

The Devil's Work

GARRY LINNELL

I.

He cradled the dead body in his hands.

It was such a beautiful thing. Death was a brazen thief that stole the warmth from his victims while he watched. But it never took everything. It still left enough to touch and gently stroke and remind him how majestic a corpse could be, long after its heart had stopped pounding and its limbs had stiffened and its blood had clotted and turned cold.

Besides, he was skilled in removing all traces of death's touch, for he was a man who took pride in restoring his victims to life.

So patient was he, so precise. He could take a body twisted and frozen and bent out of shape, all matted with blood and bone fragments. Within a short time it would be cleaned and propped up so lifelike, so *alive*, you were sure its eyes were gleaming and its chest about to rise with newly found breath.

Who knew why he enjoyed doing this so much or why it had become such a passion. Perhaps it offered a kind of redemption, a way to pay back the universe for all the killing. Perhaps that is why he took so much care, for once the grisly business of extinguishing life was over he became gentle with his victims, almost loving.

He put the body down carefully and picked up a knife from his bench. It was sharp and his hand was steady. He had done this many

times in many parts of the world. He knew exactly where to make the first incision. He knew how to flay the skin, to peel it to one side, to expertly cut through all the bone and cartilage and tendons before removing the eyes and cleverly adjusting the head to a more pleasing angle.

There were other things he could be doing, of course. There was always more work to be done. But the body in front of him had been dead for more than twelve hours and he never liked it decaying for too long.

There was also no point going outside. It was just after breakfast on Saturday morning, 21 May 1892. A storm had come roaring across Port Phillip Bay in the southern Australian city of Melbourne. He could hear the wild banshee scream of the wind hammering on doors and slamming against windows. Gobs of rain – heavy, leaden – pounded the roof. His rented home, perched on a corner lot on an exposed hilltop, was almost sobbing, its timber frame groaning and sighing like an arthritic old man.

In the front yard two pomegranate trees had surrendered the last of their fruit. No real loss. He did not care for their red seeds and crimson pulp. He was a man of simple tastes and thought the pomegranate's edible qualities overrated. He preferred something less flamboyant, like the orchard in the backyard with its promise – sadly unfulfilled in recent months – of fragrant lemons and plump pears and twisted ropey vines sagging with grapes.

He concentrated on the task before him. He squinted through small wire frame spectacles perched high on his nose. His forehead, ringed by a receding hairline, was furrowed. He could have been a bank clerk methodically counting pennies. He made his first incision, a preliminary cut next to the breast. But as he pulled the knife away to study his progress he heard a bell, its faint ringing almost suffocated by the ferocity of the storm.

Someone was at the front door. In this weather?

Sidney Dickinson put his knife down, his concentration broken. He wiped his hands, stood up and walked down the hallway to the

front of the house. Behind those spectacles were eyes that hinted at sadness. He had a thick black moustache and goatee that only partly disguised a gaunt, weary face. He had turned forty-one a few weeks earlier and while there had been much wonder and excitement in recent years, there had also been stress.

He had travelled the world, relentlessly it seemed, on ships, trains and bumpy horse-drawn carriages that jarred a man's bones no matter his age. He had endured typhoid, his body wracked by abdominal pains and drenched in feverish sweats. Then, just as he began regaining his strength – the doctors had warned a full recovery might take years – a drunken thug had wrenched his glasses away and hurled him to the floor of a hotel lobby, kicking and beating him almost senseless.

It was enough to make a man feel old. But the incessant travel, the sickness and the bruises from that beating were nothing compared to what Dickinson had confronted in recent months. He was hardly a squeamish man. He never blanched when it came to cutting flesh or scooping warm guts with cupped hands. But he had seen and heard things over the past eight weeks – hideous, revolting *things* – that had given him new insights into the depravity and evil that lurked in some men's hearts.

It had left him horrified and saddened. For days he had felt a heavy weight pressing upon his spirit.

He walked passed the parlour to his left with its fine piano and open fireplace. Several excellent paintings adorned the walls. He had closely studied those works of art soon after renting the house. They had met with his approval, which was no small thing, for Sidney Dickinson was a man who had spent much of his life scrutinising the brush strokes of the masters, delighting in the way they captured a fleeting moment to convey so much meaning and feeling.

Dickinson had stood behind podiums around the world and lectured on art to hushed and appreciative audiences. He had only recently completed an extensive tour of New Zealand and Australia. Reviewers had admired Dickinson's 'attractive voice', his 'rich fund of

dry humour', his 'witty and terse' style of delivery. They often referred to him as 'Professor Dickinson', which was perhaps a little of an exaggeration, although he never minded. He had mesmerised crowds in Sydney, Melbourne, London, Paris and across his native America with his stereopticon magic lantern, a dazzling contraption with two lenses that projected colourful scenes on to large screens, dissolving one and replacing it with another image.

An American newspaper had hailed him for inventing 'a new form of entertainment for intelligent people . . . any showman can throw pictures on a screen, but it takes a scholar and a critic to select the pictures and draw the value from them'. Dickinson had written critiques of the French Impressionists and once informed readers of *The Boston Daily Journal* that Renoir's 'Luncheon of the Boating Party', while 'at first sight a preposterous jumble of colour and form . . . is found on examination to achieve a certain out-of-door and atmospheric effect which is recognizable as very true to atmospheric conditions'.

He was a man of cultural and intellectual pursuits who enjoyed bushwalking with a loaded revolver and shotgun by his side. Nature's silence offered serenity and new colours and shapes to admire, a welcome change from the drab stone and muted pastels of the city. Australia was still a new country to him and there was something about its strange and often desolate landscape – that sheer expanse of *nothing* – which appealed to him. The light was stark and, in summer, almost blinding. He thought it would be 'quite impossible to find, in any part of the world, more striking effects than are found ready to the artist's hand in the Australian landscape'.

But that Saturday morning, when he opened the front door all he could see was a washed-out sky, a gloomy canvas stained with nothing but swirls of black and grey. And in the corner of the front verandah, huddled hopelessly against the driving sheets of rain, stood a drenched and wretched figure with a faint glimmer of hope in his eyes.

Sidney Dickinson, art critic, correspondent for *The New York Times* and, because one needed a reliable source of income, local

representative of the Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York, was impatient.

There was a body on his workbench at the rear of his house that required his attention. It was a purple lorikeet, one of a 'fine assortment of cockatoos, parrots and other brilliantly plumaged or curious birds' he had shot while on a collecting trip in the countryside the day before. Dickinson loved his taxidermy and had several hours of 'congenial labour' ahead of him that day, removing and preserving their skins before stuffing and mounting them so well a visitor would swear he had brought them back to life.

But first he had to listen to that stranger on the porch, a man with wet dark hair plastered to his scalp, clothes sodden and hanging heavy, face ashen and almost jaundiced.

The bedraggled visitor, a salesman for a local publishing company, was offering him a gruesome confession of lust, betrayal, murder and demonic possession. For a mere sixpence Sidney Dickinson could thumb through the damp pages of a just-published pamphlet and read about a man so wicked and morally bankrupt the world now knew him as 'the criminal of the century'.

That man, that creature called Frederick Deeming, was rumoured to be Jack the Ripper, the unidentified serial killer who had murdered and mutilated at least five women in London's Whitechapel district several years earlier. Deeming, a serial bigamist, conman and swindler, had slaughtered two of his wives and all four of his children, slicing their throats and burying their bodies in shallow cement tombs on opposite sides of the world. He had roamed the planet for years under various aliases, preying on the innocent, the gullible and the desperate. In just a few days' time the colony of Victoria intended to put a rope around his neck and send him back to the hell that had spawned him.

Sidney Dickinson put his hand in his pocket and handed the salesman his sixpence, more out of charity than curiosity. He didn't expect to learn anything new. He had already heard this story before, in all its stomach-turning detail.



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Two days earlier he had stood in front of the killer and spoken to him. The aftermath of that visit with Frederick Deeming would leave him shocked and sleepless for a long time to come.

It would also confirm what Sidney had long suspected. Reality was nothing more than a carefully crafted stage. Behind it lurked a realm of shadows where demons and monsters like Frederick Deeming dwelled and preyed on the living.