

The House in Jubilee Wood



As we each of us set about our perhaps mundane lives, it is natural that we restrict the complexity of the world around us in such a way as to make of it our own creature. We dwell on the commonplace, that which fetches us with the least inconvenience to the end of the day, and so we are inclined to overlook or ignore that which may lie in the shadows at the edge of our gaze.

The truth, however, is often much stranger and sometimes more disturbing than the reality we choose and that for which our humdrum existence can make allowance.

The true nature of the happenings I am about to relate I leave to you, dear reader, to judge for yourself. All I can do is to set out these strange events in the form in which I possess them. But it is necessary to prefix them with a question and, perhaps, a warning.

The question is simple. Can these events as I shall endeavour to describe them possibly be true? Once more it shall be left to others to judge.

The warning is more elusive, and more uncomfortable to set out. Perhaps it would after all be better were we to continue to occupy ourselves with the minutiae of everyday life, and not let our senses stray towards the shadows.

For there, as we shall see, on the threshold of darkness may lurk a reality much more alarming than any we might wish to countenance.

My story begins in the quiet days following Christmas during the early years of the last century. I beg the indulgence of those for whom the geographical setting of this tale will be familiar, but for those not acquainted with the area a little description will perhaps prove valuable.

Brandeston is a small village set in the Deben valley in rural Suffolk, deemed charming even by the standards set by that delightful part of the world. It might claim to be fortunate in that very little has happened there and, for the most part, history has passed it by.

One fine morning in late December, then, there came to the village a visitor – one not wholly a stranger to this part of the world and who hoped to spend a quiet few days after Christmas with his books and in walking with his dog.

On this occasion our visitor – let us call him Roberts – had set off with his dog at a brisk pace from the cottage he had rented on the edge of the village, intending to visit the inn on his return for a simple luncheon and no doubt a glass of something warming. The frost still lay heavy in the meadows and there was ice in the puddles, and Roberts made his way over the river and skirted around a wide field towards the great bulk of trees set against the skyline which he already knew from his map was known locally as Jubilee Wood.

His pipe was drawing sweetly and he was in good spirits, as was his dog, who capered in the frozen ruts and, in the absence of any quarry, decided as is the way of dogs to invent his own. As Roberts made his way up the hill towards Jubilee Wood his mind was on other things. So it was that, by the time he had skirted the trees and was about to make his way back towards the river and the village beyond, he realized that his dog was no longer with him.

He called a few times, paced back the way he had come and called again. The animal was probably hunting among the trees and too preoccupied to hear his master's entreaties, but if Roberts were to reach the inn in time for luncheon he would have to retrieve the animal without further ado.

So he ducked under the first branches of the wood and negotiated a rusty iron fence to find himself in what had once clearly been well coppiced woodland, the widespread branches of the trees thereby giving a sense of space under the dark canopy. A slight scuffling sound somewhere ahead drew his attention. He found the dog with his snout buried in the undergrowth and his tail wagging, having perhaps found a small rodent of some kind which would do for sport in the absence of better game.

This part of the wood was more spread out and Roberts had the strange illusion that in some way it was bigger within than its dark outline on the hill would suggest. Beyond the dog he saw what seemed to be shrubs of box and, when he investigated, he found they were indeed box – now straggly and

unkempt but presumably having once graced some well tended driveway or designated the bounds of a great house. Though of any house there was no sign.

Since the wood took its name from Victoria's jubilee it could be assumed that the house had fallen into disrepair and become derelict long before that event. It seemed strange to Roberts, however, to plant a wood where once there had been habitation and in what was still a prime site, overlooking as it did the entire Deben valley.

Roberts followed the line of the bushes in the hope that he might in some way infer the previous layout of the property. So it was as his attention was thus drawn elsewhere that he stumbled over something hidden among the leaves, and almost fell.

He poked at the spot with his stick, which made a grating sound as though against something other than wood. So he knelt and investigated further. His gloved hands clasped what seemed to be a piece of masonry, and he did his best to smooth away the decaying leaves to discover what he could. This at least seemed to support his theory of a house. But the object was too heavy and had been too well embedded over the years for him to make any progress in moving it.

He crouched lower to examine it. Sure enough it was masonry. It was clearly very old and covered in moss. Roberts removed his gloves, the better to feel the outline of the object and discern more of its detail. As his fingers slid as far around its underside as they could they discovered a small hole, which his touch told him was neat and smooth and man-made. So he spent two minutes gouging at the soil to make a big enough gap for him to slip his fingers inside.

They touched something clammy and he immediately withdrew, imagining a slug, but as he did so something about the touch made him think this thing might also be man-made and he tried again. He teased the object from the hole and brought it out into the dim light.

At first he thought it might have been a torn remnant of some apparel, perhaps made of leather, but as he turned the slimy object over in his hands he realized it was, or at least had been, a bag or pouch of some kind. It had perhaps originally been drawn together at the neck with a cord which had long since rotted. It might once have contained tobacco, so he gingerly pulled open the neck, trying as he did so not to tear the material.

There was something there, something small and hard. He tried to draw it out and found a piece of metal, roughly cylindrical but stopped at one end, though the whole was so dirty and rusted it was impossible to guess what once it had been. With it was a piece of paper or parchment of some kind but it had rotted and came apart in his fingers. He fancied he could see figures or writing of some kind, but it was too dark in the wood to make out much.

His interest was naturally aroused but so by this time was his appetite and he still had a mile to go to reach the inn, he tucked away his find until later. He called his dog to him and picked his way back towards the path.

It seemed to him as he made his way across the frosted grass that the day was already beginning to wane although it was still hardly afternoon. The sunlight had taken on a wan and fragile character and the early chill seemed to be returning.

He made his way down the slope towards the bridge which would take him back to the road, and paused for a moment to look back at the wood, whose shadow already seemed to be growing across the meadow towards him. In the distance, at the edge of the wood where a stile led into the meadow, he thought he could see a figure against the horizon. No doubt it was another like him enjoying the bracing air, though his new companion stood quite still and seemed, so Roberts said later, to be looking back down the hill towards him.

But Roberts was in more need of nourishment than company, so he made his way briskly back to the road and then on towards the inn. Once or twice he stopped to look back, expecting to catch a sight of the stranger, though he could not explain to himself why.

The inn keeper served him with bread and cheese and beer, and it was not until he had made the best of all of them that Roberts thought to ask his host if he might know anything of the history of Jubilee Wood and of any house which might have occupied the site previously.

The inn keeper could not help, but just within the door at a long table sat a party of locals, stooped over their beer. One of them had looked up on hearing the question and ventured the information, 'begging your pardon sir', that there had indeed been a house there at one time. He seemed to know more but appeared reluctant to talk, a common trait among country people. However he did suggest that Roberts might visit a local archivist who lived on the outskirts of the village and who might know more. Roberts thanked them but was not sure how far his interest might take him until he had examined his find in more detail and better light, so he made his way back to the cottage. The cold had set in a good deal and he was pleased to be home and stoke up the fire against the dwindling light.

Indeed the wind had got up and the approaching dusk was bringing with it the appearance of a wild night to come, and as a little later Roberts closed his curtains against the outside world it seemed as though the act itself had brought yet more furies. But he had his supper already prepared and he felt snug at his knowledge that he did not need to venture out again but could spend the rest of the day and evening alone with his pipe and his books.

There was, he had always thought, something inexplicably reassuring about settling down with a volume in front of a fire, with nothing to preoccupy one

but the labyrinthine paths of one's own imagination. On this occasion though, he did not find it easy to settle and felt restless. For the umpteenth time that evening he found himself poking the fire, his mind wandering. By now the wind had become gusty; there would be spells of quiet outside and then it would fling itself almost it seemed at a particular window or door, as though determined to break in. There would be sudden squalls which rattled sharply at the windows and gave him a start. Occasionally too there was a scratching at the pane as though of twigs.

Or fingernails.

'Dear me!' he thought to himself. 'This will never do.' Roberts was not an overtly imaginative man and his current reading – a biography I believe of Sir Roger Chantrey, the 18th century sculptor whose best known work is probably the statue of Sir William Pitt in Hanover Square – seemed in itself unlikely to encourage such hallucinations.

Roberts made a considered attempt to return to Chantrey's philanthropic attributes and eventually overcame his restlessness, spending the rest of the evening enjoying his supper and his book. But when it came time to retire to bed his earlier uneasiness only returned when his dog, usually an avid protector of his domain, absolutely refused to set foot out of the house. Try as he might, Roberts could not persuade the animal to go beyond the back door. He seemed afraid to do so and curled up whimpering on the floor rather than obey his master's instructions.

So Roberts retired to his bed, the dog more than eager to stay close to his heels, and fell asleep without further ado.

He could not be sure what woke him. He was not aware of any sound other than that of the storm, nor of movement, but his first awareness was of sitting up in bed, his senses alert. Although he had no idea what had disturbed his sleep, it was with some perplexity that he realized his dominant emotion at that moment was of fear.

After some moments he climbed out of bed and put on his robe, thinking himself fanciful that he should immediately seek out his stout stick as a means of defence, though against what he did not care to speculate. He noticed however that his dog, which had taken to lying on the floor at the foot of the bed, now sat bolt upright with his ears erect.

Perhaps the animal had heard a fox. Even so, it might be a miscreant of some kind, prowling about outside looking to make off with something of value, so he felt it best to reconnoitre briefly.

He came downstairs to find the fire still glowing in the hearth and instinctively threw on more logs. The firelight leaping against the walls gave the room a more cheerful air and the dog seemed to share Roberts' gladness at not being in the shadows. After all, Roberts decided, perhaps it would be

unwise to venture outside. With such a storm he might easily fall prey to a chill. At least, that is what he told himself and, in truth, he was pleased to be convinced.

He sat in the armchair and threw a coat over himself and, in time and with the storm perhaps abating somewhat, he fell asleep. Thus man and dog remained as the fire dwindled and, eventually, pale daylight arrived beyond the curtains.

With the promise of another sparkling day and a full breakfast inside him, Roberts was inclined to overlook his fancies of the previous night and attribute them to that second piece of pie, or perhaps an excess of cheese. The wild winds had by now gone and the lane outside the cottage was strewn with the debris which marked their passing. Twigs and dead leaves were strewn about the verge, here and there blown into heaps where they had become trapped against a fence or an out house.

One spot in particular attracted his eye, where the debris appeared as though thrown there by a dervish, so torn and tangled they seemed. But as he looked closer he discovered something else. There were marks in the ground where the frost had given liberty to a brief thaw. The marks, though indistinct, were of a foot of some kind.

At first Roberts thought them from the heel of his own boot from when he had collected logs from the out house. But then he fancied that perhaps they were from a hoof. Some creature had walked this way, though what kind of animal and when it might have done so he could not tell. One thing he could be sure of, however, was that they were directly beneath his window.

That would explain last night's happenings, he decided with not a little relief. Some farm animal had strayed and found itself in the garden of the cottage. So he went on his way to make the best of the day ahead. He thought he might call on the local archivist to see if more light might be shed upon the house in the wood, and accordingly set off towards the outskirts of the village.

At one point he paused to take in the scene, the lane reaching ahead of him and winding away up hill into the trees, the village behind him set snug against the winter chill. It looked as though it might snow. But as he looked back he noticed that once more he was not alone.

A figure, indistinct still, stood some way behind him and was apparently gazing in his direction. There was no reason whatsoever to assume that it was that same companion who had watched him from Jubilee Wood, though in truth there did seem to be something familiar about him. Roberts fancied he could detect an intensity about him that he did not quite like.

The dog stared too. It occurred to Roberts that, if indeed it was the same man from the day before, this was a strange to-do indeed. He told himself that it was some harmless local with nothing in his head but to follow strangers

about. Nevertheless, he was pleased this had taken place when it was still bright morning, and imagined for a moment the idea of being followed by this figure in the dark.

Very soon he came upon the cottage which had been described to him in the inn. He tethered his dog and knocked upon the door, which was opened almost at once by a beaming woman who, in answer to his question, assured him that she was the archivist he was seeking. Once inside he put down his stick and accepted a chair and explained his interest in what he took to be a ruined house in Jubilee Wood.

‘Ah yes,’ said the lady. ‘Indeed there was such a house as you describe. It belonged to a local family, the Allbarrows, who had lived here for some generations but whose fortunes seemed to have forsaken them.’

‘There were stories about the house, I believe, but then you know what local people are like. There was apparently a fire there, which caused damage although it seems the house still stood afterwards.’

‘For some reason though it was then abandoned. I am not certain about the date but I think it was probably in the early part of Victoria’s reign, so the house would have been derelict long before Jubilee Wood was planted there. Of the Allbarrows now there is no evidence. They have simply disappeared.’

‘I find it strange, though, that there is almost no sign of it now,’ said Roberts. ‘And even if it were fifty years after the fire it might be expected that some part of the house still stood when the wood was planted. Surely it would be most unusual to plant trees over the site where a house remained, however derelict.’

‘Unless it were demolished beforehand,’ the lady suggested.

‘But then why should that happen when it would be easier simply to plant the commemorative wood somewhere else?’ Roberts asked.

‘Perhaps the wood was planted on that spot for the very good reason that the house had stood there,’ she said.

Roberts looked puzzled.

‘What reason could there possibly be for doing so?’ he wondered.

The lady smiled enigmatically.

‘As I said, country people make up stories about things they do not understand. The old man Allbarrow was not well liked, it is said, and found a good deal of trouble keeping servants. The man was known to have a sizeable library but the books were mostly concerned with obscure treatises on astrology or alchemy or even witchcraft, apparently. Nobody knows for sure, because the tales only came from disgruntled servants and they were hardly educated and would certainly never have read the books.’

‘Allbarrow had a son who became involved with one or two of the local girls, which did nothing to improve the views of the village towards the family. ‘One of the girls is said to have disappeared, a servant, and she probably simply

ran away. But given the temper of the local people they held that the Allbarrows must have made off with her or driven her away or even sold her into white slavery.

‘So gradually the house became rather cut off and fell into decline. All the servants left and nobody would go near it. Nothing is known about the family’s fortune but it seemed to run out as far as one can tell, since their decline from thereon became marked.’

‘Can you tell me anything more about the library and Allbarrow’s strange interests?’ Roberts asked.

‘Very little, except that apparently it was in the library that the fire broke out. I have some papers somewhere which relate to the matter, though they seem wild and almost unintelligible and I have never been able to make anything of them. I can furnish you with one of them immediately, though I shall have to search for the other, which meant nothing to me since it was in Latin.’

She shortly produced an envelope for which Roberts thanked her, retrieved his dog and continued his walk. Once more the day seemed to wane early. The sun had gone and the light had grown bleak. Roberts had the lonely countryside to himself. Although he found himself glancing behind him more often than was necessary to appreciate the view, he saw nothing more of his earlier strange companion. Once more he took his luncheon at the inn and again returned to his books and his fire.

Before he went into the house, however, he looked once more at the mark in the turf outside the window. Yes, it could be the heel of a shoe, but if one were fanciful it might just as easily have been made by a bare foot were such a thing feasible in this weather, although the foot would have had to have been very thin. The imprint seemed to be more of bone than of flesh.

Roberts went in and made up the fire, quickly becoming as engrossed as it is possible to be in a biography of Chantrey. After a while he lit the lamps and took the archivist’s envelope to the fire. He settled himself in his chair before carefully opening it.

Inside he found what seemed to be part of a diary, torn from its binding. It was in a broad spidery hand and it read:

‘...a most remarkable transformation in spiritual faculties that a man might wish, so as to control those elemental beings which effect to shape the universe. It is written that most pleasing results may be obtained, even to becoming master of life itself, so that a man by so doing might live for ever.

‘After many years close study of such texts and learned discourses by the ancients, I believe I have had disclosed to me those secrets which underlie the limitations of this life. There remains but one course to take which will enable me to join the supreme beings, and that I am aware shall place my actions against what those lower intellects might call civilization.

But I am within reach of this most supreme of goals, and that it might be achieved merely by bringing an end to one so worthless, a simple seamstress, appears to me a very slight...

Here the writing ended. They were certainly ramblings, as the archivist had suggested, but there was an also arrogance in them which Roberts found distasteful. The document did not seem worthy of much more of his time, so Roberts went back to his books and forgot the letter, immersed instead in Chantrey's exploits in depicting the majesty of Wilberforce.

Once more as the day receded and darkness fell the wind grew, again almost as though it had been waiting for just that event. On this occasion it came fitfully, gusting against the cottage and making the windows shake. It began to moan about the chimney and on occasions seemed almost to be calling down into the little parlour where Roberts sat. Goodness! What wild weather they had in this part of the world, and so sudden. The night seemed alive and restless, and so impressed was Roberts by the almost human sounds it made that he did not stir from his chair. Nor did his dog move far from his master's side.

With such a noise about him, Roberts found he could not concentrate on his reading and instead decided to turn his attention back to his find in the wood the day before. He had placed it in a drawer for safekeeping, but when he opened the drawer and picked up the objects the cottage seemed to be struck a physical blow from without. Suddenly a tremendous gust blew one of the windows open. Roberts slipped the bag and its contents into his pocket and strode to the window and it took considerable strength to make it fast again as best he could, almost as though a determined burglar was pushing from the other side.

He was reluctant to retire to bed for some reason and returned to his chair, eventually dozing fitfully into sleep. But soon he was aware of a dream. He explained it afterwards as being as though looking in at some unfolding tale. It was confused and morbid and it made Roberts uncomfortable. Several times he started awake, but however much he disliked it as soon as his eyes closed again he was visited by the same dream, at the same point from which he had escaped it.

There was a house and a courtyard, gaunt and forbidding. Voices were raised in anger. A terrified girl fled through endless corridors and, in the darkness behind her, Roberts knew somebody or something followed. Whoever or whatever it was, Roberts found he was profoundly reluctant still to be present when it emerged into the dim candle light.

He woke with a start. The wind still blew but now there was another noise. The house apparently had rats, tearing at the skirtings as though trying to break through. His dog crouched with hackles raised and appeared terrified.

There was something about such a co-ordinated assault of noise in the darkness which Roberts found decidedly unsettling. He was concerned that the storm might break open the window as had happened the previous night, and so crossed the room to the window to examine the fastenings.

It was rattling already as he drew aside the curtains to examine it. What light there was from the room shone upon the panes and so made it difficult for Roberts to see outside, but he was aware of a fury of swaying and dancing trees and branches, bending to the storm and lurching suddenly at the window. They made fantastic and alarming shapes and in a moment of horror Roberts thought he imagined a figure, its head thrown back in a shriek of fury carried up by the storm, before he let fall the curtains and was back at his fireside in one bound, piling on more logs and wrestling with the image still in his mind.

He was later to recall the several dreadful hours spent until daylight as the storm and whatever it brought with it raged around the house and stalked the windows and doors. Whilst he waited in the bright firelight for the horrible possibility that the storm and perhaps something else might break in, he tried not to think of what he imagined he had seen outside, nor of whether or not it had been his imagination. But as daylight began to glimmer at the curtain's edge and the storm once more abated, he began to chide himself for his fears.

Over breakfast with the prospect of another fine day, he tried to reason with himself. Gradually, as now he allowed some measure of recollection, the nature of the apparition or whatever it was became clearer. He recalled its shape, the head thrown back in apparent rage, the fingernails like talons scratching at the window.

Whatever can have driven his mind to such outlandish lengths as to conjure up such a man? Because a man it was. Or at least, as he admitted uneasily to himself, what had once been a man.

Roberts felt somewhat restored after breakfast, though clearly he had much to think about. Eventually he put on his boots and went outside to look for evidence of some kind. The scene which greeted him did little to put his mind at rest.

The tracks he had noticed after the previous night's storm had now become a virtual maelstrom of wild gougings in the soft ground. They were at their most frantic and confused just under the window, and on examining the frame he found something else.

The frame, already old and rather fragile, now bore fresh marks such as if a wild animal of some sort had clawed at it. Roberts stared at it dubiously. He tried to reason with himself against a quite irrational alarm, but in spite of his reluctance to accept it he was sure the marks had not been there before.

That day he went to the inn early and deep in thought. After he had taken his luncheon he felt in his pocket for his tobacco and discovered his find from the wood which he had dropped in there the previous evening.

He placed the bag gingerly on the table and withdrew the rusted piece of metal from within. Here in the snug bar it seemed perfectly innocent, yet Roberts had a gnawing fear that it was the cause of the unpleasantness of the past two nights.

With his knife he began delicately to clean it of the rust and dirt which had accumulated. At one point he looked up and saw he had attracted the attention of the local man who had spoken to him there the previous day. The man smiled bashfully and made to apologize for his curiosity.

‘Not at all,’ Roberts reassured him. ‘Indeed you may be able to help me. Would you have any idea what kind of object this is?’

The man came over and, at Roberts’ insistence, joined him on the settle. He picked up the object and scrutinized it closely, holding it close to the end of his nose. Eventually he scratched his head and chuckled.

‘Well bless you, sir, I know what that is!’ he declared, holding it triumphantly before Roberts. ‘That’s just a thimble, sir.’

Roberts must have looked blank because he went on.

‘A thimble, sir, you know. Like as your mother – oh begging your pardon – my mother used to use for darning clothes and suchlike. A thimble, such as a saddler or a seamstress might use.’

A thimble, of course. It was crushed out of shape but now he could see it clearly. More thought provoking though was his companion’s explanation. What had the diary said of *‘one so worthless, a simple seamstress?’*

‘It’s seen better days,’ the man said, apparently puzzled at the interest Robert had in such a thing.

‘Yes,’ Roberts agreed. ‘I found it in Jubilee Wood yesterday. I was wondering whether it had any connection with the house you mentioned once stood there.’

‘Oh ah,’ said the man, replacing the thimble carefully on the table and withdrawing his hand.

Roberts told his companion how he had come by the thimble as the man’s gaze moved slowly between Roberts’ face and the objects on the table. He seemed to shrink away from them.

‘Do you know of any other artefacts which might have been found at the site of the old house?’ Roberts asked.

‘I can’t say I do,’ said the man. ‘It’s not the kind of place I’d choose to go ferreting about, begging your pardon again.’

‘Why not?’ Roberts wanted to know.

‘Well I daresay you know best, sir,’ said the man. ‘It’s not for me to say. But perhaps it doesn’t do to go disturbing these old places once they have settled, like. They have a mind to keep themselves to themselves.’

The man rejoined his companions and Roberts was aware of some whispered conversation and dark looks between them. He re-lit his pipe and sat over his beer for some time, thinking of all that had occurred over the past two days. Of one thing he was sure. The idea of spending another night in the cottage alone with this thing was repugnant to him.

Eventually and with grim reluctance he reached a decision and walked over to the bar, hailing the landlord. The man confirmed that yes, indeed he did have a room for the night if the gentleman should wish to take it, and so with a farewell to his informant Roberts and his dog left the inn and set off in the direction of Jubilee Wood.

The sunlight was pale and rather fragile and Roberts was keen to reach the wood before it set. He crossed the bridge at the foot of the long meadow and saw the massive bulk of Jubilee Wood ahead of him. It seemed to grow darker as he approached, and already the sun had dipped low in the sky.

A nervousness had gripped Roberts after his night’s experiences and the marks on the window, so it is not impossible to imagine his dread when his eye strayed to the corner of the wood by the stile, and saw there a figure, watching.

He tried to look away and increased his stride, now under the shadow of the wood. Its bare branches reached starkly towards the sky like bony fingers, in a piteous or perhaps vengeful gesture. The dog now hung back and Roberts caught his alarm. He was confounded to find that his courage had left him and for whatever reason he could not countenance stepping in among those trees again.

The countryside was settling into an expectant silence as he retrieved the thimble and its bag from his pocket and, gathering himself, hurled it high towards the wood. He watched it in the clear air as it fell without a sound among the dark shapes of the trees and, without a further glance towards the stile, he hurried back towards the inn. He later declared that the walk back towards the road was as unsettling as any moment during the adventure, and he could not help but recall the words from *The Ancient Mariner* about the traveller who:

‘...walks on,
And turns no more his head,
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.’

At last he made the road and hurried back to the cottage, packing just enough to see him through the night. He would return for the rest when it was daylight again, and now hurried on to the inn.

The evening passed pleasantly, with no more alarms. Roberts sat in the chimney corner with his book and his pipe and, when he retired to bed, nothing disturbed his sleep. In the morning as planned he had a man move the rest of his luggage to the inn, where he spent the remaining short time of his holiday in the kind of relaxed mood he had anticipated when he arrived there.

It was on the final day, when he was consulting his railway timetable and ordering up a dog cart, that he and the landlord were interrupted by the pot man to say that a lady wished to speak to the gentleman.

The lady was none other than the archivist.

‘I had been told you had moved your lodgings here,’ she said, though it seemed to Roberts that she was searching his face in a rather queer way for some clue as to the cause of his change of plan.

‘You will recall,’ she went on, ‘that I remarked on another document regarding the house in Jubilee Wood. I have now found it, and I felt it might interest you to read it. My Latin is not good, so it is beyond me I am afraid. No doubt you will have better luck.’

Roberts took the proffered envelope with promises to post it back to the woman once he had done with it. And so it was that he bade farewell to Brandeston with mixed feelings, its beauty undeniable but its forgotten history rather more disturbing. He caught his train and, having two hours to amuse himself, he took out the envelope and carefully removed the document from within. It was frail and was clearly torn from a book, like the other. As his informant had told him, it was in Latin. Although his Latin was a little rusty, he found not too much difficulty in its translation.

I berate myself for my carelessness in mistranslating the text, for although the first part of my desires is achieved and I have triumphed over death, my corporeal person is not as yet transmuted. The girl was used just as I had thought the master had instructed. According to Hermes Trismegistus the secret to capturing the soul of one of one's fellow creatures must be to use one of the subject's personal belongings in order to take from this creature such essences as shall deliver the final triumph and immortality.

‘Once obtained and subjected to the proper rituals, this object will lead to subjection of the body and then the soul of this creature. What remains of this being may then be disposed of as may suit convenience.

‘Yet I remain here and still limited to a body I had expected to outlive. So must I be patient through as many years as may prove necessary, until such time as I can discern the final secret which will give me all I desire. The secret remains within my grasp, whether it take a century or more, but my work must remain safe! Until the day I can reveal myself I must remain here and wait. All are gone, all will wither, so the secret must be protected. So it is I ...

The last phrase puzzled him: *'Quis est custodem super ea.'* 'Custodem' ought to mean 'guardian' and he frowned over the phrase for a few moments until he realized in horror what the message meant.

'So it is I who is a guardian over them.'

There is little more to tell. Roberts never cared to return to Brandeston and his views on certain aspects of life and its more melancholy philosophies were no longer as clear as once he would have declared. His appreciation of the pleasures of walking did not greatly suffer, though he admitted that he became rather more circumspect on where and when his tread should take him. As it was, the glimpse of a bare dark wood late on a winter afternoon caused him more than one uncomfortable walk home.