

A Languid Elagabalus Of The Tombs

Rhys Hughes



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Stories from a Lost Anthology

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A Languid Elagabalus Of The
Tombs © Rhys Hughes

Illustration, “I’ll have another of those,
Miss Borgia” © Sherriffs

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I am still a priest. Before that I was a teacher. Basic mathematics was my field. Shortly after I qualified, I was dispatched inland to instruct the children of a remote village in the Welsh mountains. The task was an impossibility from the start. My pupils were frightful individuals, pale and stunted and often drooling, as if direct descent from the aboriginal inhabitants of these wilds had compromised both health and reason. Later I learned that the waves of historical invaders, be they Celts or Saxons or Normans, hadn't penetrated this far, owing to the complete absence of profit to be made from tilling the thin soil, fishing the narrow streams or hunting the impenetrable forests. Which left me with a query: why had the original settlers not moved on?

Obviously it was because they were incapable of doing so. Migration over difficult terrain is a procedure best performed in daylight and the ancestors of my charges had seemingly grown afraid of the sun, insisting on conducting their business after dusk. This photophobia was hereditary, but whether an unforeseen consequence of inbreeding or evidence for more sinister violations remains to be determined to my satisfaction. However I am inclined to accept the latter theory, particularly with regard to a quirk of methodology demonstrated by my students, who were happy to multiply, divide and subtract numbers from a limitless range of integers and fractions, but who declined to perform addition. Despite my threats, they would not write the plus sign.

The problem was its shape, of course. It hardly takes a logician to deduce that the cruciform pattern was anathema to these junior

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vampires. Incidentally, this is a cheap way of filtering the monsters out prior to puberty. I submitted my suggestion to the government, but the response I received was dismissive. I maintain it to be a useful rule that children who can't do elementary sums belong to that class of bipedal leeches and undead parasites which infest our rural schools. I can't say whether the situation in the cities is comparable, for I never taught in those. Less than one year after embracing the profession, I resigned from it, having barely escaped with my soul intact. Nor shall I ever return to the Welsh hills. I remain in flatter regions.

Indeed, the lowlands of the west offered me a gift which I accepted without gratitude: my slightly archaic use of language. It's normal down here. Safer they may be, but these towns and villages still dawdle after the present century. I won't claim the locals are primitive. More than a few understand the principles of the internal combustion engine and some are even able to fix their own tractors. It's a different sort of primal sludge. A culture lagging behind the world instead of diverging from it, which is why there is less mental space for manifestations of paranormal evil. These territories will catch up eventually, unlike the communities of the slopes, which are scarcely human. And in terms of creepy ambience, level vistas are refreshingly dull.

There are pagan altars in the woods, of course, and bridges owned by the devil, but it isn't necessary to greet strangers at these places with hasty steps in the opposite direction. The stone and wood integral to erecting such monuments doesn't harbour evil creatures, at least none so unsubtle as bloodsucking mutants, and no localised aura of menace has yet reduced me to bouts of shrieking. Then I enrolled in Lampeter University. The choice of study was limited to theology. Since 1822, when it was founded by the Bishop of St David's, the college has sucked up thousands of fearful men and disgorged them as priests. The main portals are grand enough symbols for the lips of this process, and suitably moist with the perpetual rain which sweeps in from the Irish Sea.

It was there I first heard of Horace Gripp.

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Our tutor of metaphysics gave his standard speech of welcome to the freshmen and watched out for those who listened with signs of agitation. There were seven with twitching eyelids and he gestured for us to remain behind after the oration. Dr Mock was a keen judge of character, for the impatience we had shown was that of eagerness to learn rather than haste to be free of the lesson. The position he held was hereditary and fables concerning student mishaps had been passed down from his predecessors on a paternal knee in front of a hearth. Thus they had etched themselves on his consciousness more deeply than would a more formal telling. His tone was relaxed and avuncular, but there was unease in the way he folded his arms and leaned forward. He hissed:

“The university is a dangerous place for an undergraduate, and many avoidable tragedies have stained the cobbles of our cloisters, the tiles of the corridors and the varnished boards of your rooms. There have been examples of drunkenness, opium, barratry, insolence, neurosis, cynicism, socialism, theft, dancing, murder, even girls. But such disasters aren’t the ones to fret about, for we have long experience in dealing with them and there are recognised procedures for their expiation. They are mostly products of laziness and geolatory, the unconscious worship of this world and its rudimentary pleasures. Far worse are sins of perverted wisdom. I won’t worry about the other students. Because they betrayed boredom or confusion during the lecture, they are safe.”

He rocked on his heels and looked ancient as he added: “But in your case I sense potential trouble of a kind which no mortal law can punish. You are keen, almost desperate, to become metaphysicians. Yet this isn’t necessarily a pure ambition. There are pitfalls beyond your imagination. Permit me to illustrate my meaning, which is also a warning, by relating the awful history of Horace Gripp.”

Which he did, in the following manner:

He had been a student here several generations earlier, returning with a conscience from the shortest official war ever. That conflict, forgotten almost as utterly then as today, took place in Zanzibar, when

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the ruling Sultan resolved to defy the mighty British Empire by neglecting to renounce his throne on the request of a Royal Naval squadron. This difference of view on the proper sovereignty of the island escalated into military conflict at 9:00 a.m. on 27th August, 1896. The Sultan, Seyyid Khalid bin Bargash by name, held out until 9:45, same morning. The artillery bombardment by itself was enough to secure a surrender. A dozen buildings were flattened, including a warehouse full of cloves. Smashed to powder, this spice blew in clouds above the bay.

Horace was a sailor on one of the gunboats.

It wasn't the actual battle which affected him so strongly, but the reaction of one of his shipmates, Billy, who inhaled too deeply as he leaned on the rails to observe the rout with a spyglass. His nostrils were plugged with the pungent dust and then cleared themselves with a violent sneeze. The explanation for his subsequent behaviour was that this explosion had damaged his brain, for during the victory celebrations he began acting in a manner unbecoming to a British serviceman. He bewailed imperialism and the exploitation of natives. Horace helped him to his bed and was astonished when the fellow requested a box of snuff. He shrugged away the plea with reference to the importance of nasal health and turned to leave. Then he heard a second sneeze, much louder than the first.

The madman had stuffed his nose with gunpowder and passed a lighted match underneath. The mess was excessive. The absurdity of this tragedy, its lack of sufficient reason, disturbed Horace more than he dared admit to his superior officers. But the moment he was discharged from duty, he made his way to Lampeter and began his religious studies. If he hoped to earn peace of mind in these hallowed halls he was quickly disillusioned. His retreat from horror resulted in misleading him further down the path of ultimate darkness into diabolism. I'll briefly describe how. For ultimate competence in theology, a novice must become closely acquainted not only with official texts of divinity, but also with works opposed to them. One must know the enemy.

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In the highest turret of the college building, a secret library was ready to receive its newest patrons. Shelves cut from the trunks of holy yews reluctantly held rows of heavy books, many of them bound in leather cured not from the skins of mammals but from toads or worms. Only a very few were printed, and even fewer composed in recognisable languages. Many wore huge iron locks whose keys could only be obtained from the tutor of metaphysics, an ancestor of Dr Mock, who rarely obliged. He was Horace's guide on this tour. But as he showed his new pupils a few of the tamer volumes, a strong enough dose until they had become hardened to noxious influences, he erred in stressing too strongly the importance of infernal learning in helping to define its godly opposite.

Demonic theory, he stated, shaded the area around good as neatly as a pious hymnal coloured its matter, and thus in the close perusal of an abominable grimoire or goetic codex one might come to a superlative idea of the actual shape of the Almighty. And the staff of Lampeter were bold realists who knew that this negative way of appreciating the Deity was a more interesting one than learning hymns. But it had to be controlled. A student might be tempted outside the shape, into the horrible void. Only the most devout would be allowed to explore beyond the mild shelves. Not even he, the tutor, had ventured to the back, where the worst tomes were able to employ their own pages as tongues and beckon readers by name, if they knew them, like vellum whores.

Parched parchments, eager to drink his mind! That's what Horace now thought, and he resolved to return to the library at night, for he hoped to make rapid progress toward sainthood, to lull the memory of the nasal death, both barrels of which still blasted his dreams, to eternal sleep, and he knew he wouldn't get it by the conventional route. Virtue was too boring a discipline to hold his whole attention. It would take him years to apprehend the godhead that way. He wanted peace from the Zanzibar War now. His obsession with it would eat his brain before he graduated if he didn't find a swifter path out. He still had some gunpowder, stolen from his ship, as if playing with it, feeling the grains, would enable him to finally fathom Billy's idiotic suicide.

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It didn't by itself, of course, but he realised it might indirectly serve that purpose, and he conveyed it to the library after midnight. He declined to break down the door, for that ingress would be discovered, and he dare not risk expulsion. Instead, he ascended the spiral stairway inside the relevant tower as far as the highest window and climbed through it onto the ivy which choked the turret. This wasn't as dangerous as it may sound, for the exterior stonework was eroded from decades of ceaseless drizzle and offered plenty of footholds. Horace was able to scale up to the summit of the tower and attempted to enter through one of the library chimneys. The fit was tight but possible, and the student lowered himself down a sooty shaft.

He crawled out of a chill hearth, disused for a century, with ashes not of wood or coal sticking to both elbows. Whatever was burned in this chamber before it became a library wasn't fuel. It was probably the evidence of a forgotten, mysterious crime. It hardly mattered. He had emerged at the back of the room and found himself abruptly among the most abhorred missals, like a diver who leaps over a continental shelf into the watery abyss with weights on his boots instead of encasing himself in a bathysphere and familiarising himself with the depths a fathom at a time. And this simile is pertinent in more ways than one, for every shelf requires a certain volume unknown to booklists, like the hold of a shipwreck with anachronistic cargo, or a tale which seemingly writes itself.

There was no moral diving bell for Horace. Anomalies can happen. An ancient galley with a store of mechanical calculators had been discovered, and here appeared a book of blank pages which filled up as he blinked. It was the first tome he had picked, the only one to guess his name correctly. With a pinch of gunpowder and a match he opened the lock. The detonation was louder than anticipated in the cramped library, and audible in the quadrangle below, where the fastidious porter strolled the dark cobbles, listening for the giggles of smuggled girls. But he later attributed the minor blast to an unsecured door slamming in the wind and so did nothing. Horace was quite free to continue reading his soul away, which he promptly did, until dawn pulled him out and down to lessons.

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He slept through a lecture on the proofs of God's existence. His dreams were reviews of his damnable study.

At the end of class he woke full of insight.

But it was foul erudition, too compelling to regard just as shading around the profile of virtue, charity and love. His attention was fixed, as the tutor of metaphysics had warned, outside the circumference, in an infinite realm of darker sagacity. He returned to the library that night with a flask of brandy to steady his trembling hands and gloves to catch the volume as it hurled itself off the shelf in its eagerness to corrupt him. He knew it only as the bad book, for it had no proper title, a grim contrast to the more quoted manuals of hellish bent, which delude misers and impotent lovers with elaborate names, often terming themselves keys or touchstones or open doors, generally pretending to be the works of magicians from Hebrew and Egyptian mythology.

The bad book was thoughtful, for when he read by starlight it wrote its letters large, a word to a page. But when he remembered to bring a candle on his subsequent visits, it reduced the girth of its fonts. Even when the porter noted this pallid flame moving across the highest oriel, he made no effort to investigate or raise the alarm, deciding that it must be the body of a trapped firefly magnified by the glass. Plainly he didn't care to enter the library, preferring to collect his pay for tackling natural violations, and those chiefly in the shape of intruding females, whom he enjoyed restraining with his bare hands, rather than adopting a positive stance against ineffable evil. I won't censure him for that, and nor did Horace, who was unaware of the spy.

In time, it occurred to our student that if he simply took the book back to his own rooms and concealed it under his mattress he might study it without these acrobatics. Because nobody ever ventured to the rear of the library, its disappearance couldn't be noticed, and provided none of the neighbours, who occasionally called on him to borrow soap or etchings of nudes, both of which he kept to disguise his real desires, caught him in mid-sentence, he should have no trouble with the authorities. Even if they did, soon he would possess the power to dislocate their pious bones for the best part of eternity, without mentioning the lyres to be strung with their spinal cords. Not that he

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cared to lumber, or lumbar, himself with too many backfalls in his melodies, aching appoggiaturas and stuff.

Now Horace gave up climbing and became more malign as the days flew past on wings of paper stretched over a vastly extended third finger, an insult and a bat's anatomy in parallel. See how my mouth has been ruined by eldritch, necromantic, crepuscular, thaumaturgical experiences? I try to speak simply, but the elaborate metaphors won't let me. Don't listen. But, sick, here's the rest: he learned, after finally reaching the exact midpoint of the mighty tome, using the lashes which fell off his eyelids as markers, for already he was suffering from some scorbutic ailment, an absence of vitamins in his diet, which itself was minimal or nonexistent compared with the recommended daily calorific intake for scholars of his size and weight, because he preferred to skip meals and devote more time for study, he learned, I repeat, how to communicate with the dead, in an unconventional and ghostly fashion.

There was nothing psychic about the process, no trances, ectoplasm, ouija boards or assistants hidden in cupboards. It was a straightforward case of meddling with bodies, sawing them up, selecting parts, stitching them together into an abominable composite cadaver, and reanimating this nightmare by tugging the chosen spirit out of the aether and forcing its wispy limbs into the decaying trousers and sleeves of its wormy arms and legs. The problem is that most ghosts fit their own bodies perfectly. It is rare that an alternative suits them, unless it's a twin. Horace had a scorching need to understand why his shipmate had detonated his own nose. No amount of philosophy would provide a solution. He had to get it explicitly from the corpse's mouth.

And to do this, he had to recreate the physical form of the fellow. His memory for dimensions was good and he felt confident he really would be able to fashion a fleshy model capable of entrapping the spectre without having it flapping around inside or constraining its misty molecules too tightly and compressing it to a strange fluid, a particularly unpleasant and unhelpful possibility. No, he was a skilled butcher. Lampeter has no big cemeteries, but the villages in the

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vicinity, some of them abandoned centuries ago, have their share. He wandered and violated them at night. The base physical nature of this work combined with chronic malnutrition turned him paler and more dissolute in appearance than before. Together frailty and horror shaped his face.

He became a languid Elagabalus of the tombs.

That's the best way of describing him, and it didn't fully slip the attention of his tutors and colleagues that he was up to something relevant to this phrase, but they couldn't say exactly what. Only Mr Mock guessed the nature of his folly, but he had no hard proof to justify an official expulsion, for the library seemed to be untouched and his surprise raids on Horace's rooms failed to net any grimoires. Indeed, his suspicions in this respect were severely curtailed by the discovery of the volume that was hidden under the mattress. Nudes on every page, innocent if truth be told, and Mr Mock himself was fatally attracted to the pretty nun, who retained only her wimple, on page 69. So he was powerless to do anything other than await gory developments.

Which didn't take too long. For the whole of a midsummer night, too humid for sleep, too bright to smuggle girls, with a buttery elephantine moon scraping the gables of Lampeter's houses, and other more aggressive roofs jabbing their neighbours in the eyes, the highest windows in other words, on such a night, while the students chewed their pillows, strange noises emanated from the locked rooms of Horace Gripp. The men who tried to force the door, Dr Mock among them, were repelled by the curious echo of their fists and feet on the oak doors, as if the rhythmic thunder was bouncing off not the hard angular student but being absorbed by a much softer form, partly fluid perhaps. Before they splintered the wood, a terrible voice suddenly screamed:

“Enter this corpse, curse you! Enter it now, Billy Broom, you salty buffoon! I must know the secret of your despair! What is it? Hurry into this cadaver, sluggard! Check it out now, towheaded brother! A languid Elagabalus of the tombs, they call me; but you are an inept Baudelaire of nasal experimentation! Come to me quick or else! Wait

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there! Not you! I don't want you inside my work! Fly back to the Pit! Leave me alone, you melodramatic example! Slither away, you grotesque something! Harken to my overdone exclamations of utter but unfashionable panic. Aiyeee!"

Then there was a deafening roar and the door blew off its hinges. A powerful blast had been directed outward from the source of the shrieks. Dr Mock was the first to recover his senses. He stood and warily entered the smoking room. Now he realised that Horace's reluctance to touch food in the college canteen had been an elaborate pose, probably for the sake of making him appear mysterious, for he had plainly been secretly dining on smuggled meat. The walls and ceiling were spattered with bacon, hunks of beef and green hams, projected thither by the energy of the student's suicide. Gunpowder was later found in the chamber and a book beneath his mattress which was a personal journal, with entries charting his mental decline and subsequent decision to end it all. Oddly enough, this volume resembled the book of nudes, which had vanished. The warty covers and milky parchment were identical.

Dr Mock began reading the journal. Standard depressed stuff, hardly anything supernatural about it, the sort of text any student might write when pressures and frustrations become too great. Frankly it was boring. Reading between the lines of pathetic verse and the rhetorical questions about the purpose of the universe, the favoured fake worry of youth, the true meaning roared as loudly as the detonation: *I need a girlfriend!* It was an easy case for the authorities to deal with. Horace Gripp had done away with himself in a fit of lunacy occasioned by involuntary celibacy. That's always a peril when hoping to graduate in theology. But snorting gunpowder and igniting it wasn't as symbolic an act as it appeared. More likely, it was the only instant suicidal technique he knew, which explains why he used it.

The cleaners weren't pleased to be roused from their beds to scrape the victim from the walls. Shreds of flesh and splinters of bone tend to stick in the baroque flourishes of elaborate wood-panelling. But the job was finished before dawn, and Horace was shovelled up, bagged and hauled down to the university crypt. Because of his mortal

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sin he had to be interred in the unconsecrated sector, where the buckets and stepladders were stored, for suicide is an abuse of the Creator. But they treated him kindly enough, considering the condition he was in. The oddest thing about this affair was the fact his remains weighed twice his living self. Also, no powder burns were noted on any of the individual cubes which had once belonged to his face. Nor was a charred match found at the scene. But it had to be gunpowder. The clouds of sulphur which tumbled out of the room when Dr Mock forced entry, choking the nervous mass of tutors, precluded any other alternative, didn't they?

“What do you think of that then?”

The seven of us exchanged glances and pursed our lips. I decided Dr Mock was a man of icy will, for he hadn't spilled a drop of sweat during the recounting of his anecdote. It was clear the story contained a profound moral message, one we were now expected to meditate on. I had managed to do this as it was being told, and was ready for debate, so the advantage was mine. Not that I pressed it. I kept silent and waited for the others to assert their opinions.

“It's a parable about temptation,” they said.

Dr Mock clapped his hands in glee. “Absolutely right! When the college was founded it was deemed necessary to warn freshmen about the risks which accompany scholarship. Only students who seem thirstier than most for knowledge are given this special lecture, for as you progress in theology you'll have to grapple with notions which can raise doubts in even the purest minds. As well as learning proofs of God's existence, you'll have to learn their refutations, in order to understand that faith is more important to priests than logic. But it's possible for keen intellects to be corrupted very rapidly by ideas which reject those of our calling. Most students are protected by disinterest, but with you it was essential to take precautions.”

“We won't be seduced now,” they answered.

“Good! Then my story has had the desired effect. Stay away from the love of strange knowledge for its own sake. Keep always the true

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purpose of your studies before you. Don't become like Horace Gripp. Don't become languid Elagabalii of the tombs!"

"We are dissuaded from that predicament."

Class dismissed, they departed, blinking at the tutor, tugging each other's chins. But I didn't follow them. Dr Mock pretended not to notice me until they were out of earshot.

"May I be of help, Mr Delves?"

I smiled. "Your tale wasn't about temptation, as my colleagues have declared. It was about namelessness."

He was impressed. "I beg your pardon?"

"Yes, sir, the state of not having a label. I know what you hoped to achieve with your anecdote, but my peers failed your trust. I alone passed your secret test. I am prepared to receive further instruction in how the perversions of the dark arts may be confronted and dispelled. My gratitude toward you is practically boundless, for I now understand that nameless horrors are always the worst."

He removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes. "Mr Delves! What I have just related to you was a fiction. None of it really occurred. It was a fable to illustrate a simple point. Be wary of learning. Not all knowledge is good. That's all I meant. No such person as Horace Gripp ever lived."

"Ha! Ha! A superb joke, sir! Will you give me a tour of the library in the tower? I am mentally ready."

"There isn't one. It was just a background detail to make the piece more traditionally creepy. There isn't even a tower. Stand by the window and look for yourself. You don't really believe we would keep a stock of unholy grimoires here in Lampeter?"

I smirked. "I understand your discretion."

"Do you? In that case, I suggest you search the college at your own leisure. If you do chance on a concealed library containing copies of keys, touchstones or open doors, I'll be pleased to hear from you. I'll even bestow a reward!"

"That confirms my belief that magical books with titles are of less spiritual danger to a novice. I won't bother to look for those. I'm more intrigued by the blank volumes which write themselves and can vary

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their contents to evade suspicion. Like Horace, I'm fleeing a set of dejecting experiences which require sublimation by the metaphysics of theism, but my spirit is tougher than his."

"Mr Delves, be calm! I don't predict a need to tax yourself in this regard during your stay in our institute. There's a simpler reason why those books remained nameless in my speech. My time is limited and creation of enough minor detail to reassure extreme pedants is currently beyond the requirements of the syllabus."

I rushed forward and gripped his shoulders. "Your time is limited? How has this happened? Is something after you? Have you also fallen prey to the rotten influence of those innominate tomes? Can it be that you too secrete under your mattress works bound in warty hides with pages which croon like catamites?"

"Heavens no! Such titles don't exist!"

"So you admit they don't have titles! Thus they are nameless, are they not? Is the test still running?"

Dr Mock began to weep. I wondered why he was toying with me in this fashion. Perhaps it was part of my ordination into that secret society of enlightened academics which I now felt sure existed here. He had dropped enough hints to persuade me of this but he clearly wasn't yet satisfied with my suitability, for he wiped his cheeks and sighed with a caution disguised as weariness:

"No titles? That's because I can't be bothered to invent any! They are irrelevant to the plot."

"Ah yes, the actual message of your anecdote, which is one mystery, serves to distract the listener from the fact that the narrative itself has an inconclusive ending. Another enigma! I mean, what exactly did happen to Horace in his chamber on that fateful night? It wasn't suicide or accident, but the occult option hasn't been developed properly. It remains nebulous, the visual equivalent of nameless. I begin to realise what's expected of me. The terror in the 'plot' of your warning resides in its dynamic haziness, its lack of exactitude. When an explanation is found, the fear will mostly evaporate. Definition is the foe of horror! Definition by name or explication!"

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Dr Mock smote his forehead with his fist, but I thought I discerned his eyes glittering with pride when he blinked them in the recovery from concussion. I was on the right track, no doubt about that, but there was a long way to go before this sport was finished, or even acknowledged as a game by the umpire, who bellowed:

“No, no, Mr Delves! Any inconsistencies in my fable are due to the incompetence or haste of its author. There aren’t meant to be solutions to Horace’s demise. I don’t know what ‘really’ happened to him, nor do I care, and neither should you. It was just a fairytale. It worked for your colleagues, but plainly you are more awkward.”

I waited for him to soften his tone. He added with a sigh: “Maybe that’s not such an undesirable trait. A priest has a responsible rôle in modern society. He’s the final defender against the general notion that all knowledge, whatever its moral basis, is worthwhile. We are eager to oppose this trend, to preserve some of the veils on the body of nature that others wish to rip away. We hope to leave her with not too many, not too few, but just enough to lend dignified movement to her laws, a balance crucial to our position between animal and angel.”

I clicked my heels and saluted him. “I appreciate your inclination to speak in riddles. It’s for the best. I intend to prove myself worthy of joining your secret society in the minimum time. Tonight I shall work on a formula for Horace’s extinction.”

“Please don’t, Mr Delves!”

I touched his arm. “Don’t fret. I won’t become a languid Elagabalus of the tombs, or a languid anything of anywhere, for that matter. I once taught arithmetic to vampires. That’s the shocking experience I wish to purge from my soul, as the suicide of his shipmate was to Horace, but little bats who flap around the classroom with exposed fangs, instead of simply throwing paper darts, annihilate any last vestiges of languidness in the crucible of the evasive scurry!”

“Lord! I have a lunatic for a student!”

“Who is it? Do you want me to keep watch on him? Is he also nameless? Or is it young Willis?”

Dr Mock pointed a clumsy finger. “Out!”

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I went, feeling very pleased with myself. Joining a secret society, especially one designed to combat evil, was an ambition I wasn't aware I had until the possibility arose, which on further reflection is entirely appropriate. And Dr Mock had already set me the first practical trial of my induction: to find the secret library on my own. He obviously trusted me more than his ancestor trusted Horace. What a compliment! But first I had to examine the hidden recesses of his anecdote.

Returning to my room, I threw myself down on the bed and considered the gravity of what I had learned.

It was weighty enough to crush a timid intellect into a sphere with a radius less than that of a grape!

Madness would ferment words into whines!

This proves I can do the syntactical jokes better than Dr Mock, but my sleeping capabilities were probably inferior to his, for I tossed all my dreams away that same night, as if I sailed along on blankets churned by inner typhoons of unwelcome memories, not my own. Horse latitudes for nightmares! They sank. Full fathomless five. Actually there were about a dozen, but that spoils the poetry.

Namelessness was the key to the bloody lock on the wormy door which led to the slimy dungeon of total horror. I knew that for certain. Up in the mountains the vermin of darkness had words to represent their shapes and identities. The little vampires were terrible but graspable, because they could be called something personal. They had appellations—Milly, Miles, Ross, Ferdy, Warren, Anna, Darren, Choggles, Barnum, Egg, Nathan, John, Rachel, Caspar—so it was always possible to form an idea in the mind of what pursued you. An impression clothed in a word. Ah look, it's Simon at the window! Catch this clove of garlic, Rita! Pardon me while I soak my cane in holy water, Thomas!

But with nameless horrors this isn't an option. You are constrained by inevitable silence to stand and blubber while evil seizes its chance. No point even trying to talk your way out of an assault by indescribable ineffables! You can't reason or plead with them on an intimate level. No opportunity to evolve a useful victim-aggressor

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relationship, to play on shared experience as suffering individuals in a contingent universe. The doom given to you by them will always have the formality of the unknown. At least with natural disasters, insensate murderers, such as tornadoes, you can shout out a family cognomen, “whirlwind!” or “spindizzy!”, as it sucks you to the other side of death, sneeringly, in the hope of shaming its physics. Not that it will, but it’s worth the attempt. With nameless killers, nothing is worth anything.

Consider the synonyms of the word nameless. All are as disturbing as themselves. What are they? I won’t say, because most are still unidentified, unspecified, anonymous, unlabelled, undesignated, untagged, unspeakable, unutterable, inexpressible, unmentionable, indescribable and simply not right to talk about. Were they free to be listed, I’d advise you to look the other way.

If Horace Gripp had been called “any old student,” his experiments would have been even more frightening. It occurred to me that the condition of namelessness might be rendered less harmful, if not exactly safe, by forcing its avatars to accept individual labels. A simple expedient! But the label would have to be exactly appropriate, or else it would be redundant, and there’s nothing so against itself and useless as a nickname which hasn’t caught on.

Dawn came. I went down to matins. I ate my breakfast of gruel. The morning passed slowly. I sat in class and discovered why the omniscience of God doesn’t invalidate free-will. Just because he knows what’s going to happen doesn’t imply we haven’t chosen it.

After the lecture I stayed behind, and this was also my own choice, but Dr Mock regarded it as the workings of a malicious fate, for he was frowning at the whole cosmos as he waited for me to depart, and when I didn’t he snapped: “What is it now?”

“Pardon me, sir, but I may have solved the puzzle of Horace Gripp’s death. Would you care to listen to my theory?”

“Don’t be idiotic, Mr Delves!”

Which obviously meant I was foolish to imagine he didn’t. So I inhaled deeply and began: “Horace invoked the phantom of his shipmate, Billy Broom, as intended, but summoned up a stowaway with him. I’ll explain that succinctly. We often hear talk about the

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‘spirit of war’. What does it mean? What if it isn’t a metaphor for ideological aggression? What if there truly is a ghost of combat, a sort of manitou of massacre? Let’s assume for now there is. Well, normally it would be far too large, and thus dilute, to interact noticeably with its material subjects. For example, a spirit of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-48) would stretch across dozens of states in space, and decades in time, and that’s such a wide stretch that its particles, presumably formed from etheric atoms finer than those of brute matter, would be shared among too many men in too many locations at too many times to affect individual psychologies. Rather like snorting a single molecule of cyanide.”

Dr Mock fanned his face with a sheaf of lecture notes. I took this as an invitation to proceed. I said:

“But in the case of the Zanzibar War of 1896, the conflict was so brief that its spirit didn’t have a chance to thin itself out. It more or less remained in a single congealed chunk. Probably it rolled around in the wind. Maybe the artillery blasts from the gunboats knocked it over the sea. Anyway, Billy Broom inhaled it whole. It went inside him and stuck in his subconscious. But as the political repercussions from the war expanded after the ceasefire, it started to grow inside him. He had no option but to make more room. Snorting gunpowder and igniting it was just his way of expanding his mind.”

“What has this got to do with Horace Gripp’s death?”

“It was the answer to the suicide that he wanted. But it cost him his own life. For in the passing of the years between his career as a sailor and his diligent work as a theology student, those repercussions, though minor and mostly unrecognised, had grown larger. Read the political history of Zanzibar if you don’t believe me. When he created a vessel for Billy’s spirit by joining together suitable bits of corpses, he did it so well that he summoned up the entire package: Billy’s ghost and the spirit of the war, which had its roots in the other’s soul. The corpse vessel didn’t have gaping nostrils as an emergency pressure valve and so the battle phantom was compressed inside it at enormous pressure. It was probably the size of the room now, but was expected to be at home inside an average human cadaver. Naturally, or

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supernaturally rather, it blew the body apart, killing the dead Billy and the living Horace in one dramatic and sulphurous blast.”

After a pause, I asked: “How did I do? Am I right?”

“Mr Delves, I don’t think the man who wrote the fable had that solution in mind. He didn’t want to invent a clever tale. He just hoped to scare students for their own good. An artful story wasn’t necessary. Something crude and effective would do.”

“Yes, but knowing exactly what happened makes it less intimidating, less creepy, less horrific, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose so. All the same, please go away!”

“I’ll find the hidden library before the week is over, I promise. You’ll be delighted you chose me as your favourite disciple, sir! I won’t let you down.”

He addressed me with a mystic word: “Cretin!”

Obviously if names were the deadly enemies of horror, the more the better! I skipped along the corridor. I reached and lurked in my rooms. I heard young Willis giggling through the wall, doubtless at something profane, displaying all this contempt for learning. I opened the encyclopaedia I had brought with me from my teaching job. I muttered respectfully to myself as I turned the yellowing pages:

“What exactly is an Elagabalus?”

The answer chilled my bones around their marrow, which is contrary to most expectations of fear, but not because of any direct revelation of monstrous depravities. It’s not a thing as such, an Elagabalus, but the name of a Roman Emperor who ruled from 218 to 222. He was descended from a clan of priests of the ancient Syrian sun-god and imposed worship of this deity on his subjects when he gained the throne. Replacing Jove with Baal didn’t endear him to his Senate, but it was his indolence which proved to be his undoing at the hands and spears of the Praetorian Guard. The Roman world had long been used to bloodthirsty autocrats, but effete listless ones were a totally new disadvantage.

Elagabalus was torpid and apathetic. When he wasn’t resting on a couch of feathers he was sleeping on a bed of petals. He yawned with exhaustion at the act of sniffing the most refined perfumes. On the few

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occasions he travelled anywhere it was in a chariot pulled by teams of naked youths. He was so light and vapid the yoke of this vehicle could be harnessed to rings in their pierced nipples without risking undue distortion. When he volunteered himself for castration, because he was too lazy to remain a man, he slumbered through the operation without requiring the customary anaesthetic services of a vat of wine. He ordered the surgeon to drink it instead. Asked if he ever intended living, he replied: "My slaves will do that for me."

He was the very personification of languidness.

But this data presented me with a problem of logic, an enigma of language. Dr Mock had described Horace as a 'languid Elagabalus'. But if the word Elagabalus is synonymous with the word languid, then there's no need to use them in conjunction! It's tautological and adds nothing to the meaning. Dr Mock might just have said 'an Elagabalus of the tombs'. That extra 'languid' is redundant.

I couldn't accept that an intelligent man like Dr Mock, a tutor of metaphysics and advanced crusader against diabolism, hadn't realised this, and therefore I was compelled to conclude that this tautology wasn't an example of clumsy grammar but had a genuine, though abstruse, significance. What was it? It seemed a mystery beyond my capabilities of analysis. But the answer is harrowingly simple.

Although inserting the word 'languid' before 'Elagabalus' doesn't directly augment the substance of either, it does imply there might be such a thing as a 'non-languid Elagabalus'. Consider that! It's the same as saying a 'non-languid languid'. It's a self-contradiction! Dr Mock must have been hinting that self-contradictory things can exist! What a philosophically awful prospect!

If he felt it necessary to include that superfluous 'languid', which he had, then it was clear he believed in the viability of logical impossibilities, that they actually have conceptual form, because a 'non-languid Elagabalus' is as impossible and unimaginable as a 'dark light' or 'circular triangle' or 'married bachelor'. It's not impossible in the sense of purple unicorns or edible planets, which have no place in the real universe but can be pictured in the mind. No, it's more impossible than that. It can't even be conceived.

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Try to visualise it and you'll understand what I mean. It cancels itself out before it even becomes an idea. And yet Dr Mock was claiming that this logical impossibility was an actual phenomenon! I shuddered at the consequences which might follow from entertaining this possibility. A corporeal logical impossibility would have to remain nameless. It was all coming together at last! By granting these anomalies names, whether they liked it or not, we could convert them from logical impossibilities into empirical ones. Returning to my earlier analogy, the process was akin to transforming a circular triangle into a blue unicorn, or a married bachelor into an edible planet.

This explained why Dr Mock kept insisting that Horace Gripp was a fictional character rather than an historical personage. As a fictional character defined by his unlikely adventures he was merely an empirical impossibility. This suggested he had once been something much worse: a logical impossibility! So granting him the name Horace Gripp had cured him of his inconceivability! This was the only feasible explanation for what I had learned from my tutor's special lecture. And it would be my rôle once I graduated as a priest to continue this tradition, changing impossibilities from a state of greater to lesser evil by the process of naming them! Not that they would thank me for this. They wouldn't even notice. *Tacent, satis laudant!*

I felt extremely confident I was now ready to join Dr Mock's secret society, and I waited in my room for some indication that I had passed the test, but on further reflection the practical side of my assignment still needed to be completed before membership could be won. I went in search of the library.

It took three successive nights of creeping around college to find it. And it turned up in the most prosaic place imaginable. Inside the stationery cupboard at the rear of the Dean's office! Breaking a pane of glass in one of his windows, slipping the latch and climbing through, I rummaged unsuccessfully through his desk before noticing the seemingly innocent door in the far wall. It was unlocked. I opened it and encountered a sight of such bilious bibliolatriy that I nearly fainted. Thousands of nameless books stacked in neat rows on shelves! Much

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worse was the fact that all were blank inside. Exactly the sort of abominable grimoires that had destroyed Horace all those decades ago!

I had brought a pen along with me. I now set to work defusing these manuals of malevolence. I gave them titles and authors. I invented historical magicians and wrote these names on the covers and spines. I also filled a few with random but harmless words. In the end, as dawn crept up behind me, I was forced to resort to merely scribbling like an infant on as many pages as possible. But I didn't leave a single volume untouched. I was quite pleased with some of my fictional authors and bogus titles. Here are my favourites: Bishop Wormwood's *False Book of Truths*, Papus Levi's *Arcane Enabler*, the *Compleat Wrangler* of Izaak Spoilchild, *Advanced Pickface Techniques* by Bungay Peele, Gramarye Moses and her *Senile Cuddle*, Florence Near's *Inner Belly of Isis*, Celine Dion Misfortune's *Pan Alchemy*, Hermes Trigamous and his *Slapped Cheek Trilogy*, and the powerful but slipshod *Aching Soul* of Solomon the Cobbler. My own view is that these suppositional tomes and sorcerers deserve to be confused in the minds of modern scholars with the genuine articles.

I escaped back to my room without being caught and slept in the blissful knowledge that I had contributed to reducing the total amount of horror in the world. I decided to treat myself for my good work. Instead of rising to attend lectures, I remained in bed. Dimly I heard commotion in the corridors. People were shouting. Then there was a knock on my door. Very urgent, as if it belonged to a fist whose owner wasn't going to be deterred by silence.

Wearing a wry smile, I crossed the room and admitted my visitor. It was Dr Mock. Plainly he had come to extend an official invitation to join his secret society. Before he opened his mouth, I nodded and winked. "I accept your offer!"

He shook his head and sat on my bed with a sigh. He said: "Somebody has been damaging stationery."

I beamed in reply. "We've got those ghastly logical impossibilities on the run! We're a great team!"

"The Dean is furious, Mr Delves. A whole cupboardful of new ledgers has been vandalised. We've had to suspend the recording of the

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college accounts until replacements are secured. I can't defend you on this one. But before I turn you in, tell me why you scrawled gibberish all over them?"

"Fighting namelessness, sir!"

"Yes, yes, a lunatic. I guessed it all along. Don't you realise my reputation will be sullied when the Dean discovers that I gave private lectures to the culprit?"

I knew he was serious. "In that case, don't say it was me. Blame let's see, young Willis instead."

"But it was your handwriting, you dolt!"

"Can't you use metaphysics to convince him otherwise?"

"Why should I? Young Willis is a conscientious student. He spends his time enjoying alcohol and women. He's normal. So why should he be expelled for your crime?"

"Reasons of blackmail. If you tell the Dean the fault is mine, I'll inform him about your misdemeanours. I'm not referring to the picture of the naked nun in a wimple which your ancestor tore out of Horace's book and passed down the generations to you, but the hereditary crime whose evidence was destroyed in the grate of the secret library in the nonexistent tower!"

Dr Mock had started to jab at my chest with his index finger when I began my little speech, but he broke off when he heard its last sentence and slumped back on the bed, cradling his head in his hands. He said: "I admit it. You've got me there, Mr Delves. I didn't expect anyone . . . I mean to say . . . It was so long ago . . . How could I . . ."

"We never do," I replied, kindly enough.

He controlled himself with enormous effort and cried: "I'll arrange for the expulsion of young Willis. I'll also do my best to ensure you graduate as a priest as quickly as I can."

I nodded. I had finally passed the test!

And if you're wondering what the crime was, the one whose evidence was disposed of in the library grate, I'm not going to tell you. Nobody helped me work out the true circumstances of Horace's death, so why should I assist you with this? I reduced the nebulosity of that scene, its visual namelessness, to an acceptable level of dread on my

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own. Now it's your turn. The ultimate horror of it won't stop haunting you until you devise a method of explaining how a real crime can take place in a fictional setting. At the moment it's a logical impossibility. Your task is to convert it to a less damaging empirical impossibility. If you fail, so will your soul.

You have until tomorrow. Better hurry!

Dr Mock kept his word and I graduated at the end of my first term. I was given control over a rural parish which covered a vast area of forgotten villages and inhabited caves. It was a flat domain, but mountains loomed in the distance. I was grateful enough to turn my back on them as I went about my duties. Tramping the narrow lanes between remote settlements, I continued to wait for specific orders from my new mentors. Unless they arrived in a coded form I couldn't understand, such as the order of leaves falling off a tree in autumn, all communications were absent. It appeared I was expected to operate alone, which is the safest way for a secret society to conduct business. It made sense. But I did worry about my ability to always choose the most efficient method of discharging my obligation to oppose evil. Mercifully, there are adequate clues written into a priest's basic community functions.

One of the most powerful ways of annihilating the hateful condition of namelessness is also one of the simplest. Odious bundles of undefined abhorrence are passed to me on a nearly daily basis, but the formula for defusing their nebulosity is old and direct and undemanding. When it's over I dry my fingers on my surplice. In my career to date, I have dealt with scores of these unspecified monsters, diluting them from illogical horrors to unreal ones. The subjects generally wail, but there is much rejoicing from the witnesses. Today I can't share their jubilation. As I said right at the beginning, I'm still a priest. But not for much longer. This morning I received a letter from Lampeter University stating that Dr Mock has expired. A heart attack while entertaining a smuggled girl. He has left instructions to make his private journals available to the Dean after his death. They will reveal how I blackmailed him. I shall be defrocked!

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I clutch my head and sway as I stand by the altar. I must be strong for the sake of my congregation. The first mass of namelessness is passed to me and I struggle against the temptation to vomit with fright. I bite my lower lip as my eyes stray across its revolting form. How can such abominations be permitted to exist in this cosmos? They can't! Which is why crusaders like myself work tirelessly to enfeeble them. I lower it roughly into the cool liquid, trying to keep hold against all my instincts on the squirming thing. Then I raise it aloft and cry with all the force of a sensual release: "I christen this child Horace!" I stagger back, but there are others to come. "I christen this child Horace!" A third and fourth. "I christen these children Horace and Horace." A fifth, sixth and seventh! "Horace! Horace! Horace!" The parents haven't asked for the name Horace, and it's not really suitable for the girls, but I'm in no state to toy with alternatives at this moment!

Now they are named, the worst they can ever become are vampires in the mountains, and indeed I even see some of them turning their heads to peer through the open door at the peaks on the horizon. The schools up there will teach them to count by intuition rather than addition. That's bad enough. But when I am stripped of my authority and no longer available to adulterate namelessness, this region will be flooded with a much worse evil. I run out of the church, gasping, down the lanes. But whatever village I pass through, whether of brick or straw, I always see them. Nameless horrors everywhere! Always lurking in the same place. But I notice them from the bulges they make. I tear away the fabric that conceals them. I point directly at those marks of illogic! Do they really think they can hide in the bellies of certain women for periods of up to nine months?