

Angel of Highgate (Excerpt)

by

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Chapter 1: In Hopes of the Resurrection to Come

September, 4th, 1859. It was almost seven a.m. on a Sunday morning. God was in His Heaven. Queen Victoria was on her throne. And Lord Geoffrey Thraxton was prowling the pathways of Highgate Cemetery.

Ectoplasmic mists swirled about the brooding mass of stone mausoleums. A ghostly winged form—a carved angel perched atop a grave—crooked a beckoning finger from the gloom. Thraxton ignored the summons and strode on, the fog cupping his face in its cool hands.

Despite the early hour and the somber setting, Thraxton was impeccably dressed in black frock coat and tight, camel-color breeches, a bright yellow cravat knotted at his throat, a grey silk top hat perched at an insolent angle upon his head. In one kid-gloved hand he gripped a walking stick topped by a golden phoenix bursting forth from tongues of flame. The other hand, gloveless, stroked the cashmere lining of his coat pocket. In his early thirties, and of above average height and muscular build, Thraxton had a face that could have been said to be both

handsome and noble, were it not for a certain weakness in the mouth, a hint of dissolution in the corners of the intense blue eyes.

In the still air, the only sound was the crackle of leaves underfoot, the rattle of robins in the berry bushes, and as the hour struck, the slow, dolorous clang of bells from the nearby Church of St. Michael's. To the west lay the city of London, an invisible but palpable presence in the fog, for the smoke coughed up from the sooty throats of its myriad chimneys left a bitter taste of sulfur on the tongue.

Highgate was arguably the most beautiful necropolis in the capitol, with its mixture of Classical and Egyptian influenced tombs and mausoleums, including its most celebrated architectural flourish, the Circle of Lebanon, so named for the gnarled cedar that rooted at its center. It was a place for London's fashionable living to perambulate, as well as a final resting place for London's fashionable dead to await the Doom Crack and the body's Resurrection.

At this hour, however, Thraxton had only the latter for company. On a path leading to the Egyptian Avenue, he paused to contemplate the rain-worn face of a stone angel, its eyes cast downward in an expression of profound loss. At that moment, the bells of St. Michael's peeled a final stroke and fell mute, opening an abyss of silence wherein the world beyond the cemetery fell away, and the dead caught their breath. Then a sorrowful wail drifted from afar, faintly, as if all the stone angels of Highgate were weeping, but soon followed the rattle of carriage wheels, the jingle of horse brasses and the muffled thump of hooves on soft soil.

A rectangular shape loomed in the mist, gathering solidity until it materialized in the form of a hearse drawn by two coal-dark mares, their huge heads nodding with black plumes. Atop the hearse rode two funeral grooms in black frock coats with top hats draped in black crepe. Two more paced behind the hearse on foot, followed by four women in black mourning dresses, their

faces darkly veiled. These women were the source of the weeping, which was interspersed with the occasional heart-cracking wail. At the rear of the procession strode two men dressed in daily attire but for the black crepe armbands that marked them as mourners.

The taller of the two was a handsome gentleman of about the same age as Thraxton, whose blond curls spilled out from beneath his top hat. The man that walked beside him was a full foot shorter, barely into his twenties, and whose bowler hat and shabby jacket marked him as a domestic servant. Both men wore expressions shaped by the solemnity of the occasion, yet the servant's face seemed to bear a look at once both serious and supercilious.

The hearse clattered around the bend of the narrow lane and Thraxton stepped aside to allow it to pass, doffing his top hat in respect. Such a lugubrious display was calculated to instill a profound sense of loss and mourning in all who witnessed it, yet the sight of the hearse had served only to tease a faint smile onto Thraxton's lips.

The glass sides of the hearse flashed as it drew alongside and he caught a glimpse of the deceased—a young woman in a crystal coffin, her body swathed in a white lace death shroud of intricate delicacy.

As the solemn cortege trundled by, Thraxton's presence went unacknowledged by the slightest glance from either the funeral grooms or the wailing women. But the blond gentlemen looked up as he passed, and for the briefest of moments his calm brown eyes met and held Thraxton's.

The funeral procession carried on for another thirty feet and drew up next to a stone mausoleum. To gain a better vantage, Thraxton clambered up on the pedestal with the stone angel. Setting his hat momentarily atop the angel's head, he stood with his arms wrapped around

its waist, his cheek pressed up against the mossy stone as he watched the melancholy scene from a discreet distance.

The lamenting reached its climax as the four grooms lifted the coffin from the hearse. Assisted by the gentleman and the servant, they bore it into the tomb upon their shoulders, and the mourning women wept after them.

It was over quickly. The mourners re-emerged from the tomb, minus the coffin, the groomsmen led the horses around until they faced the direction they had just come from, and soon the cortege passed by heading in the other direction. The funereal wailing softened into the distance. The hearse grew transparent, lost substance, and dissolved into the seething grayness. Thraxton retrieved his top hat, stepped down from his angelic perch, and sauntered toward the mausoleum.

A fresh wreath hung upon the bronze door, above which a stonemason had carved a grinning skull nestled amongst winged cherubs. Thraxton studied the Memento Mori as he stole a single white flower from the wreath and threaded the bloom into his boutonniere. He cast a casual glance first left and then right. The funeral party was long gone. Apart from the slumbering dead of Highgate, no one was about. The latch lifted beneath his thumb and a gentle push creaked the tomb door open. Thraxton slipped inside and swung the door shut behind him.

Inside the tomb, a profusion of candles burned here and there, their waxy scent muddled with the fragrance of white lilies scattered atop the coffin's crystal lid. He stepped closer. The flowers concealed the face of the deceased, so he swept them to the floor and peered in. What he saw made him catch his breath. The woman inside the coffin was beautiful and shockingly young, scarcely sixteen.

“My God,” he gasped, “how perfect a bloom to have fallen so soon.”

His fingers closed on the handle of the coffin lid. A gentle tug revealed that it was not fastened. The crystal lid was massive and awkward, but Thraxton heaved it off and set it down on the floor.

At last, he stood over the open coffin gazing down at the vision within. Despite the heavily applied white powder and red rouged cheeks and lips, the woman seemed young, fresh and alive. The sight of that face, like a sleeping angel's, sent a tremor through him. To disturb such beauty seemed sacrilege, but after a moment's hesitation, he reached out and caressed the soft down of her cheek with his fingertips.

"The blush of youth still lingers on flesh grown cold."

As he traced the full, rouged lips with his thumb, a muscle in his jaw trembled.

"Surely Death, your new husband, would not be jealous of a single kiss on this, your wedding day?"

Thraxton leaned in and softly kissed the corpse's lips. They were full and pliant, and parted slightly as he drew his lips away.

"How sweet. Even in death. How sweet."

The shroud was fastened at the front by a number of delicately tied bows. He caught and tugged the end of the topmost. The bow silkily unknotted and the shroud fell open, revealing an alabaster neck and chest. The remaining bows soon surrendered to his quick fingers and Thraxton drew the shroud open to reveal small, firm breasts with taut, high nipples, the soft dome of a belly, a patch of golden hair between the thighs. In the shifting candlelight, the flesh seemed marble that had flowed waxen and set in the shape of an Aphrodite.

Thraxton's eyes drank in the sight. He realized he had been holding his breath, and now let it out in one deep, languorous sigh.

“Ah, pretty one, has a coffin become your bridal bed? Will Death be the first to take your maidenhood?”

Thraxton slid out of his coat and let it fall at his feet. His fingers tore at the buttons of his vest. He yanked the fine linen shirt over his head in one quick motion, shedding several pearl buttons. By now, anticipation had tightened him into a throbbing knot, and as he peeled off the tight breeches he was already stiff and quivering in the chill air of the tomb.

Naked, he climbed up onto the bier the coffin was set upon and stared down upon the body in a state of greedy rapture.

“And now,” he breathed, “a taste of the fruit new-fallen from the tree, before the worms can canker it!”

Thraxton lifted and spread the woman’s legs, letting them dangle on either side of the open coffin, then slid in between. It was difficult to move in such restricted confines, but he squirmed his hips left and right, searching for an entry, until he slid in effortlessly.

“I will cuckold Death and add my little death to yours!”

As he began to thrust, the cold body moved rhythmically under him, breasts swaying. The sound of his labored breathing filled the tomb, and the light of the guttering candles refracted through the coffin’s crystal sides, threw grotesque, quivering shadows on the walls.

Outside, the morning fog was beginning to burn off under the weak September sun. The service at nearby St. Michael’s had finished but a few minutes ago, and now many of those who had attended, gentlemen and their ladies, couples with their children, were enjoying a stroll in the tranquil peace of the cemetery grounds.

Inside the mausoleum, Thraxton’s thrusting had intensified to the point where the woman’s head was softly thumping into the end of the coffin. It could have been a trick of the shifting

candlelight, but it appeared as though the corpse had the slightest of smiles upon its lips. The dead woman's legs had slid down until the cold soles of her feet pressed on Thraxton's steely buttocks. Even more miraculous was when the corpse's eyes opened slightly and a singularly delicious giggle escaped the deceased's lips.

“Was there ever a more lovely Lazarus?”

By now the pathways of Highgate Cemetery were busy with morning strollers and relatives come to lay flowers on the graves of their loved ones. The visitors now looked up in alarm and horror as the serenity of a Sunday morning was broken by the echoing grunts and moans of a man and a woman in the throes of sexual ecstasy.

Their macabre tryst completed, Thraxton collected his scattered attire from the floor of the tomb, while the woman put on clothes that had been tucked beneath the coffin's satin pillows. Dressed only in a white corset, the young woman let out a mischievous giggle as she tied the red silk bow that held up one of her knee-length white stockings.

“You took your bleedin' time, Geoffrey,” she said. “My bloomin' arse was freezin' in that coffin!”

Thraxton smiled as he cinched the silk cravat into an insolent knot at his throat. “Merely showing due deference and respect for the deceased, Maisy, m'dear.”

She snickered at that. “Bloomin' heck. I don't fink wot you just done to me was the least bit respectful!”

“Nonsense,” Thraxton corrected, slipping an arm around her narrow, corseted waist and pulling her towards him. “What greater respect can a mere supplicant show than to worship at the altar of Venus?”

Maisy's eyes softened at his words. "I know I'm nuffink but a common tart, Geoffrey, but when you says them things it makes me feel all special and bee-you-tee-full!"

Never taking his eyes from hers, Thraxton slipped two fingers inside her, then put them in his mouth, tasting the acrid tang of their commingled essences. He sought to share it with a kiss, his tongue probing the sweet cavern of Maisy's mouth. For a moment, she sucked on his tongue thrillingly. Perceiving her renewed passion, Thraxton felt his ardor rise again. But then Maisy dissolved, once more, into titters.

It shattered the illusion, reminding Thraxton that, despite the elaborate pretense, Maisy was merely a street girl he had purchased for a few hours diversion. He broke off the kiss, gave her cheek a fond caress, and went back to pulling his clothes on.

"And so you are beautiful and special," Thraxton said, digging a heavy coin from his pocket which he pressed into her hand. "And here's a golden sovereign to keep your beautiful arse warm in the winter."

Maisy, who had never seen much more than a shilling for herself in the four years she had worked as a prostitute, gasped at the largesse. "Thanks ever so much, Geoffrey! You are a proper gent you are!"

He grabbed her roughly and kissed her hard on the mouth, then spun her around and slapped her on the bare behind.

"Now then, go my child and sin no more!"

Maisy rubbed her stinging right buttock and giggled effervescently.

"My Gawd! You are such a cut up, Geoffrey. Really you are. You oughta be on the music hall stage!"

Thraxton paused in brushing a smudge of tomb dust from his top hat. He threw his arms out expressively.

“But I am, my dear. I am. And every day of my life is merely another act I must play.”

While Maisy pulled on her dress, Thraxton sat on the coffin staring into the shadows, a thousand conflicting thoughts wrestling in his mind. He was given to moodiness, and now he felt a post-coital depression settling upon him, mixed with the vague sense of disappointment that always accompanies the indulgence of a long-held fantasy.

Maisy by now had finished dressing, and with her parasol and little lace-up boots that showed when she coquettishly lifted her skirts, could have passed for the local vicar’s daughter out for a Sunday promenade. On her way out of the mausoleum she turned and curtsied to Thraxton.

“Good day, milord,” she said and dissolved once more into giggles.

The heavy door thumped shut and Maisy was gone.

A waft of fresh air crashed into the walls and dispersed, churning with the heady scents of candle wax, flowers and sex. Thraxton moved about the tomb, extinguishing candles, until only one remained burning. He stood close by, feeling its heat on his cheek, his face lit by the candle’s amber glow. His eyes instead were fixed on the shadows that squirmed at the edge of the light.

The candle flame shivered in a sudden draft that made the shadows lunge then recoil. Thraxton gazed into their shifting depths and sensed an invisible presence hovering there. When the hairs at the nape of his neck began to rise, he knew it had arrived. The Dark Presence. His old adversary.

“Death?” he said, his voice a brittle whisper in the echoing silence of the tomb. “Can you hear me, Death? Yes?” He smiled. “Not today ... not today.”

Thraxton licked his fingers and pinched the wick out with a sizzle, and with no light to hold them back, the shadows of the tomb fell in upon him.

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