

I.

*June 19, 1837.*

*Belgravia, the home of Lord Quimby.*

Much later, as he watched his manservant, Perkins, eating the dog, Quimby gloomily reflected on the unusual events of the evening.

But oh: it had begun so promisingly! All of the zombies were safely confined to the lower quarters, the prostitutes had arrived and were being served drinks in the library and Quimby was briefing the man about the...

'What is Henry calling it, this new technique of his?' he had asked, directing his question at the young man who stood in his study, Henry's assistant.

Quimby had schooled with Henry Fox Talbot at Harrow. The two had since gone their separate ways, of course: Quimby had inherited his father's title and estate and used his leisure and wealth to pursue a life of dissolution, ungodliness, and an unholy interest in revenance; Henry, meanwhile, had inherited his father's great intellect and put his time to altogether more worthwhile use, developing something called calotype.

How calotype worked, Quimby wasn't sure and didn't care. He was interested only in the end result, and upon hearing of this invention and seeing its great potential for adding an extra frisson to his debauchery, he had issued a summons. Fortuitously, his knowledge of certain *events* at Harrow had secured him access to Henry's new process, though – somewhat understandably – not Henry himself. Instead Talbot had sent a young apprentice, a snickering fellow named Craven, to do his dirty work for him (and if Quimby had his way – which was after all a foregone conclusion – it

would be very dirty work indeed) and it was he who now stood in Quimby's study having set up the contraption for his lordship to inspect.

It looked like nothing more than a box on a tripod, and a rather shabby box at that, but was, apparently, so it was said, capable of doing something most extraordinary.

'It's called photogenic drawing, sir,' said Craven. 'Though in France they're calling it *photographie*.'

Quimby thought about this for a moment.

'Hm,' he said, 'much as I hate to credit our seditious overseas neighbours with anything approaching common sense, it has to be said that *photographie* is certainly less of a mouthful than photogenic drawing, do you not think?'

'Mr Talbot's very keen on photogenic drawing, sir.'

'So be it. And what has Henry *photogenically drawn* so far?'

'He's captured some scenes of the Lake of Como, sir, very nice they are too, as well as the Oriel window in the south gallery of Lacock Abbey, a truly beautiful photogenic drawing, sir, if I may say so.'

'Scenery,' snorted Quimby derisively. '*Scenery*. Typical of Henry. No imagination whatsoever.'

'Sir?'

'Craven, listen carefully,' said Quimby, his voice taking on the tones of a conspirator, 'in the library downstairs sit three of London's most debased and degenerate women, and shortly I shall be availing myself of them. One at a time and all at once, though not necessarily in that order. It will be your job, Craven, to document this momentous event, using... that,' he indicated the tripod Craven had carried into the study, which now stood in the corner of the room, 'and I can promise you the results will be far more diverting than scenes of the Lake of Como.'

‘Yes, sir.’

Quimby leaned close. ‘It has been said, Craven, that one of these ladies can accommodate *an entire pineapple*.’

‘Goodness, sir.’

‘Exactly. Not a sight we wish to entrust merely to our memory.’

‘No, sir,’ beamed Craven, happily.

From outside came the sound of a scream, and Quimby moved to the window in order to push aside his gratifyingly weighty drapes and peer out to the street beneath.

Filthy cobblestones shone dully, the only illumination from weak gas-lights positioned at either end of the street, or else from his own scullery window. He frowned, squinting, looking for the source of the noise – from the mews behind him, perhaps? But then, as he watched, a man appeared at one end of the street, running for his life, eyes wide in terror.

He wore the cloth cap and leather apron of a working man – a cooper, perhaps – and he appeared to be streaked with some fluid.

Was it tar? Oil? The gas-lamps were flickering wildly, as though affected by something more than the wind.

Flickering off.

Then on.

Off.

On.

No, not tar or oil, Quimby saw, as the man drew nearer, passing beneath his window; it looked like blood.

For a moment the only sound was of his boots on the cobbles. Next, another noise that Quimby took a moment or so to place. Scuttling.

Then he saw it. The man was being chased by rats, four score of them at least. They seemed to flow along the street after him, thick and viscous like a stream of effluent, black apart from bared teeth. At their head, unmistakably, was a rat that was much larger than the rest.

A rat that had two heads.

The running man glanced desperately behind him then screamed again. In response the pack began to squeal, and for a second or so the sound was so piercing it was all Quimby could do not to cover his ears.

Then the man reached the corner and was turning it just as the pack leader jumped, the teeth of one its heads slicing deep into his neck, the other head twisting back then striking, almost like that of a cobra. The man was dropping to his knees as he turned the corner out of sight, his hands coming back, flapping at the two-headed rat, trying, failing, to dislodge it, his impetus carrying him forward, around the corner.

Just his feet visible now, kicking on the cobblestones.

Quimby watched as the chasing rats turned the corner, seeing their mass build. A pool of blood spread around the man's boots, still scrabbling but unable to find purchase, the weight of the vermin bearing down on him, preventing him from finding his feet. His screams became muffled, as though something had been forced into his mouth. Then came the sound of wet gagging.

Then silence.

His feet stopped kicking, his whole body jerked by the mass of rats as they ate him alive, the gas lamps flickering on and off.

'Sir?'

Craven spoke from behind him and Quimby turned. How long had he been standing at the window? He rubbed at his eyes. Christ, that was the last time he touched absinthe. The absolute last time...

'What was the screaming, sir?' said Craven.

'You heard it, too?'

'Yes, sir. From the road outside.'

'Did you hear... squealing?'

'Something very odd, sir, yes.'

Perhaps, thought Quimby, he'd been too hasty in blaming the absinthe. Maybe an unfortunate cooper really *had* been attacked by a two-headed rat right outside his window.

He barked with laughter.

Don't be so bloody ridiculous, Quimby. It was nothing but a hallucination. An old drunk running, who fell and hit his head, that was all.

Could be dead, he mused.

Hm, they were always in need of a cadaver. Messrs Hare and Burke had become so bloody expensive of late; neither were the bodies as fresh as they might be; thought they could charge the earth just because they had the name. Who's to say they really were sons of *the* Burke and Hare anyway? After all, they could be any old pair of Scotsmen; there were so bloody many of them in London these days...

Anyway. Quimby took a deep breath. Clapped his hands briskly.

'Right, my boy,' he told Craven, 'down to business. Bring your contraption and we'll repair to the library for some... Hm, I've a mind to christen the process *pornogenic drawing*, what do you think?'

'In France they'll call it *pornographie*, sir,' joked the younger man.

‘It’ll never catch on, Craven.’

Just then came the noise of an almighty scream, this time from inside the house, and the door to Quimby’s study was flung open.

The two men started as into the room burst Quimby’s manservant Perkins, red-faced and flustered, reaching for the door and slamming it closed on the unmistakable sounds of a great commotion from downstairs, then standing with his back to it as though to keep it barred. He stood for a moment, wide-eyed and breathing heavily, his clothes in disarray.

‘Really, Perkins,’ snapped Quimby, ‘what is the meaning of this?’

‘Sir, it’s the zombies, sir,’ Perkins managed, breathing heavily.

There was a crack of lightning from outside, a rumble of thunder.

‘Yes?’ said Quimby, still irritated. ‘What about the zombies?’

‘Sir, they’re eating the prostitutes.’