THE GOOD PRESBYTERIAN AND THE SUCCUBUS

By far the most poignant case we encountered in the course of our research was that related by a Presbyterian minister. His is the sole account on record. The demoniac in question died in 2003 before we had an opportunity to interview him. Nevertheless we are confident that the following account is reliable, obtained as it was from a man whose credentials – both academic and spiritual – are of the highest order.

We arranged to meet Dr Bernard McElliot in his office in the church hall. His ministry is situated in a prosperous Dublin suburb; it answers the spiritual needs of a congregation that, though dwindling in numbers, remains steadfast in its faith and in its sense of community. There is a strong tradition of pastoral care. At the start of our meeting, Dr McElliot courteously sought our permission to take an urgent phone call; the caller appeared to be in some distress and the minister's gently spoken advice brought her comfort. He is a caring man, perhaps sixty, with an easy manner. His office is that of an academic: the many bookshelves are lined with scriptural exegesis, concordances, and works relating to church business and administration. He instructed his secretary to hold all further calls. He was eager to discuss the strange case of Peter Rickett.

Rickett, we learned, was eighty-nine at the time of his death. Born at the outbreak of one world war he had survived another. Seeking adventure, he went to England in 1933, where he enlisted in the army as a non-commissioned officer. When Britain entered the war against Germany in 1939, Peter's regiment was part of the Expeditionary Force sent to aid the French. He was among those evacuated at Dunkirk, during which action he sustained a leg injury from of a ricocheting machine-gun round. The injury was to cause

him chronic discomfort in later years, although it did not prevent him from reporting for active service as soon as he was discharged from hospital. In 1944 he found himself in Italy, as Allied forces sought to liberate that country. Again Peter Rickett was wounded in action, this time very seriously. A shell fired by the retreating Germans at Monte Cassino tore away a large part of his stomach. He nearly died. He sat out the rest of the war in a nursing home in Buckinghamshire.

He returned to Dublin in 1946 and used his severance pay to fund a degree course in engineering at Trinity College. Almost immediately upon graduation he secured a position with Dublin Corporation. He had a hand in many important civil engineering projects throughout the 1950s and 60s; several of the most prestigious and innovative public works carried the Rickett stamp.

He retired in 1982. He had looked forward to enjoying his twilight years in the company of his wife Mary, but that was not to be. She died of cancer in 1991, leaving behind five grown-up children with families of their own.

With Mary's passing, Peter Rickett lost more than a wife. The couple had been a shining personification of the dictum that love conquers all. They had overcome some of the worst religious intolerance imaginable in order to be together.

At the heart of their difficulties lay Mary's Roman Catholicism. The couple met and fell in love in 1953, in a time when Ireland was only nominally a secular state. They decided to marry and a date was set. Peter had always known that a 'mixed' marriage would pose problems, yet had been naive enough to believe that those problems would be minor. Neither was prepared for the response from both sets of parents.

Peter's people had always believed he would marry a Presbyterian. His grandfather was a Belfastman who had come south largely for reasons of economic expediency. He had brought with him a faith that was as unshakable as

it was narrow, and reared his children to view the Roman Church with suspicion. When Peter announced his intention of marrying Mary, his father was appalled. He saw this 'betrayal' as the thin end of the wedge that would come between him and his faith.

To a certain extent he was justified; the 1950s were a time of great repression in Irish society. De Valera had made no secret of his pact with the Catholic hierarchy; Rome would enjoy a 'special position' within Irish affairs. The discriminatory *Ne temere*, decreed by the Vatican in 1907, was also in place – and nowhere else was it enforced with the same rigour as in Ireland. Under this ruling, a non-Catholic marrying a Catholic would have to agree that any children of the marriage would be brought up as Catholics. Understandably, the non-Catholics of Ireland saw this as a means by which their numbers – already much reduced since the 1920s – would decline further.

As if this was not obstacle enough to the young couple's happiness, Mary's family also bitterly opposed the match. Her parents were staunch republicans. Both her grandfathers had taken part in the Easter Rising, and her great-grandfather's family were victims of 'souperism', the unethical methods of proselytizing used by a small number of Protestant clergymen during the Famine years. For Mary to marry into a Presbyterian family would, in her parents' eyes, bring undying shame on their house, and sully ancestral memories.

For many months, blazing rows were the order of the day in both households. Neither set of parents would yield; the family honour was going to take precedence over love. Peter and Mary alike were threatened with disinheritance; every form of emotional blackmail was brought to bear. They would be ostracized, they learned; the children of the marriage would never know their grandparents.

Perhaps it was the very vehemence and spitefulness of the anger thus un-

leashed that drove the pair to take the course they did. They left Ireland entirely. With the help of an old college friend, Peter secured a fine position as an engineer with the London Board of Works. Within months of their engagement, the couple had bought a house in Wimbledon, married without difficulty in a registry office, and enjoyed a wonderful honeymoon in Bognor Regis. On their return it was discovered that Mary was pregnant with their first child.

The girl, whom they named Emily after Peter's aunt, was in time joined by four siblings. By 1961 all were attending the same school in the west-London suburb the family had moved to. The school was non-denominational, a situation which admirably suited the parents.

That is not to say that Peter and Mary did not care for religion. In fact both were exceptionally devout. Neither had allowed their parents' narrow thinking and prejudices to cloud their judgement. They had reached an agreement shortly after marrying: they would allow the children themselves to choose the religion they wished to follow. To everyone's surprise – and to Mary's dismay – all but Emily chose the faith of their father. There does not seem to be a good explanation for this and, if there was, Reverend McElliot was not informed of it.

'I only know what Peter told me,' he says. 'And this was in later years, when he and Mary had returned to Dublin. This would have been in the early eighties. All the children were grown up by then and gone their separate ways. Two went to Canada; the others stayed in England.'

By that time Ireland had become a very different society from the one the 'eloping' couple had left. A spirit of ecumenism was blowing across the Christian divides; old enmities were forgotten or allowed to die. Peter's parents were elderly by then and time had mellowed them. There was a reconciliation with their wayward son. Mary's parents, however, stood firm; in their eyes she had

disgraced the family. Both died without ever seeing either their grandchildren or great-grandchildren.

Peter had envisaged starting an engineering consultancy in Dublin. He had already leased premises and secured his first contract before deciding that it was not for him. He was sixty by then, close to retirement age. He dropped the idea in favour of something radically different: he decided to open a restaurant. They were both fond of cooking, had always enjoyed having friends round to dinner and trying out new recipes on them. They took over the lease of an existing restaurant and used their savings to renovate it to conform to their own ideas. It was a success, although not as successful as the couple had hoped. In time they hired a chef and took a back seat.

'It was about this time that they moved here,' Dr McElliot says. 'They no longer had to travel to the restaurant every day so they could live wherever they liked. Peter showed up one Sunday out of the blue and that was that. We saw him regularly at worship from then on. A fine man, very open and friendly. He fitted in very well. I think everyone thought he must be a widower or a bachelor. It was only after a time that he told me about Mary and what happened back then. He was still very cut up about it, and who can blame him?'

In 1991 the greatest tragedy of all would befall Peter. He lost his darling wife.

'Cancer,' Dr McElliot says simply. He discloses nothing of its nature. 'Thank the Lord it was over rapidly. Within two months of its being diagnosed she was no longer with us. She did not linger, as so many sufferers do, and neither of them had to witness the terrible deterioration that usually accompanies cancer. There was no chemo or radiation; it was too far gone for that. That, I expect, was a blessing.'

Her family showed for the funeral, stayed on for an hour or two to offer

condolences, then were gone. Peter would never see any of them again.

His youngest daughter Renee, who by then had a grown-up family, very kindly remained to look after Peter for a month or two. Her husband returned to their home in Sussex; he would visit every other weekend.

For the truth was that they feared for Peter's sanity. He had taken Mary's death very badly. He was inconsolable.

'I've never seen a man so cut up over the death of a loved one,' Dr McElliot says. 'I was half-afraid we were going to lose him as well. If it wasn't for Renee I'm certain we would have. She was wonderful altogether.'

He goes to a filing cabinet and returns presently with a newsletter. It is crude, seems to predate desktop publishing and modern printing techniques. He opens it on the desk before us; there is a group photograph taken at some congregation event or other. Renee is a striking woman: tall, fair-haired, beautiful bone structure.

'I'm showing you that because she's the image of her mother,' the minister says. 'They might have been sisters. Anyway, Renee was such a comfort to him during those first dark weeks. Peter wished to mourn in private, and of course my wife and I respected that. After a time, though, I'd look in on him, maybe bring him a little something my wife would make. He liked that. But he was taking it very badly. Renee couldn't get him to eat anything. One could see his health getting worse by the week. He spoke of suicide. That was what worried me most of all.'

Dr McElliot's visits to the Rickett house grew increasingly frequent and more prolonged. Very soon the visits were following a pattern. Renee would make supper for the men and retire; Peter and Dr McElliot would talk long into the night, the widower pouring out his heart to the minister. It was during one such session that Peter spoke of his wish to end it all. He saw no point in continuing; with Mary's passing, the bottom had fallen out of his world.

She meant everything to him. He saw no reason why he should not join her in the afterlife.

'I don't mind telling you that was a tricky position he put me in,' the minister confesses. 'Peter's arguments made perfect sense – that is, if one looked at them in the cold light of reason. He and Mary had been inseparable while she was alive. Why should he not be allowed to join her in death? Particularly when his life without her had no meaning, as far as he could see. I put it to him that perhaps the Lord had a special purpose for him, one that Peter was unaware of but would be revealed in time. "Bernard," he said to me. "I'm seventy-eight years of age. If I haven't discovered my mission on this earth by now, I never will. What use am I here? Would I not be better off with Mary?"'

'I had to bring a little theology to bear,' Dr Elliot continues. 'And I tell you those are the hardest moments of all: when you have to assure a suffering fellow Christian that the Divine plan is greater than the human one, and that we must accept it. We must accept that God knows what's best for us, not in the temporal sense but in the long run, in the sense of what's best for our immortal souls.'

The minister pauses. He is choosing his next words carefully.

'There is of course the difficulty that nowhere in Scripture does the Lord actually *forbid* us to take our own life. But Paul told the Philippians that "to live is Christ and to die is gain." He went on to say that his "desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake," meaning the sake of the people he was trying to convert. I interpret that as an allusion to a God-given duty to our fellow men. In the end I told Peter that the commandment that forbids us to kill must be interpreted as forbidding all killing, including killing ourselves.'

And so it went for several months: Peter Rickett plunging into black moods of despair and the minister pulling him out of them again. It did not help

when Renee returned to Sussex, but that was an inevitability; her own family came first. Peter simply had to learn to cope with his loss, as all bereaved persons must.

As more months passed, it did seem that the truth of the old adage of time healing all wounds was borne out. He retrieved some of his former *joie de vivre*, could laugh and smile again – if only infrequently. On Dr McElliot's urging he began to take more of an interest in the congregation's affairs. He joined a group of elders who made it their business to actively support the aged, the sick and the dying. They visited hospitals and hospices, making the final days of elderly patients a little more comfortable and dignified. Such proximity to the death of others seemed to take Peter's mind off his own grief.

Dr McElliot was pleased. He felt that progress was being made. Peter's thoughts were no longer morbid. He would still speak often of Mary, but now it was in a more positive and healthy way – up until the morning, a little over two years following her death, when he called unexpectedly to the minister's home, before the good man had finished breakfast. Peter was flustered, wild eyed. Dr McElliot feared he might have a seizure of some kind.

'Bernard, Bernard!' he gushed. 'You'll never guess. Mary came to me last night! She wants me to join her.'

Dr McElliot is of the old school of Presbyterianism. He does not hold with ghosts. He mistrusts them. He will speak of 'a chasm which divides this world from the next', and will refuse to countenance the possibility of the dead returning. He explains that there is no call for it, that Jesus Christ is the only mediator we need, and that Deuteronomy expressly forbids necromancy, or communication with the dead.

'Sit down, Peter,' he said gently, 'and tell me all about it.'

Over a cup of tea the elderly man related his extraordinary experience.

He had gone to bed at roughly 2 am, as was his habit; he was finding that he needed less and less sleep. An hour later he awoke to find a figure standing at the foot of the bed. It was his beloved Mary. She looked to be 'not a day over twenty', according to Peter. In fact, she appeared exactly as she had the day they met, all those decades past.

As apparitions go, it seems to have been small beer. Mary's spirit was not quite solid, but nor was she ethereal either. Peter described her appearance as being 'like a black-and-white film'. He estimated that she remained visible for no more than a minute and a half. In that time, though, she managed to convince him that she had survived death and that she missed him terribly. She seemed sad. Peter recalled her exact words.

'I am lonely, so lonely here,' she said. 'My dear, I need you by my side.'

The minister considered the elderly man before him. He had come to him with a story which may or may not have contained truth. Dr McElliot does not dispute the existence of ghosts, but nor does he give credence to every sighting of a 'spirit', no matter how trustworthy the witness may be. His first thought was that Rickett had imagined it, that an obsessive mind was somehow enabling him to fulfil his dearest wish: that he and his beloved wife be united. The minister elected to believe this latter explanation. It was important, too, that Peter should come to terms with the reality of his situation, hard though it might be.

He gave what guidance he could, suggested to the widower that he might be better off investing even more time in the welfare of the congregation's less fortunate, and placing more trust in the Lord.

Dr McElliot was confident that his advice had fallen 'into good ground'. He was mistaken. The following week, Peter called round in the evening, and, having taken supper with the McElliots, joined the minister in his sitting-room. He had important news. On the commendation of a friend he had

visited a group of spiritists on Orwell Road, Rathgar.

'He told me about the séance,' the minister says, 'and no detail was spared! I had to keep myself from smiling because it was as if he was telling me about something from Victorian times. From the way he described the house, I got the picture of an old rambling place with heavy dark furniture and velvet curtains. One could almost see men with wing collars and the women in bonnets. Peter wasn't sure if somebody actually lived there or it was owned by the group. There were nine of them that evening, including Peter: three gentlemen and six ladies. Most were elderly with the exception of a young man of about twenty-five, a first-time visitor like Peter. The poor fellow had apparently lost his wife in a drowning accident. He was hoping to be able to contact her.'

Peter joined the others in a room on the first floor. He remembered it as having a very high ceiling, a big fireplace that appeared to have been boarded up, heavy wine-red curtains which were already drawn although it was early on a summer's evening. There was a faded Turkish carpet and a small table in the middle of the room, only a little bigger than a card-table, but circular, with chairs arranged about it. Peter and the others took their seats.

All except him and the young man were relaxed and talkative. They discussed such matters as 'spirits', 'channels' and 'the other side', relating the words and deeds of their ethereal interlocutors as others might comment on a recent episode of a soap opera. Someone revealed how a spiritist group in Edinburgh had made a breakthrough of some significance that very week, apparently involving an 'apport'. The group members were impressed.

Peter wondered when the medium would join them. They had been seated in the room for a half hour or more and there was no sign of her – he assumed the medium would be female. He was taken aback when one of the ladies present, the most unprepossessing of the three, abruptly requested that the main light be dimmed, and announced she was 'ready to begin'.

She invited the participants to link hands around the table and called for all talk to cease. Peter had paid no attention to the windows when entering the house, but decided then that those in that particular room must be double glazed; there was only the whisper of sounds from the road. The light was fading. He was sitting almost directly across from the medium. He watched in curiosity as her head drooped slowly down onto her chest, until she appeared to have fallen asleep. But she had not. To his consternation, she began to growl.

'Not really a growl in the sense of an animal, a big cat or something,' Dr Elliot says. 'Peter described it as being more the sound of somebody clearing their throat, but drawn out. He did an impression for me. It was not unpleasant. Like somebody grunting with satisfaction.'

Almost at once, something utterly out of the ordinary occurred. Peter had been expecting a gradual preamble to the proceedings, perhaps the medium's renewing acquaintance with 'spirit guides' and what not. This he had been prepared for, he said. He had come to the séance with mixed feelings, the Christian side of him finding the idea of necromancy faintly repugnant, his despairing side ready to grasp at straws. The last thing he expected was that the proceedings would commence with his own circumstances; he was startled when the medium spoke his name. But the voice she used was not her own. It sounded uncannily like that of Mary Rickett.

'Peter,' she said. 'Oh, Peter!'

He was dumbstruck. To be sure, he had come to the house in Rathgar with the express purpose of receiving confirmation. Confirmation that the soul does indeed survive death. Confirmation that his lost love was not entirely lost to him. Confirmation that she it was who had visited him in the early hours of morning. Confirmation that she would visit him again. But, for all that, he was awed and afraid when Mary's voice came issuing from that mouth, from

the lips of a complete stranger, from a woman who never knew Mary in life and could not possibly know her in death.

Or so it seemed to Peter.

'Pray for me, my darling,' she said. 'Will you promise to pray for me?'

He could not answer her.

'I am in a cold place,' the voice said, issuing perplexingly from the woman slumped opposite. 'There is no warmth here, Peter. I am so cold, so alone. That is why you must pray for me. Will you do that?'

He found his own voice at last.

'Yes – anything, Mary,' he croaked. 'Anything for you.'

'Thank you, Peter. I will come to you again, my darling. I'll come to you when you pray for me.'

With those words, the spirit of Mary evidently departed, to be replaced by that of another woman. The intonation was different, and she introduced herself as 'Paula'. There was a gasp from the young visitor. It seems that his drowned wife had manifested by way of the medium.

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