

The Devil's Picture Book

I wasn't a drinker then. Not until that humid, hell-hot afternoon. Friday the thirteenth, it was. I'll never forget that.

I was parched. So when I passed the alehouse, a cold pint seemed an obvious choice. The tavern sat in a row of second-hand stores and ethnic food outlets. Only the upper flint walls and gambrel roofs betrayed the age of the building. The interior was dark; its paintwork stained with centuries of smoke and grime. The three old men standing at the bar weren't in the mood for talking, so I found a seat by a table in an alcove at the back.

I'd almost finished my drink when a couple sat down beside me, both I would estimate in their late eighties. Neither asked if I minded, so I suspected they believed this spot in the shadows was theirs. Perhaps that's why none of the other patrons dared sit there.

They were thin and clad in long dark coats; strange garb for a warm summer's day.

The man took out a pipe and lit it. 'Ain't seen you in here before, boy.'

I anticipated the barman would object to my new companion smoking. He glanced in my direction and then returned to serving. 'No, my first time.'

'Be the last,' cackled the woman. 'Strangers never return.'

No surprise... the floor was dirty, the furnishings dated. There was a chill in the air, although the thermometer had edged past thirty on the street outside.

'Really?' I feigned surprise. 'It's got a lot of character.'

The man grimaced. ‘Don’t get the young ones in here. Nothin’ for them. None of that music or stuff.’

‘Only us old codgers,’ added the woman. ‘And we’re not long for this world.’

The alcove filled with smoke—the tobacco possessed an unpleasant tinge, a combination of herbs and rotten eggs. I wondered if they expected me to buy a round. Neither had brought a glass to the table.

‘Some people would like that,’ I said. ‘Bit of quiet.’

‘Too old,’ the woman said. ‘Time they knocked it down.’

My eyes adjusted to the gloom. The beams supporting the ceiling, scarred by the ravages of time and woodworm, shrouded in the webs of long-dead spiders, spoke of a pre-Victorian origin. Rot crept up the panels of the wall from the floor, resembling the mouldering fingers of the dead reaching from a tomb.

‘When was it built?’ I asked.

The old man guffawed, revealing a mouth filled with rotting teeth. ‘Near as ancient as us, eh?’

‘A historic spot like this should attract visitors.’

‘Who’d want to be here?’ growled the woman. ‘I only come ’cause of him.’

She didn’t even look at her husband, if that’s what he was. Instead, she’d nodded at the wall behind me. A sudden tiredness overwhelmed me.

‘Can you feel it?’ she asked.

I stifled a yawn. ‘What?’

The man blew out a ring of smoke that drifted into the darkness above us. ‘The atmosphere, boy. The cold, the damp.’

He was right. I was shivering and my head swam. Perhaps several long draughts of ice-cold lager had affected me. 'It's not warm in here.'

'It's the ghosts,' she replied. 'Most haunted pub in the city.'

I laughed. I wasn't superstitious. Not then.

A minute later, I was no longer cold, my tiredness replaced by a strange contentment. I decided I liked the pair. Their outfits told me they were poor—I should offer them a drink. I now suspect a link between my transformation and the contents of his pipe.

'Can I buy you something?'

The woman shook her head. 'Very Christian of you, young man, but we don't drink.' She cast a venomous glance towards her husband. 'Only come here to meet his friend.'

Her partner sucked on his pipe, the bowl burning fiery red in the shadows. 'He ain't my friend, no more'n he be yours.'

I looked around. The customers and the barman stood in silent contemplation. None had acknowledged my companions, so their acquaintance was not among them.

'Are you expecting someone?' I asked. 'Only I don't mind sitting somewhere else.' I didn't fancy moving. I found a strange comfort in their presence.

The man gave me a toothless smile. 'No, boy, you stay there. He ain't mindin'. Never does.'

The woman touched him on the arm. 'The lad should go. Maybe this once?'

'Don't be stupid, Agnes,' he replied in what was almost a whisper. 'He enjoys meetin' new people. Been a while since we're havin' a young 'un.'

She looked at me for a second. I sensed fear in her eyes.

I dragged up a cliché to break the silence that followed. ‘Do you come here often?’

‘Now and again,’ said the old man, his face obscured by smoke from the pipe. ‘When we have to.’

They couldn’t have expected me to turn up. The patrons ignored them. The only other potential source of companionship was an unlikely visitor who neither classed as a friend.. It seemed the couple offered no companionship to each other, their only bonds habit and convention.

The man continued to draw on his pipe, but I no longer noticed the foul smell. I wanted to help them, to put joy into their miserable lives. I couldn’t sit with an empty glass any longer, so I made another unsuccessful plea to let me buy them a drink.

Rebuffed again, I tried to get to my feet. The man put out a hand to stop me, but my momentum forced him to let go. Dizziness overwhelmed me. The room spun, but somehow I regained my balance as I turned towards the bar.

A stranger blocked my way. Tall, dark-haired, tanned, his eyes a cold grey, an aquiline nose, unnaturally white teeth. He wore a black suit, shiny with age. There were no lines on his face, but I sensed he was old.

‘Please sit down.’ His cultured voice carried a hint of a foreign accent. My giddiness remained; I was glad of the excuse.

The stranger sat between the couple and pulled a pack of cards from his pocket. ‘I like to pass the time with these. Some call them the devil’s picture book. You’d think he would desire something more risqué.’

I nodded as he shuffled the pack.

‘The authorities forbid any other game but cribbage in licensed premises. I find the law tiresome. It inhibits the imaginative. You know the rules of the game?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

He pulled a scoring board from his inside pocket—carved ivory, or a bone of some other dead creature. ‘Including cut-throat?’

The stranger sensed my ignorance. ‘If you don’t declare the full value of your hand, I claim your loss. And vice versa. Somewhat like the parable of the talents in the so-called good book. God abandons those who don’t achieve their potential.’

‘I didn’t think God abandoned anyone.’

‘He’s abandoned you.’ He smirked.. ‘Shall I shuffle and deal?’

I had no time to refuse. His hands were a blur as he mixed the cards. He dealt me six, the same number to himself.

The old woman pre-empted my unspoken question. ‘We no longer play.’

‘Shall we make this interesting?’ asked the stranger. ‘A small bet. Say one pound fifty?’

A strange amount, I thought. But one I could afford to lose. ‘Why not?’

My confusion must have been clear when I realised we played with a Tarot deck.

‘You are familiar with the Latin version?’ asked the stranger.

I merely nodded and studied my cards, discarding two.

‘Please cut the deck, then. I shall concede the first crib.’

I split the undealt cards and turned the top one over: the Hanged Man.

‘My mistake,’ said the stranger, pocketing the card and turning over an image of a corpse pierced by a myriad of blades. ‘I thought I’d removed the major arcana.. You know this is the ten of swords?’

I should have walked away. My will and legs failed me as he placed the king of pentacles on the table. I played my hands without enthusiasm, convinced my opponent would cheat. Nevertheless, I reached the target of 121 with ease.

‘Congratulations,’ he said. ‘Sadly, gaming is illegal in establishments like this. We must agree your reward will be a simple recompense for your fellowship.’ He held out his hand. ‘Agreed?’

‘Agreed.’ His palm was ice cold when I shook it.

The stranger reached into his pocket and took out a small leather bag before pouring the contents into my hand. ‘My debt. And now I must depart, although I look forward to our next encounter.’

My world clouded, and I knew nothing more until I found myself stumbling towards the counter.

The barman’s voice penetrated the swirl of light before me. ‘You okay, mate?’

My vision cleared.. Other eyes fixed on mine, split between concern and contempt.

‘Sure,’ I lied. Another deep breath and I gained enough strength to complete the last few steps to the bar.

‘Another one?’

‘Better just have a coke. No ice, please.’

‘Been here long?’ I asked, as he placed my order on the counter.

‘Three years,’ came the reply. ‘Long enough.’

‘Is it true the place is haunted?’

One of the elderly men at the bar cackled.

The barman smiled. ‘Old wives’ tale. They say back in the seventeen hundreds the old couple who lived here lost their souls to Satan in a card game and he’ll keep them out of Hell if they find him a new victim every year.’

I felt the coins freeze in my hand, so cold they burned. Each one was a five pence piece.

I counted them...

Thirty pieces of silver.

I swivelled around. The chair I’d vacated stood empty against a blank wall. There was no alcove, no table, no couple, no tall stranger.

I haven’t been back. I stay clear of old places, always sniffing the air for that unmistakable mix of brimstone and tobacco.

Even though I keep telling myself I had a lucky escape, I can never shake off the fear I’d gambled away my soul at that table.