

GOTHIC BOURNES

**A NIGHT IN THE CATACOMBS
(1818)**

TRANSCRIPTION BY

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(pages 19-23)

A NIGHT IN THE CATACOMBS.¹

[19]

MR² EDITOR,

IF you consider the following pages as possessed of interest, I should be happy to see them inserted in your Miscellany. The story may not be so thrilling as some of those you have already given to the public, but I can answer for its truth; and I dare say if old Jerome, who used to shew the catacombs in Paris, be yet alive, he will recollect the handsome Englishman, with brown hair, and dark-blue eyes full of meaning, whom he released one morning from a night's imprisonment in those gloomy vaults. I shall only add, in behalf of my friend, whose letter I transcribe, that he is a person of the most unsullied honour and veracity; and that the fine powers of his mind, however warped and weakened by superstitious fears in his youth, have since completely recovered their proper tone and elasticity.

Your's, [sic] &c.

D. K. S.³

September 1818.

MY DEAR S——,

THERE is nothing more baneful than the influence which privileged nurses and other attendants upon young children exercise over their untutored imaginations, through the medium of superstitious dread. You know that there are few who have suffered more from such cruelty than myself; that for the prime years of my youth I was the victim of a distempered fancy, which I in vain attempted to chasten or correct; and that it was only by a most singular and unexpected accident, that I was freed from the reign of terror. But I believe you have never been made acquainted with the full detail of that accident; and I therefore send you this account of it, impressed with the deepest gratitude to the providence which turned to so much benefit in my own case, that which, considering the peculiar state and temper of my mind, might have caused insanity or death, and wishing it to become, if possible, as useful to others. Superstition is not indeed an epidemic of the present age; yet there may be individuals, who cast their eyes upon my tale, that will thank me for its lesson.

I never knew the fostering care of a father; and my mother, except by the boundless affection which I remember in my solitary tears, did not well supply his place. Inheriting a large domain in the wildest district of Wales, I was early taught to attach notions of dignity and importance to myself, and entertained a long train of more interesting

¹ Despite being the title of the text, the original publication adds a period at the end.

² The lack of full stop at the abbreviation of "mister" suggests the author may be British.

³ Initials of the author: Sir Daniel Keyte Sandford (1798-1838), Scottish scholar, politician and professor of Greek at the University of Glasgow; some further information about the author, available on the University of Glasgow website: <https://universitystory.gla.ac.uk/biography/?id=WH0244&type=P>. Real names tend to be avoided throughout the narration.

thoughts than usually occupy the breast of boyhood. From the indulgence of my guardians to an only son, I was never sent to school, and thus had no opportunity of acquiring the prompt and active spirit that is generated in a public seminary, or that hard yet brilliant polish of the world, that repels from its surface all assaults of sanguine and romantic feeling. My domestic tutor enriched my mind with an extensive [20] knowledge of the classics, and imbued it with the deepest admiration of their beauties; but he did not apply himself to correct the wild tissue of absurd and superstitions [sic] notions, which an accurate observer must have detected in my bosom, or the greedy taste for fiction, and nervous sensibility, of which I myself perceived and lamented the excess. Ever since I could walk, I had been under the superintendence of an old nurse attached to the family, whose memory, like that of most of her countrywomen, was well stored with legend and tradition, and who had secretly acquired an absolute authority over me. While I was a mere child, she used to frighten me into obedience, if refractory, by threats of supernatural interference, and sometimes by devices of so horrible and extraordinary a nature, that I can hardly now recollect them without a shudder. The earnestness and emphasis, moreover, with which she told me tales in which she more than half believed, gave her gradually an entire dominion over my fears and fancy, which she could rouse and regulate at will. Even after I had emerged from the nursery, it used to be my great delight to steal⁴ to her apartment in the evening, and sit listening for hours to her ghostly narratives, till my knees shook, and every nerve in my body trembled, in the agitation and over-excitement she produced. It was then almost too much for my courage to hurry through the long passage, lighted by a single central lamp, to the library in our gothic mansion; and there, when I entered breathless and with a beating heart, I used to find my mother alone, weeping over the correspondence of my poor father in silence, and yielding to the sorrow that finally bowed her to the grave. My sole amusement every night, while thus sitting in the room with her (for we saw no company at all), was in poring with a perpetually-increasing interest, over all that could most tend to nourish the deleterious⁵ passion of my soul. My mother was too much absorbed in her own recollections to pay much attention to my employments or my studies; and her own mind was too much weakened by affliction to have suggested any salutary restoratives for mine.

The agonies I felt at my beloved parent's death, and for many a wakeful night after she was committed to the tomb, are too sacred to my remembrance, to be even now unravelled. I shortly after came of age, and one of the first acts of my majority was a visit to Paris, during the short interval of war afforded by the peace of Amiens,⁶ in the hopes of alleviating my anguish. Here indeed I saw something of life; but I was too reserved to enter into intimacy with any of those to whose acquaintance my guardians introduced me. Proud, shy, and sensitive, I was fearful of their penetrating into the weaknesses of my character, which I felt were far from harmonizing with the general

⁴ To move somewhere quietly or surreptitiously.

⁵ Harmful.

⁶ The Treaty of Amiens (1802) meant a temporary cessation of hostilities between revolutionary France and the British Empire by the end of the Second Coalition War (1798-1802).

opinions of mankind; and I fancy they perceived something unfashionably cold and sombre about me, which mutually prevented our knowledge of each other. To the value of even your friendship, my dear S——, I was then insensible,—but you cannot say I have remained so.

In one of my lonely rambles about the wonderful and interesting capital I was now visiting, I joined a crowd of twenty or thirty persons, waiting at the outer door that leads to the upper entrance of the Catacombs.⁷ I had heard of these extraordinary vaults, but not having passed before the *Barrière d’Enfer*,⁸ I had not inspected them in person. Though I could not help conjecturing that a subterraneous cemetery, where the relics of ten centuries reposed, must be a sight too congenial⁹ with the morbid temper of my mind, I had no notion of the actual horrors of that mansion for the dead, or in my then distempered state of feeling, I should not have trusted my nerves with the spectacle to be expected. How will the curious tourist of the present day smile as he peruses this confession, if you give my story to the public!—but a few perhaps will understand and pity what *were* my follies. As it was, I provided myself, like the rest, with a waxen taper, and we waited with impatience for the appearance of the guide from below, with the party that had preceded us. It was about three o’clock of a sultry afternoon, and we were detained so long, that when the door opened at last, we all rushed in, and hurried old Jerome to the task of conducting us, without giving him time for the necessary precaution of counting our number. I was an utter stranger to [21] all present, and felt at first, as if I should have wished to view the sight, towards which we hurried our conductor, with him alone, or at least with fewer and less vociferous companions: but when we had descended many steps into the bowels of the earth, and the cold air from the dwellings of mortality smote my brow, I owned a sensible relief from the presence of the living around me, and was cheered by the sound of their various exclamations. Even with these accompaniments, however, it was with more than astonishment that I gazed upon the opening scene, and ever and anon,¹⁰ wrapped up in my thoughts, I anticipated with secret forebodings, the horrors I was doomed to undergo.

It would be superfluous to describe what has been described so often, yet none can have received, from a survey of the catacombs, such impressions as my mind was prepared to admit; and few can have retained so vivid and distinct a picture of their appearance, as has been branded on my soul in characters not to be effaced. Alas! I entered them with little of that fine exalting spirit so divinely eulogized by Virgil, in the motto that is inscribed upon their walls:

⁷ This is the only instance where “Catacombs” appear in upper case.

⁸ The *Barrière d’Enfer* (“Gate of Hell”), a couple of tollhouses which served as a gate to the city of Paris. The catacombs extend south from this point. More information (in French) available on Paris Promeneurs website: <https://paris-promeneurs.com/la-barriere-d-enfer/>

⁹ Suited to, agreeable to.

¹⁰ Every now and then.

“Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,
Atque metus omnes, et inexorabile fatum
Subjecit pedibus, strepitumque Acherontis avari!”¹¹

The interminable rows of bare and blackening skulls—the masses interposed of gaunt and rotting bones, that once gave strength and symmetry to the young, the beautiful, the brave, now mildewed by the damp of the cavern, and heaped together in indiscriminate arrangement—the faint mouldering and deathlike smell that pervaded these gloomy labyrinths, and the long recesses in the low-roofed rock, to which I dared not turn my eyes except by short and fitful glances, as if expecting something terrible and ghastly to start from the indistinctness of their distance,—all had associations for my thoughts very different from the solemn and edifying sentiments they must rouse in a well regulated breast, and, by degrees, I yielded up every faculty to the influence of an ill-defined and mysterious alarm. My eyesight waxed gradually dull to all but the fleshless skulls that were glaring in the yellow light of the tapers—the hum of human voices was stifled in my ears, and I thought myself alone, already with the dead. The guide thrust the light he carried into a huge skull that was lying separate in a niche; but I marked not the action or the man, but only the fearful glimmering of the transparent bone, which I thought a smile of triumphant malice from the presiding spectre of the place, while imagined accents whispered, in my hearing, “Welcome to our charnel-house, for THIS shall be your chamber!” Dizzy with indescribable emotions, I felt nothing but a painful sense of oppression from the presence of others, as if I could not breathe for the black shapes that were crowding near me; and turning unperceived, down a long and gloomy passage of the catacombs, I rushed as far as I could penetrate, to feed in solitude the growing appetite for horror, that had quelled for the moment, in my bosom, the sense of fear, and even the feeling of identity. To the rapid whirl of various sensations that had bewildered me ever since I left the light of day, a season of intense abstraction now succeeded. I held my burning eyeballs full upon the skulls in front, till they almost seemed to answer my fixed regard, and claim a dreadful fellowship with the being that beheld them. How long I stood motionless in this condition I know not—my taper was calculated to last a considerable time, and I was awakened from my trance by the scorching heat of it’s [sic] expiring in my hand. Still insensible of what I was about, I threw it to the ground; and gleaming once more, as if to shew the darkness and solitude to which I was consigned, it was speedily extinguished. But, by the strong impression on my brain, the whole scene remained distinct; and it was not for some time that my fit of abstraction passed away, and the horrific conviction came upon me, that I was left deserted, as I fancied in my first confusion, by faithless friends, and abandoned to the mercy of a thousand demons. All the ideal terrors I had cherished from my childhood, exalted to temporary madness by the sense and certainty of the horrid objects that surrounded me, rushed at once upon my soul; and in an agony of impatient consternation, I screamed and shouted, loud and long, for assistance. Not an answer

¹¹ Verses from the Latin poet Virgil’s *Georgics*. Translated excerpt: “Happy he who has been able to come to know the causes of things and has cast beneath his feet all fears and relentless fate and the roars of greedy Acheron,” a clear hint on the dominant philosophy of Enlightenment.

was returned, but the dreary echoes of this dreadful tomb. I saw that my cries [22] for succour were hopeless and in vain, and my voice failed me for very fear—my jaws were fixed and open, my palate dry—a cold sweat distilled from every pore, and my limbs were chill and powerless as death. Their vigour at length revived, and I rushed in a delirium through the passages, struggling through their various windings to retrace my path, and plunged at every step in more inextricable error, till, running with the speed of lightning along one of the longest corridors, I came with violence in full and loathsome contact with the skeleton relics at the end. The shock was like fire to my brain—I wept tears of rage and despair; and thrusting my fingers in the sockets of the empty skulls, to wrench them from the wall, I clutched their bony edges till the blood sprung from my lacerated hand. In short, I cannot paint to you the extravagancies I acted, or the wild alternation of my feelings that endured for many hours. Sometimes excited to phrenzy,¹² I imagined I know not what of horrid and appalling, and saw, with preternatural acuteness, through the darkness as clear as noon,—while grisly visages seemed glaring on me near, and a red and bloody haze enveloped the more fearful distance. Then, when reason was on the point of going, an interval of terrible collection would succeed. I felt in my very soul how I was left alone—perhaps not to be discovered, at any rate for what appeared to me an endless period, in which I should perhaps expire of terror, and I longed for deep deep sleep, or to be as cold and insensate as the things around me. I tried to recollect the courage, that only on one point had ever failed me, but judgment missed her stays, and the whispers of the subterraneous wind, or the stealthy noises I seemed to hear in concert with the audible beatings of my heart, overcame me irresistibly. Sometimes I thought I could feel silence palpable, like a soft mantle on my ear—I figured dreadful hands within a hair-breadth of my body, ready to tear me if I stirred, and in desperation flung myself upon the ground. Then would I creep close to the mouldering fragments at the bottom of the wall, and try to dig with my nails, from the hard rock, something to cover me. Oh! how I longed for a cloak to wrap and hide me, though it had been my mother’s winding-sheet, or a grave-flannel animate with worms. I buried my head in the skirts of my coat and prayed for slumber; but a fearful train of images forced me again to rise and stumble on, shivering in frame with unearthly cold, and yet internally fevered with a tumult of agonizing thoughts. Any one must have suffered somewhat in such a situation; but no one’s sufferings could resemble mine, unless he carried to the scene a mind so hideously prepared. Part of these awful excavations are said to have been once haunted by banditti; but I had no fears of them, and should have swooned with transport to have come upon their fires at one of the turnings in the rock, though my appearance had been the instant signal for their daggers.

In my wanderings I recovered for a moment the path taken by the guides, and found myself in a sort of cell within the rock, where particular specimens of mortality were preserved. My arm rested on the table, where two or three loosened skulls, and a thigh-bone of extravagant dimensions, were lying, and a new fit of madness seized me. My heart beat with redoubled violence, while I brandished the enormous bone, and hoarsely called for its original possessor to come in all the terrors of the grave, and there

¹² Frenzy.

would I wrestle with him for the relic of his own miserable carcase. I struck repeatedly, and hard, the hollow-sounding sides of the cell, shouting my defiance; then throwing myself with violence towards the opening, I missed my balance, and, snatching at the wall round the corner to save myself, I jammed my hand in an aperture among the bones, and fancied that the grisly adversary I invoked had grasped my arm in answer to my challenge. My shrieks of agony rang through the caverns, and, staggering [sic] back into the cell, I fell upon my face, hardly daring to respire, and expecting unimagined horrors or speedy dissolution.

How my feelings varied for a space of time, I know not; but sleep insensibly fell upon me. In my dream, I did not seem to change the scene, but still reclining in the cell, I fancied the skulls upon the wall the same in number, but magnified to a terrific size, with black jetty eyes imbedded in their naked sockets, and rivetted with malicious earnestness on me. A dim recess seemed opened beyond one side of the cell, and each spectral eye turning with a sidelong glance towards it, drew mine the same direction by an uncontrollable fascination. Still appearing to gaze determinedly upon them, I had power, as I dreamed, to obey their impulse simultaneously, and to perceive a dreadful figure, black, bony, and skull-headed, with similar terrific eyes, whom they seemed to hail as their minister of cruelty, while with slow and silent paces, it drew near to clasp me in its hideous arms. Closer and closer it advanced,—but, thanks and praise to the all-gracious Power that stills the tempests of the soul!—the limit of suffering was reached, and the force of terror was exhausted. My nerves, so long weak, and prone to agitation, were recovered by the over-violence of their momentum,—and, instead of losing reason in the shock, or waking in the extremity of fear,—the vision was suddenly changed,—the scenery of horror melted into light, and a calm and joyful serenity took possession of my bosom. My animal powers must have been nearly worn out, for long—long I slept in this delightful tranquillity,—and when I wakened, it was, for the first time of my life, in a peaceful and healthy state of mind, unfettered, and released for ever from all that had enfeebled and debased my nature. I had passed in that celestial sleep from death to life, from the dreams of weakness, and lapses of insanity, to the full use and animation of my faculties,—and I felt as if a cemented load had broken and crumbled off my soul, and left me fearless and serene. I was never happy,—I was never worthy the stile of Man till then; and, as I lay, I faltered¹³ out my thanks in ecstasy to Heaven, for all that had befallen me.

My limbs were numbed by the cold and damp of the floor on which I had been lying; but, rising from it, a new being in all that is essential to existence, I entered the passage, and walked briskly up and down, to recover the play and vigour of my frame. I found the thigh-bone on the ground where I had dropped it,—and no longer tortured by the fears that were gone for ever, replaced it quietly in its former situation. I kept near the entrance of the cell, that the first guide who descended might not miss me; and it could not be more than two hours, before Jerome, whose hair stood on end when he heard

¹³ Archaic for “to falter”.

where I had passed the night, came down with an early party of visitors, and freed me from my dungeon.—There was no straggling among the company for that day.

You well know, my dear friend, what have been my habits and employments since that night; and I could summon you with confidence, to give your testimony, that few persons are now less slaves of superstitious terror than myself. By a strange and singular anomaly of circumstances, the wild fancies I had imbibed in the free air of my native hills, and among the cheerful scenes of romantic nature, I unlearned in the dreary catacombs of Paris. If I still am fanciful, you will not charge me with extravagance; if I still have sensibility, I trust it does not verge on weakness;—and, as I have proved my personal courage on more than a single trial, I may be allowed to smile, when I hear in future some boisterous relater of my narrative condemn me for a coward. E.—

Place R——, Sept. 1818