

Self-fill of prompt #2: Moving .gif of the detective as a young man

by mazaher

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This unbetaed story, tentative as it is, is a self-fill for a prompt (see endnotes) that I left on LJ some time ago, and which remained an orphan. If you recognise a phrase or half-phrase here and there, it is because Wilde wrote them first.

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London in the 1880s. A strange place of contrasts, where exquisite art, exquisite literature, exquisite thought, untouched yet by the certainty of worldwide disaster, thread a golden strand through abjection and despair. Where luxury is served by misery, spacious, elegantly furnished homes stand back to back with cramped mews and sordid hovels, and everything is for sale, even human flesh.

There is a young man living in Mayfair. His name is... Let's say his name is Alan Campbell. In person, he is very stern and rather pale, his pallor being intensified by his coal-black hair and dark eyebrows.

He is often away from home, sometimes abroad: he can afford to follow his whims to their source. He is acquainted with the colour of the sky as it reflects in the Danube in Vienna, as well as with the smell of ancient wood and paint in La Fenice theater in Venice, and the chant of wild bees as they feed on poppy and chamomile flowers on mount Hymettos.

He has no interest for the visible arts, but an appreciation for music which approaches devotion. He plays the violin and piano better than most amateurs.

He is clever. He was brilliant in the Natural Sciences Tripos at Cambridge; a tall, thin, taciturn, solitary youth, surprisingly athletic for someone who never went in for team sports, and a capital fencer. It is not widely known whether he gathered a degree before leaving at the end of his third year.

His enduring passion is chemistry. He has a laboratory of his own in his town house in Hertford street, where he shuts himself up for days, much to the despair of his mother.

She was rather relieved when he finally broke his seclusion two winters ago, and began a friendship with a certain young man about town which he met at Lady Berkshire's the night that Rubinstein played there. They would dine together, go to the opera, and concerts, and literary and artistic evenings in Piccadilly. Or so he would say on going out in a swirl of silk-lined cape, his ebony and silver cane swinging, his eyes twinkling.

He would return in the early hours of morning, often frowning, sometimes bewildered, and then he would disappear for the whole day in the laboratory, or in his bedroom, refusing meals and company.

The association went on for eighteen months. Then, suddenly, it was broken. If they happened to meet somewhere in the months that followed --and our young man had grown very careful in his choice of venues, on the rare occasions when he went out for an evening-- they barely spoke to each other.

The incident, whatever it may have been, had left him strangely melancholy, silent, absorbed in his research, and shy of playing in public.

His name had since appeared once or twice in some of the leading scientific reviews, in connection with curious experiments. Strange packages were delivered for him through the back door; papers on embryology and comparative anatomy arrived in the mail.

Before long, he was going to develop an horror for blackmailers.

But no-one knew what had happened between Mr. Campbell and the handsome, elegant gentleman which he had never introduced to his mother.

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It had been the madness of springtime, Campbell would tell himself later. A long winter had given place in early April to the delight of jonquils, creatures of light swaying under the cool fingers of the south-western breeze. A late morning in Kew Gardens, strolling arm in arm with Dorian, he had felt the other man's white-gloved fingers sliding down to his wrist and weaving with his own, just for a moment. Startled, he had turned toward his companion. Dorian had laughed then, eyes merry and bright, then he had walked ahead toward the waterlily pond. Alan had followed, taken in a mix of emotions where fascination overcame confusion. By night, in Dorian's house in Grosvenor square, after dinner, and port, and Turkish cigarettes, only one bed had been unmade.

Alan Campbell was not a man of half-measures. He had given himself to this strange springtime in his blood with full awareness and no regrets. He was not sure whether he was in love with Dorian, nor whether Dorian was in love with him. He knew so little about love!

From his clean, straight-lined, exactingly tidy laboratory, he had always looked down on the softer emotions like something unquantifiable, impossible to test reliably, slightly dirty, often comical, and ultimately superfluous. The things people did for love! ...or so they said. They wore absurd clothes, curled their moustache, painted their faces, and never spoke the truth about their feelings, whatever they may be. They seemed to couple for the most flimsy of reasons, and to part for the most ludicrous. Happiness with a partner appeared to him a mere chance; stability, a myth.

Yet here he was, completely taken. On one level, his life had not changed: he still worked at his experiments, and indeed he was writing some of his best essays; he surely didn't dream of giving any special care to his appearance, and what little conversation he made was as straightforward as it had ever been. On another, however, his life had been turned upside down by this man, shining like a cloud's silver lining, from whom he could not take his eyes. He never knew what the next day would bring; he only knew that, whatever Dorian proposed, wherever he wanted to go, he would follow, dazzled and mute, and more completely happy than he had ever felt in his life.

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Then, one evening, Dorian had missed their appointment to dine at the Savoy. Alan had returned home and passed a listless hour, still in his evening clothes, trying in vain to concentrate on Herzig's paper on guajols in «Monatshefte für Chemie». Around eleven, a note had been brought in from Dorian. It had been delivered by a page-boy, and when Alan opened the envelope, a key fell in his hand. The note read, in Dorian's hasty, elegant scrawl: *Alan, the moon is lonely and I need your violin. Won't you come? Please do, and let yourself in. First floor, door on the left.* It gave an address in Vauxhall Street which Alan didn't know. It took him a minute to take his violin-case, hat, cape and cane; a quarter of an hour to find a cab willing to take him to Lambeth at that hour. It was past midnight when he turned the key in the latch of a three-storied house of brown brick. The narrow hall appeared decorous, but poorly maintained; the stairs creaked faintly under his steps. He thought he heard muffled voices behind the scratched walnut door on his left. He knocked, and was called in.

The curtains were open in the room, the lights out, and a white round moon shone through the window on a rumpled bed, lighting the space like a colder sun. A boy of maybe seventeen, naked, was stretched on the mattress, his shoulders half raised by pillows, his wrists and ankles tied with leather straps to the bedposts. His dark curly hair was ruffled, his lips red with berry juice which had dripped on his chest, belly and groin. A fine streak of the deeper, denser red of fresh blood crossed his throat, gathering in a single round drop in the hollow between his clavicles. He was aroused. For a moment the only sound was his quiet panting.

Über die Constitution des Guajols.

Von Dr. J. Herzig.

(Aus dem Universitätslaboratorium des Professors v. Barth.)

(Vorgelegt in der Sitzung am 9. Februar 1881.)

Während die Constitution des Guajacols vollkommen aufgeklärt ist und auch in der Kenntniss des Pyroguajacins durch die neueren Arbeiten ein weiterer Fortschritt zu verzeichnen ist, sind wir in Bezug auf den Charakter und die Natur des Guajols, des dritten bei der trockenen Destillation des Guajakharzes auftretenden Productes noch ganz im Unklaren. Zwar ist seine Zusammensetzung von verschiedenen Forschern wiederholt übereinstimmend mit C_9H_8O angegeben und die Molekulargrösse durch die von Deville ausgeführte Dampfdruckbestimmung ermittelt worden, allein von dem Charakter der Verbindung, der Natur und Constitution derselben kann man sich aus dem vorliegenden Materiale keine richtige Vorstellung machen. Und doch ist, abgesehen vom Interesse, das die Verbindung an und für sich bietet, mit der Aufklärung des Guajols auch ein weiterer Schritt zum Erkennen der im Guajakharz enthaltenen interessanten Substanzen geschehen. In der Voraussetzung, dass die früheren Versuche nur am Mangel an Material gescheitert sind, habe ich das Studium dieser Verbindung wieder aufgenommen, um einiges Licht über seine nähere Zusammensetzung zu verbreiten.

Bei der Darstellung des Materials aus dem Destillat habe ich mich an die Angaben früherer Chemiker gehalten und habe auch so ziemlich dieselben Erfahrungen gemacht, wie sie bereits wiederholt beschrieben wurden. Das Guajol kann, so oft man es auch destilliren mag, nie ganz farblos erhalten werden, bräunt sich beim Stehen nach einiger Zeit, und selbst frisches, scheinbar farbloses Product hinterlässt beim Destilliren einen bräunlichen

"You came just in time. Geordie was getting restless, and I was getting bored." Dorian Gray stepped out of the shadows behind the open door, took out his cufflinks, pocketed them, and began unbuttoning his shirt. "Alan, this is Geordie Miller. Geordie, Mr. Alan Campbell. And now, Alan, take out your violin and play Dvořák for us, like a good fellow. This is a night for Dvořák, don't you think? Maybe later you can have your turn."

Alan stood frozen for an interminable moment, until he glimpsed the beginning of a smile on Dorian's face, the oblique Etruscan smile he'd been more than half in love with. He'd turned on his heels and run down the stairs, clutching his violin-case, Dorian's musical laughter pursuing him long after it could be heard no more.

He had wandered for a long time, losing his way in the comb of alleys north of Princes Road, finding it again through Lambeth Walk, Paradise Street, along the wall of the burial grounds and on to High Street, and Lambeth Bridge like a huge snake uncurled across the river. Dark as ink was the water, calling, calling, but he didn't stop and didn't listen.

It was dawn and a washed-out sun began to turn the sky to pearl when he found himself at his own door. He stopped for a moment on the steps, shaking finely, unable to comprehend how the common light of day would rise on the world after what he had seen; after what had happened to him. Then the clip of the milkman's pony approached, and he hastened inside.

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They say a single moment can shape a whole life, be it the ecstasis of revelation, or its horror. It was certainly so for Alan Campbell. Barely last night --was it only last night?-- a whole world of wonder unfurled in front of him. Now he only felt secure in his laboratory, at night, weighing and mixing the liquids and powders of which he was absolute lord.

He knew that he would go out in the world again, at some point: restored, if not healed, and armed with his mind like a razor-sharp weapon to protect his weaknesses with his strenghts, and himself from ever trusting again. He also knew that a metamorphosis had first to take place, was taking place, like a supersaturated solution forms perfect crystals at the right temperature and pressure. He would wait and see, in the cool closed still of his lab, what crystal his future life would be. It would take time, but time seemed now to stretch endless. He could wait.

Only once his concentration was broken, on the seventh of November.

His servants wondered one late morning at the chemicals and instruments that a note from their young master required they stuff in a heavy wooden chest, and allow some other gentleman's footman, which they'd never seen, to carry away in a cab. The chest was returned in the early evening, smelling of nitric acid. They were glad that a second note, written by Mr. Campbell in an unusually jumbled hand, ordered them to leave it unopened in the lab.

He didn't return home for two days himself.



For the whole winter he worked hard at his chemistry, only coming out to perform more delicate experiments at St. Bartholomew's Hospital. He spent extravagant sums of money on books and reviews, many of them foreign, on subjects as disparate as philosophy, surgery, the chemistry of synthetic pigments, and the history of crime.

His mother died in February.

One day, in early March, he summoned the cook, housemaid and footman, gave them each letters of warm recommendation, and announced that he would close and sell the house, furnished as it was, within a month.

By mid-April, he was living in a cheap rent room in Montague street, next door to the British Museum's Library and within walking distance from St. Bart's, and starting to make a living as a consultant detective.

He has an horror of blackmailers.

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Endnotes:

-- J. HERZIG, *Über die Constitution des Guajols*, appeared in «Monatshefte für Chemie», III, 1, 1882, pp. 118 ss.

-- The antique hypodermic syringe and needles is © Digital Dolls, 2009. The bee and the jonquil are mine.

-- The prompt ran:

The 1880s, London.

There is a young man living in Mayfair.

He is often away from home, sometimes abroad.

He is a very clever young man, with no interest for "the visible arts" but an appreciation for music (he plays the violin and piano "better than most amateurs") and a keen interest in science.

He was brilliant at Natural Science at Cambridge, but it is not known whether he gathered a degree.

Devoted to chemistry, he has a laboratory of his own where he shuts himself up for days, much to the despair of his mother.

After associating closely for eighteen months with a certain other young man about town which he met at a Rubinstein concert, they broke their relationship and now they barely speak to each other.

The incident has left Campbell strangely melancholy, silent, absorbed in his research, and shy of playing in public.

His name has since appeared once or twice in some of the scientific reviews "in connection with curious experiments".

In person, he is very stern and rather pale, his pallor being intensified by his coal-black hair and dark eyebrows.

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Doesn't this description remind you of a young Holmes?

The young man who resembles a young Holmes is Alan Campbell in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He is the chemist whom Gray blackmails with unspecified secrets of his to be revealed to a third party, in order for Campbell to get rid of the body of Basil Hallward, murdered by Gray the night before. The "experiment" takes more than five hours and a heavy chest of chemicals and instruments.

When he's finished and leaves, Gray goes upstairs. "There was a horrible smell of nitric acid in the room. But the thing that had been sitting at the table was gone."

I think there may be some backstory in here, dark and hard, based on the rather chilling postulate that Oscar Wilde never existed, and that Dorian Gray did.

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