because it was not from an overdose or a shooting but that she was found at the end of a blind alley, with bloody and broken fingernails from attempting to scale the brick wall at the end, apparently dead from sheer fright. As he read this he recalled with satisfaction the foresight that had lead him to construct the "delivery note" from two separate sheets of paper – between which was glued the flier that he had been handed personally – and to thank also the greed that had led Heathcliffe to carelessly discard the delivery note in his eagerness to investigate contents of the inviting looking parcel.

There were no more mysterious deaths in London, and Andy heard no more about Heathcliffe Dagher. All that is known is that nearly three months later, on the afternoon of the 23rd, a pedestrian in Jersey City, New Jersey was struck on the head and killed instantly by a safety helmet falling from a scaffold erected around the 101 Hudson Street, there being, it was clearly proved in the subsequent lawsuit, no workman on the scaffold at that moment: and the pedestrian's papers identified him as "Heathcliffe Dagher".

Only one detail shall be added. At the sale of Dagher's possessions after his funeral, a copy of MR James' ghost stories, sold with all faults, was acquired via eBay by Mr Andy Walker. The story "Casting the Runes" was, as he expected, heavily underlined and annotated.