

Printer's Devil Court



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Temple, Farley and Freeman. Solicitors
2 Delves Court
St James's SW1

Dear Sir

The enclosed item has been sent on to me by Messrs. Geo Rickwell, Antiquarian Bookseller, with the instruction that it be passed on to the beneficiaries of the estate of the late Dr Hugh Meredith. As you know, the library in which it was found was entrusted for sale to Messrs Rickwell. Of a few items not included in the sale, mainly for reasons of poor physical condition, the enclosed was deemed to have no commercial value. I am therefore sending it to you to deal with in any way you see fit. I would be grateful for acknowledgement of its receipt in due course,

Yours etc.

The book in question measures some eight inches square and the sheets, of a pleasing cream paper, had been folded and hand-sewn together with heavy card backing – a neat and careful piece of amateur book-binding. Apparently this, together with botanical illustration and embroidery, was one of the soothing hobbies taken up by Dr Meredith in old age, when he had long ceased practice medicine, not only because of his advancing years, the family story has it, but because he suffered from sort of intermittent nervous condition.

The book has no title on the cover or the spine but on the first page is written

The Wrong Life.

Hugh Meredith MD

The Book



In my first year as a junior doctor I moved into lodgings in a small court close by Fleet Street, an area which could not at the time have changed greatly since the days of Dickens. The court was small and the tall, narrow, grimy houses faced into a dismal yard, at one end of which a passageway led into the main thoroughfare. At the other end, a similar snicket led to the graveyard and thence to the church of St Luke-by-the-Gate. The church was pressed in on either side by two warehouse buildings and most of the graveyard was ancient and no longer in use. Old stones leaned this way and that, monuments and tombs were greened and yellowed over with moss and lichen. One or two trees struggled upwards to find what little light they could, and at their bases, more gravestones, sunken flat to the earth, were almost entirely obscured by weeds, ivy and rank grasses. In between was a mulch

of dead leaves. I sometimes took a short cut through the churchyard on my way – often late – to the hospital. Once, when my sister was visiting me and I took her that way, she said that she could not understand why I was not frightened out of my wits when walking.

‘Frightened of what?’

‘Ghosts ... the dead.’

‘As to ghosts, my dear Clara, I do not believe in them for a moment and dead bodies I see in the hospital every day so why would either of those things frighten me? The only thing to be wary of in these dark hidden corners of London are living thieves and pickpockets. Even the vagrants can be threatening after they have been drinking illicit cider.’ I laughed, as nevertheless, Sarah pulled me by the arm to hasten our way to the main gate.

When this story begins its late and dismal autumn. Every morning mist rose and hung over the river after a cold night and when it turned milder for a day or two, the

choking fog rolled over the city, muffling sounds, blurring the outlines of buildings and tasting foul in the mouth and nostrils, so that everyone went about with their faces half-covered in mufflers. Braziers burned at the street corners, where the hot chestnut and potato sellers rubbed hands stiff and blue with cold. Traffic crawled along the Strand to Fleet Street, headlamps looming like great hazy moons out of the mist. Fleet Street was a din of hot metal presses turning out the daily and evening newspapers. Open a small wooden door in a wall and you saw down into a bedlam of huge iron machines and the clatter of chutes, down which rolled the *Evening News* and *Standard*, *The Times* and the *Chronicle*, by the mile. Men at work below were dwarfed by the presses, faces grimy with oil and the air was thick with the smell of it and of fresh ink and hot paper. I loved it and wandered these old streets whenever I had a half hour to spare, venturing up unfamiliar passages and alleys into Courts and Buildings, discovering hidden

churches and little gardens. But best of all I liked to walk beside the river, or to stand on the terrace of the medical school which overlooked its great flowing expanse, now treacle black, now sparkling in the sun and carrying so many and various craft on its tide. Such idle moments were rare, however. I was usually attending patients, following great physicians on their ward rounds, learning from the surgeons in theatre and the pathologists in the mortuary. I loved my work as I had loved every moment of my studies. I suppose the latest in a line of doctors would either take to medicine as a duck to water or rebel and become a bank manager.

Two other doctors lived at number two, Printer's Devil Court, at the time of which I write. Walter Powell, a year ahead of the rest, James Kent and Rafe McAllister. James and I occupied one floor, Walter and Rafe the other. It was a dark house, with steep, narrow stairs and we each had a miserably small bedroom and shared bathroom, with temperamental plumbing.

But we had one large sitting room which stretched the width of the house and had a coal fire with a chimney that drew well, a reasonably comfortable sofa and three armchairs. There was a handsome mahogany table at which we ate and sometimes worked. The room had two windows, one at either end, in each of which stood a desk. There was precious little natural light and the outlook was of the opposite buildings. By now it was dark at 4 o'clock and lamps and fire were lit early. We kept irregular hours, sometimes working all day and all night, so that we only met to eat or relax together a couple of times a week. The landlady, Mrs Ratchet, rarely spoke a word but she looked after us well enough in her way, cleaning and clearing, making the beds and the fire and providing food at odd hours. We were fortunate, hard-working and innocent – or so I thought. I got on well with my fellows. James was a simple, easy-going man, with little imagination with a great deal of human sensibility. He was a plain-speaking and compassionate