

SEEKING MR HARE

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For Louis Andrew Leitch

Born 31 August 2011

By the way, gentlemen, has anyone heard lately of Hare? I understand he is comfortably settled in Ireland, considerably to the west, and does a little business now and then, but only as a retailer, nothing like the fine thriving wholesale business so carelessly blown up in Edinburgh.

On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts,

Thomas De Quincey

Calton Jail, Edinburgh ❧ October 1828

John Fisher, the head jailer and best of a rotten lot for his colleagues would dearly love to do me in and save the hangman a job, says there's a gentleman who needs to take a likeness of me, one of the other turnkeys having brought a broadside in with a picture of Willie Burke on it and didn't they get him to the life, the neat, dapper little figure of him like somebody you'd willingly marry your daughter off to instead of Beelzebub's nephew. Not that I claim any such dispensation in that department myself, him with the cut of a lay preacher in his frock coat and cravat and me a slovenly-looking black-guard by comparison, but still and all the pair of us ran neck and neck, shoulder to shoulder, ending up in here together facing the consequence of our misdeeds.

And so this other turnkey, who hates the Irish as much as the rest of them do, knowing I've not been blessed with the benefit of schooling like my partner lodged in the other part of Calton Jail, says he'd be happy to read the piece out to me, and so off he goes: *'Come all ye resurrection men, I pray you beware, you see what has happened Willie Burke, and likewise William Hare,'* and it's odd listening to our history sold in the street to people who never heard tell of us a month previous and now are of the opinion they're privy to all concerning us, except we never did dig any bodies up, a malicious story put about by certain folk for their own ends and lying satisfaction.

It being the first I've set foot outside my cage for near on a month, led along the corridor a barrage of insults and spittle

comes my way, one of my abusers withdrawing to his dark hole sucking his knuckles, for Fisher carries an ebony club and is not backward about using it. But finally I'm brought to a large chamber with raised seats all around, a reek of something chemical in the air making me think this might well be the very place they dissect the bodies, even those the pair of us delivered up to Dr Knox and his young jackals hungry for fresh entrails to dabble in, and sure wouldn't it be the grand jest entirely if yours truly ended up on a slab himself like the one in the middle of the room.

Motioning me to sit on a chair alongside it, Fisher stands nearby until some gentlemen start taking their places on the high benches all around as if at a show, and me the object of their entertainment, this Irish savage shackled and in his shirt, same garment sticking to his back for want of a change or a wash like its owner since getting lifted by the Watch in the early part of October.

And so there I remain until an elderly, foreign-looking gent in a long doctor's coat makes his appearance along with another man, only younger, with the look of a lackey about him, bearing a basin of white stuff, and without a word of by your leave doesn't this same fellow start rolling back the neck of my shirt as though intent on barber's work, but instead of which he starts rubbing some manner of oily substance on my head and into my scalp.

Now how such a procedure might prepare one for a drawn likeness is a mystery to me, but I endure it nonetheless, for lying on damp straw with an empty belly hardens a man's resolve to escape the noose by fair means or foul and if that entails playing the model prisoner, fair enough, for this Irish neck is still precious even if some youth is anointing it with oil from a vial without excuse or explanation, until finally our young friend finishes his business with me, his superior motioning him to stand aside, then addressing those up in the gallery.

‘Gentlemen,’ says he in a strange sort of an accent, ‘we are ready now to apply the first layer of plaster of Paris, and you should be aware a life mask demands more skill and expertise than one taken after the subject’s demise, as working with the living, breathing flesh requires a fine and delicate touch so as to cause as little discomfort to the sitter as possible.’

Well, on hearing this, Fisher went pale, as if the intended ‘subject’ was himself and not his prisoner, noticeably so, for normally he has a high colour due to a fondness for the whiskey, which I smelt on his breath when he came to fetch me, setting off a craving for a dram myself, not having enjoyed a taste or even a sniff of the *cratur*, since getting lifted from my house in Tanner’s Close in the early hours, Burke as well, I’d wager, having heard reports of him taking near half a pint of laudanum on account of him getting neither his rest nor sleep at night.

But then the nightmares always were a torment for Willie, his woman, Helen MacDougal, complaining of it, as in the grip of whatever was afflicting him he would sometimes near throttle her before regaining his senses with her lying alongside him in the bed. And many’s the time, too, haven’t I heard him cry out in the next room, convinced it must be the murders preying on his mind, which still may be the case even if he has no longer cause or opportunity to suffocate and strangle others.

Having been made to lie flat on my back on the table, a pair of quills inserted in both nostrils to allow me to breathe after the plaster is lathered on my face, the Professor, as now I will name him, explains the next stage in the procedure, a thread to be laid across the forehead, bridge of the nose, mouth and chin, before a second layer of the stuff is put in place so as to make the final separation easier.

Lying there at his mercy, yet determined to display no sign of weakness, I concentrated on the twin channels of my breathing while the stuff dried and tightened like a second

skin before a fresh coat was buttered on, but pulpy this time, more like mortar, and then all those present adjourned, for I could hear them leave, until it seemed I was the only one left in that place, mummified from the Adam's apple up, when to my surprise Fisher's voice sounded nearby.

'Never in all my born days have I seen the like of what these people have done to you. Like a graven image you are, although the mould, they say, will come off in one piece, your friend Mr Burke having one rendered as well.'

Which turned out to be the case, but only after the rope had been cut from off his neck, and before Knox opened up the rest of him for public display.

After that I heard nothing further and so it came to me, the jailer must have left like the rest of them. But if my vision was impaired my smell was not, for detecting a blast of liquor breath, I heard him sigh, 'Willie, Willie, it's still not too late, you know,' thinking he meant for me to rise up like Lazarus and tear the mask away.

But then the notion of repentance coming from Fisher was a surprise, him with the drink and all, although many's the time I've seen others in the Lawnmarket just like him condemning the 'devil's buttermilk' whilst barely able to stand upright.

'No one, no matter how awful their sins might be, should face their Maker without first purging the purple stain of transgression. Already your own friend has bared his soul to certain gentlemen of the cloth, although being a Roman like yourself his first call was to the Reverend Father Reid.'

Aye, and someone who'd come sniffing around me as well like a dog smelling a bone to suck and slaver over. But didn't I give him the short shrift with a thank ye kindly, monsignor, but not today, nor any other day behind your little lattice screen, except we were in the cell at the time, him with his fine lawn handkerchief pressed to his nose, regretting, no doubt, the absence of incense to cloak the stink of piss and sweat and other foul stuff, and sure I haven't seen hide nor hair of him

since, giving me up as a bad job, unlike Willie down on his knees fingering his rosary beads every chance he got.

But Fisher was not the one to be put off, babbling on about everlasting mercy and heavenly forgiveness when, if I'd had the power of reply, I might have told him time enough for that after I had got out of having my neck stretched. Still, like all the rest of them with their broadsides and ballads, let him go on believing what he wants to believe, and those other fine judicial gentry, too, for I've had my fill of *them* these past weeks, picking over our comings and goings like crows on a dunghill.

And so then this other flock of scientific scavengers filed back in again, the Professor directing his young helper to test the plaster, when I could have told him, that's if I was able to, it was near as hot and hard as the hobs of hell itself with a raging itch beneath, which maybe was the desired intention, putting me through this form of correction.

Lying there, I felt the thread drawn clear, followed by the outer mask coming off, then, 'Observe, gentlemen, the negative mould from which an accurate positive can now be made!', a sigh going up as if those present had witnessed some kind of a miracle.

Still all that concerned me was how long it might be before I could open my eyes and mouth and have the straws taken from my nose, also if I'd be afforded the opportunity of seeing my own likeness when complete, for not too many men are given the privilege of having their features faithfully rendered in plaster in company with the likes of Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte, even the great Sir Walter Scott, who, I'm given to understand, attended some of our trial days in person himself.

Suddenly, I felt someone take a tight grip on my skull followed by a sharp tug, then a dry cracking sound like the breaking of the shell of an egg, and finally I was free of my restraints. The straws were plucked clear, a wetted cloth

passed across my face, my eyes and mouth wiped clean, and I could see once more, with the Professor holding up his handiwork, and even though the thing itself was rougher than expected I half-recognised myself, eyes closed as though in a deep sleep.

‘This, gentlemen, concludes our demonstration. The mould you see before you will now be taken to my studio to be finished and replicas made for those desiring to make private use of them.’

And, bowing low before an outburst of clapping, the little man in his white coat took his leave, followed by his young assistant bearing the plaster head. *My* head, I kept reminding myself, not entirely enamoured of the notion, let it be said, though others might relish being preserved for posterity in that fashion, even someone with a reputation as bad as my own. But then I had neither desire nor appetite for any further notoriety, vowing if fortune smiled on me I would vanish from the public gaze as if the earth had swallowed me whole.

In the meantime I decided to present a more agreeable face to my jailer, even if it meant swallowing some of his religiosity. So, meek and mild, I climbed down from the table to be escorted back to my underground hole where raging and throwing yourself against stone walls and iron bars was for the likes of those others I could hear crying out in the small hours without a plan or purpose, or the likelihood of another drink.

Returning to the lock-up, no angry outcry greeted my appearance, Fisher’s truncheon having something to do with it. Yet I still could smell resentment seep from each cell, as if I’d received some form of preferential treatment instead of a sound beating while away, some white stuff on my hair and cheeks only adding to the mystery and a desire to find out more, for ‘Hare, Hare, what did they do to you?’ one of them called out after I was locked up, ‘Did you get a dram at all?’ as he was on a charge of public drunkenness and so his thoughts ran on no other topic.

Fisher had left me a small pocket testament, telling me it would provide comfort from its mere touch and presence, and putting on a show of gratitude I took it from him and off he went content he'd opened heaven's door a crack, letting yet another poor sinner creep through. And from that moment on I kept it on display, for he couldn't stay away, peering in at me with his wee leather-bound book in my hand every chance he got. The sight seemed to gratify him and every so often he would slip the odd morsel through the bars, a heel of bread, a bit of cold mutton one time, even though it was forbidden by those in authority, who preferred seeing me gaunt and drawn in the dock when ordered to appear there.

Strangely enough, after a time I grew attached to that little book, it being the sole article remaining in my possession, having been stripped of everything save the clothes I stood up in, or, more truthfully, lay down in. Opening it, I would sniff its pages even though they had no proper odour, running a finger along the edges, blood-red in hue, becoming darker when pressed together. The cover was of some stiff stuff like buckram, the title imprinted in gilt, or maybe gold. *Holy Bible*, I think it said, for even if the art of reading had escaped me I could still make out the odd word, and it came to me if I'd had the benefit of schooling like Burke I might have passed the time rightly, delving into some of those Old Testament tales I used to hear back home in Killeen chapel.

The turnkey who read out my ballad that time brought in another piece of writing, from the *Evening Courant* on this occasion, labelling me 'a rude ruffian, drunken, ferocious and profligate', and I don't know what was expected of me, outrage at being slandered, maybe, even though most of the words were accurate save the word 'profligate', which evaded me.

When he was gone, taking his newspaper with him, I repeated the words over and over, wondering what they might look like on the page, for being able to read them for myself