

*Desmond MacNamara*

## Confessions of an Irish Werewolf

by  
Desmond MacNamara

---

---

As I walked toward my lodging at a respectable widow's house near the Marino, my thoughts turned to teeth. I lost two molars when visiting the Hyde Park Exhibition in 1851. I blame the Sudan giant, sent by the Khedive of Egypt to decorate his pavilion. Such strong bones: camel meat, I expect. I left a great deal of his ebony carcass in the remaining market gardens of St. Marylebone. Caused a deuce of a scandal. Anyone would think he was a Knight of the Garter instead of the younger son of a prosperous slave trader. Of course, they were all against slavery. The British government, the Egyptians, the French and the Sudanese, but everyone knows how to look away when a financial interest requests a little accommodation: a blind eye or a job for a brother-in-law. And theoreticians like Malthus or Adam Smith have a lot to answer for. While piously regretting the agony, they reckoned our Irish Famine a great social success. It reduced the population by half and improved the acreage available for pasture and ranching.

I arrived at my lodgings to be greeted warmly by Mrs. Devereux, who set about preparing a meal of codlings and ragout. This excellent woman, originally from Wexford, I believe, and a true Munster lady, was nevertheless descended from the stray fruit of the Richard Devereux who offered up his head in the Tower of London to Tudor political scheming. An ignoble death, yes, but his generous seed thrives in Ireland where he had served his Queen a little unwisely.

After the meal, before a fire of tree trimmings, I set about examining my clues to the identity and fate of my young quarry who had so successfully eluded me on Ireland's Eye. I admired her ingenuity, which made me long to meet her. I felt we might have a lot in common. Yet, somehow I was perfectly able to reconcile this feeling with the knowledge that I felt compelled to eat her; or, at least, her more succulent parts. There is always a rejected residue, as in Nature. A lion eats part of its prey, scavenging animals snarl over most of the remainder, and there is always a little left for the vultures. In Ireland there were always scavengers. The wolves driven into the

*Logos 2.4 – Fall 2003*

*Desmond MacNamara*

open by the rape of the Munster forests, the foxes, the pine martens, the crows and the eagles. And after them the insects, wasps and the demon of corruption itself, a living and baleful entity.

Ah, but this is a scatological digression. I laid out my clues on a collapsible bezique table, such as were quite popular a hundred years ago and are still found lying around. Perhaps even used for bezique or patience. I dipped a phosphorous Lucifer stick down into the bottle, which still contained 1/10 fluid oz. of liquid, and touched it to the back of my hand. It made a dark brown-purple spot, which I enlarged to a short stroke. When dry it remained insoluble under tap water in the scullery but came away readily with powdered pumice from my washstand. I resolved to leave it with an intelligent apothecary on the North Strand to learn more.

The handkerchief was incomplete, but by laying it on a sheet of foolscap I could deduce that it was originally nine inches square. I examined the lace crochet. Beyond being pretty in a girlish way, it seemed neutral of identity. As a nervous relief I laid a piece of fine paper on the needlework and rubbed it with a fingertip smeared with lamp soot. This was an old trick, employed in divination or to seek a different perspective of the same object.

I did it idly, almost out of habit, not hoping for any enlightenment. Almost immediately I could pick out the oddly-formed letters MACN on a wider cartouche segment of the lace on the leg of the drawers. This was facing the front of the garment, though it was hard to tell. A similar lacey pattern that would have hung over the back of the knee of the wearer seemed to show the letters CON . . . Y. A degree of speculation was involved, since the art of the crochet hook or, perhaps, the skill of the crocheteuse, did not lend itself to clear calligraphy. The purpose of the lace, I am told, is twofold. To reassure the wearer as to her status, her social and general acceptability, or to titivate her limbs when undressing before a lover or a young husband. Country maidens wore none at all, nor do most serving girls, as the reader has probably noticed. In these classes, a shift or a petticoat is usually found sufficient. This tells us something about the wearer of this half garment.

She was not a young lady born in that class, or she would not have traveled by horse tram and certainly not alone. Not a milkmaid or a servant girl, so what? A shopkeeper's daughter or the favorite daughter of a senior clerk in a city counting house. Speculation is so fascinating, but something more solid

*Desmond MacNamara*

is needed. For people like me, and we are very rare beings, the hunt is obsessive and cannot be set aside or evaded. We are chosen by some destiny as hunters and all our blood and flesh is directed to that end, whatever moral doubts or aesthetic reservations which centuries of experience and ever-changing cultures may have insulated our bestial core.

So I rang for my landlady, an intelligent woman with an extensive knowledge of local events and important trivialities.

“Is there a good apothecary in the neighborhood, Mrs. Devereux?”

“There is indeed, Mr. Fitzlupus, just down the road. A fine Medical Hall with the usual three jars of colored liquid in the window and the two pyramids of rhubarb and garlic pills.”

“Garlic pills?”

“Yes, Mr. Fitzlupus. His own brand. Young Mr. Stoker next door is studying medicine and swears by them. So do I. For the fever, stones or even the gout. Economic too. Look at the cost of getting the steam tram to Lucan Spa and drinking that awful water at tuppence a glass.”

“Quite so, Mrs. Devereux.”

“And sitting in the water in a wet shift, pardon my mentioning it, sir.”

“Of course, of course. We are both, I think adults. I think I will visit your apothecary.”

“Straight down the road past Fairview Corner, you can’t miss it.”

A few minutes later I pushed the door of the Medical Hall and discovered Mr. Jeremy Owens, an amiable and observant Welshman, in the act of casting pills from a boxwood mold. He was about forty, with slightly wavy brown hair, well coiffeured, and a moustache trimmed to a point where it grew down the sides of his mouth. He was dressed in striped trousers, linen shirt and green waistcoat, rather like a surgeon in an amputation theater. I produced my small bottle from the island and asked if he could analyze its

*Desmond MacNamara*

remnants. He uncorked it and smelled with deep sniffs. "Well, let us see now," he announced.

He put his finger on the opening, inverted the bottle and tipped his tongue to the dark spot on his finger. He did this a few times, then poured some water from a flask into a drinking glass and cleansed his mouth. He repeated the process before drawing a few drops onto a sheet of white glazed paper. He examined it by eye before drying it over the fantail of a gas burner. Scratching the dried stain with a scalpel, he pursed his lips and said: "As I thought. A solution of potassium permanganate in walnut juice."

"Walnut juice. Good heavens."

"A very intense stain for skin, wood or anything, really. The potassium permanganate is also a purplish stain when its crystals are dissolved in water. It is for writing on a reluctantly permeable surface: not paper. Polished wood, smooth stone, shell, even human skin."

He laughed dismissively.

"I see! Thank you very much. Instead of enlightening me you have added to my perplexity. But I am grateful. Pray what is your fee?"

"Don't bother about that. Need any garlic pills? You look a bit pale to me."

Now I know, and many others know, the popular belief that garlic is a bane to the Deathless. Well, we werewolves are the only deathless ones. All others are mere hobgoblins, pisogues and mindless thoolermerauns without corporal reality. All the garlic in the world would not trouble their insubstantial reality nor could it cure the belief in them by the ignorant. Down the years I have banqueted on their bodies: usually young ones. Either sex will do, though my tastes incline me to young women. My three sisters near Ballymore Eustace prefer young men, especially poets and musicians. Goodness knows they eat infrequently but their cave is well known. The Earl of Kildare and the Duke of Ormonde both rode to see them, but kept out of sight, far from the mouth of the cave.

I suspect the fact that the were-girls were naked as well as transcendently beautiful has something to do with it. Typical of humans. Their lives are so

*Desmond MacNamara*

brief that scattering or collecting their seed is an urgent need. My own sexual urge is enormous, coming up to my killing season, but I suspect that a natural philosopher with his brass microscope would find my sperm count nonexistent. In my pre-menopausal phase I suspect that I infect with infertility. But I am no expert in these matters.

However, my business with the apothecary was done. I bought five boxes of pills, resolving to throw them in the horribly polluted River Tolka nearby. As I left I remarked amiably, "I hope you enjoy your work with pills and powder cachets."

He shook his head. "I have a very sad duty, assisting Dr. McEvoy in a post-mortem examination of a young woman whose body was recovered from the estuary yesterday. She must have been digging for sand eels because, although she was dressed in a two-piece suit, her feet were bare and her stockings were in her pocket."

"Would you describe her as a *boule de suif*?"

"Plump," he smiled. "Pleasantly plump, anyway."

I felt excited. "Could I come with you? I am a licensed surgeon."

I hoped he wouldn't ask me when and where I was awarded this distinction. The answer, "In the wars of the Spanish Succession," sounded a long time ago, even though it only feels a few years to me. Anyway, I never served under John Churchill and not very much with Dillon's regiment in Flanders. Ah, the happy days before the Hanoverians crossed the sea to flaunt their weighty mistresses in London. Their chair carriers earned their pennies the hard way.

But the apothecary, who was a Huguenot or a Moravian, appeared prepared to take me at my word. I tend to speak with gentle friendly authority.

"Dr. McEvoy's experience in forensic matters is not extensive. I am sure he would be delighted by your kind offer. Certainly he relies on me to detect poisons or certain drugs. I rely mainly on smell, which is usually unpleasant when removed from the stomach of a corpse."

*Desmond MacNamara*

“Are you sure that will be acceptable? How will I know? Should I bring my surgical case?”

“Don’t concern yourself. I will send a messenger with a note and a note of confirmation to you afterwards, if you will furnish your name and address.” The apothecary twisted his mouth and raised his eyebrows when I gave my name. “Mr. Fitzlupus. Unusual name, but of good Hiberno-Norman stock, I am sure. Well, sir, you shall hear from me.”

The same evening, after lamplight, the messenger boy arrived with a note indicating a time and place for the post-mortem, at half past eight in the temporary morgue in Store Street just beyond, but safely so, the brothel district, so beloved of callow college students and rutting ranks of the British army. It often seemed that alcoholic drink and rowdy company were as important as willing flesh, though both were usually in full supply.

The following morning I hailed the first car passing: a jaunting or high car, speedy dangerous vehicles with high strapped seats, attainable by steel stirrups and perched above very high wheels. The driver, or “jarvey,” faces forward at the same height as the imperiled passengers, flicking his whip and coaxing the nag into a sportive gallop. We were in Store Street in a few minutes, much quicker than by cab, a double fare hansom or a more commodious growler.

The dark door was open but the flagged passages and adjoining rooms were bare, cold and empty. I waited. A woman appeared. She stared at me with apparent hostility while removing her shawl and bonnet. “Are you Surgeon Fitzlupus?” she admonished me severely.

“Yes, ma’am. I am waiting for the others. They are late. Is this the right place?”

“They’ll be along, don’t worry, sir. The chemist usually picks up Dr. McEvoy from the pub where he has breakfast. Meat pie and tay and a few brandies. Can’t start the day without it all.”

Even as she spoke I heard voices and discerned the apothecary and a large fleshy-faced man with a Monaghan accent whom I took to be McEvoy. I distrusted him instantly, as much as I doubted the surroundings. The

*Desmond MacNamara*

apothecary smiled and attempted an introduction, which McEvoy almost ignored.

“Where’s the specimen?” he practically bawled. “I haven’t got all morning.”

“You have some visits in Mountjoy Square and Belvedere,” said his assistant, his soft voice concealing a possible irony. I discovered that he answered to the name of Jeremy.

Dr. McEvoy was impatient. Furthermore, he did not remove his jacket or don an apron. “Where’s the cadaver?” he demanded angrily. “Why isn’t everything ready? I am a busy man.”

The Dublin-bred Sarah Gump took things easily. “It’ll all be ready in a minute, sir. In a couple of ticks.”

McEvoy grunted while the nurse, if such she was, wheeled in a three-wheeled flat trolley on which the body of a young woman was lying, not very symmetrically, one arm hanging down the side.

“Dammit, woman,” McEvoy roared. “Do you call this ready? What do you call all this?” He fingered the hem of her skirt.

“Give us a chance, sir, the polis men only brung her down here last night.”

“Plenty of time. Well, get her ready.”

The doctor’s brain was becoming heated. Jeremy had been rummaging in his bag and produced a pair of tailor’s shears, about to cut away the crumpled clothing from the body.

“God forgive you,” the nurse stopped him with indignation. “How do you think I can live on a half crown fee?” She undid the waistband of the dead girl’s skirt and pulled it down over the feet, folded it and put it on a bench. She struggled with the bodice or jackets but got it off with Jeremy’s help. It joined the skirt, neatly folded on the bench. A petticoat and a sort of shift proved more difficult, due to the drawstrings and sodden knots. The dragon permitted Jeremy to cut these. They could easily be replaced. The girl was wearing no drawers, but one garment remained: a tailored band of brocade

*Desmond MacNamara*

covering the rib cage and held by three inches of lacing, slightly loose or shelved on top to support the breasts and hold them to a degree of uplift decreed by fashion.

By this time, almost ten minutes later, McEvoy was incandescent and seemed about to strike the woman, but Jeremy, quietly efficient, snipped the laces that joined the girdle. The two sides popped apart and the woman manage to drag the garment from under the corpse. This meant that the body was lying slightly to one side, bent, one breast hanging to one side and the other unsupported and flattened by its own weight on her ribs.

Jeremy nodded and together we succeeded in laying the poor girl out on her back, crudely brushing back her hair on to the bare boards of the kitchen table and closing her eyes. Rigor mortis was ebbing. I carried out these duties dumbstruck and with a strange mixture of feelings. This poor relic was the girl in the horse tram and Ireland's Eye. I know that people say the world is small, but this made it seem like an atomic globule, such as the natural scientists postulate.

Together Jeremy and myself had laid the poor girl out and were waiting for Dr. McEvoy's directions as to where to mark her body for the incisions. To our surprise, instead of indicating anything, or indeed examining the front of the body in any detail whatever, while we were struggling with the girl he had been striding up and down the dismal room, testing the tap on the trough and pouring noggins of brandy into the cup on his pocket flask.

As we awaited his instructions he yelled impatiently, "When the devil are you going to prepare her fully?"

"What do you require, sir?" Jeremy spoke quietly.

"She isn't shaved, dammit. Can't see much with all that."

Both of us stared in puzzlement. Two pockets of hair in the armpits and a firm growth in her groin. Surely these would not form the first points of inquiry. As we stood cogitating McEvoy roared, "Her head, dammit. Get her scalp clear. How the hell do you expect me to see through all that hair?"

*Desmond MacNamara*

After a couple of seconds we understood that he needed her head shaved. But why? The apparent cause of death was due to drowning, although injury or even death could have occurred before she entered the water. Did he expect head injuries? We encountered no major extrusion of flesh when combing her hair. Combing her hair? McEvoy must have thought we were mad. However, Jeremy set to work with his shears while I tried to follow with a freshly stropped scalpel. For some reason I hated the task, as did Jeremy. The girl had been my quarry. My need would have done her the ultimate harm, but this poor thing, spread on a kitchen table, aroused pity. The shaving of her head was the final humiliation.

With some difficulty, Jeremy, the woman and myself managed to turn her face downward to crop and shave the top and back of her head. It made her look more impersonal, remote, sexless. Beyond humiliation.

Before turning her onto her back again I noticed a possible wound in the middle of her back and some broken brownish marks on her left buttock. The shaving was so difficult with the scalpel that I did not have time to examine either mark in detail. Dr. McEvoy would do so and put them in his report. He was not the kind of man worth advising on technical, or indeed I suspect, any matters.

What followed was astonishing. Peering closely at the slopes of her crown, above her forehead, he went to his bag and produced a razor, a jar of soft soap solution and an ordinary round hog fitch. After lathering accessible areas of the patchy stubbly cranium, he shaved it, lovingly. Then with a fine sable brush dipped in a black pigmented suspension from another sealed pickle jar he marked off areas of bare scalp. When he had finished impatiently, we both knew his next need. Together we turned the poor girl over on her face again.

The doctor went at it like a man driven by a feral force, which he probably was, and fine-shaved and marked out irregular areas on the back portion of her head. Then he transferred all this, with some accuracy, to several sheets of paper printed with head profiles. Dr. McEvoy was a phrenologist! We waited in the cold dark room while this mad discipline was recorded.

We were still shivering when he abruptly ceased and began to pack his bag. Neither Jeremy nor I could believe it. "But Doctor, the wound on her back,

*Desmond MacNamara*

the marks on her posterior. Surely . . .” McEvoy started to pull on his coat, then fumbled in his pocket for a coin to give the woman orderly, if that is what she was.

“No need to go further,” he snapped. “I have all the information that I can expect. A member of the female criminal class. An abortionist, a poisoner, a prostitute. It’s not important.”

“But how did she die? You have to write the report for the coroner.”

“Pooh, that’s easy. Drowning, suicide, or misadventure. That’s for the police to decide.”

“But the marks on her body?”

“The matter is closed. One criminal less; I have the evidence from her own cranium. You can’t have better evidence than that. You might call it cranial confession.” With that, he left abruptly and after his footsteps pounded down the flagged corridor we heard him whistle for his conveyance.

Even the dour woman was surprised. She must have been used to many a grisly performance on the same kitchen table. But I had to find out more.

Jeremy held the colza oil lamp over the dorsal area and I examined and probed. Something like a sharp knife had pierced the flesh between the ribs, probably punctured a lung. That’s all I could extrapolate from a brief and, I might say, highly illegal probe. My surgical apprenticeship dated back to the wars against the Sun King, under Marlborough and Queen Anne, when science had just begun. We have come a long way since then. Nowadays people take beef tea for consumption, fish extract for brain fever and carbolic acid for wound infection and gangrene. My medical knowledge is somewhat out of date. In any case I might entangle poor Jeremy. People are always suspicious of apothecaries. A customer buys a noggin of laudanum and takes 100 drops in a bottle of Bual to kill the sharp taste. He or she or someone in the household dies, and who is blamed? The apothecary who was lulled into charity by wrenching stories of a toothache or petit mal.

The vulnerability of both Jeremy and myself became apparent very shortly. After the doctor’s exit, the two of us had examined the stab wound in the

*Desmond MacNamara*

girl's back and thought it was a possible cause of death. We had also examined the left cheek of her buttocks carefully, using the oil lamp held by hand and a magnifying or quizzing glass: a useful device, in a pinchbeck cover that I used to carry on my watch chain.

Together we made out the following stray letters, part of a longer inscription in some sort of brown ink, possibly done with a reed and pith pen, but this is pure guesswork. Both Jeremy and I thought of the bottle of inky substance which had been identified by Jeremy by his singular analytical process the previous day. My passing strange chemistry affords me a stunningly sharp discerning vision and I read out the words to Jeremy, who wrote them down as best he could. When we came to examine them we found: “— as he sun — to God — he sets — look — turned —ose.”

The singular canvas chosen by the graphologist (for it was certainly not written by the girl) was scarcely large enough to contain the message, if such it was. The last barely decipherable syllables were on the top of her thigh, just under the gluteal fold. The lettering had been blurred by the abrasion of clothing, perhaps even more than if she had worn her drawers. It had also been diminished by action of sea or brackish water and the handling of the body on recovery, of which we know nothing.

I called on the woman to restore the clothing, since we could hardly leave the body bald and naked on the table. To my surpass and apprehension she replied aggressively, “They're gone. Me daughter took them through the yard.”

“But this is theft,” cried Jeremy.

“Sorry a bit of it. They're no more than me rights.”

“This body was not a pauper,” I protested. “By now the police may well have found her relations.”

“It's up to them, then. The clothes will be half laundered by now, and ironed and sold by tomorrow morning.”

“Only with paupers,” I explained. “And it is not a right, merely an unofficial concession.” I had in fact no idea, but thought this possible.

*Desmond MacNamara*

“Well, it’s too late now,” the stolid harpy complained. Then, though aggressively ignorant, she showed some discretion. “There’s this book that was in her skirt pocket. No money, though.”

I was pretty sure there was some sum of convenience, without which no young lady would venture far from home. The price of a cab or a pot of tea, at least.

“You and the chemist, you were doing things to her that Dr. McEvoy didn’t order. You had no right. I’ll tell him.”

This was awkward. What we had done was innocent, even proper. We knew the doctor to be so obsessed with phrenological nonsense that he gravely neglected his duties. Perhaps he always did. The legal administration was heavy on theory but excessively light on practice. Nonetheless, Jeremy as an apothecary and I as a furtive immortal could not afford too deep an inquiry. Knowing the Royal Irish Constabulary as I do, I suspected that if the girl’s affairs proved too onerous, they would quite happily pack several box files on to both Jeremy and me. Papers, and the more the better, seemed to satisfy their purpose, as they saw it. Dublin Castle must be a tumulus of chewed foolscap and mouse nests in token of the paper dreams of the Royal Irish Constabulary: the men in dark green with short carbines to keep Ireland obedient, faithful and, dare I say, grateful.

“I refuse to leave her like this. Here’s a half sovereign. Go to Amiens Street, five minutes away. There are several haberdashers. Montgomery Street, the red lamp area, is adjoining. Bed linen and ladies’ requirements must be in plentiful supply. Get some sort of decent undergarment and a Manchester cotton sheet.”

“And a chignon clip, for the hair,” Jeremy added. Since she was quite bald I could not see the purpose but Jeremy, being totally human, had a deeper sense of feeling for human dignity. Down the centuries I have become perhaps overly cerebral.

As the woman donned her shawl I remembered: “Here! Where is this book? Let me have it before you go. There’s another crown for you if you get back quickly.”

*Desmond MacNamara*

She handed over the sodden package instantly and hurried away.

Near the oil lamp, by the girl's foot on the table, I opened the package. It was a notebook, possibly a diary, and it gave her name and place of abode. She was Dympna Conway of Phillipsburg Mews, near Fairview, near my lodgings and even nearer to Jeremy's pharmacy. The pages were written in lead pencil, which was fortunate, but impossible to read in its present condition. It would have to be carefully dried.

I could hardly give this task to my very inquisitive landlady but Jeremy, a bachelor with a daily lady, could do it neatly and reliably. My first instinct about him as an intelligent, honest and well-read man was proving true.

By the time the female creature returned we had decided on the next stage of the inquiry. To inform Dr. McEvoy of the dead girl's name, etc., and to read her journal, if such it proved to be. As we manhandled her into a shift or camisole, her body had to be bent, which stretched the skin in places, particularly the buttocks. Lying face down, the dead flesh compressed a little under its own weight, as did her breasts when she lay on her back. All fatty parts were affected by gravity and unsupported by muscles to the slightest degree, excluding the breasts, which have none. But when the body was bent as the woman and Jeremy struggled with the garment, I was able to extend the word "sun" to "sunflower." How extraordinary! What possible message could this be? I drew Jeremy's attention to this and we resolved to finish matters here, and adjourn to consider the problem in greater comfort.

With the grudging help of the woman we swathed the girl's body in a cotton sheet, cowled over her shaven pate. But before finishing and pinning it securely to prevent accidental unwrapping, Jeremy carefully gathered her shorn tresses from a shelf and rearranged them somehow on her head with the help of the cheap metal hair clip. It was a touching gesture of respect. Two thick fronds of hair separated on her brow and were swept back behind the cowled folds of sheet.

We packed our bags, gave the female creature a further half crown and emerged onto the cobbles of Store Street, where we whistled twice to summon a clopping empty cab returning from the railway terminus. Jeremy descended at his pharmacy, where his "boy" was holding the fort, and we

*Desmond MacNamara*

arranged to meet later. I returned to my lodgings where my landlady sent out to a nearby pie shop while I settled down to copying any necessary parts of the dead girl's writings. Having done this, I could safely give it to the police, providing that seemed proper. Our police are a monumental and obese collection of semi-educated Irish peasants, and better suited to protecting landlords and applying curfews and the latest Coercion Act that detecting deaths in peculiar circumstances. Over a pot of porter and a veal pie I started to read and take notes.

Dympna was, it appeared, quite an intelligent girl who lived alone in a mews cottage at the rear of a large mansion, now a home for widows of Church of England clergymen. Rows of small brick houses with garden patches and service lanes were being built in the neighborhood, though much of it was still market gardens and small dairy farms.

Neighbors thought it odd that Dympna lived alone and did some work locally as a milliner. But she was friendly, a member of a local church charity, and had at least one relative who visited her every week: her Uncle George, a hearty and bucolic man, who worked as a brewers' taster, traveling the province of Leinster by steam train and being met at the railway stations by a cab or a high car to take him on to the taverns of the neighborhood, where he would arrive unannounced to sample the condition of the brown and the yellow ale.

If its condition were grievously wrong, sour or flat, the brewery would stop his supply, leaving him to hunt for alternative suppliers, though they too would be suspicious. In practice this never happened. All the townslands of the county would know of his arrival. He was welcomed like royalty: a couple of mouthfuls of porter or ale, spat into the sawdust, and he would settle down to a meal or a snack washed down with whiskey or brandy, depending on whether there was an R in the month. In towns like Bray, Wicklow or Arklow by the sea, he gorged himself on oysters, mussels or scallops. But no doubt his odyssey ensured a higher quality of beer service. He was an honest man. He could afford to be.

Much of this was written on the first few pages of the sodden book. But it was just possible to read it. It was or seemed to be a summary of what had gone before the beginning of the journal, though written in somewhat disjointed observations to herself, not to an outside reader. Statements like,

*Desmond MacNamara*

“I know people think it odd, me living in this little house, but what else can I do? The women of the parish are friendly enough. Some of the young men are over-friendly, not that I mind that too much. Last year we all went to Raheny in a brake to pick crabapples and blackberries. It was great fun. Jenny Flanagan’s brother kissed me, right in front of everybody. But I didn’t care. Jimmy Clancy would have been nicer but Nelly Hanratty has him by a rope. She’s a show-off. Thinks she can do what she likes.”

Much of the writing, including the curriculum vitae of Uncle George, was written in this style, but the interior of the book was too wet to spread or read. I set it upright, pages splayed slightly, before the fire. It was quite warm weather but a fire was usually set for night, to drive away night vapors and damp. I may be fairly immortal but I do not like being a sick immortal. I found the plague very uncomfortable at a time when any kind of comfort was at a premium, when the burghers of Dublin could not choose between the Fitzgeralds and the King of England (who also laid claim to be the “Lord of Ireland”).

While the damp pages were drying and curling I set out the situation as I saw it. A young woman, not quite as slender as I first thought, traveling by tram and steam train to the fishing village of Howth, a hilly peninsula encircling the north of Dublin’s circular bay. She visited a cliff-girt island off the coast and disappeared, leaving a leg of her drawers, half a lace handkerchief and some brown wood stain in a bottle. Then she reappears dead, in the North City morgue, to be examined by a crazy and incompetent police surgeon who measured the bumps on her cranium, leaving Jeremy, his occasional assistant, and myself, an interested drop-in, to carry the inquiry further.

For the sake of our safety and general propriety, the police would have to be told. But so much needed to be explained: the writing, the extensive writing on the left buttock. Why? Who did it? It was of course possible that the girl had written it herself on paper with the appropriate ink. This image could then be transferred to a jelly hectograph such as is used in notaries’ offices or large counting houses. Normally, half a dozen prints can be taken from such a device, providing the paper is grease—or wax- free and slightly damp.

Now it was just possible that Dymrna, for some unfathomable purpose, had seated herself in a sitz bath until her seat was thoroughly soaked. Then, by wiping the chosen buttock with a swab of alcohol, aqua vitae or whatever, to

*Desmond MacNamara*

remove all skin secretions. Having done all this, it is possible, though not probable, that she carefully seated one cheek on the hectograph jelly, leaned forward and backward once or twice, and then carefully arose, leaving the hectograph on the chair or whatever. She would then need to leave the lower half of her body uncovered until the imprint dried, probably in the privacy of her own bedroom.

Such a process, if undertaken, would almost certainly be undertaken alone. If in the company of a woman friend it would surely evoke a destructive giggle, and even in the year 1869 it is unthinkable in male company.

Many years, nay centuries ago, when I first came to this country from Wales, there were some strange things done. But clans and families have survived them. It is sometimes alarming to realize the extent of the change. But we all progress, and this is an incredibly progressive century.

The damp pages were tolerably dry, so I set out for the pharmacy to have the crumpled pages smooth-ironed by Jeremy and to continue the inquiry. I wonder whether this obsessive drive is a reflection of my age-long compulsion to tear and eat human flesh at fortunately rare intervals. Who can judge the cross-relationship between mind, soul and body? Neither the theologians, the philosophers nor the doctors of medicine have probed this bond.

Jeremy was waiting for me and led me to a room behind his Medical Hall, next to his workshop and store. I passed by tiers of wooden drawers, each with its chemical content scripted in Latin. Pestles, mortars and pill molds were laid out neatly, sparkling clean. Shelves of bottles carefully labeled stood on the opposite wall. The lighting was bright: a skylight and two fantails of gas over the working surface. The room beyond held a small table, a bookcase and two fairly comfortable farmhouse chairs.

“A dish of tea first, to lubricate the mind?”

I nodded assent and Jeremy poured with the authority of a chatelaine or a monitoring grandmother. A plate of sliced crumpets spread with bramble jelly lay between us. This pleased me. The tea was aromatic Darjeeling and the conserve was jelly, not jam. Seedy fruits are best conserved as jellies rather than jams.

*Desmond MacNamara*

As we took our comfort Jeremy pointed to his workshop.

“I have the ironing stones heating in my curing oven. So whenever you are ready. And there’s something else that may help.”

I washed down the last piece of crumpet and Jeremy collected the tea things and laid down a folded strip of blanket on the table. He went next door and came back with a smoothening iron, fully charged with two hot stones. Rather expertly, he spat on the surface and when it hissed violently left it on a piece of slate to cool a little while he opened the book and laid one page on the blanket.

The smoothening of the single page only took a few seconds and we managed a dozen or more before the smoothening iron required two new hot stones. These were replaced in a few moments and the task was soon completed.

“Now I want to show you something that will save us many weary hours.”

I followed Jeremy into the chemical workshop.

“This—” he gestured to a structure that held a wooden photographic camera, lens downwards to a small table on which a document could be laid. “This—” he pointed to a large circular mirror glass, “will focus the light of the evening sun through the glass ‘coach roof’ and condense it onto the pages of the notebook.”

He put it on the rostrum and adjusted the mirror. Even without the direct sunlight the luminosity was vastly increased.

“Very soon now,” said Jeremy as he opened a box of plate carriers, fully loaded.

“How did you get so many?” I asked in surprise.

“Like to be well prepared. Prepare them myself in the winter months. Printing cartons as well.”

*Desmond MacNamara*

“Are you a professional photographer as well as an apothecary?” I inquired, slightly puzzled.

“Just a little scientific recording. For my own information.” He spoke a little shortly, so I didn’t bother to press the point.

The photographic recording of the diaries proceeded smoothly as soon as the evening light hit the window.

“The pencil marks are very pale, but I can print them as black as I like,” he told me. This pleased me for two reasons. It would assist me to read more of the journals, and the frail calligraphy of the original would deter or diminish the police interest in the case.

I cannot think why but there lies a deep dislike of the police in the heart of most citizens. They sing “The Peeler and the Goat” or “All those fat-arsed big police/ Monumentally obese/ Is it never going to cease?/ says the Shan Van Vocht.” Well, the Shan Van, the poor old woman, may say it, but so do the highly irreverent children of Dublin. Irish-Anglo-Norman I may be, but I distrust all Peelers.

The evening sun rays had sunk to a more acute angle and no longer limelit the pages of the diary via the convex mirror, but Jeremy had finished his exposures and was in and out of a heavily curtained cupboard, developing his plates. The first couple had emerged, washed and fixed, and seemed clearer than the originals, but in negative of course. This hardly mattered since they could be read easily against a sheet of frosted glass, behind which stood a colza lamp with a well-polished reflector. Jeremy had indeed substituted the metal reflector with a shaving mirror. The few sheets that might prove difficult could be printed onto a positive paper to whatever size (within reason) that would aid interpretation.

This was done with the help of a magic lantern which was often used in the local church hall, evangelical, of course. The Roman Catholic majority church was busy sinking the foundations of its empire, with the help of the Conservative or Liberal government in Westminster. The Low Church Protestants favored by Huguenot descendants like Jeremy thrive on fee-raising entertainments of converted Berbers or Tuaregs or hand-tinted slides of biblical interest.

*Desmond MacNamara*

A muffled lowing of cows from the back lane reminded me that the cows were being driven back from evening milking to their small pastures and byres beyond the half-built suburban houses. A few customers entered the shop, sounding its doorbell automatically, but Jeremy, busy as he was, dealt with them rapidly. He had drawers packed with this favorite nostrums already made up in neat packages or pill boxes, carefully labeled Headaches, Flux, Purges, Toothache, Ladies' Delay pills and so forth. He would also administer a few drops of laudanum in sweet rhubarb wine. This was a great favorite, though the patients invariably died later of some terrible wasting ailment. Still, Jeremy's nostrums gave some comfort and many a night of sleep.

Before taking the diary to the police, I decided to acquaint Jeremy with my summary of the full story, excluding my own initial motives, of course. Very few have been privy to them down the years. He was, in his quiet way, a capital colleague in an extra-legal, though not illegal inquiry such as this. Despite his fifty odd years he had far more resources than me. After reading him my summary I even advanced my hectograph theory in full, expecting him to share the ingenious joke. To my surprise he accepted it as one of several equal possibilities. He also had a suggestion of his own. He claimed it could have been etched photographically and offered to show me an example.

Although giving no credence to his thought, I expressed a curiosity to see such an example. He went to another cupboard off his workroom and rummaged through what sounded like files, and came back with two positive prints.

"I coated these papers myself. I don't trust the commercial laboratories. But the point is that I have adapted a silver solution that takes readily to human skin, providing its surface is swabbed with alcohol first. Look at this."

He thrust a half plate print before me. It showed the naked back of a young man, lying on a table. His head was turned sideways: could he be dead? On his back was his name, place of discovery and two dates.

"A young fisherman from Howth. I helped in his recovery. Didn't trust the police or the municipal idiots to get things right. While he was lying all day in

*Desmond MacNamara*

the Coulters' coach house I did this. Everyone thought it was a good idea, but no one adopted the practice, I need hardly say. The dates are the probable time of drowning and the time of recovery. This gives useful information about tides, currents and winds. Very useful data for a fishing community, don't you think?"

I swallowed my surprise but agreed wholeheartedly.

"Now look at this one. A living subject, in a manner of speaking."

A youngish woman with a fine figure: wide hips, narrow waist and generous thighs appeared to hover above a neatly tended grave. Her eyes were open and she looked straight at the beholder. But the truly astonishing thing is that she was entirely naked, had two large feathered wings sprouting and spread behind her shoulders and seemed to be about a foot above the ground. Across the generous tops of her thighs, in a very decorated script with linear ornament, were the words "Vitam Aeternam." On each knee was a Maltese cross within a circle.

Now I have seen many strange things, but this, as the country boys from the central plain would say, "Beats Banagher."

"What's this?" I spluttered. "The rear view of a naked young man, a very dead one, and the living and charming ghost of a very dead woman. I suppose the lady is meant to be the occupant of the grave."

"In a manner of speaking, Mr. Fitzlupus. The grave is real. The young woman is real and is one of the dark angels of Montgomery Street, the red light district down the tramtrack. Oh, this was a few years ago, but after the Fenian Rising at Tallaght and Greenhills. Before the tramway rails. Those damned omnibuses. Expensive, dangerous and quite unreliable."

"But the girl's face."

"From a photograph supplied by the grieving husband, grafted onto the body of Imelda, who at that time was only a kitchen maid in the brothel. It was an expensive but splendid memorial to a young wife carried off by the fever, for her widower. He told me he gazed at it nightly as he lay in his cold bed. Very touching."

*Desmond MacNamara*

“No doubt, no doubt,” I muttered. “People yearn for such things.”

Jeremy shook his head. “People tell me the strangest things when I recommend a certain kind of pill or suppository to them.”

“I’m sure they do” was all I could say.

I must confess to some surprise at the resurrection photograph. After so long a time on earth, very little shocks me, but the older one becomes the more conservative they say. I think not. Certainly not universally. But as years and generations are surpassed, the memory of old certainties secretes a black pearl of bigotry to cushion the irritable mind. It is no nacreous jewel of the soul but a poisoned pearl.

As I was wrapping the diary in brown paper I asked him. “Are there many people who cling to memories of life like that young widower?”

“Dear me, yes. He was quite normal. This is a century of science and industry, but also an epoch of splendid tombs and mausoleums. Storied urns and animated busts abound a short walk from here, along the banks of the river Tolka. In other countries they have built great cities of the dead where memories decay slowly. But decay they do. Take my word.”

A bit overwhelmed by this, I muttered, “Ah yes, indeed. Poor Thomas Gray would have no churchyard to write his *Elegy* now.”

“Oh, there are still ten thousand humble places. By the ruined church of Kilbarrack, a few miles away, where the sea birds soar and scream and the sea geese call mournfully.”

“Do you get many requests like the resurrected lady?” I asked.

“Oh lots. Some I refuse but I often photograph the ‘laying out’ of someone: a parent or a spouse. A long exposure in a dark room with lighted candles. Death masks, often. They pay well and I got used to it. The dead are gentle in their last smile. I have been asked to cast a full body, oh, several times. But I did so only once, and for two reasons. It has to be done in large sections, carefully keyed to fit after removal. It is hard heavy work and, for some

*Desmond MacNamara*

reason, I don't like seeking an assistant. Everyone from the viceroy down to the coal porter would soon know all about it. And something else. After the first time I began to wonder about the motives of my clients. When I undertook to do a cast for another widower, if such he was, I dressed the body in a long shift, with the help of the laying-out lady. Always formidable creatures. I then drenched the garment and the body in sweet oil to form a barrier to the plaster. Very tastefully too. In the Greek style of delicate swirling folds and pleats. Very difficult on a prone figure since such folds are formed by gravity, and a bit of Greek fancy as well. Greek girls on vases or metopes always seem to wear wet clinging nightdresses. But, just as I stood back in triumph, the client called to see how it was going.

“ ‘Sir, I wish none of this. My dear one must be as pure and naked as an angel of Paradise.’

“Taken aback and slightly hurt, I remonstrated. ‘I can cover the hair with a cap and build up a plaster mass afterwards, as in some death masks.’ But there is hair elsewhere on the body. It would mesh in the plaster.’

“ ‘Then, sir, you must shave it,’ he directed and, see, he reached into his pocket and produced a brown wig of lustrous human hair. ‘You can glue this to the head of your cast, and a few ringlets will suffice for the groin.’

“As I began to remonstrate he threw something onto the table: a pair of carefully matched glass eyes. ‘Can these be inserted and the eyelids remodeled? The cost is of no importance, but I must have a perfect effigy to dress in whatever clothing I desire.’ I started to splutter. ‘But sir . . .’

“ ‘That is quite enough. No evasions. Do you know who I am?’ he said.

“I had indeed his name and that of his dead wife, with all the proper documents, left by the funeral undertaker. He handed me a card in gilt script, giving the name of one of the most illustrious Anglo-Norman families in Ireland, still secure in their estates like the vicar of Bray, despite Penal Laws and confiscations.

“I was struck dumb by much of this strange work which had to be done in the early afternoons, when housewives are resting, or at night when photographic records are difficult and protracted. Furthermore, I doubted

*Desmond MacNamara*

the morality of this cult of death, for such it certainly seemed to be. A photographic image or a death mask could serve for post-funery purposes. Tombstones and carvings, or secret drawers in a private chest of sad memories. I know the Montgomery Street area of brothels and have executed many tasteful 'Etudes Academiques' of the residents to decorate the walls and screens of the waiting rooms. These are artistic, though some of the clients may savor them more carnally. When Maisie Madigan from Athlone changes her name to Yolande and poses, dimples and all, with a Greek water jug on her head it may stretch credulity a bit but the artistic intention cannot be doubted. It is common knowledge that there is a 'special' chamber, draped in black, where a Cape Coloured girl called Elsie lies in a coffin, but her services are flesh and blood. I think that people like my 'resurrection wife' or the cast of a young woman with a wig and glass eyes is for visual stimulation only. It harms nobody. It seems a lonely pleasure, but it offends my taste as a scientist and a photographic artist. I intend to leave my collection of plates to Trinity College Library where they can be appreciated in a more enlightened age, when machines can carry man in aerial flight and fast ships can cross the Atlantic Ocean in five days. Mark my word, that's how it will be in a hundred years."

This unexpected outpouring and philosophizing left me with little to say. "We must discuss these and more urgent matters further. Meanwhile I will walk to the police barracks and deliver the diary. I think I will say it is from you, since you are one of the crazy doctor's most frequent assistants. Good evening, sir. I will see you very soon."

With that, I quitted the premises of this remarkable apothecary and made my way in the late sunset toward the police barracks, reflecting as I strode purposefully on my luck in encountering Jeremy. Yet those strange photographs and his ingenuous description of some of his strange encounters made me realize the need for my own greater discretion.

Too long a submersion in the rising middle class of this city and a period of prosperous merchandising before that and other pursuits had grafted onto my primordial soul a moral code that I fully accepted and approved of; despite my violent actions to the contrary from time to time.

The sergeant was civil and welcoming. "Is it about a horse biting you?" he inquired as I entered.

“No, it is not.”

“Some say the starving hackney animals are after the padding in gentlemen’s suits. Like the shoulders.”

“Certainly not,” I snapped, a bit startled by his odd solicitude. “I assisted the doctor in a routine post-mortem this morning and he left before Mr. Jeremy and I found this diary in the clothing. It identifies the dead person by name and dwelling.”

“That is a matter of great convenience,” the sergeant remarked ponderously, but as he thumbed his way through the pale silver grey scribbles on the ironed pages I realized that he would not pursue the girl’s history very far. “Ah, here we are. Name and address. Now let’s.” He thumbed his way rapidly to the last writings. “Mmmm—‘Spoke to Julia on leaving the sewing group. Promise to take tea on Monday, 3.40. Must bring Ladies Own Journal on tight lacing and flushes. Hope she will not take offence.’ Nothing much here, is there sir? None of us ever know the fate the next hour might bring.”

“Indeed, no.”

“Oh, that’s a certain fact that no one can avoid.” The sergeant flipped the diary with a mournful shake of his head. “Did Mr. Jeremy examine this, sir?”

“Oh he did, sergeant. Very thoroughly.”

“Oh! Good, sir. Then he will surely direct me to any particular relevance.”

“I don’t doubt that he will, sergeant. A very good night to you.” The amiable disinterest of the police in the identity of the dead woman, the search for the next of kin and the burial: all this was unresolved. “Uncle George” had not been informed, nor her church sewing circle. Even her exact age was unknown, beyond a reasonable conjecture of youthful womanhood. Was she a virgin or not? Dr. McEvoy’s phrenological bumps would hardly help in these very important lines of inquiry. The Irish, like most peoples who derive their livelihood from the land, are a disputative and legally-inclined lot, but criminal law administration is almost entirely confined to landlords, land agents and tenants or the exact observation of the successive Coercion Laws

*Desmond MacNamara*

that free expression of clergy, werewolves and laity alike. The popular song “The Peeler and the Goat” was barely satirical. Many a goat or ass or a heifer was impounded with heavy fines for wandering abroad after curfewed darkness.

With these thoughts on my troubled mind I wandered far amongst the green lanes and market farms from Clontarf, where King Brian Boru was hewn to death in A.D. 1014, to Swords, where the tall Round Tower bore witness to more turbulent and yet more peaceful days. That is if one is disposed to feel sentimental about round towers and ruined monasteries. But it is a long time since “Malachi wore the collar of gold/ That he won from the proud invader,” and I felt my “change” coming on.