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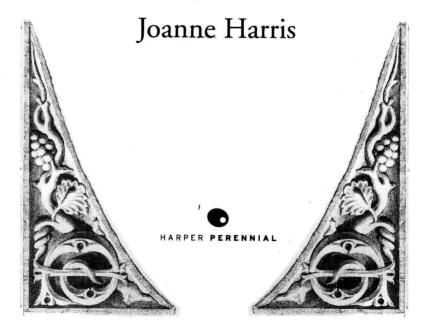
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Acknowledgements

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Many thanks to everyone who helped to bring this sleeper back to life. First of all to Christopher, who liked it from the start; to Serafina, Howard, and Brie; to my lovely editor Jennifer and all my friends at William Morrow; to Graham Ovenden for the cover I always wanted; to the booksellers, reps and stockists who work to keep my books on the shelves, and finally to all those fans of my earlier novels who have written, railed, persisted, queried and clamoured to see this one back in print.

Introduction



Manuscript, from the estate of Henry Paul Chester January, 1881

As I look at my name and the letters which follow it I am filled with a vast blankness. As if this Henry Chester, painter, twice exhibited at the Royal Academy, were not myself but some ill-defined figurent of somebody's imagination, the cork to a bottle containing a genie of delicate malevolence that permeates my being and launches me into a realm of perilous adventure, in search of the pale, terrified ghost of myself.

The name of the genie is *chloral*, that dark companion of my sleeping hours, a tender bedfellow now grown spiteful. Yet we have been wedded too long now for separation, the genie and I. Together we will write this narrative, but I have so little time! Already, as the last shreds of daylight fall from the horizon, I seem to hear the wings of the black angel in the darkest corner of the room. She is patient, but not infinitely so.

God, that most exquisite of torturers, will deign to give me a little time to write the tale which I shall take with me to my cold cell under the earth—no colder, surely, than this corpse I inhabit, this wilderness of the soul. Oh, He is a jealous God: pitiless as only immortals can be, and when I cried out for Him in my filth and suffering He smiled and replied in the words He gave to

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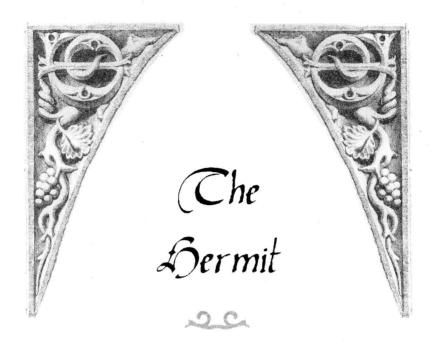
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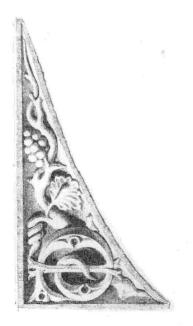
Moses from the burning bush: *I Am That I Am*. His gaze is without compassion, without tenderness. Within it I see no promise of redemption, no threat of punishment; only a vast indifference, promising nothing but oblivion. But how I long for it! To melt into the earth, so that even that all-seeing gaze could not find me...and yet the infant within me cries at the dark, and my poor, crippled body screams out for time . . . A little more time, one more tale, one more game.

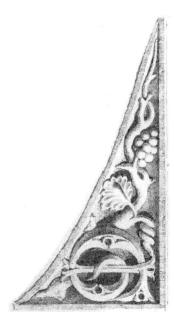
And the black angel lays her scythe by the door and sits beside me for a final hand of cards.

I should never write after dark. At night, words become false, troubling; and yet, it is at night that words have the most power. Scheherazade chose the night to weave her thousand and one stories, each one a door into which time and time again she slips with Death at her heels like an angry wolf. She knew the power of words. If I had not passed longing for the ideal woman, I should have gone in search of Scheherazade; she is tall and slim, with skin the colour of China tea. Her eyes are like the night; she walks barefoot, arrogant and pagan, untrammelled by morality or modesty. And she is cunning; time and again she plays the game against Death and wins, reinventing herself anew every night so that her brutish ogre of a husband finds every night a new Scheherazade who slips away with the morning. Every morning he awakes and sees her in daylight, pale and silent after her night's work, and he swears he will not be taken in again! But as soon as dusk falls, she weaves her web of fantasy anew, and he thinks: once more . . .

Tonight I am Scheherazade.







Don't look at me that way—I can't bear it! You're thinking how much I have changed. You see the young man in the picture, his clear, pale brow, curling dark hair, his untroubled eyes—and you wonder how he could be me. The carelessly arrogant set of the jaw, the high cheekbones, the long, tapered fingers seem to hint at some hidden, exotic lineage, although the bearing is unmistakably English. That was me at thirty-nine—look at me carefully and remember . . . I could have been you.

My father was a minister near Oxford, my mother the daughter of a wealthy Oxfordshire landowner. My childhood was untroubled, sheltered, idyllic. I remember going to church on Sundays, singing in the choir, the coloured light from the stained-glass windows like a shower of petals on the white surplices of the choristers...

The black angel seems to shift imperceptibly and, in her eyes, I sense an echo of the pitiless comprehension of God. This is not a time for imagined nostalgia, Henry Paul Chester. He needs your truth, not your inventions. Do you think to fool God?

Ridiculous, that I should still feel the urge to deceive, I who have lived nothing but a life of deceit for over forty years. The

truth is a bitter decoction: I hate to uncork it for this last meeting. And yet I am what I am. For the first time I can dare to take God's words for myself. This is no sweetened fiction. This is Henry Chester: judge me if you wish. I am what I am.

There was, of course, no idyllic childhood. My early years are blank: my memories begin at age seven or eight; impure, troubled memories even then as I felt the serpent grown within me. I do not remember a time when I was not conscious of my sin, my guilt: no surplice, however white, could hide it. It gave me wicked thoughts, it made me laugh in church, it made me lie to my father and cross my fingers to extinguish the lie.

There were samplers on the wall of every room of our house, embroidered by my mother with texts from the Bible. Even now I see them, especially the one in my room, stark on the white wall opposite my bed: I AM THAT I AM. As I passed the summers and winters of my boyhood, in my moments of peace and the contemplation of my solitary vices I watched that sampler, and sometimes, in my dreams, I cried out at the cruel indifference of God. But I always received the same message, stitched now for ever in the intricate patterns of my memory: I AM THAT I AM.

My father was God's man and more frightening to me than God. His eyes were deep and black, and he could see right into the hidden corners of my guilty soul. His judgement was as pitiless and impartial as God's own, untainted by human tenderness. What affection my father had he lavished on his collection of mechanical toys, for he was an antiquarian of sorts and had a whole room filled with them, from the very simplest of counterweighted wooden figures to the dreamlike precision of his Chinese barrel-organ with its hundred prancing dwarves.

Of course, I was never allowed to play with them—they were too precious for any child—but I do remember the dancing Columbine. She was made of fine porcelain and was almost as big

as a three-year-old child. Father told me, in one of his rare moments of informality, that she was made by a blind French craftsman in the decadent years before the Revolution. Running his fingers across her flawless cheek, he told me the story: how she had belonged to some spoiled king's bastard brat, abandoned among rotting brocades when the Terror struck and godless heads rolled with the innocent. How she was stolen by a pauper woman who could not bear to see her smashed and trampled by the sansculottes. The woman had lost her baby to the famine and kept Columbine in a cradle in her poor hovel, rocking her and singing lullabies until they found her, mad and starving and alone, and took her away to the asylum to die.

Columbine survived. She arrived in a Paris antiquarian's the year I was born, and Father, who was returning from a trip to Lourdes, saw her and bought her at once, though her silk dress was rotten and her eyes had fallen into her head from neglect and rough handling. As soon as he saw her dance, he knew she was special: wind the key set into the small of her back and she would begin to move, stiffly at first, then with a slick, inhuman fluidity, raising her arms, bowing from the waist, flexing her knees, showing the plump roundness of her porcelain calves under the dancer's skirt. Months of loving restoration gave her back all her beauty, and now she sat resplendent in blue and white satin in my father's collection, between the Indian music-box and the Persian clown.

I was never allowed to wind her up. Sometimes, when I lay awake in the middle of the night, I could hear a faint tinkle of music from behind the closed door, low and intimate, almost carnal . . . The image of Father in his nightgown with the dancing Columbine in his hands was absurdly disquieting. I could not help wondering how he would hold her; whether he would dare to let his hand creep beneath the foaming lace of her petticoats . . .