

The Devil's Command

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INT. HEXHAMVALE APARTMENT NIGHT

In a sparsely furnished apartment living room there are odd ornaments and a mask over the fireplace. THE NARRATOR is seated at a small table. His profile is visible, and gradually his face, but not the other side of the table, or who he faces and addresses. He is solemn and clearly stoic in the face of a mysterious burden.

THE NARRATOR

There's a very specific reason why it haunts this place. (beat) I'll try and explain. I mean, that is why you're here. [edit]

EXT. THE INN NIGHT

The Inn is a run down and nondescript village watering hole. The door opens and the LANDLORD enters before approaching the bar.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

I was working the late shift. It was close to last orders when this chap comes in.

INT. THE INN NIGHT

THE NARRATOR

What can I get you?

LANDLORD

Brandy.

Landlord stares pensively at the middle distance.

THE NARRATOR

£3.50 please.

LANDLORD

Oh? (beat) City prices.

THE NARRATOR

Well you don't pay for the atmosphere. There's everyone's favorite thing.

LANDLORD

What?

THE NARRATOR

Something for free.

LANDLORD

It is if you're poor. Know what your favorite thing is if you have money?

(CONTINUED)

Narrator shrugs, affably. Landlord leans forward.

LANDLORD

Money.

Narrator busies himself wiping the bar while looking away.

THE NARRATOR

You have enough then.

LANDLORD

More than you, that's for certain. You have any property?

THE NARRATOR

No.

LANDLORD

I do. A lot. Most of it has been in my family since the Conquest.

THE NARRATOR

Is it a property that brings you out this way tonight?

LANDLORD

Yes, as a matter of fact. I've recently acquired one in this village. It was a care home for the elderly. Do you know it?
[edit]

THE NARRATOR

You mean the place that was vacant for a few years? What do they call it?

LANDLORD

Hexhamvale.

EXT. & INT. HEXHAMVALE EVENING

The care home is a late 70s red brick building. It is in reasonable condition but there are signs of decay.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

He got to talking about how he brought the place and how he was renting out its rooms to people on low incomes - people who weren't going to complain much about anything. But rent wasn't the main reason he wanted the property. His real motive is what you should be interested in.

INT. THE INN NIGHT

LANDLORD

I acquired it after the company running the place gave it up. The County owned it but it was taking too long to find a new tenant, so they put it on the market.

THE NARRATOR

You're telling me the County sold Hexhamvale just because they couldn't wait to lease it out again?

LANDLORD

That's what I was advised.

THE NARRATOR

Okay, but it's not what I heard.

LANDLORD

And what did you hear?

THE NARRATOR

That they were lining up to bring bodies out.

LANDLORD

There were some rumours about a couple of, how should I put it, untimely deaths that occurred in quick succession. They kept it all out of the media, so it didn't put me off.

THE NARRATOR

I suppose it's expected that some residents will pass away, but not that many, that quickly.

LANDLORD

Residents? Shows how much you know.

INT. HEXHAMVALE DAY

A body lies with legs in corridor with signs of self-harm. There is an arm over side of bath dripping blood.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

It was staff members that died. Several had taken their own lives.

INT. INN NIGHT

LANDLORD

The price fell through the floor because the County was in a panic to sell. If word about something like that spreads too far you'll be stuck with a white elephant. The County already has enough of those I think you'll find. It was another reason to buy.

THE NARRATOR

Another reason? How many did you have?

Landlord looks away.

LANDLORD

Of course ultimately all I really want is the land. (beat) Renting the place out is an instant return on investment, but it comes with its own set of problems.

THE NARRATOR

Like what?

LANDLORD

Getting enough people to stay there.

EXT. HEXHAMVALE ENTRANCE NIGHT

Landlord stands outside waiting and watching impatiently.

The LODGER approaches through shadows and stops in the porch light. She is hesitant.

Landlord sneers.

INT. THE INN NIGHT

Landlord turns back to address Narrator.

LANDLORD

Let me educate you.

INT. HEXHAMVALE NIGHT

Lodger dragging suitcase in then down corridor.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

He told me about one woman that moved in. Like most of us she was working a minimum wage job.

INT. HEXHAMVALE APARTMENT NIGHT

Gathering dusk, sunset, birds at dusk. Lodger inspects interior and decor including mask over fireplace curiously but with uncertainty. Turning heater up. Walking down corridors listening at doors. Looking out windows; investigating sounds and shadows.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

He said she started complaining about the rooms being cold. Then about strange noises, or voices, or footsteps. She was calling him every other night, or so he said. Later she told him she could see shadows of people outside but he dismissed it as tree branches, or people passing the place on foot, or anything else caught in the headlights of passing cars. He said others had complained before but they all seemed to leave shortly afterward.

Lodger sits reading. Shadow encroaches on the blind in the background. Disappears past edge of blind as if entering the room.

A dark figure walks in front of her (between her and camera)

THE NARRATOR (V.O.) (cont'd)

She was like most of them I suppose. It wasn't long before she realised that what was outside (beat) was really inside.

INT. HEXHAMVALE APARTMENT NIGHT

Narrator at table.

THE NARRATOR

He explained how Hexhamvale was built on land once owned by Lord Charles Burgrave. His ancestors were granted numerous estates around here after the Restoration. It included his manor house, Damgate Hall.

INT. DAMGATE HALL

Views of Crest.

A hand and whip covered in blood in foreground and the figure of a maid crouching in the background while convulsively sobbing.

(CONTINUED)

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

The family crest had a red hand in it because one of Lord Burgrave's predecessors had reputedly whipped a servant to death. Charles himself had clearly inherited a hatred of servants and all those who lacked connection. [edit]

Hunting scenes from contemporary books and wall murals.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.) (cont'd)

He was an obsessive hunter and let hunting dogs loose on his gamekeeper for some minor error. They ripped the man to pieces.

INT. HEXHAMVALE APARTMENT NIGHT

Narrator at table.

THE NARRATOR

Burgrave supposedly treasured his hounds more for doing so. His notoriety grew until his death in the mid 1800s, and when his family line ended abruptly soon after, everything was sold off to clear the debts he had incurred over decades.

INT. INN NIGHT

LANDLORD

My family had some of the land. So did one or two of the other landowners of substance. I've been buying it from them piece by piece when the time has been right ever since. My great grandfather even tried to buy the title. Sadly he was outbid. [edit]

Landlord leans forward

LANDLORD (cont'd)

Of course the story suggests Burgrave sold his most valuable possession during his lifetime. He is said to have had commerce with the Devil in order to extend his life.

(CONTINUED)

THE NARRATOR

Are you trying to tell me he sold
his soul?

LANDLORD

He also tried cheating the Devil
out of his bargain. Don't you
know the legend of Satan's Mill?

EXT. THE MILL DAY

Story book cover opens and frontispiece turns. The Mill is
a dilapidated structure that is animated before it
dissolves to live action.

BURGRAVE runs over marshes near horizon looking over his
shoulder as he goes.

Burgrave runs toward the mill.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

He started by telling me how
Burgrave had spent his extra
years gambling and drinking his
inheritance away, and when the
devil came to collect, Burgrave
fled. The Devil pursued him,
drunk out of his mind, across his
lands.

INT. THE MILL DAY

Burgrave sits inside the Mill against a wall looking down.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

He was eventually cornered in a
derelict drainage mill. The Devil
waited, playing cat and mouse,
leading Burgrave to believe he
had time to hatch a plan.

EXT. THE MILL DAY

Burgrave looks at a mask before putting it on. He runs
from Mill door and jumps into river

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

He fashioned a likeness of Satan
out of clay, mud, sand, brick
dust, and bits of leather -
whatever he could find. Then he
ran for his life and jumped into
a nearby river.

EXT. MARSH DAY

Devil reflection with masked Burgrave under water

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

When Satan pretended to claim his prey from the water Burgrave held his breath under the surface, thinking the Devil would mistake him for his own reflection. So satisfied was he with the absurdly ambitious deception he'd induced Burgrave to attempt, Satan allowed him to think the trick worked and withdrew.

EXT. DAMGATE HALL EVENING

The Hall under gathering storm clouds.

INT. DAMGATE HALL NIGHT

Burgrave sits wheezing in chair lit by firelight.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

So believing he had fooled the Devil, he limped back to Damgate Hall, but without the favour of his dark prince, Burgave grew weaker with each breath.

EXT. MARSH DAY

Burgrave wanders.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

Satan cursed him that in death he'd walk his lands forever, wearing the hideous mask he'd used to try and evade his gravest debt.

INT. CHURCH RUIN DAY

Burgarve strides through the roofless interior of ruined church.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

The Church took this story so seriously it denied him a Christian burial.

EXT. MARSH DAY

Burgrave strides.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
 Being condemned by Satan served
 to intensify his contempt for all
 but those he thought of as his
 peers.

INT. THE INN NIGHT

LANDLORD
 And now he carries out the
 Devil's will with a vengeance.

THE NARRATOR
 So in the story he hopes to
 reflect the ultimate
 personification of evil? How is
 that different from anyone else
 who calls himself an aristocrat?

LANDLORD
 And how are you different from
 anyone else who would benefit
 from adopting a large measure of
 deference? Perhaps you'll find
 yourself in a position in which
 no-one important sees you until
 eventually you don't see
 yourself, like my lodgers at
 Hexhamvale.

Landlord regains his supercilious composure

LANDLORD
 You know some of the furniture
 I've used there came from Damgate
 Hall, including a very special
 chair.

INT. HEXHAMVALE

Shots of an old chair as if it were a throne.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)
 Okay, I'll ask. What's so special
 about the chair?

INT. THE INN NIGHT

THE NARRATOR
 Was it Satan's throne??

(CONTINUED)

LANDLORD

No, but it is the chair Burgrave died in.

INT. DAMGATE HALL

Burgrave slumps forward in the chair but is suddenly animated backward wearing the mask that he frantically tries to remove.

INT. INN NIGHT

THE NARRATOR

Where is it?

LANDLORD

You know that woman I was telling you about?

INT. HEXHAMVALE APARTMENT NIGHT

The chair is in view but through doors. In the foreground the Lodger is in kitchen. The chair is empty as she walks between work top and breakfast bar preparing a meal. On last trip as she turns to go back to the table the figure of Burgrave is visible in the chair as she passes.

THE NARRATOR (V.O.)

It was in the apartment she rented, and Hexhamvale was built on the last piece of land once owned by Burgrave. Damgate Hall was demolished to make way it. Now all his former property was in this guy's possession. [edit]

The door slams shut. Rhythmic banging on door begins. Lodger approaches the door with obvious trepidation and opens it. Burgrave stands holding the mask from over the fireplace. The Lodger's face betrays spasms of fear.

Burgave gestures flamboyantly to Lodger to take the mask from his outstretched hand.

Lodger stands in doorway dressed in Victorian maid's uniform and the mask.

INT. THE INN NIGHT

LANDLORD

So many who rented there just vanished. Their rooms always looked abandoned. Perhaps more have moved in than have moved out.

Landlord gloats

(CONTINUED)

LANDLORD (cont'd)

But I digress. I haven't told you the best part of the legend. It suggests that those who help Burgrave will have his graces and protection in this life and beyond. (beat) Then, it's just a folk tale that you feel free to parody, isn't it?

Narrator seems more interested.

THE NARRATOR

Are you saying what I think you're saying?

Landlord prepares to leave. Looks at watch.

LANDLORD

(beat) Now you're addressing me as if I am paying attention.

Narrator watches landlord leave and looks deep in thought, as if considering what he should do.

EXT. THE INN NIGHT

Landlord gets into car

INT. LANDLORDS CAR NIGHT

The Landlord moves into the frame of the rear view mirror. Burgrave leans into view behind him in the back seat.

LANDLORD

Hexhamvale?

Burgrave nods assent.

EXT. HEXHAMVALE NIGHT

Narrator explores the curtilage of Hexhamvale. Peers through a door before forcing it. Enters Hexhamvale flat.

INT. HEXHAMVALE APARTMENT NIGHT

Narrator walks into living room and sees Lodger on floor unconscious. He begins to try and wake her.

THE NARRATOR

You need to get out of here now.

A door creaks. The narrator turns. The Landlord is there. He brandishes a knife.

(CONTINUED)

LANDLORD

No! You need to get out of here now. You're trespassing.

The Narrator stands his ground to ensure Lodger's escape.

LANDLORD (cont'd)

Oh. It appears chivalry isn't quite dead. (beat) But it will die with you. [or]

LANDLORD (cont'd)

[ALT.] Very well. Now I can use force.

Landlord lunges forward with the knife. Lodger flees and Narrator uses arms defensively. The shadow on the wall shows the Landlord's arm draw back with the knife and plunge forward toward the jackknifing shadow of the Narrator. [edit]

The view swings past a seated figure and rests on the face of the MEDIUM who seems poised to deliver a conclusion. She is framed between two attentive (new) TENANTS of Hexhamvale as a seance comes to a close. Medium looks from one to the other.

MEDIUM

That is all I am getting about what happened here. He didn't say any more. All the phenomena you've observed in this place since you moved in are a warning. When furniture and other objects shake, or when doors close by themselves and you are locked out, it takes all the spiritual energy he has. It's his way of trying to warn you.

TENANT

About what? The former Landlord? We were told he disappeared after the body was found.

MEDIUM

It's more a warning about Burgrave, and how people like him are treated in life and in death. They are habitually feared for their callousness, or honoured for family connection and inheritance. There are better reasons to value people.

(CONTINUED)

TENANT

You mean (beat) for showing
courage, or compassion.

TENANT (cont'd)

Yes.

MEDIUM

Yes, people can surprise with
their selfless actions. On the
other hand, by passing title and
property within a family line
some try to create the illusion
of immortality and the inevitable
continuity of ownership. Yet
other individuals hope for reward
and to evade harm themselves by
carrying out the agenda of the
selfish and over-privileged.
Ironically only that makes them
dangerous. If you stop believing,
you can free your minds from
their influence. Use the example
of the brave man who stood up to
them, and who gave his life for
someone made helpless only by her
mistaken belief they were better,
or more important than she. Let's
all believe in ourselves instead.

The tenants look positive, affirming subtly.

FADE OUT