JOSEPH O'CONNOR

Shadowplay

VINTAGE

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Vintage
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Vintage is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK

First published in Vintage in 2020
First published in hardback by Harvill Secker in 2019

penguin.co.uk/vintage

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781784709150

Typeset in 11.5/15.76 pt Van Dijck MT Pro
by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd, Pondicherry

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

FSC www.fsc.org MIX Paper from responsible sources FSC® C018179

For Carole Blake

Abraham 'Bram' Stoker, clerk, later a theatre manager, part-time writer, born Dublin, 1847, died London, 1912, having never known literary success.

Henry Irving, born John Brodribb, 1838, died 1905, the greatest Shakespearian actor of his era.

Alice 'Ellen' Terry, born 1847, died 1928, the highest paid actress in England, much beloved by the public. Her ghost is said to haunt the Lyceum Theatre.

In every being who lives, there is a second self very little known to anyone. You who read this have a real person hidden under your better known personality, and hardly anyone knows it – it's the best part of you, the most interesting, the most curious, the most heroic, and it explains that part of you that puzzles us. It is your secret self.

Edward Gordon Craig (Ellen Terry's son)
from *Ellen Terry and Her Secret Self*

ACT I

Eternal Love

Victoria Cottage Hospital,
Near Deal,
Kent.
20th February, 1908

My dearest Ellen,

Please excuse this too-long-delayed response. As you'll gather from the above, I'm afraid I've not been too well. Money worries & the strain of overwork weakened me over this wretched winter until I broke down like an old cab-horse on the side of the road. What's good is that they say little permanent damage is done. My poor espoused saint has moved down here from London, too, to a little boarding house on the sea front & comes in on the 'bus to read to me daily so we can continue irritating one another contentedly as only married people can. We enjoy quarrelling about little things like sandwiches and democracy. I am still able to type write as you see.

Last night, I had a dream of You-Know-Who – he was in Act Three of *Hamlet* – & somehow you came to me, too, like a rumour of trees to a tired bird, & so here I am, late but in earnest.

How wonderful to know you are putting together your Memoir & how frightening that prospect will be for untold husbands. You ask if I have anything left in the way of Lyceum programmes, costume sketches, drawings or a Kodak of Henry, lists of First Night invitees, menus, so on. I'm afraid I haven't anything at all in that line of country. (Are you still in touch with Jen?) Almost everything I had I stuffed into my *Reminiscences* & then turfed the lot (five suitcases-full) into the British Library once the book was published, apart from a couple of little personal things of no interest or use to anyone. You're correct to recall that at one time I had a file of letters from poor Wilde but I thought it wise to burn them when his troubles came.

What I do have is the enclosed, a clutch of diary pages & private notes I kept on and off down the years & had begun working up into a novel somewhat out of my usual style or perhaps a play, I don't know. The hope was to finish the deuced thing at some point before my dotage. But I can't see that happening now that I seem to have lost the old vigour. In any case, since I have no savings & the London house is heavily mortgaged, I must marshal what forces I possess & find employment that will pay, which my scribblings have never done. The plan is to ship ourselves to Germany, perhaps Hamburg or Lübeck, the cost of living is lower there & Florence speaks the language. God knows, we are a little old to emigrate at our time of life, but there it is.

As to the scribbles: some parts are finished out, others still in journal form. I had intended changing the names but hadn't got around to it – your own name, being part

of you, seemed too beautiful to change – & then, some months ago, I happened across a curious tome by an American, one Adams, in which he writes about himself in Third Person, as a character in a fiction, an approach that rather tickled me, & so I thought let the names be the names.

Since you appear in proceedings yourself, you'll find looking through the ruins a curiosity at any rate & it might raise a smile or two at the old days of fire & glory, the madness of that time. Among the pages you will encounter a couple of smidgeons from an interview given by a certain peerless actress some time ago to *The Spectator*: the transcription of her answers is there but not the questions, don't know why. If any plank of the shipwreck is of use (which I doubt) for your Memoir, salvage rights are yours. Well, perhaps check with me first.

Much of it is in Pitman shorthand, which I think you know. If you don't, a local girl in the village will or there is Miss Miniter's secretarial service near Covent Garden – I can see the street clear as daylight but can't think of its name. You may remember her. She is in the Directory.

Some of it is in a code even its maker has forgotten. I wonder what I can have been trying to hide & from whom.

Well then, old thing – my treasured friend – it is a holy thought to imagine my words moving through your heart's heart because then something of me will be joined with something of you and we will stand in the same rain for a time under the one umbrella.

All fond love to you and your family, my dearest golden star, And Happy Birthday next week I think?

Ever Your Bram.

P.S.: Like a lot of thumping good stories, it starts on a train.

— I —

In which two gentlemen of the theatre set out from London for Bradford

Just before dawn, October 12th, 1905

Out of the gathering swirls of mist roars the hot black monster, screeching and belching its acrid bilious smoke, a fetor of cordite stench. Thunder and cinders, coalman and boilerman, black cast iron and white-hot friction, rattling on the roadway of steel and olden oak as dewdrops sizzle on the flanks. Foxes slink to lairs. Fawns flit and flee. Hawks in the yews turn and stare.

In a dimly lit First Class compartment of the dawn mail from King's Cross, two gentlemen of the theatre are seated across from one another, in blankets and shabby mufflers and miserably threadbare mittens and a miasma of early morning sulk. Their breath, although faint, forms globes of steam. Not yet seven o'clock. Night people, they're unaccustomed to being up so early unless wending home from a club.

Henry Irving has his boots up on the opposite seat and is blearily studying the script of a blood-curdling melodrama, *The Bells*, which he has played hundreds of times throughout his distinguished career, from London to San Francisco, from Copenhagen to Munich, so why does he need a script and why is he still annotating it after all these years and why is

he muttering chunks of the dialogue, with half-closed eyes, at the fields passing by the window? His companion sits erect, as though performing a yogic exercise intended to straighten the spine. The book he is reading is held before him like a shield. The train creaks onward, towards the northern outskirts of London.

Several centuries have passed since they last exchanged a syllable or even one of those wincing, gurning, eyebrow-raised stares in which, like all theatre people, they are fluent. The sheep's trotters and pickled eels bought hurriedly at King's Cross remain uneaten – somehow sweating despite the cold – in grubby folds of old newspaper. A bottle of Madeira on the floor has suffered an assault. A few drops remain, perhaps to reassure the drinkers that they are not the sort of gentlemen who would start on a bottle of Madeira in the cab to the station not long before seven o'clock of a morning and finish it in the train before eight. There is between them that particular freemasonry of the elderly couple who have long sailed the strange latitudes and craggy archipelagos of monogamy, known much, seen much, forgiven almost everything, long ago said whatever needed to be said, which was never that much in the first place.

'What is that rubbish you are reading?' Irving asks, in the tones of a maestro demonstrating 'sophisticated boredom' to a roomful of the easily amused.

'A history of Chislehurst,' Stoker replies.

'Sweet Christ.'

'Chislehurst is in several respects an interesting town. The exiled Napoleon III died there in terrible agony.'

'And now a lot of people live there in terrible agony.'

The day could be long and tense.

A bloodstained, scarlet sky, streaked with finger-smears of black and handfuls of hard-flung gold. Then a watery dawn

rises out of the marshlands, pale blues and greys and muddied-down greens, like daybreak in a virgin's watercolour. Staggered beeches here and there, sycamores, rowans, then a stand of queenly, wind-blasted elms and the Vs of wild geese breasting across the huge sky like arrows pointing out some immensity.

Beyond the steamed, greasy window, the beginnings of the midlands: the distant lights of towns, the smokestacks and steeples, the brickfields and quarries served by new metalled roads. Between the towns, the mellow, dreeping meadows with their byres and barns and crucified scarecrows, the towpaths by the green and calm canals, the manors and their orchards and red-bricked boundary walls, the mazes and lodges and rectories. It is so like the Irish countryside yet not like it at all. Something different, undefinable, a certain quality of light, a sadness, perhaps, an absence that is a presence. Welcome to an absence called England.

The chunter of the train as it strains up Stubblefield Hill, the leaden sway and spring as it descends and rolls on, its momentum disconcerting on the downhill curve, and from time to time a sudden heaviness, a sort of worrying drama, as the carriage gives a skreek or a shuddering lurch. The roped-up trunk shifts in the luggage rack above them – the porter wanted it in the cargo carriage but Irving refused – and now the edges of a town.

The backs of little houses inch by in the rain. Twines of washing slung from window ledges or strung across midden-heaps serenaded by furious dogs. A dirty-faced child waves from a glassless window. A chillingly scrawny greyhound pulls at its chain. The navy-black sky and a broken fingernail of moon and a downpour so sudden and violent it causes both men to stare out.

Portly, bearded, in the fourth decade of life, Stoker still looks like the athlete he once was. At Dublin University he boxed, rowed in the sculls, swam. He once saved a man from drowning. His suit is a three-piece Gieves & Hawkes of Savile Row, a subtle herringbone tweed, fashionable thirty years ago. The Huntsman greatcoat is of heavy frieze, like a general's. He has a talent for wearing his clothes, looks comfortable, always, though everything he has on this morning has been repaired more than once, re-seamed, let out, taken in, patched up, not unlike the friendship. The bespoke if re-soled brogues are newly blacked. His hands are veined and knotty, a bit obscene, like hands hewn from lumps of bog oak.

Irving is frailer, sunken-in since his illness, skeletal about the emaciated, equine face. He is ten years older than Stoker and looks more. But flamboyant, long-limbed, uneasy remaining still. Purple velvet fez, organdie and linen scarves, fur-collared cloak, mother-of-pearl pince-nez. Lines of kohl around the lakes of his dark, tired eyes, dyed-black hair dressed in curls by his valet every morning, even this one. Walking-cane with a miniature skull as knob ('the shrunken head of George Bernard Shaw'). Like any great actor, he is able to decide what age to look. He has played Romeo who is fourteen and Lear who is ancient, on the same tour, sometimes on the same night.

He lights a short thick cigar, peers out at the rain. '*Die Todten reiten Schnell*,' he says. The dead travel fast.

Stoker's response is a disapproving glower.

The train enters a tunnel. Flicker-lit faces.

'Put your eyes back in your head, you miserable nanny,' Irving says. 'I shall smoke as and when I please.'

'The doctor's advice was to swear off. You know this very well. I may add that the advice was expensive.'

'Bugger the doctor.'

'If you could remain alive until tonight's performance, I'd be grateful.'

'Why so?'

'It is rather late to cancel the hall and we'd forfeit the deposit.'

'Rot me, how considerate you are.'

'But if you wish to be a suicide, that is your affair. The sooner the better, if that is your intention. Don't say I didn't try to prevent you.'

'Yes, Mumsy. What a caring old girl.'

Stoker declines the bait. Irving pulls insipidly on the cigar, rheumy eyes watering as though leaking raw whiskey. He looks a thousand years old, a mocking impersonation of himself.

'I say, maybe I'll be lucky, Bramsie, old thing.'

'In what respect?'

'Perhaps I'll turn out like the feller in your ruddy old potboiler. The un-dead, my dears. Old Drackers. Mince about Piccadilly sinking the tusks into desirable youths. Chap could meet a worse fate, eh?'

'I am attempting to read.'

'Ah, Chislehurst yes. The Byzantium of the suburbs.'

'We are thinking of moving there, if you really must know.'

'You mean Wifey is thinking of moving there and you're thinking of doing what you're told, as usual.'

'That is not what I mean.'

'The lady doth protest too much.'

'Do shut up.'

'She'd look jolly good wearing the trousers, I'll give her that. Tell me, how do you squeeze into her corset?'

'Your alleged witticisms are tiresome. I am now going to ignore you. Goodbye.'

Irving chuckles painfully in the back of his throat, settling into a fug of smoke and sleepiness. Stoker reaches out and plucks the cigar from his fingers, extinguishing it in an empty lozenge-tin he always carries for the purpose. Thing like that could cause an accident.

He watches the wintry scenery, the swirl of snow among oaks, the long stone walls and hedgerows. All the endless reams of poetry this landscape has inspired. Burn an Irishman's abbey and he'll pick up a broadsword. Burn an Englishman's, he'll pick up a quill.

Ellen is with him now, her mild, kind laugh, one evening when they walked near the river at Chichester, one of those streams that is dry in summertime. What is the word for that? He blinks her back into whatever golden meadowland she came from.

An old song he heard years ago in Galway has been with him all morning like a ghost.

The sharks of all the ocean dark
Eat o'er my lover's breast.
His body lies in motion yon
His soul it ne'er may rest.
'I'll walk the night till kingdom come
My murder to atone.
My name it was John Holmwood,
My fate a cruel wrong.'

Who can explain how it happens, this capability of a song to become a travelling companion, a haunting? In the dark of early morning the strange ballad had swirled up at him out of his shaving bowl or somehow stared back at him from the land behind the mirror, for no reason he understands. And now, he

knows, it will be with him all day. He is trying to recollect more about the first time he heard it.

All writers who have failed – and this one has failed more than most – develop a healing amnesia without which their lives would be unbearable. Today, it isn't working.

Carna. County Galway. His twentieth birthday. Near the townland of Ardnaghreeva. He'd been there for his work, attending the courthouse, taking notes, when an adjournment was announced in the trial for murder of Lord Westenra's land-agent, one Bannon. The planned twenty minutes became an hour, then two. He went out to find a drink.

The people were speaking Gaelic. He felt lost, uneasy, frightened of something he couldn't name. Many were barefoot. The children gaunt as old keys. He couldn't understand it. Twenty years had passed since their wretched famine; why were the people still cadaverous and in rags? Why were they here at all?

A balladeer so thin that you could see the bones of her arms was singing a song but the ballad was in English. 'Little Holmwood,' someone said it was called. And then came the dreadful news from inside the courthouse. The magistrate had died, alone in his chamber, sat down to sign the death warrant but at the instant when he'd donned the black wig his heart and eyes had burst. Blood had gushed from him in torrents, drenching the floor of his chamber, until only his flesh and bones were left, like an empty suit. The prisoner had escaped. 'The devil's work' had been done. Some of the people nodded coolly while others crossed themselves or walked away. The ballad-maker never stopped singing.

Returned to Dublin, he'd been restless, shaken by what he'd witnessed. There was something terrifying about the singer's imperviousness, if that's what it was. Behind it, dark

murmurings nagged at him, as though the song had caused the death.

Unable to sleep, he had resorted to laudanum but it hadn't worked, left him feeling worse, disconnected, prey to red visions. The following night he attended the theatre, arriving late from his work at Dublin Castle. A few months previously he had begun reviewing for the literary pages of a newspaper. There was no money but it afforded free passes.

The play was into its third act by the time he arrived. A rainstorm was roaring outside. Soaked, cold, in the darkness he couldn't find his seat so he stood in the aisle near the prompt chair. Lightning sparkled through the high windows of the theatre – like many old playhouses, it had once been a church. The gasps of the thunderstruck audience.

Henry Irving stopped in mid scene and stared down at them grimly, his eyes glowing red in the gaslight. Paint dribbling down the contours of his face, like dye splashed on a map, droplets falling on his boots, his doublet and long locks drenched in sweat, his silver-painted wooden sword glittering in the gaslight, shimmering with his chainmail in the lightning. For what felt a long time he said nothing, just kept up the stare, slinking towards the lip of the stage, left hand on hip, wiping his wet mouth with the back of his sleeve. Sneering, he regarded them. Then he spat.

As the gasps arose again, he resumed speaking his lines, insisting he'd be heard, that their revulsion didn't matter, that in fact it was essential, a part of the show, a gift without which this play about evil couldn't happen.

'*'Tis now the very witching time of night, when churchyards YAWN*' – he opened his maw wide and let out a rattling groan – '*and HELL ITSELF breathes out contagion to this world!*' He shook,

clutched at his throat, as though about to vomit. *'Now could I drink hot blood and do such bitter business'* – gurgling the terrible words – *'as THE DAY WOULD QUAAAAKE TO LOOK ON.'*

By now the people were screaming. He began to scream back. Not a shout, not a bellow – a womanly scream. Plucking the sword from its scabbard, swirling at the air, screaming all the while like a banshee. It was frightening, too discomfiting. A man shouldn't scream. Some in the audience booed, tried to leave, others rose in stampedes of operatic cheers, from the gods came the thunder of boot-heels on the floorboards. Stoker, in the thronged aisle, felt thirsty, faint.

He turned and looked at the cheap seats, behind the cage.

Punks, drunkards, the disgorged and disgusting. Warted, thwarted vagabonds, rent-boys in drag. Madwomen, badwomen, gougers on the make. Fakers, forgers, mudlarks, midgets, Bridgets on the game and rickety Kitties. Oozers, boozers, beaters, cheats, picklocks, urchins, soldiers on leave, poleaxed goggle-eyed poppy-eating trash, refugees from the freakshows and back-street burlesques. And the smell. O dear Jesus. It buffets you like a gust, layers of fetid fetor and eyeswater yellow like the smoke from a train to Purgatory.

Why do they come here? Stoker doesn't know. All he knows is that they do come, they always will. If they screamed at the pain of their irrelevance, no one would listen. They need someone to scream for them. Henry Irving.

On the train for Bradford, memory comes to Stoker in Present Tense, as though recollecting the other man that every man contains.

Weak, trembling, the young critic makes his way to the street and walks around the building to the stage door. Already the crowd has begun to assemble. The play is still *on* – you can

hear the muffled shouts of the actors – but the people are here, in the rain. Dozens, scores, soon hundreds. A covered carriage clops up, the horses nervous, stamping, the driver shouting at the people to move away, there'll be an accident. Policemen arrive and try to hold them back, the crowd pushes towards the doorway, chanting his name.

Irv

ing.

Irv

ing.

Suddenly, roughly, two ushers emerge, one carrying an umbrella, the other a truncheon, hurrying him out like a boxer from the ring, through the storm of little notebooks pleading for autographs, through the macabre forest of outstretched scissors pleading for locks of his hair, and up the folding steps to the carriage. He's still in his stage clothes but with a raincoat thrown over him and a bottle of champagne in his hand.

As the carriage pulls away down Sackville Place, the police manage to barricade off the rabble.

'Stay where you are if you'd be so good, sir, this street is closed.'

'I work at Dublin Castle,' Stoker says quietly, showing the credential badge in his wallet. 'I am on government business. You'll want to let me through.'

Why does he follow? What is he doing? The last tram for Clontarf is about to leave from the Pillar and he needs to be on it, but he's not. Ahead of him, the carriage is now approaching the bridge. He walks slowly at first, stumbling on the greasy pavement, straining to see, now hurrying.

On the southern side of the bridge, the carriage is stopped by a herd of cattle being driven to market and he catches up. When

it jolts off again, through a minefield of cowpats, he continues. Round by Trinity College, where he took his mediocre degree, along Nassau Street, up Dawson Street, along by the Green, the shop windows shining with rain.

Under the arms of a dripping aspen on the edge of the park, he watches as the tall-hatted cabbie dismounts and opens the carriage door. The Shelbourne Hotel is shining like a palace in an illustration of Christmas, the crystal lamps on its pillars blaze.

For some reason there is a delay. He pictures the rooms, sees himself moving through them, the great splendour of the ballroom with its Italian marble and gilt, its orchestra playing Mouret's 'Sinfonie de Fanfares', portraits of judges and aristocrats in the alcoves, ice-buckets, upended bottles, shucked oysters, innocent apples, maids tactfully dusting nude statuettes. In his mind's eye he sees Irving striding through the furnace-like opulence, waiters take his hat, his gloves, his cane, the maître d' beckons towards a discreet table behind the ferns.

Rain on the aspens. A concierge and a pageboy hurry out through the glass doors with umbrellas. From the carriage alights a gracious woman in a long fur cloak. She pauses a moment, looks up at the sky, enters the hotel. The carriage clops away.

Winterbourne: a river that is dry in summertime.