

TO DRIVE OUT EVIL SPIRITS

written by

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TO DRIVE OUT EVIL

BLACK MAGIC

Library Mystery

LONDON.

Attendants at a library in the West-end of London have to be changed every three months. If they are kept there longer they are in danger of losing their reason.

The library is a collection of books on black magic, witchcraft, and sorcery, most of which are hundreds of years old, and extremely valuable. They are not for sale, but are kept in the upper part of a bookshop in Charing Cross Road. Twenty different attendants have been employed since the collection was started three years ago. The first became morose and collapsed with a nervous breakdown. Another was put in. He developed the same symptoms, and before another attendant could be found he was removed to a mental home.

GIRL WHO VANISHED

A girl was employed. She became strange. Suddenly she disappeared. The next attendant became subject to fits and had to leave. The next, formerly a quiet man, became violent and took to crime. Then the son of the owner of the library became the attendant. While alone he began to read the books. Many ancient witchcraft formulas were

described. Some told how to obtain immortality. Sometimes he would remain awake all night, trying by concentration to project his soul through space. Failure depressed him. He would not talk. New attendants were put in and after three months each in turn showed signs of being affected. Since then the attendant has been changed every three months and there has been no more trouble.

(Goulburn Evening Penny Post, Friday 23 June 1933)

*Newspaper article from Trove (an102866263) reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Australia

I come from the land of snakes, sharks, bloody monstrous spiders and Rolf Harris. I'm not one to scare easily. And that's exactly what I told Wilkie Edwards, owner/manager of *The London Esoteric Library and Museum* and the self-proclaimed 'Home of the largest occult sciences collection in the Northern hemisphere'. I was hired and offered a three month contract on the spot. That was a week ago and the first thing I did was move the grimoire bound in human skin into another room. Not because I was scared...it just gave me the heebie jeebies.

The brass bell over the door jingles and a wide-eyed tween drags her reluctant parents over the threshold. I know the type. Fresh off the Harry Potter walking tour and on the hunt for the Leaky Cauldron and the entrance to Diagon Alley. A steady stream of Pottheads comes through the door most days and they spend all of five minutes in here before they realise it's just a series of dusty, musty rooms of books and they're gone faster than you can say 'Expecto Patronum'.

Much more common are the modern witches. No longer inclined to run naked in groups of 13 under a full moon, the modern witches are mainly bored, married women looking for the perfect spell

to stop a husband's wandering eye or perform a curse on a meddling mother in law. And then there are the kitchen witches who dabble in herbal medicine and look for the perfect recipe for curing their snotty childrens' ailments.

'Morning Skippy.'

'Hey Reg. It's all ready for you.'

Reg is a middle-aged man with a receding hairline and decked out in a Chelsea FC #16 jersey stretched tightly over his gut. He makes a beeline for one of the back rooms where I've already set up for him. Reg is neither Potter fan nor kitchen witch. In fact, he looks like he would be far more comfortable with a pint than a potion. I always thought witchcraft was just old ladies and black cats but it's quite common to see men like Reg visiting the library and museum.

'Today's the day. I have a funny feeling in my bones.'

I want to tell him the crick in his neck and ache in his lower back are due to his poor posture. I've been working here for a week and so far he's arrived right on 8am every morning. He spends his days hunched over a dusty manuscript and is still there nine hours later when I'm closing up. And still no closer to discovering the text's secrets.

'Madison darling, your aura is looking quite muddy today,' another regular, Astra Willowsong descends on my desk in a cloud of incense. 'Is everything alright?'

'Oh yeah. I got caught in the rain on the way to the Tube this morning. It was really bucketing down.'

‘No, darling. Your aura. Your personal energy field,’ she sees my blank face. ‘Never mind. Has the *Wiccan Weekly* arrived yet?’

After guiding Astra to the latest magazine arrivals and convincing her that neither my aura nor chakra is in need of cleansing, I’m free to return to my desk in the front room. It’s the cushiest job I’ve had in a long time and just perfect for an Aussie on a working holiday. Thank God for Wilkie’s high staff turnover. The large double windows could do with a good clean but still offer me the perfect vantage point to watch people as they hurry about along Charing Cross Road.

Charing Cross Road was once a bookish oasis. Sadly, most of the bookshops are long gone and even Marks & Co at number 84, the most famous of them all, is now a McDonalds. In fact, the downstairs level of the current London Esoteric Library and Museum used to be a specialist bookshop, *The Grimorium*. Sometime in the 80s, the bookshop closed and the occult library spilled out to fill every nook and cranny of the building. Nowadays, grimoires and spell books fill every shelf throughout a labyrinthine series of rooms over two floors. The museum part of the establishment is nothing special. A skull, a couple of talisman trinkets and three sets of incomplete tarot decks. As if by some magical intervention, the independent library survived and even recorded a small increase in membership last year. Wilkie Edwards doesn’t seem overly interested in the venture and I suspect he is just biding his time until he gets an offer from a multinational fast food joint or the entire interior gives in to the creeping black mould on the walls.

After lunch, I’m on the floor playing with Millie Jenkins’ three year old while she thumbs through *Cunningham’s Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs* when the bell sounds and a tall, scruffy man walks in. I don’t recognise him.

‘Morning. Can I help y...’

He barely makes eye contact as he heads past us towards the back rooms. Millie has a baby strapped to her chest and another to her back and she is on the hunt for some kind of herbal contraceptive.

‘Rude.’

‘Very,’ I agree.

The library is a rabbit warren of rooms and tucked away reading nooks for visitors to hide themselves away in. There are wooden ceiling beams and a glorious floor-to-wall rolling ladder that I secretly take for a spin whenever I’m alone à la Audrey in *Funny Face*. I go to shelve a copy of *The Teachings of Li Wang Ho* and realise there’s no sign of the tall man. It’s not the first time I haven’t been able to find someone in here. In fact, it happens all the time. Men, roughly Reg’s age, enter, vanish and then leave hours later. As I pass Reg’s desk, I feel his eyes boring into my back.

Half an hour later, I hear footsteps on the stairs and the tall man reappears. He nods as he passes my desk and then blends seamlessly into the crowd on the street.

‘I’m closing up in 5,’ I gently shake Reg awake at 4:55. ‘Any breakthrough?’

‘Not today,’ he sighs. ‘But there’s always tomorrow.’

‘A man came in earlier. Tall, blonde. Have you ever seen him in here before?’ I’m still curious about the mystery man.

‘Don’t know who you’re talking about. I didn’t see anyone come through.’

Studying the manuscript day in and day out is beginning to take its toll on poor, old Reg. His eyes squint as he adjusts to the light and he staggers out the front door, leaning against the door jamb to get his balance before heading in the direction of the tube station.

‘Why don’t you take a day off? Have a break and come at it again with fresh eyes?’ I call out after him.



Despite my advice, Reg is waiting patiently for me the next day when I arrive. He’s huddled with Astra and a young boy dressed in a Gryffindor scarf under the eaves trying to take cover from the constant drizzle.

It’s shaping up to be a quiet day until a soggy, bespectacled American professor bursts through the front door just after lunchtime. It turns out he’d been reading the latest hermeneutical news on his iPad over breakfast in his hotel when he realised that some researchers were on the cusp of deciphering an ancient Egyptian codex. The very same ancient Egyptian codex he’s been studying for the past few years as one of the world’s leading experts in Coptic texts. He abandoned his cuppa of Earl Grey and the Hop-On-Hop-Off Bus Tour that his wife had pre-booked and trekked halfway across London in the rain in the hopes we might have the facsimile. We do. And to his delight, it’s in full colour. He beckons to his wife who is loitering outside.

‘You can’t take him anywhere,’ his wife groans as she shakes off her umbrella. ‘He didn’t even last one day of holidays.’

‘Please honey?’

‘Okay. You have one hour max. We didn’t travel to the other

side of the earth for you to do exactly what you can do at home. We can still fit in some shopping before they close!’

I catch his eye roll as he mutters softly, ‘But that’s what *you* do back home.’

‘You’ll have to meet our resident cryptographer,’ I remember Reg and his manuscript. ‘I’m sure he’d love to hear your thoughts about the text he’s studying.’

Reg isn’t at the desk but his manuscript is open on the table, ‘Oh. He must’ve popped out.’

‘May I?’ The professor pulls out his glasses and inspects the page, ‘Hmm. Looks like some kind of Gaelic to me. But that’s not really my area of expertise.’

I blow a couple of decades of accumulated dust off the codex and make his wife a cup of tea. Two cups later, the American professor emerges. Anxious to see London and armed with my shopping tips (don’t miss Primark), she practically drags him out of the library. I give her two days tops before he discovers Room 66 in the British Museum.

I’m surprised to find Reg sitting at his desk as if he’s been there all along when I do my closing time sweep around the library and museum later in the afternoon.

‘I came by earlier with someone but you weren’t here?’

‘I went out for a bite to eat,’ he shrugs.

‘Oh. I didn’t see you leave.’

He’s surprisingly dry for someone who went out in the rain.

Plus, the professor's wife and I were chatting in the front room the entire time and I'm certain that nobody came in or out that door. He's telling porkies.

'Any closer to cracking it today?' I try to mask my suspicion.

'Fraid not.'

No wonder. The manuscript is still open on the page it was on when I walked past with the professor four hours ago. He leaves and I sit down and stare at the page. The drawing is faded and hard to make out but it resembles some kind of Da Vinci-esque contraption.



'It's a diagram.' I share my thoughts with Reg when he returns the next morning. 'It's showing how to build some kind of machine. See here. And here. These could be the different parts.'

'Mmm.'

Considering he has spent the entire last week (and God knows how long before that) in here trying to uncover the text's secrets, Reg is strangely more interested in checking his phone messages than he is in listening to my theories.

'Alchemy perhaps?' I try again. 'And how do you have reception in here?'

'EE,' I've finally got his attention.

'He's definitely drinking something in this one,' I ponder one of the drawings. 'Some kind of magical elixir?'

I turn another page.

'Whoa. Look at the facial hair on this one! Maybe it's a hair growth cream? Do you think it could be recipes?'

Reg looks amused and slightly uncomfortable. I think the hair growth suggestion hit a bit too close for home for him with his signs of spreading male pattern baldness.

I suddenly remember what the professor said earlier. 'It's not Gaelic, is it?'

'Of course not,' he snaps. 'That's one of the first things I checked.'

I really want to take another look at the manuscript but I have a pile of new memberships to process and Reg seems a bit pissed off with me. I've crossed some kind of invisible line and I can sense from his body language that all he wants is to be left alone with his text. I keep my distance until closing time.

'See you tomorrow,' all is obviously forgiven as Reg flashes me a smile when he leaves.

'Sorry darling. I lost track of the time,' Astra Willowsong is the last to leave and apologises as she bustles past me.

I lock the door and flip the OPEN sign to CLOSED. I start upstairs and work my way through each room, re-shelving books and manuscripts, straightening up chairs and turning off lights. I expertly manage to manoeuvre a used tissue from the floor and into the bin without making contact by using two pencils and a copy of *The Rosicrucian Manifestos*.

I enter the front room and am surprised to see there's someone lying on the floor in the middle of the room. That in itself is

not an unusual sight around here. Quite often I walk into a room and have to step over Astra attempting astral projection or simply having a snooze. The other day she claimed she flew over Hampstead Heath. But as I get closer to the man, I realise he's not visiting the astral plane...unless you count death as a kind of permanent out-of-body experience.

I'm not scared. I'm just likely to pass out at the sight of all the blood pooling around him. I felt so squeamish when I grated my finger while doing carrots last week that I had to sit down for 20 minutes. I go outside both to stop my knees from wobbling and to pick up some reception on my phone. Even out on the street, I practically have to perform a dance for the satellite gods to get enough bars to make a call. I dial Triple Zero, hear a robotic voice telling 'this number is unavailable' and realise I don't for the life of me know the UK emergency number. So, I call Wilkie instead. I can hear the *5 News at 5* blaring in the background as he tells me to hold fire and that he'll be there ASAP.

It looks like the poor man came to a violent end and I'm reluctant to go back inside in case I bump into the killer. After five minutes in the cold, I weigh up the chances of them hanging around the scene of the crime and decide I'm far more likely to catch my death of cold. There's no sign of the killer inside. But there's also no sign of the dead body.

It takes fifteen minutes for the police and Wilkie Edwards to arrive.

'So, let me get this straight. You're saying there was a body in the library?'

One of the officers points at the spotless, polished floorboards.

'A body that vanished into thin air?'

'He was right there,' I insist.

'Eight days,' Wilkie sighs. 'That's a new record.'

No-one says anything but the officers look at each other knowingly. Wilkie and the three police officers have a quick, private conference. They're whispering but I overhear 'three months', 'Gerda' and 'crazy'.

'Don't look at me like that,' I protest. 'I'm not crazy.'

Wilkie sends me straight home to the house in Shepherd's Bush that I share with three Aussies and a token Kiwi. My share mates aren't as quick to dismiss my experience.

'We've all seen things that weren't there. I once thought Dylan was an onion.'

'It's true,' Dylan laughs. 'But he was pretty wasted at the time.'

'A few months back I drank so many Caramel Macchiatos that I OD'ed on caffeine and thought I saw the Dalai Lama waiting for the Bakerloo line at Oxford Circus,' Jade recalls. 'How much caffeine did you have today?'

'Umm. I may have had a few cups,' I admit. 'That's probably it.'

I don't think of it again until later when I'm rummaging in my handbag for money to chip in for pizza when I find a piece of old, yellowed parchment that looks like it's been torn from one of the late 18th Century French grimoires. The eerie drawing depicts two skeletal figures trying to drag a screaming man back to the gates of Hell.

Pour ressusciter d'entre les morts.

Les morts. The dead. I don't need to draw on too much of my high school French to decipher the rest of the text. *To raise the dead.*



When I arrive on Monday morning, the door is already unlocked and there's a hand-written sign in the window:

HELP WANTED

3 month contract

Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm

Enquire within

'What the hell, Wilkie?'

'Madison! I honestly didn't think you'd be back,' he seems surprised to see me.

'Well, I am,' I rip the sign out of the window toss it into the bin. 'I have no idea what happened on Friday but I intend to find out.'

Besides, I need the job. Even after splitting it five ways, the rent's not cheap in Shepherd's Bush. And I value my dignity and personal hygiene too much to join my share mates in dumpster diving for dinner.

I crawl down on my knees and inspect the spot where I saw the bloodied body. There must be something there. A trap door? Flecks of blood? Anything to prove it wasn't just a figment of my overactive imagination or too much caffeine.

'You're sure you're alright?' Wilkie sounds sceptical.

'I'm fine,' I assure him as I lean closer and sniff the floorboards.

'Thank God. I hate interviewing,' Wilkie is out the door in a flash. 'And I can't stand being in this place for another second. It gives me the creeps. And there's something growing on the walls over there.'

'About that...'

But he's halfway out the door already, 'It's nothing. Not dangerous.'

On Tuesday morning, I walk through the museum and discover the 76 remaining cards from the Rider-Waite tarot deck scattered all over the floor. I pack them away only to find them in the same state just before lunchtime. I pack them away again. The same thing happens at 2pm and again at 4pm. Lather, rinse, repeat.

And there's another torn parchment message for me amongst the cards:

Pour rendre folle une personne.

To drive a person crazy? Well, you'll have to do better than that!

On Wednesday, I wake up with a large, red pimple smack bang in the middle of my forehead. I spend fifteen minutes in front of the mirror trying to hide it under layers and layers of foundation but by the time I get to work it's shining like a bright, red beacon. Visitors to the library try their best to focus on me and not the zit, but I can feel their eyes being drawn to it when I talk to them. And obviously it hasn't escaped the notice of my mysterious visitor:

Pour ouvrir le troisième œil.

Now it's just being mean.

On Thursday, I arrive to discover that all the books have been rearranged to sit on the shelves with their spines facing in. It takes me the whole of Thursday and most of Friday to put them back to normal. I find the message tucked between some membership forms on my desk on Friday afternoon when I finally sink into my chair.

Pour chasser les mauvais esprits.

At home that evening, I'm sitting cross-legged on my bed with my laptop on my lap. According to Google Translate, the message of the day is 'to drive out evil spirits'. I don't know if I would necessarily call them 'evil'...but I have doubts about their ideas on interior decorating. Out of interest, I decide to test the professor's theory about Reg's text. But unfortunately, Google Translate has every language (Igbo?) under the sun except Celtic.

I type some of the words that I've noticed recurring over and over in Reg's manuscript into a Gaelic-English Online Translator. I switch dictionaries from Irish Gaelic to Welsh and then to Scottish Gaelic until finally I get a result. *Uisge beatha. Water of life.* The manuscript might very well hold the secrets to the fabled 'water of life'? And it's highly likely that Reg already knows what it says considering he lied about the whole Gaelic thing.

The following week, I keep a much closer eye on Reg. I find some excuse to enter the reading room every twenty minutes or so and I can tell by his body language that he's not impressed at all by the extra attention. Even under my constant surveillance, Reg still manages to vanish right from under my eyes.

The next time a mystery man enters the library, I decide to follow him. I follow him to one of the back rooms where he stops in front of a bookshelf and leans against it. The bookshelf swings backwards to reveal a doorway which he disappears through. The bookshelf swings back in line with the others and I wait a few minutes before following him. In my haste to see what lies within the not-so-secret-anymore room, I overlook the low clearance and smack my head on the door frame. The noise of my skull connecting with the timber causes Reg and the four other men to jump and freeze with their tumbler glasses raised to their mouths. Then someone hiccups loudly.

Half an hour later I've been inducted into The London Esoteric Whisky Appreciation Society. My first sip burns all the way down to my stomach. I'm really more of a Long Island Iced Tea kinda girl but I can't help but be impressed by their elaborate set-up here in the bowels of the library.

'This distillery has been here since the 1890s,' Reg steps me through their process of drying out the barley, malting, leaving the wort to ferment and then distilling. 'My father introduced me to it and his father before him.'

'And this text contains the recipe for the finest Scotch whisky you'll ever taste. It dates back to the English Malt Tax and no-one knows quite how it got here from Bonnie Scotland. It's London's best kept secret.'

'Or it was. Until you came along asking questions,' I recognise the 'dead' man from last week.

'So, you tried to scare me away because I was discovering your secret?' I lock eyes with him and he looks sheepish.

‘It’s always worked in the past. Usually takes about three months before the library attendant realises anything’s up. But you were much quicker on the uptake.’

‘They thought I was crazy. And the last girl, Gerda was sent back to Germany!’

‘We did what had to be done. And it was all for nothing because you’re sure to tell Wilkie Edwards. And that’ll be the end of all of this.’

‘He doesn’t already know?’

‘Hasn’t a clue.’

My three month contract and the remainder of my working holiday visa fly by far too fast. For my last two and a bit months in the job, I become a kind of middleman for Reg and Co. to field new Society members so Reg can focus on the distillery. I’m all for introducing a secret handshake but we reach a compromise on a secret password. I’ve developed quite a taste for the ‘water of life’ and will sorely miss Reg’s hot toddies.

And on my last day at The London Esoteric Library and Museum, I find a bottle of London’s most exclusive single malt whisky and another torn page sitting beside my handbag:

Pour découvrir les trésors cachés.

To discover the hidden treasure.

Katie Mills

Katie Mills is an academic librarian from Perth, Western Australia. In her free time, she enjoys travelling and hoop dancing. She was awarded the Benn’s Books Prize for Best Investigative Short Story at the 2014 Scarlet Stiletto Awards.