

THE PALE CHILD

‘They never told you about the pale child?’

The apothecary leant in as he spoke, his voice hoarse from years of smoking a pipe. He’d sold potions from his booth in the market for longer than anyone could remember.

‘And you a butcher?’ said the tailor, his features rendered demonic by shadows sculpted by the flames in the hearth. We were seated in one of the many taverns crowding around the ancient square.

‘My father is the butcher,’ I replied. ‘One day I will run his business, but for now I only sell his meat.’

The apothecary stared at the fire. ‘The child will not care.’

I hoped they were merely making fun of a newcomer. ‘Why should I fear a child?’

‘Not any child,’ muttered the tailor.

The apothecary nodded. ‘You’ve seen him just the once, have you not?’

‘Who knows?’ I replied. ‘Four weeks ago, a mere glimpse. A small figure in rags who stared at me for a full minute before fleeing. No doubt a beggar’s son, or some runaway from the workhouse.’

The apothecary pointed the stem of his pipe towards the window. A full moon bathed the deserted market in eerie light. ‘He only appears on a night like this. You should pray for clouds before you leave the inn.’

I forced a chuckle. ‘Then I shall get wet. And besides, others than I might see him.’ I grinned at the tailor. ‘Why, perhaps you might find him stalking you tonight.’

The tailor shook his head. 'I am not a butcher.' A malevolent smile creased his face. 'Nor his apprentice.'

Perhaps the ale was taking effect—my nervousness was subsiding. 'I am young and strong. No child can intimidate me. So, tell me why I should cower before this infant.'

The tailor and apothecary exchanged hollow laughs. I became convinced they were taking me for a naïve fool.

The apothecary bent over and knocked his pipe against the grate. 'First, have you ever noticed that most of your trade is conducted as the sun sets?'

'So what? My customers have ceased their labour for the day. It is obvious they would buy meat on their way home.'

The apothecary shot me a piteous smile. 'If that were true, my own trade would follow suit. It does not, for my clientele comprises servants and women who reside at home, as does that of the other butchers. Your own stall is not established, but those who hunger for meat will find no other outlet open at dusk. Your competitors are long vanished, afraid of the pale child.'

I dismissed his logic as another attempt to scare me. 'Then they are cowards, frightened by a gossip's tale.'

'Do not confuse courage with ignorance,' said the apothecary.

I laughed. 'Then spin me the tale if you wish to see me tremble.'

'Very well.' The apothecary filled his pipe and lit it with a long taper from the fire. 'Many years ago, the city was in turmoil. The countryside was in revolt, and food was scarce. There were four butchers in the market. Three were as honest as a man could expect in your trade, but the other was a known scoundrel.'

'Some say he was in league with the devil,' added the tailor.

‘Indeed,’ said the apothecary, ‘although even Satan himself would have thought twice about entering an alliance with such a man.’ He blew a ring of smoke towards the ceiling. ‘I believe his stall was on the same spot yours now occupies. He had taken a mistress, the widow of a murdered candlemaker.’

‘Many claim the husband was slain by the butcher,’ said the tailor.

The apothecary shrugged. ‘Perhaps. We must assume that the lot of a widow in those days was so poor that she had little choice but to serve that evil man. To no-one’s surprise, he treated her so harshly that in the end she took her own life.’

The tailor touched me on the arm. ‘Filled her pockets with stones and walked into the river.’

The apothecary relit his pipe. ‘So they say. She had a child, a boy of perhaps nine or ten. The butcher’s cruelty did not stop at the mother. He kept the child chained in the space below his counter, only releasing the lad for long enough to steal from his rivals.’

‘You see,’ said the tailor, ‘only a child could crawl in the voids below the stalls. The boy would seize meat from the shelves, then disappear into the darkness beneath.’

‘Why did the child not try to escape?’ I asked.

‘He knew no other life,’ replied the tailor, ‘even though he must have hated the butcher.’

The apothecary shivered as he glanced at the moon. ‘No-one suspected at first. Times were hard, and an urchin stealing from the market was commonplace. The child was feral, a grotesque figure with long unkempt hair and fingernails like a dragon’s claws.’

The tailor resumed their tale. ‘Such a creature could not remain hidden forever. He was seen by one of his victims, who struck the fleeing boy with a cleaver, rendering the child’s left arm useless.’

‘You can understand,’ said the apothecary, ‘why the child seeks revenge on those who trade in flesh.’

I remained sceptical. ‘You speak of a time long past. The boy must have died centuries ago.’

‘Indeed.’ The apothecary sucked on his pipe. ‘The child was last seen alive a week after his injury. Another butcher almost caught him. The boy was now a liability.’

Their story was intriguing. I granted them that. ‘Did the evil butcher kill the boy, then?’

The tailor laughed. ‘Who knows? The body was never found, but how easy is it for a butcher to dispose of a corpse?’

‘But not a vengeful spirit,’ said the apothecary. ‘The butcher was found three months later, lying dead before his stall, a look of terror etched upon his face. Three months, mark you well.’

‘So?’ I refused to be seen as a fool. ‘A footpad, a failure of the heart... More likely explanations than a ghost.’

The apothecary pointed the stem of his pipe directly towards me. ‘Three months. And under six months later, the man who wounded the child was found dead, his throat ripped apart.

Perhaps clouds kept him alive a little longer. They say the boy appears twice at the shining of a bright full moon. Those who meet him for the third time will perish.’

‘Show me your evidence.’

‘Seek it yourself,’ snapped the tailor. ‘Ask the other tradesmen. Walk among the tombstones in the churchyard.’

I bade them a contemptuous farewell and sought the fellowship of more convivial companions. I was unaccustomed to strong ale and was in a merry mood when I left the

tavern. Desiring to reach my home as quickly as possible, I walked between the deserted market stalls.

A child blocked my way.

He was small, his hair long and matted. One arm hung limp by his side, the other extended as if he was pointing with the elongated curved nail that emerged from his bony finger. Even at fifteen paces, a smell reminiscent of a charnel house wafted towards me. Although he seemed frail, I confess I was scared and turned to leave the market by another exit.

The boy stood in my way once more. The brilliance of the moon was behind him, and I swear his body was translucent, allowing the silver light to illuminate his thin frame. Now he was pointing directly towards me, that terrible claw aimed at my heart.

I ran. Left or right, backwards or forwards, the spectre blocking my way at every turn. I could not escape that fiendish creature no matter how I tried, exhaustion mercifully overcoming my fear. It was ten minutes before I regained consciousness, quivering and breathless by the church wall that borders the market. I saw no more of the pale child that night.

I was reluctant to return to my work the next day, but in the light of dawn my father's wrath seemed more threatening than a spirit. As the days went by, my fears abated and I wondered if my experience had been a drunken hallucination. The moon had run almost a full cycle when, more through curiosity than fear, I took a stroll through the graveyard adjacent to the square.

In the far corner, hidden behind long grass, I found it. A moss-covered stone, barely legible: "Thomas Rouse, 1637—1682, butcher, killed by wild beasts in this market."

What manner of creature could penetrate the city walls and haunt those dark passages? What wounds would lead the authorities to conclude that an animal was responsible? My forgotten

fears resurfaced. Had Rouse had been a victim of the pale child? If so, how many others, too poor to afford a monument, had fallen prey to that vindictive ghoul?

I staggered back and tripped over another stone half-hidden by weeds. I read the faint words: “William Drew, butcher, 1725—1750.” Twenty-five years old, unlikely to have died naturally, even in those far-off days.

Trade was brisk that day, and my hopes of leaving early were dashed. The sky had been overcast, but as the lamplighter began his work, the clouds departed to reveal a full moon. Anxiety enveloped me as I hurried to clear the stall and take what was left to the poorhouse. Around me the other traders had finished, and I found myself alone in the silent centre of the market.

A cold wind blew through the alleyways as I walked at pace towards the exit and the salvation of the city streets. I could hear carousing from the taverns, the noise of cartwheels on the cobbles, every sound a reminder that I was close to safety.

The child stepped out in front of me, a mere ten feet away. His eyes now shone red, his body glowed with eldritch light, the hideous sharp nail aimed at my throat. The aroma of putrefaction assaulted my nostrils.

I dropped my bundle and sank to my knees, begging him for mercy, praying to the God I had forsaken. Still he came forward, his arm outstretched. Paralysed with fear, I was unable even to utter a cry for help from those in the unreachable streets beyond.

He was above me now, the foul miasma stronger than ever. I dared to glance at his hand. The finger no longer pointed at my neck, but instead was directed over my head.

Somehow, I knew what I must do.

I turned and half-walked, half-crawled towards my stall, the awful spectre following me.

With trembling hands, I unlocked the cabinet under the counter and retrieved my strongest knife. I used it to pry up the rotting boards that lined the floor.

The child now pointed down at the cobbles I had exposed. I raked away the soil between them and soon was able to pull out the heavy blocks. When I had done this, I scraped at the hard earth beneath.

Bones glistened in the moonlight. A small skull confirmed they belonged to a child. Watched by my persecutor, I gathered up the relics, placing them with as much dignity as I could muster into my bag. Together we walked to the graveyard where I used the knife to dig a hole in the shadow of the great church. There I buried the remains, mumbling a prayer as I did so.

When I had finished, I looked up.

The boy had vanished.

Since then, I have succeeded my father, and my stall is the most profitable in the market. My sons help me now. Often, when the nights are clear and the moon bright, I find a gold sovereign in my takings that I do not remember receiving.

I have decided to put some of my new fortune towards a proper funeral for the murdered boy.

For on those same nights, I sometimes catch a glimpse of a vague shimmering figure pointing towards the churchyard.

The pale child has not yet achieved the peace he craves.