

The Angel

Lee Jackson

Editor's Note

Since the publication of his first novel *London Dust* (Arrow 2003), Lee Jackson has established himself as a prolific neo-Victorian crime writer. Averaging a novel a year, Jackson specialises in vivid re-inventions of nineteenth-century London for twenty-first century audiences, from the splendour of the city's bright lights to the lurking dangers of its darkest alleyways. Repeatedly the metropolis itself becomes a co-character, providing the enabling space for the arousal, pursuit, and thwarting of criminal desires, as Jackson evokes some of the neo-Victorian novel's favourite haunts: from music halls, brothels, railways, slums, and refuges for fallen women, to mourning emporiums, pleasure gardens, coffee houses, photographic studios, and mesmerists' parlours.

Jackson's atmospheric, period detail derives from meticulous research. With characteristic generosity, he has made his research findings freely available on his Victorian London website (<http://www.victorianlondon.org/>), which forms an important resource and database for historians and writers working on the nineteenth century, as well as including useful links to a number of related websites of neo-Victorian interest. An anthology of Jackson's favourite sources has also been published as *A Dictionary of Victorian London* (Anthem 2006).

Hidden away in a corner of the Victorian London website is Jackson's contribution to this journal, a light-hearted pastiche of the Ripper story that, unlike most of his fiction, revolves around a supernatural turn, not explicable in rationalist terms. The story may be read as parodying the continuing hold of the Ripper figure over the popular imagination, the widespread simplistic and misleading perception of his acts as *the* defining nineteenth-century crime and the birth of the modern serial killer, and the excuse of gratuitous sadism that the trope often seems to afford to writers. Jackson's story self-mockingly participates in the by now stereotypical Ripper resurrection staged in so much neo-Victorian writing. Such work diverges widely in emphasis, including texts as varied as Nene Adams lesbian romance-thriller *Black by Gaslight* (P.D. Publishing 2006), Boris Akunin's 'The Decorator' – a Jack the Ripper goes to Moscow story – in *Special Assignments: The Further Adventures of Erast Fandorin* (Phoenix 2008), and the recently televised, three-part UK crime series *Whitechapel* (ITV 2009). In the latter, re-enacting his anonymous Victorian counterpart's murders, the postmodern Ripper, though eventually vanquished, conveniently once more escapes identification. In Jackson's short story, in contrast, the comeuppance is of a rather

different kind, as much directed at the reader, as the writer deliberately short-circuits conditioned expectations.

The topics of Jackson's novels evoke both Victorian sensation fiction and our own century's tabloid journalism, covering suicide, child murderers, baby farming and infanticide, pornography, blackmail, sex killings, and more. His most recent novel, *The Mesmerist's Apprentice* (William Heinemann 2008; Arrow 2009) is the second of a mystery series set in the 1850s, published under 'L.M. Jackson', involving the female but far from 'lady' detective Sarah Tanner. As does so much nineteenth-century emergent crime fiction, Jackson blurs the lines between criminal and detective-cum-avenger figures, problematising his audience's emotional investment in reading about 'bloody' neo-Victorian crimes and often violent retribution as opposed to modern-day 'bloodless' justice. It is hoped that inclusion of his pastiche in *Neo-Victorian Studies* will draw Jackson's varied work to the wider attention of neo-Victorian theorists that it amply deserves.

MLK

The Angel

The Devil reclined upon the chaise longue, resting his boots upon the fabric, getting mud everywhere. He was dressed in a black morning suit, which neatly concealed his tail, and wore a cravat of the deepest crimson, matching his ruddy complexion. In fact, were it not for the twin knobs of pointed cartilage that marred his forehead, one might almost have taken him for a lawyer. His unblinking eyes, however, made Dr Wragg feel sorely ill at ease and, consequently, the latter gentleman stood anxiously in front of the fire-place, playing the coals with the poker, waiting for his guest to speak.

'Despite what you may have heard, Sir,' said the Devil in a languid aristocratic drawl, finishing the cigar he was smoking with a final puff, 'I am not in the habit of making bargains.'

Dr Wragg blanched, unsure whether to reply, tweaking his copious whiskers.

'In fact, I find my business does well enough and I have little need to drum up trade, particularly in these parts.'

Dr Wragg tugged his collar nervously.

‘However, I must confess,’ said the Devil, ‘that I was intrigued by your letter.’

There was a pause.

‘I-I-I was not sure the Sorting Office would know the address,’ said Dr Wragg, nervously.

‘Indeed,’ replied the Devil, pulling a manila envelope from his pocket and taking out the letter, reading it again to himself. ‘One cannot but admire the penny post. Now, if I understand you correctly, you propose to carry out a series of murders?’

‘Yes, your honour, indeed,’ replied Dr Wragg.

‘In locations derived alphabetically from entries picked, at random, from Greenwood’s Metropolitan Gazetteer?’

‘That is my intention, your honour,’ stated Dr Wragg, as firmly as he were able.

‘How novel,’ said the Devil, looking over the letter again. ‘Well, it shows a certain ambition, twenty-six murders in twenty six nights.’

‘Twenty five,’ interjected Dr Wragg.

‘Twenty five?’

‘I cannot find a locality beginning with X,’ replied Dr Wragg, a tone of regret in his voice. ‘And,’ he continued apologetically, ‘I must confess I had rather planned only one per week, in the first instance at least.’

‘Oh dear,’ said the Devil, looking a trifle disappointed.

‘On Sundays, mind you,’ added Dr Wragg.

‘And, in return for these efforts in my name, you wish to be granted eternal life?’

‘If you please, your honour.’

The Devil looked rather pensive, and pulled out a pencil from inside his coat, jotting down a variety of calculations on the back of the manila envelope. When he had completed this arithmetic, he looked up at his host.

‘Would you consider two hundred years, plus an annuity of one hundred guineas?’

Dr Wragg thought upon the matter and, considering it unwise to haggle, replied in the affirmative. The Devil smiled and stood up from the chaise longue, extending his left hand towards his host who shook it heartily, then hastened to offer him his hat and coat.

‘As to the date,’ said the Devil, ‘I shall expect delivery on All Hallows Eve, at midnight.’

‘Delivery, your honour?’

‘Oh, some proof in each case, if you please. I am told ears or hands are the easiest but, really, I am quite indifferent.’

‘Ah. And where may I find your honour?’

The Devil pondered for a moment, then pulled out a small leather-bound diary from his jacket, flicking through the pages until he found the relevant date.

‘I think, if it is convenient for you, upon Islington Green. Make sure you are prompt, Dr Wragg. Twelve sharp, mind you, or we claim the customary forfeit.’

‘Oh, indeed, your honour,’ he replied, holding open the door, ‘as you wish, your honour.’

The Devil nodded goodbye and left, replacing his stove-pipe hat upon his head as he descended the stairs, perfectly concealing his horns. Wragg stood quite still, gazing thoughtfully into the fire. There was much work to be done.

Outside, on the Pentonville Road, the Devil looked at his watch and hailed a cab, wondering if he was in time to catch the 11:45 from Euston.

Dr Wragg was a physician by profession and had long cultivated a healthy disregard for human life, being overly familiar with both its beginning and end. The first murder was, therefore, a simple matter, a maidservant’s newborn child quietly deprived of breath in a house in Colebrooke Row; in this, he allowed himself a certain degree of latitude, content with being merely in the vicinity of the The Angel. On the following Sunday, keen to employ a variety of methods, he garotted a girl in Bagnigge Wells, that green haunt of lovers and thieves; a cord round her neck and his trousers around his ankles. On the third Sunday, he met with an old soldier in Clerkenwell, with whom he shared a drink and a discrete pinch of arsenic. Seven days later, on a visit to the theatre, a little-known actress had her back quite broken; she was assumed to have fallen down stairs.

In the fifth week, he befriended a little street arab, and disposed of him at Euston; they found the orphan’s body a week later in a piece of left luggage, unclaimed.

By the sixth week, he began to seek novelties; he found a beggar woman by a Fleet Street coffee house, ground a broken bottle into her face, then left two pounds in her pockets. Then came a young girl, gagged on the grass in Green Park, a nanny on her half-holiday. The following Sunday, an old whore in her Haymarket rooms, choked in performance of some unnatural French vice. Then back to Islington, an old woman, blue and bloated, floating in her petticoats in the New River. Then Johnson's Court, a mundane stabbing at midnight. In Kings Cross, another baby found cold in its cot. In Leather Lane, a man kicked to death, with a dozen blows to his head. At the Monument, a maid who jumped over the rails, or so it seemed. On Newington Green, a crossing sweep, bludgeoned with his own brush.

On Oxford Street, a flower girl crushed under a waggon; a considerable disruption to traffic as the vehicle was unloaded and the wheel removed from its axel; the driver apologised profusely for the inconvenience.

By now the weekly task had become quite routine. In Paradise Row, Stoke Newington, a banker was shot through the head. Queenhithe docks, an accidental drowning. On the Regents Canal, another. In St Giles, a case Wragg ascribed to cholera morbus; no more questions asked. In the Temple, the garotte again. Upper Street, a slit wrist suicide, dead in her bath. Vauxhall Gardens, another knife through the ribs. Waterloo Bridge, a leap into the Thames. At The Yorkshire Stingo, something unwholesome dissolved in a glass of stout.

The Zoological Gardens, a curious death, blamed upon a chimpanzee.

And so it was over in a trice.

Dr Wragg sat in his rooms on All Hallows Eve, looking at the clock. He felt it was bad luck to open the wine but took a sip of brandy instead, placing the proof of his crimes, a pickle jar containing the thumb of each victim, upon the mantelpiece. In retrospect, obtaining the thumbs had been the most trying aspect of the whole affair, since it had often proved difficult to appropriate them at the scene of the crime, even with the pair of pliers he had specifically bought for that very purpose. In fact, in three cases he had

been obliged to visit the morgue under cover of darkness and acquire them after the fact; he hoped this would not count against him.

At eleven o'clock, he stuffed the jar into his coat pocket, determined to be early, and made his way from Pentonville Road, up to the Angel turnpike. It was manned by a portly employee of the parish who knew the doctor by sight.

'A late call agin, Sir?'

'Indeed, yes.'

'Ah, now there's a shame. I was goin' to ask ye to share a drop of the best with us.'

The man pulled a small flask from his pocket, asserting that it contained the finest brandy he had ever tasted, a present from a driver whom he had excused the toll. The doctor consulted his pocket-watch and, having a fondness for that liquor, and already being within sight of the Green, assented to a quick drink.

It is well known that punctuality and alcohol are not good bedfellows; indeed, forty minutes or more passed in idle conversation before the doctor realised it was but a minute to midnight. He issued a loud curse and darted past his companion at the toll booth, running wildly along the middle of the High Street, past the weary stone face of Hugh Myddleton, until he lay, breathless and exhausted, upon the Green. Even then, he face was quite flushed with panic, until he heard the bells of St Mary's echoing twelve bells in the distance. Midnight.

The Devil never came, having been invited to a dinner party in Fulham.