

AUNT HETTY

by

John Linwood Grant

AUNT HETTY

I did not recognise the old woman in the corner of our hall.

Whilst other guests clustered around the great hearth, mindful of winter's grip on the estate, she remained quiet, silent, seated almost in the corridor to the kitchen. A shadow lay across half her face, placing her even further from the murmurs and laughter of the gathered revellers.

"Who's that over there, by the passage?" I asked my wife, tipping my head slightly in the direction of the stranger.

Muriel turned from one of our neighbours – a Buckley or Bentley – and frowned. "Some elderly dowager from your side of the family, I assumed."

"Not that I know of."

"Then go ask her, Philip." And she swivelled on sharp heels to continue her former conversation.

I thought for a moment of employing one of the children to enquire if the old woman needed anything, and hopefully discover her name – but Muriel approved only of the most practical and direct route to any solution. So I went over myself.

Stepping closer, I could make out drooping eyelids and a broad face; her skin was weather-lined, painted only with such blemishes as come to us all with age, her hair a tight grey coil. Her clothes were... I had no eye for fashion, but half a century might have passed since such a heavy clutter of black bombazine was in vogue.

"Quite a gathering!" I said with feigned cheer. "Would you like me to draw your chair closer to the fire? There is frost on the lawn already."

Her gaze lifted slowly, like a sleeper roused.

"Thank you, but the cold does not bother me."

Hardly an opening for conversation. I tried again.

"Good to have the family under one roof – yet so many I barely know. Forgive me, madam. I'm Philip Carlen, your host – and you would be...?"

"A Brulier. Henrietta Brulier."

I stopped myself from remarking that I thought that line extinct. My grandfather's cousins, as best I could recall – French émigrés from long ago.

"And yes, I am the last."

“I did not—”

“People always ask.” That was softened by a dry smile. “Call me Hetty, if you will.”

More curious than before, I took two glasses of sherry from one of the circulating maids.

“You’ve not visited Thwale House before? I fear I don’t remember you from previous Christmas gatherings, not even when Father was alive.”

She looked upwards, and I instinctively copied her. I had grown up with those blackened timbers high above, and as a child, my mother’s talk of their age had instilled in me a vague fear that one day they would crash down on me – something which my surveyor, Trevis, denied with vigour. ‘They’ve seen more than ever we will, Mr Cullen, and will stand as long again.’

“Can you see the particular darkness up there, in places?” Henrietta Brulier pointed one gloved finger. “The scorching of the wood?”

I could not, and answered so, but I don’t think she was listening.

“It is more than sixty years since I stood inside Thwale. Odd to be back, to say a sort of farewell, I suppose.”

“You are ill, Aunt Hetty?” It seemed only polite to call her so.

“No, no, I was built strong, and stay as much. Still, as we grow old, we shed much of the clutter we have gathered over the years – knick-knacks to favourites; ugly and solid furniture to the salesrooms, and so forth. My memories of Thwale are clutter, and no comfort to me. Nor were they ever.”

I glanced to where my wife and my sister-in-law were amusing neighbours, nephews and nieces by the roaring open fire; my brother was ‘deep in’ with Bob Carstairs, lately recovered after his time in the Flanders trenches.

“I’m sorry to hear that. You had some difficult times here? The family and so forth?”

Cullens, Bruliers, a handful of Fullers – the clan had been larger in grandfather’s day, and I hardly knew their names except for jottings at the back of bibles and a bookplate or two.

“I was here, when it happened. That Christmas when flames ran through this house.”

I knew that parts of the manor house had been rebuilt after a fire in grandfather’s day, in the middle of last century, but I had never enquired as to the details. Nor had I thought to ask Trevis, who would probably be able to say which sections were original and which the result of Victorian reconstruction.

“That would be...”

“Just after another war. The Crimean, which is so rarely remembered. In those days we had the cholera; now we have the influenza. War and disease, Mr Cullen, war and disease.”

“Philip, please,” I said. “Was it... I mean, were you hurt in the fire? I imagine it was quite frightening.”

Bombazine rustled as she shifted in her seat; the logs in the massive hearth crackled, and it was as if she was trying to press her chair further back into the wall and the shadows. The glass of sherry was untouched.

“Frightening? Do you truly want to know?”

A quandary. It lacked an hour yet before dinner, and I was less than eager to throw myself into the fray by the hearth. My brother and I currently were at odds over politics, and my wife’s sister was far too friendly for my liking after more than one sip from the decanter.

I dragged a plain chair over, and sat down; Henrietta Brulier regarded me with a solemn, purse-lipped expression, and began to speak...

Henry Cullen, your grandfather, was a decent man, and when we were all asked to join him for Christmas – the winter of 1857, this was – we understood that he was trying to keep some sense of family and loyalty, at a time when the world was changing. So my parents brought me with them from Suffolk, along with another relative, a boy my age – my cousin Michael Brulier, whose own father was away on business.

Michael was clever. I don’t say that as a compliment. He had been in some trouble at his school – the school pavilion burned down, cause unknown, and Michael had been near, nothing proven, of course. He was known as a ruffler of feathers, full of his own plans and purposes. I believe my father was trying to steer him into the Cullen business, hoping your grandfather might employ him in industry, and thus tame him.

So there we were, almost two dozen of us. Your Great-Uncle Beresford Cullen – the Colonel – who lost three fingers to frostbite in the Crimean campaign; your grandmother, great-aunts and various of their dependents, with a large clutch of cousins.

Thwale was grander then, and darker – no electric lights, nor gas here, this far out into the countryside, but only candles, lanterns and rush-lights. The nearest gas lighting was in Selby; the nearest fine society in York. There was riding here, and shooting, a little fishing, but nothing else. This left Michael and I, who were of an age, and a girl of fourteen, Maria, with little to do.

To be of such an age is to hover, undecided and always watched, between the safe retreat of childhood and the cunning maze of adult life. I was not cunning, but Michael was. I soon saw how he toyed with Maria, and threw sly glances in my direction at the same time; he teased me on my height – an inch more than his – but made as if he liked it really when Maria was near. I saw his game; she was taken in, and grew possessive of his time.

On our second evening at Thwale, the twentieth of December, entertainments played out in this very hall; harmless card tricks from the Colonel, and other diversions – a song from

a young lady, a recitation from one of the men. The hall hearth was burning bright, an equally prodigious Yule log ready by it to be lit on Christmas Eve. Michael came forward into the centre of the hall, dark eyes intent.

“Fire from Prometheus,” he announced to the family as they turned, curious.

He had not my height, but he had presence, I grant him that, when he wanted it so. His brown hair was tossed idly back, his youthful jacket was too tight, his trousers a little too short. A man erupting from a boy.

“A trick?” asked Uncle Beresford, coarse grey whiskers around a face still scarred by Inkerman and Balaclava. “Be at it then, lad.”

Michael smiled and ask for a path to be cleared to the great fire. With mock theatrics, he strode to the hearth, and stretched one hand almost into the flames.

“Careful now,” my mother muttered. As she had no affection for the boy, she was presumably thinking of what his father might say.

“It is quite safe, Mrs Brulier,” he reassured her. “For those in the know.”

He passed his left hand swiftly over the bulk of fire, and leapt back to the centre of the room; some of the women present gasped, for at his fingertips bloomed smaller flames, as if his hand was five pale candles. I remember clearly that your grandfather reached for the soda syphon, a proud new possession of his, but Michael waved him back – and as we all stared, unsure, the tiny flames ran up his sleeve, across the collar, and down the other sleeve, to be extinguished in a heartbeat.

There was silence.

“Chemicals,” declared Uncle Beresford. “Reminds me of the Turkish artillerymen, and their confounded powders.”

Michael bowed; the family applauded with various degrees of enthusiasm. I held back, watching his lean, proud face. Was it so simple as chemicals and powders?

Something told me that it was not.

She sipped her sherry, lapsing into silence.

“What else could it have been?” I asked at last, was drawn into her vision of over sixty years before. “A machination with lens or mirrors, or some other mechanical device? Mesmerism?”

“All of those were possible,” she agreed. “For a young man with too much time to brood.”

“You mentioned his father. What happened to his mother?”

“She died of a fever, not long after his birth. Another reason why he had been so easily permitted to come up to Yorkshire with us – his father was not over-fond of him. If he had received more love, perhaps... we shall never know.”

The clock stood only at twenty one past six. Dinner not until seven, and so...

“How did it end?”

“Not with applause,” she said. “But listen...”

On the morning of the twenty second, after a service of carols, Thwale bustled with preparations which excluded us. I strolled the gardens, and as I walked by the rear of the house, between yew hedges and a tired rose garden, I heard a soft laugh.

Forswearing the crunch of the gravel path for the quieter grass border, I crept forward, and beneath a twisted yew, saw Michael with Maria in grasp. Her struggles were more theatre than alarm, her smile unsoured. I could not hear what they were saying, but I had no doubt he knew I was in that vicinity. His tryst with Maria was once more a manoeuvre for effect.

I left swiftly, considering how best to deal with him.

Of more immediate concern was that Maria took a fever after dinner the same day. There being no resident doctor nearby, Uncle Beresford – with considerable experience of sickness overseas – examined her, and declared that her temperature was high, but she showed no signs of failure of the organs, only a certain hysterical distress when awake. Sleep, he prescribed, and observation.

I asked if I might sit and read to her, to which her mother readily agreed. It soon became apparent that reading would be pointless; she turned and fretted, eyes closed, beneath the counterpane – so much so that I pulled it down. When my fingers brushed her bare arm, there was an unnatural heat in her, and I wished I had ice to hand. Which I did, I realised! I rushed down to the kitchen and begged a bowl, taking this into the courtyard and filling it with snow.

Back in her room, I smoothed her arms, upper chest and face with the snow, mopping it with a towel as it melted. A half hour, and she was more calm, opening her eyes.

“You have caught a chill, Maria dear. It will soon pass.”

“No... it was him. Your cousin from Suffolk – he pressed himself to me, and he burned. ‘Let proud Henrietta learn a lesson,’ he said to me...”

I frowned. “Burned?”

“Oh, he was so hot! I liked it at first – they say in books that love burns, do they not? It became uncomfortable, and I pulled from him, at which he scowled and walked back with me, unspeaking.”

I mopped her brow, read a few passages from my facile romance, and when she was asleep, I left to find Michael.

He was outside, by the woodsheds.

“It will pass by morning,” he said, before I opened my mouth. “It always does. The silly girl. What I could do for you, though...”

Raising his left hand as he had in the house, he clicked his fingers, and a flame greater than most candles flickered into existence above his thumb. “These stacked logs would burn nicely, a signal to be seen for miles. A token for you, if you like?”

His tone was light, but his expression was one I had seen before. It was one not of affection, but of desire.

Michael wanted me.

Her sudden directness surprised me; I spluttered my mouthful of sherry, turning it into a cough.

“Smoky in here,” I said, but the old woman knew better. As we looked at each other, I could see it now – large blue eyes beneath those lids, a hint of raven in the grey hair, and those broad cheekbones... she must have been quite striking. Perhaps she still was. She wore black silk gloves, but her hands seemed straight, not clawed or wizened, and I realised that she must have been tall once.

It should not have been a surprise that someone had wanted Henrietta Brulier.

“That flame could have been a trick with a lucifer,” I offered, rather weakly.

“It could.” Her reply left neither of us in doubt that more than a simple match had been in play.

“What did you do?”

“I sought counsel...”

Maria recovered fully by the next morning, leaving the family puzzled. I, however, had my fears, and sought an older head.

Uncle Beresford was at ease in your grandfather's study, a cheroot to his lips. When I knocked and entered, he smiled.

"Edwin's daughter. I remember you. I showed you and your friends a dried snake once – they squealed; you asked me if I had taken it myself, where, and how was it despatched."

I told him all I had seen, every doubt I had about Michael, keeping my head high. He listened and paced, without speaking. I still remember the sound of his heavy boots on the floorboards, the musty tobacco smell of him. A veteran of more than one war, listening to a girl with a fantastical tale.

When he stood still, his eyes were not on me. "So either you bring me a report that we have a potential – and unpredictable – incendiary among us – or a suspicion that stranger times have befallen Thwale."

"Stranger times, sir?"

"The gifts of Allah and those of a *shaitan* can be hard to separate. But we are not Mussulmans, are we?"

I did not entirely understand, but agreed we were not.

"My brother is not a fanciful man. This would make little sense to him. Will you take a duty from me, Hetty, as if you were one of my troops?"

"Yes, sir. But... does this mean you believe me?"

"I believe that you have concerns, that you bring to me a concise report of your observations so far. It is what I expect of a scout. Keep your eyes on that young man, Hetty, and tell me if aught else amiss comes to your attention."

Glad that I had unburdened myself, I agreed that I would do his bidding.

There was a grand civic ball in York the night before Christmas Eve. Your grandfather was indifferent to it, but your grandmother and others insisted that they should take carriages and attend; with a dearth of males, even Uncle Beresford was pressed to accompany them.

Untutored in higher society, Maria, Michael and I were left in the care of the servants, and instructed to do as we were told, to amuse ourselves in harmless pursuits and then take ourselves to our bedrooms until the party returned. Should the two or three youngest members of the family become troublesome, we were to read to them, settle them, and be obedient to the housekeeper, Mrs Fentley.

Maria volunteered – with haste – to play with the little ones until their bedtime, and insisted she needed no assistance. Thus Michael and I were left to our own devices.

I could not avoid him – or what I now saw as his influence. The hearths blazed high, needing more than usual replenishment, and the candles throughout Thwale seemed

brighter, more urgent that they should be. One of the maids had a sweat upon her brow and remarked that it felt 'unseasonable warm' inside, yet outside lay ice, and the drive was freezing mud.

"Have you fully realised what I possess by now? And what I can offer?" Michael asked as we sat apart in the drawing room.

I put down my book, a harmless romance with clueless girls and unscrupulous uncles.

"Your arrogance? Your tricks and fancies? Yes, I have realised those things, Michael Brulier."

His lips curled unpleasantly, and I knew that I truly did not want anything of him. He was a man in waiting, but the man to come did not appeal. An achiever, possibly, but one who would do so at others' expense, preening in his own abilities.

He leaped from the settee, cheeks red. "Tricks, eh? Must I still prove myself to you?"

One hand swept behind him, and the previously-unlit drawing room hearth began to stir, sudden flickers in the coals; his other arm lifted high, and the candles in the antique chandelier above us flared in swift response, small suns against a plaster firmament. Worse, those candles on the sideboard lit as well, catching the frayed edge of a tapestry on the wall. Old and dry, it caught in seconds.

Michael only laughed.

I have never shrieked, never fainted, in my life. I rose and struck him, hard, on the cheekbone; staggering, he fell back against the curtains, which erupted into flame at his touch. Smoke wreathed the room, and a cry of alarm came from not far away – one of the servants.

"End it!" I yelled at him, backing towards the main hall. "Quench or quieten what you have started."

"Some men are not meant to be quenched! But as you ask..."

His gesture was confident; his expression, when the fire showed no signs of abating, less so.

"It's a matter of will," he muttered, but his gaze grew wilder.

Full half of the room was burning.

"Come away, you idiot!" I cried. "You cannot control this!"

I grabbed at him, burning myself, but he stood there still, trapped in anger and determination, as if that would bring the fires around him back under his control. Choking on fumes, I staggered for the French doors which led onto the carriageway.

He remained.

Half-collapsed on the gravel drive as I was, I saw your grandfather's valet, trying to enter the drawing room from the hall, driven back by heat and smoke, and two gardeners ran past outside, not noticing me.

"Is there anyone inside?" cried Mrs Fentley, who tried to pull me further back.

"Michael was," I gasped.

For I had seen him clearly enough, a pillar of fire within the flames; seen the way he seemed to bathe in the conflagration, still seeking to master it — even when the joists above gave way and part of the first floor fell, finally obscuring my view.

The carriages arrived back not long after. Your grandfather and most of the other men organised the chain of buckets and the foot-pumps which saved the bulk of the house. Uncle Beresford alone came to me. He placed a blanket around me, and sat me by the carriage house.

"Where is he?"

I pointed to the collapsing west face of the house. "In there, sir."

His face grew grim. "I suppose we must dig, when the wreckage is cooler."

"You will find nothing but ashes."

He squinted at me. "That was the way of it, eh? And you saw it all?"

I nodded. He wrapped the blanket tighter around me, squeezing my shoulder. "Did you know, Henrietta, that your family name was once not Brulier, but de Brûlure. It changed with the centuries. You know the word?"

I had reasonable French from my lessons. "A scorch or burn."

"The de Brûlures were long associated with the *oriflamme*, the pennon of the French kings. The golden flame. When it flew in battle, no quarter was to be given. No survivors."

And together we turned to stare at the still-burning wreckage...

A child shrieked at a joke; my sister-in-law's alcohol-fuelled laughter cut across the hall. My thoughts lay between two Thwales, six decades apart.

"There will be no more Bruliers, to my knowledge," Aunt Hetty said softly. "And so whether the line truly held any abnormal gift ... it does not matter. What Michael was does not

matter. But you have begun to wonder – is this tale why I keep my distance from open fires, and Thwale’s hearths in particular.”

“Because you fear them? After your... experience here?”

From a face that had survived so many years, the clear blue eyes of a fifteen year old girl regarded me, steady.

“Since that night,” she said, “I have never felt the cold. If I were naked in the fields outside, I would not suffer the slightest chill.”

I had not a single reason to believe her fantastical tale – nor any cause to doubt it. Not once had she pressured me to accept her word, and throughout, her voice had been as reasonable and calm as someone reciting a list of groceries.

The old woman peeled off one glove – and reached over to me with a fingers which were scarred, as if they had been in a conflagration. As she touched the back of my own hand, for a heartbeat only, I felt the heat of her flesh.

“I keep away from fires, Philip” she said, “Because I might be tempted. I might reach forward, idly, to caress the flames – and find it good...”

Henrietta Brulier died on the second of January, nineteen twenty six. Seven years had passed since she spoke to me at Thwale. She left no will, and it turned out – after months of enquiry by solicitors – that I was her nearest living relative. After many sleepless nights, I instructed that she be buried, not be cremated.

Let her lie in the cool earth, and be at peace.

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John Linwood Grant is a widely-published writer/ editor from Yorkshire, UK, who has a particular affection for strange, period-set stories. His fourth and fifth collections of dark tales will be out in 2024, along with an anthology of new weird and supernatural fiction set in the Edwardian period, ‘Alone on the Borderland’ (Belanger Books).

*Further information on his work can be found on
Amazon and at his site greydogtales.com*