

**My Salieri Complex:
An Untold Story of Griffin and Kemp**
(dedicated to H.G. Wells)

Marina Julia Neary

Editor's Note

Neo-Victorian literature still tends to be fairly selective as to the nineteenth-century writers and texts it prefers to re-imagine for today's reading audience. In the main, it rewrites the lives and/or works of canonical artists like Charles Dickens, the Brontës, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Oscar Wilde, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or else revisits those of equally popular, but sometimes less esteemed authors of Gothic and sensation fiction, such as Bram Stoker and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Of course, these two categories need not be entirely separate, as evidenced by examples including *Great Expectations* (1860-61) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, rev. 1891). In general, the resurrected H.G. Wells and his works have featured much more prominently in other media, such as comic books, graphic novels, video games, film, and television serials, and this is certainly the case with regards to Wells' *fin-de-siècle* novella *The Invisible Man* (1897). Yet regardless of chosen media, since James Whale's classic 1933 horror film adaptation for Universal Pictures, the majority of revisions of Wells' novella have appropriated and re-contextualised the titular figure for generically divergent, unrelated story-lines, such as murder mysteries, espionage thrillers, super hero/villain adventures, or even comedy,¹ rather than adapting the actual narrative of Griffin's relationship with his one-time fellow medical student and later provincial South coast doctor Kemp, as Marina J. Neary does in the following short story.

Unlike other topics such as gender relations, spiritualism, class conflict, and sexuality, science has received comparatively little extended neo-Victorian treatment. Occasionally, fictions will focus on select nineteenth-century technological or medical innovations, such as photography and immunisation and, more commonly, science may be addressed indirectly via the prevalent tropes of evolution and social Darwinism, already deployed in one of the genre's seminal texts, John

Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Though Neary sets her narrative prior to that of Wells, specifically during the time of the youthful Griffin and Kemp's medical studies and scientific experiments, her main theme too is not science itself, but rather the rivalry and jealousy that the pursuit of knowledge produces when viewed as a symbol of status and power. The advancement of science, then, is cultivated as much, if not more, for the sake of the individual as that of society, for personal benefit and prestige even before the greater good of mankind, indirectly evoking some of the ethical debates surrounding present-day new technologies, which often interrogate the purported aims of certain kinds of research, as well as critiquing their unforeseen applications.²

Not surprisingly, Neary's interest lies as much in the psychological as physical transformations undergone by Griffin and Kemp in the course of their relationship. In highlighting this aspect, she also borrows from Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), which has frequently been re-read by modern-day critics in terms of its repressed subtext of homoerotic desire.³ This seems curiously apt, for not only does the metaphor of invisibility readily lend itself to the depiction of closeted desires, but such neo-Victorian 'queering' of *The Invisible Man* further highlights something ably captured by Wells – the unnerving effect that the intricacies of science exercised and continue to exercise on the laymen community, together with the strong emotional, often irrationally hostile responses evoked. As science in our own time becomes increasingly specialised, less transparent and comprehensible to non-experts and thence, in a sense, ever more 'arcane', this proves a topical concern, underlining the continued relevance of Wells prophetic writing.

Neary is by no means a newcomer to neo-Victorian literature. Besides her work as historical essayist, journalist, and poet, she has written two neo-Victorian plays, part 'biofiction' in that they re-vision historical figures rather than texts: *Hugo in London*, first performed in 2008 in Greenwich, Connecticut by the Debut Players, featuring a cast of American, British and European actors, and *Lady with a Lamp: An Untold Story of Florence Nightingale*, which premiered at the same venue in 2009, fittingly performed to benefit The Wyatt Foundation, a medical charity.⁴

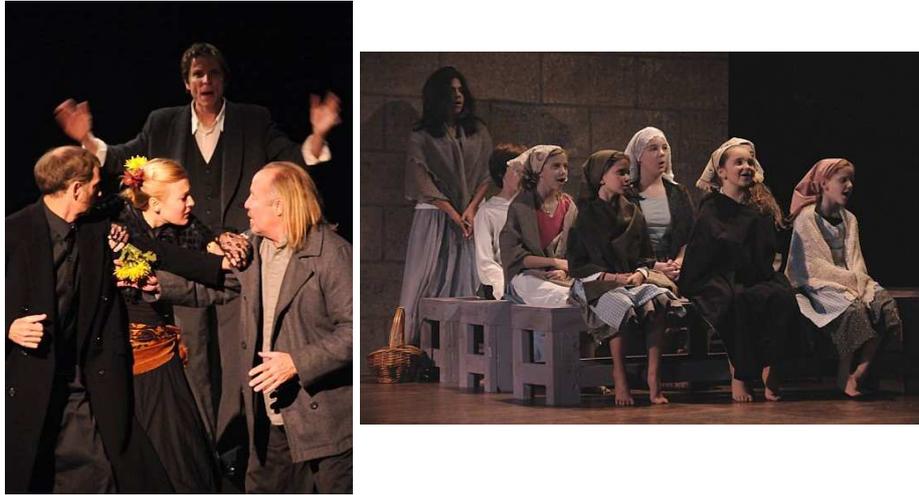


Image 1& 2: Stills from the production of *Hugo in London*, showing Victor Hugo with friends and a group of orphans. Reproduced with Neary's permission.

The former play deals with Victor Hugo's sojourn in the British capital during the Crimean War, imagining him 'slumming' with aristocratic friends among the Bermondsey poor and criminal fraternity, where his poetry has already stirred up unexpectedly Republican sentiments. *Lady with a Lamp* transports some of *Hugo in London*'s characters to the Crimean battlefield, juxtaposing medical malpractice, political intrigue, and romance in the midst of war.



Image 3: Still from the production of *Lady with a Lamp*. Reproduced with Neary's permission.

Both plays were spin-offs from Neary's more sustained neo-Victorian efforts – her first two neo-Victorian novels. In *Wynfield's Kingdom* (2009, reviewed in this NVS issue), though, Hugo only appears halfway through the novel and, for the most part, remains relegated to the sidelines of the plot as a minor supporting character. *Wynfield's War*, published at the end of last year, follows the mixed fortunes of Neary's aristocratic-born but slum-raised titular protagonist in the Crimea. In addition, Neary has recently published *Brendan Malone: The Last Fenian* (2011), described by her publisher, All Things That Matter Press, as “a folkloric satire” about destructive paternal love in 1910 Ireland.⁵

MLK

Author's Note

The inspiration to write ‘My Salieri Complex’ came after watching the 1984 BBC adaptation of *The Invisible Man*, an adaptation that is fanatically faithful to H.G. Wells’ original novella from 1897. It is an unabashedly ‘hardcore’ Victorian piece, without any subtext about political correctness, human rights or twenty-first century ethics that a Hollywood director might have endeavoured to inject into the script. I have always found the dynamics between the two antagonists Griffin and Kemp fascinating, and it astonished me that their story had not been explored by a neo-Victorian writer, when so many sequels and prequels have been written by modern authors to nineteenth-century masterpieces and popular texts. The question of an individual’s rights to his or her own body remains relevant. Are the discoveries being made for the good of mankind or for one’s personal gain? Is the explorer accountable for his actions, and if yes, to which authority? The intellectual and moral rivalry between Kemp, an ordinary physician, and his former fellow-student Griffin, a sociopathic genius, provides fertile soil for a psychological thriller. Depicting the lives of young scientists of the late Victorian era often involves exploring such topics as vivisection, eugenics and unconventional sexual preferences. The term ‘Salieri Complex’ refers to the feeling of jealousy and inadequacy that a mediocre or even slightly above average professional might feel in the company of a

more brilliant colleague. The story of Griffin and Kemp goes beyond mere rivalry. It is a tale of infatuation and spiritual captivity.

MJN

MY SALIERI COMPLEX

(University College, London, 1884)

“**A**wake, Samuel! Boarding with a genius will not transform you into one.”

That was the voice of reason, which guided me through most of my career. Yet another voice, one of superstition and vanity, tried to persuade me of the opposite. How I wished to believe that a fraction of Jonathan Griffin’s brilliance could project onto me if I only spent enough time in his vicinity! I fancied our brains resemble two communicating vessels, with grandiose theories and mysteries passing between them. Little by little, that venomous swamp of self-flattering fantasies sucked me in.

Griffin, a native of Cardiff, was almost three years younger than me but only one year behind in his coursework. He transferred to University College in the autumn of 1883, allegedly to study medicine. I emphasise the word “allegedly”. From the very beginning I had serious doubts that this man had any intention of treating patients for the rest of his life. As I learned later, medicine was the profession of his father’s choice. Griffin feigned compliance only to gain access to London’s best library and laboratory. He took most interest in optical density and refraction index, two topics that had very little to do with medicine.

We enrolled in the same physics seminar led by Professor Handley, my intellectual father, who promised me an assistant’s position after my graduation as well as the hand of his daughter Elizabeth. Everyone in the department regarded me as Professor Handley’s heir, the future king of the laboratory. At least, that was the case until Griffin’s arrival. In one week this eighteen-year old boy with a Welsh accent toppled the hierarchy that had

been in place since my first solo demonstration in 1881. When Griffin would enter the lecture hall, all chatter would cease and then turn into a collective sigh of veneration.

It happened so quickly that I did not even have enough time to grow suspicious, or indignant, or bitter. He snatched my invisible crown and placed it on his perfectly shaped head, atop a cloud of snow-white curls.

Griffin was the only albino I had ever encountered. At first he struck me as a member of an entirely different race, one that Darwin and Kingsley would declare as superior to their own, a race untainted by unnecessary pigment. Later I learned that the condition had its disadvantages. Griffin's eyes, garnet-red, were extremely sensitive to the light, obliging him to wear tinted spectacles and a hat when out of doors. Between those eyes a permanent crease was forming, growing deeper by the month. I studied that crease furtively, as if it were some hieroglyph, a clue to the mysteries of his mind.

As a child I suffered from respiratory distress. The slightest physical exertion caused me to pant and wheeze, cutting me off from the games of my sturdier peers. No, they did not taunt me. They simply refused to acknowledge my existence. At the time I would have preferred open ridicule to utter indifference. I found consolation in corresponding with Robert Louis Stevenson, who had also had a "weak chest" and spent much of his childhood in sickbed. He had shared with me the early drafts of his novels and poems. His bewildering adventures distracted me from my affliction, provided me with an opportunity to step out of my treacherous, uncooperative body. By the age of sixteen I had reconciled with the thought that I would have no companions save for the merry crew of the schooner *Hispaniola*.

My position changed when I came to University College and discovered that in matters of intellect I surpassed most of my peers. Suddenly, my physical infirmities became inconsequential. A former outcast, I became the most sought-after individual in the entire medical department. My peers, who snubbed me during my adolescence, now fought for a chance to have me for a study partner. They rapped on the door of my suite of rooms, attempted subtle bribes and invited me to family outings. For

once, I had the power of rejecting one companion in favour of another. I look back to the winter of 1881 and the succession of triumphs: my first public demonstration, concerning the breakdown of the red blood particles, followed by the first round of applause from the entire department, my first dinner at Professor Handley's house and my first excursion to the opera with his daughter without a chaperone. My future father-in-law could find no fault with my behaviour towards Elizabeth. I must confess I was never tempted to behave in any other fashion, even though Miss Handley herself kept testing my composure subtly and unobtrusively. At the time I attributed my lack of desire to violate the code of gentlemanlike demeanour to the fact that my father was a reverend. He taught us that certain desires ignite only after marriage. Disciplined young men, firm in their Christian faith, do not feed their wanton fancy. To repress one's sinful urges is a commendable feat, but not to possess them at all is a blessing. Still, it flattered me that a woman should expend so much time and money to look more appealing in my eyes. It is marvellous what discomforts women are willing to bear in order to make their waists appear narrower and their bosoms ampler. I expressed my appreciation of her efforts through terse compliments, which delighted her parents.

Gradually, I began outgrowing my malady. The symptoms did not vanish altogether, but they lessened considerably. This unexpected improvement in my condition prompted me to make a vow to God that I would devote my life to treating the ailments of the lungs.

Then the white-haired Welshman barged into my kingdom, and my wheezing attacks returned, with doubled intensity. When I was near him, I lacked for air. Griffin was stealing oxygen from me. As slender as he was, as few personal possessions as he owned, somehow he occupied most of the two-bedroom suite in the residence hall that we shared. Every corner bore the mark of his presence. Some invisible, elusive spirit reigned there, leaving practically no space for me. Griffin's bedroom served as his personal laboratory where he would continue his experiments into midnight. His arsenal included an assortment of glass tubes in which he would heat and mix various chemicals. I knew better than to pry into the nature of his experiments, but I suspected it was the fumes seeping from under the closed door of his bedroom that triggered my coughing attacks.

Still, I had no grounds for complaint, as there was nothing criminal about Griffin's behaviour. Who can fault a science student for diligence? If

his work stirred my old illness, it was my private ordeal. Remains of pride forbade me to vocalise my growing discontent. Most of all I feared being accused of having a Salieri complex. There was nothing left for me to do except drive my anger deep into my inflamed chest. When the tightness in the lungs became unbearable, I would simply go outside or wander the corridors of the residence hall. Nobody ever found out how many nights I spent on the cushions in the lounge. And nobody found out about the tempest inside my head. It was not my crown that I missed – it was my freedom. I learned what it meant to be a spiritual captive of another human being.

I knew that now, when my fellow students knocked on our door, it was most likely for Griffin, not me. Rarely would he deign to come out of his sanctuary and greet them. Usually he would remain behind the closed door upon which they would throw furtive, longing glances. With the immediacy of small children they would elbow each other and whisper.

“He’s been there for hours. What’s he doing – toying with explosives?”

“I know: he’s building a time machine.”

“Stop reading so much Jules Verne. It will do your pretty little head no good.”

“Well, at least I’m reading.”

“I tell you, albinos are all evil. It’s a mark of the Devil.”

“Listen to you! Sounding like you’re straight from Oxford. Believing in the devil is no longer fashionable.”

“Well, if the Devil exists, Griffin is his incarnation.”

“Bah, you’re just envious!”

“I say, he’s dissecting rats.”

“Bosh! One doesn’t need to go to university for that.”

“This is no university. It’s glorified butchery.”

“Gentlemen, is it just my imagination, or does Griffin’s hair look a bit whiter than it was before? I didn’t think it was possible. And his skin! Did you see his skin? It’s translucent. You can see the veins and everything.”

“Here’s an idea. Why don’t you knock on his door and ask him?”

“Like hell I will! You knock first.”

“After you.”

“No, after you!”

Men of science do not hesitate to mock those they venerate the most.

Yes, they still consulted me on academic matters. I convinced myself that they were doing it out of habit, or duty, or, perhaps, pity.

And yes, I was still welcome at Professor Handley's dinner table, but so was Griffin, although he did not take advantage of this privilege frequently. On those rare occasions when he joined us, Elizabeth would become noticeably distracted. She would study Griffin's face, as deliberately and as blatantly as her upbringing allowed, while he remained oblivious to her presence. He spoke very little and ate even less. Between courses he scribbled in his notebook with which he never parted. His colourless lips kept moving, whispering formulas. His garnet eyes would squint and widen, as if from flashes of light. In those moments he resembled a monk immersed in perpetual prayer. And Elizabeth would sigh and smile sadly. Apparently, the white-haired genius struck a chord that I never had. Not that it mattered to me. One more defeat made no difference.

Handley, delighted to now have two adopted sons, nurtured his own designs. One Friday afternoon, just before dismissing the seminar, he suggested before everyone that Griffin and I should collaborate on a study.

Science professors cannot boast about being the most tactful men in the world. This is no earth-shattering revelation. Handley was no exception to the rule.

"Every semester my students grip each other by the throats for a chance to partner with Samuel Kemp," he said, beaming at his own ingenuity. "This time I decided to try a different approach. I will remove both Kemp and Griffin from the battle and assign them to each other. It would be presumptuous on my behalf to speak for the entire University College, but personally I am very anxious to see what miracles these two brilliant young men can concoct together."

For a few seconds everyone in the hall ceased breathing and looked at Griffin, for he, apparently, had the final say.

"Is this a mandate?" he inquired, tapping his lips with the tip of his pencil.

"Not at all," Handley reassured him hastily, "merely an unobtrusive proposal. Since you and Samuel Kemp already spend a considerable amount of time under the same roof, perhaps you would use this time more constructively, for the benefit of your respective careers."

Griffin straightened out and clutched his notebook to his chest.

“If this is a mere proposal, then I fear I must politely decline it, Professor. You see, I am not quite ready to share my work with anyone, even Samuel Kemp – with all due regard.”

There was no deliberate hostility in his voice. Still, his declaration solicited a number of stifled gasps from the audience. What? Samuel Kemp received his first outward rejection! Suddenly, everyone’s glances shifted to me.

My chest tightened. I felt a sudden need to unbutton my collar. The prospect of having a coughing attack in front of my fellow students petrified me. God be my witness, I tried not to be angry with Handley. Nor did I doubt his benevolence. The man sincerely believed his idea brilliant.

“Professor,” I mumbled, raising a sweaty, trembling hand. “I was about to present the same objection, but Mr. Griffin pre-empted me. I believe it is in everyone’s best interests that we work separately. Following his example, I will take no partner this semester. I would like to think that I have earned my autonomy.”

Handley looked perplexed, not heartbroken.

“Who am I to argue with geniuses?”

He turned his back to us and began wiping the blackboard, letting everyone know that the class was dismissed.

Several weeks went by. I remained faithful to my promise to work alone for the semester, spending my time in the mezzanine of the library, avoiding my fellow students and Handley in particular. The date of my graduation was approaching, which meant I needed to start thinking about my impending marriage. Elizabeth had begun making wedding preparations, and I had no idea what that ceremony entailed. She had mentioned names of places, churches and reception halls I had never heard of. In truth, my knowledge of London outside Bloomsbury was rather sketchy. I rarely had any reason to leave the cluster of buildings that comprised University College.

One Sunday evening, after the library had closed and I returned into my flat, something unthinkable happened. Griffin emerged from his laboratory and actually spoke to me.

“Samuel,” he began with uncharacteristic softness.

I shuddered at the sound of his voice and pinched myself. Griffin had never addressed me, let alone by my given name.

“I was made aware of the inconvenience I have caused you over the past few months,” he continued. “I did not know until recently that my experiments were harming your health. You should have informed me at once. And then that horrid incident at the lecture hall! Handley took me by surprise. I suppose, I haven’t grown accustomed to his antics. That buffoon of a man...”

I interrupted him quite coldly. “You were about to say –”

Did Griffin truly believe it would take only a few words of gossip to melt the ice?

“I was about to say that an apology would not be out of place.”

“An apology?” I asked, shaking my head in confusion. “From me to you, I suppose?”

“Samuel, I would be honoured to have you for a study partner. I was simply waiting for the appropriate moment to initiate you into my discoveries. I did not wish to do it before the entire class. Most of our fellow students are sheep. But you know that already, don’t you? Have I told you what happened to me in Cardiff when I was twelve?”

“No, Jonathan, you have not told me that story – or any other for that matter,” I said with a flaccid smile.

Griffin flicked his wrist at this vexatious oversight.

“It happened in late May, shortly before the end of the academic year. I was hiding in the shade of a tree behind the schoolhouse, reading about the structure of the early microscopes, when my high-spirited fellow students ambushed me. They wanted to test the validity of the physician’s claims and see whether the sun could actually scorch me. So they gagged me, tore my shirt off and tied me to a pole with sunlight beating down on me. After two hours, my chest was the same garnet-red as my eyes. I was delirious, nauseous and half-blind.”

“Why, Jonathan, this is dreadful,” I stammered. “Such savagery! I never suspected...”

“Let me finish!” he snapped, squeezing his temples. “I did not care what those laughing apes did to my flesh. The nausea subsided, and the massive burn covering my body eventually faded. But they had also ravaged my book sack, torn up my journals and scattered the pages in the wind. I am not telling you this in order to gain your sympathy. I am merely attempting

to explain the roots of my contempt for my peers. That incident six years ago made me extremely protective of my work. Now you know why I insist on keeping the door locked. The boorish mob must be kept out of my domain.”

“But Jonathan, you cannot possibly suggest that the fellows from Professor Handley’s seminar would...”

“Of course, they would! They are still apes, even in tweed vests with pocket watches. It is a shame that Mr. Darwin is no longer with us. He would have concurred with my statement. He had a flat on Gower Street. Didn’t you know?” Suddenly, his glance softened. “But listen, Samuel, I’m very glad that I met you, even in a place like this, amidst this institutional circus.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out, only a hoarse wheeze. The glass tubes on the shelf began to blur.

“We have much to discuss, Samuel. It will take some time.”

“Honestly, I’m flattered,” I muttered, wiping the sweat off my cheeks and neck. “However, I meant what I said in the lecture hall. It isn’t in our best interests to collaborate. You see plainly that I am in no state to argue with you. I simply don’t have enough air in my lungs. Let us leave things as they are. Please, excuse me.”

I turned around, preparing to leave, but Griffin, my idol, my tormentor, stepped towards me and caught me by the shoulders.

“I need one full night to work,” he continued, as if he had not heard my objections. “Come back in the morning, and I will be ready to share my findings with you. This will be the last inconvenience to which you’ll be subjected, one last favour. It will be worth your wait, Samuel. I promise.”

Losing my footing, I leaned forward and buried my face on his chest, convinced that I was dying. The fumes from his shirt and his white hair were poisoning me. It was the first time we had come into physical contact. Before then he had not so much as shaken my hand. Even on the verge of a swoon I could not help noticing how hot his skin was. Any other human being would be delirious at such body temperature. The protein in the blood begins to curdle at forty-two degrees Celsius. It was one of the first facts I learned in my medical coursework. And Griffin’s temperature must have been close to forty-five. But then, he was no ordinary human being. His body chemistry must have been different, either from birth or as a

result of mysterious manipulations on his part. And now this alien creature was embracing me, trying to cajole me into his plot.

Terrified and jubilant at the same time, I threw my arms around his neck and clung to him, coughing and laughing.

Suddenly, I heard him whisper. "Collect yourself, Samuel."

It was neither a plea nor an attempt to comfort me but an order. Of course, he had no time for this.

Still panting, I released him. He escorted me to the door and, with a slap on the back, pushed me into the dark hall.

"Good night, Samuel."

When I came to my senses, I was walking down Gower Street, where every stone in the pavement was familiar to me. Over the last few months I had learned the pattern of the cobblestones. Those clusters of ovals and lopsided rectangles had turned into a mosaic of bewilderment and muffled fury. But that night I felt strange heat radiating from those stones, like the heat from Jonathan's hands. Those stones were alive. They whispered to me, as I was still trying to make sense of the sudden reversal of fate.

He and I... How blind, how inattentive we both had been!

I must confess that the promise of partnership and camaraderie with Jonathan thrilled me more than my engagement to Elizabeth. Her acceptance of my proposal held no triumph for me. I never pursued her aggressively, and she never resisted. One evening Professor Handley, as unceremonious a matchmaker as he was a peacemaker, simply seated us side by side at the dinner table. It was a marriage of reverence that we shared for her father. When we said "yes", it was not so much to each other but to Professor Handley.

Elizabeth was sturdy and well-mannered, though not remarkably beautiful, not in the same sense that Jonathan was. Before meeting him, I had never regarded other human beings as beautiful or ugly. My aesthetic sensibilities awakened fairly late. Suddenly, I discovered the desire to look at another face, marvelling at the clean, elongated lines of the profile and the exquisite translucency of skin. It struck me as strange that the elation, the

source of which should have been Elizabeth, was instead sparked by Jonathan. Strange, but not in any way shameful.

Having abandoned my scientific logic, I occupied a front row seat in the theatre of my own imagination, where Jonathan was playing various leading roles. The image of a twelve-year old boy martyred by his mates began evolving, taking on epic forms. Jonathan appeared to me first as a medieval heretic, condemned to burn at the stake for the possession of forbidden books, then as Prometheus chained to a rock. Just like the hero of the Greek myth, Jonathan held fire stolen from gods, but unlike Prometheus, he did not wish to share it with all of humanity. He kept the fire only for the select few, and I was among the chosen.

In the morning, when I stopped by our flat to change my shirt and fetch my textbooks, I found Jonathan's room empty. I assumed I would meet him in the lecture hall. I could not help wondering how we would behave in front of our fellow students. Would we publicise our newly formed friendship? Perhaps, he would prefer to keep it a secret and then astound the entire department at the end of the semester.

I have witnessed, on more than one occasion, scenes of jubilation when study partners, after receiving an award for a successful demonstration, would hang on each other's necks, skip, squeal like pups and kiss each other "on the brain" as they called it. Then they would rip off their ties and give each other back rides up and down the hall, to the applause of their mates. It was a chance for these future high priests of science to temporarily turn into savages. Thankfully, they did not practice such boorish antics with me, knowing my distaste for them. Undoubtedly, even the most civilized men need a release, especially if it is well-earned. Still, I could not fathom embracing Jonathan by the shoulders in public, no matter how much I yearned to.

When I entered the lecture hall, I saw Handley's assistant. The professor himself was absent. So was Griffin.

When the assistant saw me, he pulled me aside.

"Mr. Kemp, Professor Handley wishes to see you in his office."

The request to see the professor in private did not disturb me. I could not recall doing anything that would lead to repercussions. I assumed that

the nature of the conversation would be purely academic. Perhaps, Griffin had informed Handley about our decision to collaborate and requested some funds from the department.

With a fairly light heart, I came into Handley's office. He was there in the company of another professor by the name of Ellsworth. Both men were wearing ridiculously outdated silk ties that made their bloated faces look even more unsightly.

"Please, sit down," Handley commanded, pointing at a vacant armchair. "I am afraid I have some disturbing news. Jonathan Griffin was taken to the infirmary earlier this morning, in a very grave condition."

"God help him," I mumbled, sitting down on the edge of the chair. "What happened?"

"Nobody knows for certain. He won't talk to the doctor. He exhibits every symptom of severe poisoning: vomiting, pallor, listlessness, reduced circulation in the limbs."

"Well, can I see him?"

"Not yet. The doctors insist on keeping him secluded."

"Why on earth?"

Here Ellsworth intruded.

"Samuel, do you know why we called you here?"

"Because I am Jonathan's friend, naturally."

"How odd," Ellsworth commented, rubbing his chin. "I did not think that Jonathan had any friends. But he certainly had his share of enviers. The doctors have reasons to believe that he is suffering from no ordinary infection. There is evidence of a highly toxic substance in his bloodstream. The director is contemplating bringing in the constable, who may wish to question those with whom Griffin has had contact. We wanted to prepare you for this possibility. You may be among the first ones to be interrogated."

Had I had any strength left in my legs, I would have leaped up from the chair. All I could do was press my fingers into the wooden arms.

"Don't fear, Samuel, we aren't trying to incriminate you," Hayward chimed in hastily. "On the contrary, we are trying to protect you."

"I know what made Griffin ill," I blurted out, staring into the floor. "He drank one of his concoctions."

The professors shook their heads in tandem.

“You aren’t implying that it was a suicide attempt, are you?” asked Ellsworth.

“Nothing of the sort! It was an experiment.”

“An experiment?”

“Yes! The substance he took was supposed to destroy the pigment in his blood without altering its properties. I’ve heard him mumble formulas in his sleep. Pigments, optical density, refraction index, transparency of living tissues, radiation machine... His obsessive love affair with light may have reached its pinnacle.”

The professors assumed the same pose – arms crossed, heads tilted. As I continued, Handley’s eyebrow kept arching steeper and steeper.

“So, what was the objective of his experiments?” he inquired. “In your opinion, what was Griffin trying to accomplish?”

Handley’s dimwittedness was truly infuriating. How long would it take him to assemble the pieces of the puzzle?

“Gentlemen,” I said, struggling to keep my voice steady, “is it not obvious that Griffin’s goal was invisibility?”

Both professors burst out laughing. The predicament had suddenly taken a farcical turn. Handley was so amused that he needed to pour himself a glass of sherry from the carafe on his desk.

“Scientific impossibility aside,” he resumed after the first sip, “why would a young man endowed with Griffin’s appearance wish to make himself invisible? I couldn’t help noticing the effect he has on the fair sex.”

“Griffin doesn’t care about women!” I exclaimed. “You don’t understand. He doesn’t care about anyone, least of all himself. He will risk his life for his work. I’ve grown to know Griffin like no other. Ridicule me to your hearts’ content. You did not stand behind the closed door of his bedroom for hours, listening to him rant in his sleep. Please, let me see him. I can persuade him to let the doctors treat him. He’ll listen to me. We can still save him.”

My eyes must have been tearing, because Handley offered me his handkerchief. Ellsworth leaned over to his colleague and mumbled loudly enough for me to hear.

“Something tells me that this is no longer a story of Mozart and Salieri. Rather, it is a story of Byron and Shelley.”

Handley, who was not very versed in Romantic literature, did not understand the allusion at once. He began chewing on his lower lip as he usually did to mask his ignorance.

“This would be far worse for the school’s reputation,” Ellsworth continued hissing in his ear. “Sensitive young men, when deprived of female companionship for prolonged stretches of time, can fall into all sorts of unwholesome, unnatural affections towards each other. Don’t you know? In ancient Sparta...”

The more Ellsworth spoke, the more perplexed Handley grew. History was another subject outside his expertise. Both carried on as if I were not present.

“Of what crime exactly am I being accused?” I asked at last, glancing up. “Let us be clear. Is it attempted murder or aberrant carnal tendencies?”

At last, Handley began to understand what was being alluded to. His jaw dropped, and his hand grasped his tie as if it were choking him.

“Young man! Have you no shame?”

“Shame? Shouldn’t you be posing this question to your colleague? A student is dying, and Professor Ellsworth is talking about ancient Sparta. Apparently, that is where his own mind dwells. Those night walks that he took down Gower Street with a handsome telegraph boy must have led to Sparta. But who am I to judge? After all, this is a secular, progressive university. Still, all you care about is your precious reputation. It comes before everything, even science. And then you wonder why students despise you.”

Handley threw a plaintive glance at his colleague. “I can’t handle this ordeal. What is happening to our institution? And above all, why is this happening in my tenure? Two of my best students... After everything I’ve done for them! I gave Samuel a seat at my dinner table and offered him my beautiful daughter in marriage. And this is the gratitude I receive!”

“Right before the end of the semester, too!” Ellsworth replied sympathetically.

“Let me see Griffin,” I demanded through my teeth. “I don’t care whom you drag into this. I will stand before the entire Scotland Yard force if necessary. I have nothing to hide, and I don’t need anyone’s protection.”

Handley pulled his tie off his neck and wrapped it around his fist.

“Go,” he muttered half-audibly, swinging the silk ribbon towards the door.

The drowsy nurse on duty barely stirred as I entered the chilly hall of the infirmary. All curtains were closed tight at Griffin’s request, who was the only patient there that day. For a minute I lingered at his bedside, studying the outline of his scrawny body under the white sheet. He did not acknowledge my visit in any way, even though he was wide awake. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling, and his hands were still clutching his notebook.

A malicious thought flashed through my head. This was my opportunity to exact revenge, however superficial. I could threaten to expose his failed experiment to our fellow students, to make him the laughing stock of the entire University College.

But that moment of gloating lasted only a second. I reminded myself that I was a doctor in training and, as such, took the liberty of feeling his forehead. Now, it was not much warmer to the touch than the metal bedpost. I estimated that his body temperature was barely hovering above thirty degrees.

Judging from the hue of his skin, his experiment was not a complete failure. He looked even paler than before, which led me to conclude that he had succeeded at destroying some of the pigment in his red blood cells.

“What a shame, Samuel,” he began, still staring upward.

His voice was surprisingly strong, given his wretched condition. He did not look defeated in the least.

“I had every intention of initiating you into my work,” he continued, “but you simply cannot keep a secret. You’ve babbled to Handley and Ellsworth, haven’t you? No, you cannot keep your mouth shut.”

“Neither can you,” I retaliated, sitting down on the edge of his bed. “You ought to consider gagging yourself for the night.”

“How much did you hear?”

“Enough to confirm my theory that you were not here to study medicine.”

“I wish I could,” he lamented. “Sometimes I wish I could take interest in something as mundane as medicine and practice it for the rest of

my life. I wish I could be content with Handley for a professor and his homely daughter for a wife. But I'll never be like the others. I always suspected it, but when I came here, all doubt was removed. This is no place to practice science."

His head twitched on the pillow, and his gaze shifted to me. This sudden attempt to make eye contact threw me into a state of slight panic. I came close to jumping up from his bed. His icy hand released the notebook and seized my wrist.

"I must leave at once," he declared.

"Perhaps, it would be for the better," I muttered faintly. "No need to stay in a place where you feel stifled."

For an instant I thought that he was going to ask me to abandon everything and follow him, to the end of the world, wherever he was going. I don't know what made me think he would propose such a thing.

He released my wrist as suddenly as he seized it.

"By the way, you need not fear," I continued. "Nobody will find out."

"Oh, yes, they certainly will find out," Griffin objected. "The whole world will – in due time. If you ever revisit Plato's *Republic*, read the story of Gyges, the Lydian rogue who found the ring that turned him invisible. I will accomplish what Gyges had endeavoured, only through science instead of magic. And those rotten hogs from academia who scoffed at me will tremble. The whole world will tremble."

The whole world! Griffin despised it enough to want to hide himself from it, yet at the same time he coveted it enough to want to dominate it.

"Will I ever see you again?" I asked.

"Not if everything goes according to my plan. I'll be sure to visit you when my work is complete. You won't see me, but you'll hear my voice and feel my grip."

He arched his back on the mattress and laughed.

"Jonathan, you'll kill yourself!" I said, rising to my feet and backing away from his bed.

"Don't let your hopes soar."

Five days later Griffin left the university, citing poor health in his exit letter. One afternoon I returned from the lectures and found the boarding suite cleared of his possessions except for one cracked tube that he left behind and which I kept as a souvenir.

Once again, I could spend the nights under my roof without the fear of suffocating. Once again, I was king of the laboratory. Not that it mattered anymore. My fellow students began flocking back to me, their demeanour apologetic, almost servile. I did not respond to their insinuations. Their voices blended into one indistinct buzz. The only voice I heard distinctly was that of my former roommate. Jonathan succeeded at infecting me with his contempt for University College. I began viewing that place with his eyes and feeling stifled there. Once my coronation site, it suddenly became my prison. Graduation could not come soon enough. I did complete my solo demonstration on the distinction between the bovine and human strains of tuberculosis and even received an award which left me completely indifferent.

Needless to say, I never accepted the teaching position that Professor Handley had promised to me. Nor did I end up marrying Elizabeth. It was difficult to say which one of us experienced greater relief after the breaking off of the engagement. Sometimes I would catch her quizzical, pitying gaze.

Stevenson continued writing to me, sending drafts of his stories and poems, but I never responded.

I felt that by continuing to love my respectable, philistine life that Jonathan despised so, I would somehow betray him. Perhaps, if I proved myself worthy and denounced all things ordinary, he would return to me and share his secrets at last. I knew those sentiments were completely absurd and ludicrous. I owed Griffin nothing. No man should hold such power over another. And yet, his memory continued to hold me captive, even ten years after our parting. Yes, I still believed in the concept of an immortal soul, and I would sell mine just to know whether Griffin had succeeded in his outrageous quest. Was he still alive? Or had he become a casualty of his own experiments? Having no way of learning about his whereabouts, I nurtured my fantasies, perfectly aware of their destructive effect on my brain. Sometimes I would see objects levitating, as if held by an invisible hand, hear his malicious, haughty, caressing laughter.

When nobody was watching, I would pinch, slap and shake myself, trying to break free from that bizarre vision of Jonathan, the white-haired, garnet-eyed angel dissolving into air.

Editor's Notes

1. See, for example, *The Invisible Man Returns* (1940) and several of its remakes, such as *Abbott and Costello Meet the Invisible Man* (1951), in which the invisibility serum is used to assist an innocent man unjustly accused of murder to bring the real perpetrator to justice. Similarly, in *The Invisible Man* television series (ITP, 1958; NBC 1975), the scientist becomes an agent of good and a defender of justice. More recently, in H.F. Saint's novel *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* (1987) and its film adaptation under the same name (Warner Brothers, 1992), the hapless victim rendered invisible by a freak accident flees coercion to become a secret government weapon, while Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's graphic novel *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999–; film adaptation: 20th Century Fox, 2003) sees Griffin himself recruited as an unwilling government agent with super powers. In *Hollow Man* (Columbia Pictures, 2000), the brilliant young scientist again works in the service of the government, only to abuse his self-experiment with invisibility for personal vengeance, committing multiple murders and rendering himself monstrous. Along similar lines the video games series *Castlevania* (Konami 1986–), features the Invisible Man as one of numerous villains, which players must battle. In *Legacy of the Invisible Man* (2002), a graphic novel by Dave Ulanski, illustrated by Art Nichols, Ken Wolak, and Dawn Groszewski, the re-discovery of Griffin's original journals a century after his death unleashes new evil, while Joshua Dysart and J. Alexander's comic book *Van Helsing: From Beneath The Rue Morgue* (2004) combines the invisible monster/villain trope with another of Wells' fictions, as in this particular reworking the monster proves a product of Dr. Moreau's experiments. In contrast, the animation *Mad Monster Party* (Embassy Pictures 1967), the slapstick *The Invisible Woman* (Universal, 1940), and the spoof skit 'Son of the Invisible Man' included in *Amazon Women on the Moon* (Universal, 1987), as well as Donald E. Westlake's comic crime novel *Smoke* (1995), recycle the central motif of Wells' dark novella for light-hearted humour, drawing on the comic strain also present in the novella itself when, early on, Griffin plays innocent pranks on the villagers. For more detailed coverage of adaptations of Wells' novella, see Thomas C. Renzi's updated *H.G. Wells: Six Scientific Romances Adapted for Film* (2004 [1992]) and Don

G. Smith's *H.G. Wells on Film: The Utopian Nightmare* (2002), though the later only covers cinematic adaptations up to 1997, as well as a fairly comprehensive Wikipedia entry on *The Invisible Man* (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_invisible_man).

2. One might think, for example, of the use of stem cell research for discriminatory gender selection, compatible organ donor 'production', or genetic manipulation for potential military agendas.
3. See, for instance, some of the following: Stephen Heath, 'Psychopathia Sexualis: Stevenson's *Strange Case*', *Critical Quarterly* 28:1 (Mar. 1986), 93-108; Wayne Koestenbaum, 'The Shadow on the Bed: Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde, and the Labouchere Amendment', *Critical Matrix* 4:1 (Mar.1988), 35-55; Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. New York Penguin 1990: 105-126; and Anthea Callen, 'Doubles and Desire: Anatomies of Masculinity in the later Nineteenth Century', *Art History* 26:5 (Nov. 2003), 669-699.
4. The Emmy-winning set decorator George McGarvey designed the set pro bono, using antique pieces generously lent by the United House Wrecking of Stamford, Connecticut. For further details of the plays, see Neary's homepage: <http://mjneary.webs.com/>
5. For further details, see the publishers' website: <http://allthingsthatmatterpress.blogspot.com/2011/01/brendan-malone-last-fenian.html>.