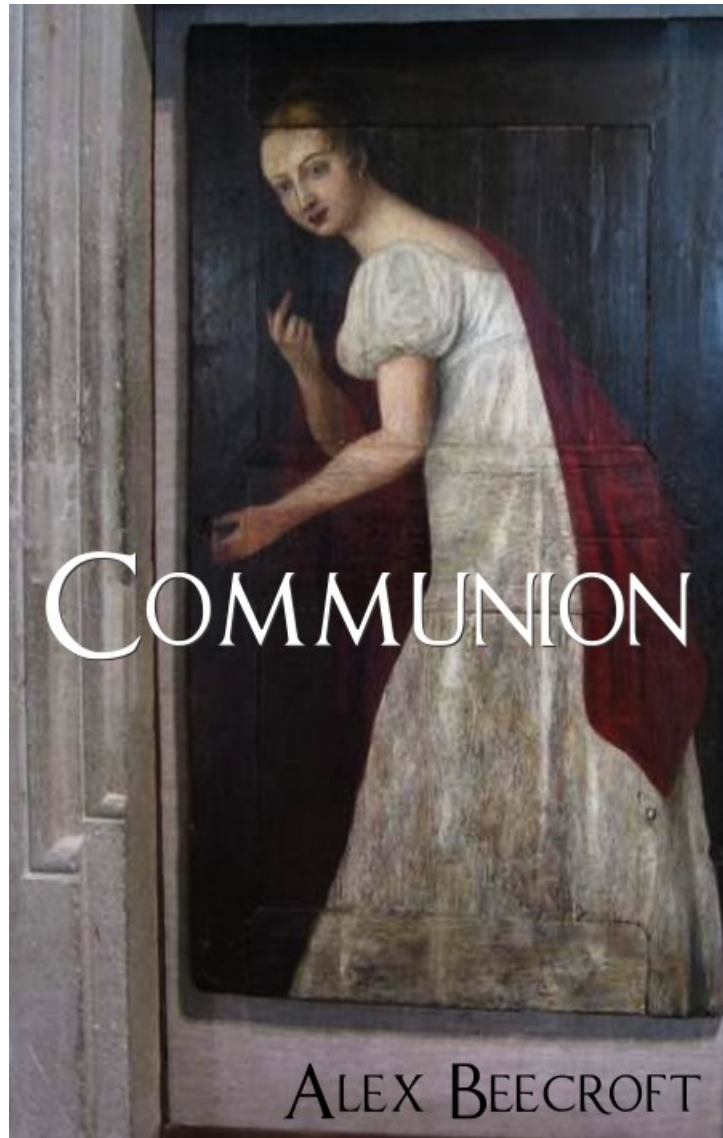


Communion
by
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“Why must you be forever meddling in everybody's business but your own?”

They sat in what used to be Elizabeth's chamber, which had now become a lumber room for unwanted odds and ends. Jasper, in the window seat, could feel the cold blast of the December wind through the panes and preferred it at that moment to Charles' heat.

Charles, golden as the Angel of the Annunciation in his quilted silk banyan and mustard-coloured suit, had a look he'd never pictured on any angel's face – wild eyed. Contemptuous.

“This *is* your business.” Jasper tried not to feel an answering contempt, but he wondered why he wore himself out, flying again and again into the glass walls of Latham self-complaisance like a bird into a window.

“Was!” Charles laid his hand on the door and paused as though he expected to sense something through the contact. “It *was* my business, but now it's dealt with. Complete. The accounts made up and a line ruled at the bottom. We solved the puzzle and freed the ghost and there's an end to it. Move on.”

“I cannot.”

“So, what? You want us to adopt the child? Teach it to read? Bring it sweetmeats--”

“It could not hurt.”

“Move in together in one house, father and father and dead thing?”

The third occupant of the room raised her head at his words. She sat hunched up by the wall. It had long been replastered, and an out of fashion tapestry hung there. There was no sign that once her mother and she had been bricked up within it to die. Four years ago, Jasper and Charles had sent the mother to her eternal rest, not realized until some months later that the ghost of the child had been left behind alone. By some strange working of providence she had, from that day, begun to age. She had learned to walk and to follow Jasper about the house, when he visited, looking up into his face with lonely and hungry eyes.

Now she snugged her little arms more firmly about her chubby legs, pulled herself into a smaller ball, and even though a wary part of him acknowledged Charles' caution might be reasonable, he still pointed her out, “Her name is Lily. And she's right there. Listening to you. Someone must take responsibility for her and--”

“And so it has to be you. I swear, you make these things up to distress me.”

“Why does it anger you – the thought of taking a house together with me? The thought of bringing up a child together, even one so strange?”

And all at once they were not talking about the ghost at all, but Charles' future, and Charles' wish to be normal, respected, secure. None of which were things that Jasper understood, let alone knew how to

combat.

Charles caught up the nearest thing on the shelf next the door – a pewter tankard of unfashionable shape – threw it at the fire-place, spraying ash and dirt half way across the bare boards of the floor. “I am not angry, I am *afraid!*”

Pity and guilt stirred beneath the surface of Jasper's resentment. “You?” he scoffed, gently, moving closer, so that he could touch the edge of Charles' cruelly compressed mouth. “Who have faced more monsters these past years than St. George himself?”

Charles did not soften in response. “They say you are a freak, in London. In the village they murmur of witchcraft. I am to tell you that George has withdrawn his invitation to you to sit down with us for Christmas dinner.”

Jasper gave a little huff of laughter, like poison escaping on the breath. How amusing that he was now too dangerous for George, when for so long it had been the other way around.

“This is without any of them suspecting the intimacy between us, which in itself is suicidal folly.” Charles reached up as if to remove Jasper's hand from his cheek, but ended up holding it, pressing his face into the cradle of Jasper's palm, closing his eyes.

He made a joke around the numbness in his chest, where everything seemed to have compressed into a single, leaden lump. “Well... they can hardly hang us twice.”

And it was Charles' turn to laugh as if someone had kicked him in the throat. “Is this the choice you offer me then – love together with death? And if I choose, instead, to live?”

Jasper pulled his hand away, glad for the moment that the gesture made Charles look so miserable. “You cannot choose to live. Do you suppose death will spare you because you deny yourself love? Your only choices are to lie or to tell the truth, in front of One who already knows all.”

Charles caught at his sleeve, but he twitched it away and opened the door. “It so happens I am dining with an old friend in London today, so George might have spared your blushes. I shall not trouble you or him any further.”

At his cold anger, the ghost child turned her face into the wall, as though she could still feel the imprint of her mother there, Charles blanched and caught at his coat, and Jasper felt how ridiculous it was for a man like him even to attempt to stand on his dignity in this house. When he felt the awakenings of the desire to turn back, to give comfort, he shoved them down hard and strode away.

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Seven hours later, having been welcomed with pleasure, soothed with interesting conversation and plied to repletion with plum duff and porter, Jasper's own ability to lie to himself finally gave out. He discovered that he was miserable, and that the only thing he really wanted to do was replay the entire conversation and bring it to a different end. He stood up mid-sentence, wound his comforter around his throat and announced “I must be going. It will be dark soon.”

G. Horowitz Esq, purveyor of quality ocular devices for the esoteric connoisseur, pushed up his spectacles, dislodging his over large wig in the process and revealing a head bald and domed as an egg. “But I must show you my microscope. I have installed such a set of filters that I assure you I will be able to count the number of angels who can dance on the head of a pin – if I can only induce them to come and settle on the specific pin I have in mind.”

“Another time, sir.” Jasper flung on his greatcoat, causing the hand of glory in its jar on the window-ledge to sway as though it were alive. He had come straight here and avenged himself by buying Charles a ridiculously expensive present. It was a set of curious glasses, made of brass and chrim pressed between delicate lenses of rock crystal. A set of glasses that would enable him to share Jasper's ability to see into the spirit world. Now he tucked the box into his inner pocket and drew on his gloves.

“Your partner is well, I trust?”

“He is.” There were few people before whom Jasper might speak freely of Charles, affection and trouble laid out bare for a friend's advice. Horowitz was not one. There was a deal of trust between them, and the old man regarded him, perhaps, as something of a son. It was why Jasper had known he could descend on him unannounced and be fed and entertained. But he still had to guard his tongue lest this little refuge too be spoiled. In view of that, he couldn't, in justice, *blame* Charles for his fear. “He is with his family. But I hope to call on them this evening and give him his gift. And to that end I really must be going.”

Horowitz sighed and moved the decanter off the table, replacing it with a stack of unbound sheets, covered with the crabbed handwriting of Dr. John Dee – Elizabeth's court mage. “Well, if you must...”

Another day and Jasper would have fallen into that trap, sat down again and touched the ancient pages with reverent fingers, wanting to know their secrets. But today was Christmas day, and he could not let it pass with Charles angry at him.

“I must. I'll return soon, father. God be with you.”

“Shalom, my son. And do. The oftener you come to see me, the better I shall be pleased.”

The wind outside was bitter, scouring down the narrow streets as if filled with flakes of iron. Returning to the livery stables where he had left his horse, Jasper detoured to pass the pillory where he had stood himself a mere handful of years ago. The wretch who stood there, hands and head clamped tight, looked but a child to him, a ginger haired youth turned as blue as the feathers of ice over the surrounding windows. He was limp and unconscious, but breathed still, faint puffs of white in the square's slate shadow. The usual crowd had been driven indoors by the chill and the occasion, and the square only contained a ballad seller, singing “The Squire's Ride” in a thready voice, and a woman wrapped in verminous shawls, with a half brick in her hand.

She readied it to throw at the bowed head of the boy in the stocks, and Jasper, slipping on the frozen muck underfoot, said quickly “What has he done to you?”

She turned to look, and she was scarcely more than a child herself, a skeleton with guarded eyes. “He

gives away the only thing what I have to sell.” And he might have spoken of mercy, but in the face of her desperation it didn't seem decent. Preaching wouldn't have moved him either, in this mood. Instead he dug a shilling from his pocket and let her snatch it from his hand. “There are better things to do than kill your neighbor on Christmas day. Go and find something to eat.”

She didn't even pause to thank him before she was running away, towards the nearest ale house. Reflecting that Charles was also right in saying that he constantly interfered in things that did not concern him, Jasper printed his address and the offer of domestic work on a sheet torn from his notebook, put it into the unconscious boy's pocket before walking away. There was yet the faint hope that he might survive long enough to need a second chance.

The gesture distracted him from his own unhappiness as he rode home, wondering if there was more he could have done, but as the Latham's estate came into view his own problems pressed round again, closer for having been temporarily allayed.

The light was fast fading from the sky. Behind him, snowclouds blotted out the stars, and small flakes had begun to prick the night. To his right, the mullioned windows of the great house shone gold beneath a frosty blue sunset striped with vivid amber clouds. As his patient horse began to plod past their long gravel driveway, what looked like a spiral of fine dust, white as the flakes of snow, whirled into his path, formed itself into the shape of a cherubic child and beckoned him towards the glim of white mausoleums beneath the beeches.

This was the first time he'd seen Lily outside the house, and he smiled at her through his distress. It was not her fault that despite everything they had been through, four years of working and loving together, Charles still privately thought him a freak.

“Come,” she said, her little voice harsh and strange as the call of a fox. “I have brought you a present. But you must come quick, or it will run away.”

He followed her under the dark of the trees, the sky red overhead and the ground white. Through the open lichgate of the graveyard and down the overgrown lanes beneath the gazes of marble angels, he wound his way through the Latham family tombs, and though he was accustomed to death it wasn't just the bitter chill that made him shiver. They were not all happy, the souls that lay underfoot here, and their discontent had blanched the grass and bent the trees around them. When he saw the dark figure standing bowed at the head of Lily's small grave, clutching something to its belly, he did not at first know if it was man or revenant, alive or spectral.

But then he stepped on a handful of icy leaves, and at the crunch the figure raised its head, a gleam of light from the windows of the house falling on Charles' golden hair. His young smooth face, thoughtful as always, broke into a radiant smile. “You're home.”

“I am. But I little thought to find you out here waiting for me.” It was very much a part of their affaire, that they should tryst thus in a graveyard, and so it seemed natural to move them both into a patch of deeper shade and kiss, cold-mouthed, while the snow pattered down from the trees around. He didn't think when he was doing it that it might be for the last time. That refinement of pain only occurred to him afterwards.

But Charles didn't hit him or push him away. He only licked his lips, from which the smile had not yet faded. "I have thought all day about what you said. How I wanted an establishment of my own, a companion and a child of my own, and yet I couldn't recognize those things when you offered them to me."

"What?"

"Be fair – they bore a very different appearance from that I had been expecting." There was a hint of strain around the edges of the smile now, as though the fear had not entirely gone away, but Charles laughed and rubbed it off with his knuckles.

"I thought over dinner, when the one person I wished to be with was not there, that no child, dead or not, deserved to be alone on Christmas day." He took out from beneath his cloak the thing he had been holding tight against him – a single mince pie on a plate, still warm, the steam rising from it, and a scent of rum and cinnamon. "Foolish, I know. I brought her this."

"You want us to bring it sweet-meats?"

"It could not hurt."

The despair he'd been carrying all day long, hard as a chrysalis in his chest, cracked open all at once, and joy emerged out of pain so intensely that for a moment they were the same thing. Jasper hid his face in his gloved hands and swallowed down his anguish and relief so that it should not startle Charles away from his decision. Gently now. Gently, for Charles was the spoiled youngest son of a spoiled dynasty, and compromise and concession were harder for him than they were for most men.

"Not foolish," he said, "because kindness is never folly. I brought you something too."

The present seemed churlish now, too elaborate and expensive for this moment of simplicity, but the look of glee on Lily's face when Charles put them on, saw her, and recoiled three feet, stumbling over Lady Georgina Latham's marble urn as he did so, made it hard to regret too much.

Jasper put a hand down and felt the small cold fingers curl about his, wet and burning cold. Charles adjusted the glasses, put his head on one side, and a look of the purest intellectual fascination came over his face. He might have whipped out a notebook and taken measurements if the ghost child had not said, "You are my cousin," in her hoarse, inhuman voice, and reached out to touch his face.

Charles' gaze met Jasper's, looking for reassurance, sanity. The trust in it wiped out all Jasper's lingering resentment. When Charles looked away from him to the child, everything was well again between them. "I suppose you are. Not my own child, but of my blood." He held out the mince pie to her transparent fingers. "*Can you eat this?*"

"Break a piece off for me. I want us to share it."

There were times Jasper wondered what spoke through her, preternaturally old for her four years of age. He wondered now if this communion between them were holy or profane. Sometimes it was hard to tell. He watched as Charles broke the pastry in two and set one piece on the grave.

“Merry Christmas,” he said, catching the man's emptied hand and holding it tight. “Does this mean we are a family after all?”

“You told me a long time ago that until the Lathams could begin to pay their debts to their victims, we never should be free. I think I owe this to her, and to you.”

“It isn't you who owe repayment,” Jasper said, awed. “But I am glad it's you who's offered. I knew you were different. I knew it from the start.”

“You keep saying that,” Charles said, breaking the remnant in two and offering him half. “But I'm not worthy of your praise. Nevertheless, such as I am, I'm yours.”

He took the morsel from Charles' chilled fingers as reverently as he would have taken the bread of life. It tasted honey sweet.