



DARKNESS

THERE

**But
Something
More...**

Anthology of Selected
Ghost Stories

Edited By

Dr Santosh Bakaya

&

Lopamudra Banerjee

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The Blue Pencil

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Editor's notes

Dr. Santosh Bakaya

Who has not been intrigued by ghosts and ghost stories? I still shudder at the recollection of those eerie ghost stories that the elders related to us, the kids, around a crackling log fire. [With the proper sound effects]. Sometimes sitting in a dark room, in cold December nights, and at times, huddled under a creepy looking tree, while other trees sloughed eerie melodies, and the insects stopped what they were doing, to become a part of the nocturnal drama. Eloquently munching peanuts, even joking, what if a rambling ghost suddenly appears, beseeching us for a handful of peanuts?

Some of us are wary of ghost stories, some are skeptical, scoffing at the very idea, and some prefer to ignore the topic with a supposedly wise shake of the head. Whether ghosts exist or don't, whether these spectral illusions are the result of an overworked imagination, whether they reflect our subconscious, the fact is, everyone likes a ghost story. It has never failed to enchant us with its eerie gothic ambience, of hooting owls, of bats hanging from cobwebbed ceilings, of terrifying screams, goose bumps, poltergeist activities, and also vulpine jackals howling, with their snouts raised to the moon! My mind is brimming with those horror stories of childhood, which have left an indelible impression.

The supernatural horror story, *The Monkey's Paw* by W.W Jacobs is one such story which I can never forget, still

very vividly recalling the rat-a-tat-a-tat that dad produced on one dark and stormy night as our hair stood on end and our little necks whirled in the direction of the door. Who was knocking at the dead of night? Our small hearts fluttered and our lips tried to frame the question. *The Masque of the Red Death* and *The Oblong Box* by Edgar Allen Poe, which we heard in childhood, continue to send chills up my spine.

In *The Ghost Chamber* by Charles Dickens, there was a certain grave mystery lurking in the depth of the old mahogany panels where half a dozen old men, all dressed in black, glided up and down the chamber's stair, and as the mystery unfolds, it leaves one aghast.

Another story which did not exactly give me goose bumps, but fascinated me in my childhood days, was *The Magic Shop* by H G Wells. The magical toys that the shop displayed intrigued me endlessly, and I dreamt of owning the magic hens, and the ventriloquist dolls, suffusing my tiny life with the hues of magic.

But, I can still feel the chills running up my spine when the story reaches the denouement, and the spooky nature of the toy box is revealed to the protagonist. It is with a sense of horror that he comes to know that the tiny toy soldiers that he bought for his son from the magic shop, get out of the boxes and start marching at night!

Now to come to some of the spooky stories in this anthology:

"In the shimmering haze loomed the solid bungalow in the background; a blurred and quivering chimera from the road. Its weather-beaten façade rose out of the haze-heart like a defiant phantom. The old imposing structure inspired popular dread in the countryside," writes Dr. Sunil Sharma, in *The White Man's Bungalow*. Many a story hides in this bungalow's nooks and crannies. As I read on, I could feel the hair on the nape of my neck stand, and as the story unspooled, I felt myself, sitting on the edge of the seat, and

eagerly waiting for what follows.

Dr A. V Koshi's short and sweet story is about a newborn who dies and immediately becomes a ghost. This profound story left me with a very sad smile on my face. I know, you are waiting to read the entire story in the book, but right now, I simply cannot resist the temptation of citing a few lines from the story:

"One day, she spoke to an old Ghost called Woohoo about it. "Who am I?" she asked him.

"You are Boo," he replied unhelpfully.

"You are who?" she asked, a trifle irritated.

"I am You Know Who," he replied. And she who had never said Boo to a ghost before said Boo, and ran away."

7/A Ballygunge Terrace, penned by Lopamudra Banerjee, with its flavor of a middle-class Bengali household, and a twist in the tale, is another spell-binding story in this anthology.

Your eyes will also pop open as you go through Michele Baron's story, "The Bridge", where she writes about, "wraiths with voices felt, not heard, clamoring to be understood, as if all life on earth itself were threatened... not all of them ghosts of cataclysms past."

These stories will just give you a taste of what is to follow, and believe me, they leave you with a lingering aftertaste of horror and terror.

More on them later.

The monk in Guy De Maupassant's short story, *The Horla*, says, "Look here, there is the wind, which is the strongest force in nature, which knocks down men and blows down buildings, uproots the trees, raises the sea into mountains of water, destroys cliffs, and casts great ships on the rocks, the wind which kills, which whistles, which sighs, which roars – have you ever seen it and can you ever see it? It exists for all that, however." Impressed by this simple reasoning, the

protagonist, nonetheless, could not make out whether he was a philosopher or a fool, so he held his tongue.

So, in all wisdom, I too hold my tongue [it would be a hideous impertinence, if I didn't!] and let the spirits... oops the stories, do the talking.

Let me vanish into thin air, leaving you to the bats, the owls and the cobwebs, the dilapidated and haunted houses, eerie chills, goosebumps...

And more goosebumps.

This anthology has it all – so brace yourselves up!

Hey, is that an owl hooting or a bat fluttering its wings in the dark? Or just a wraith trying to make its voice heard – shhh, I hear something... do you?

Whatever, it is, prudence demands vanishing before things go out of hand.

Let Lopamudra Banerjee take over from where I vanish.

I was always a coward...

Lopamudra Banerjee

“Round about the cauldron go;
In the poison’d entrails throw.
Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights hast thirty one
Swelter’d venom sleeping got,
Boil thou first I’ the charmed pot.

Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.”

Macbeth, Act IV, Scene I

The paranormal, ghostly, eerie world of spirits, witches, demons and other corporeal beings have been endearing, timeless entities in literature, films and other mediums of human communication ever since one can remember. As for myself, my early memories of encountering ghostly beings have been in the tales of the *Arabian Nights*, as I clearly remember the jinns and monsters, the impervious souls being invoked, or even coming out of bottles, casting magic spells, granting wishes, while even the seemingly benign narratives would be shaken and stirred by the thunderous gust of their sheer presence. The wondrous supernatural phenomena in Sinbad’s tales that I read in school still lure me as magical memories with their gripping images; his fantastical adventures of encountering the monsters and other supernatural beings had me under their spell for quite a long time, when an indescribable chill ran down my spine, reading of the giants, monsters and the stories of entrapment during his vicarious voyages.

In my college years, my tryst with Victorian literature was embedded with the first memories of the spine-chilling image of Catherine's unquenched spirit roaming within the precincts of *Wuthering Heights*, the paranormal figure with icy hands that haunted her sadist lover Heathcliff. In fact, Heathcliff was steeped in her ghostly essence, and said: "I know that ghosts have wandered the earth. Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad."

In Dickens' phenomenal fictional tale *A Christmas Carol*, the Christmas eve ghost story and the other-worldly beings have woven a magical tapestry which allures even to this date, making it one of the very engaging literary pieces adapted as Broadway musicals, drama productions and more. What strikes us most as readers and audiences of such supernatural presentations is that in every story, in every narrative, the luridness of the supernatural has been woven to evoke the sense of awe and bewilderment in us and also sustain it so that it becomes all the more gripping in its final impact. Who can forget the queer charms, spells and prophecies of the three witches, the three awful looking "black and midnight hags", the somber presence of Banquo's ghost in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the classic play that documents a political intrigue and the far-fetched consequences of crimes, murder and human guilt? Aren't the figments of imagination invoked by these timeless spiritual beings a poignant reminder of the fact that we all are constantly, unfailingly intrigued, overpowered by the fear of the unknown? Hence, the title of our book, *Darkness There — But Something More*, where we have tweaked these ever-intriguing lines of *The Raven* by Edgar Allen Poe: "And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,/That I scarce was sure I heard you"— here I opened wide the door; — Darkness there and nothing more."

The power of darkness is overpowering, with the omniscient presence of a soul lurking beneath its ambiguous

contours. Whether you name it as fear, or an irresistible attraction or pull, we have been swayed by it for ages, and so, an image or description of a haunted house, of ghosts and spirits hovering all over the house still casts a magic spell on our otherwise rational selves. Take the instance of paranormal investigators, countless people who have narrated near-death experiences, and others who have tried to document the ever-ambiguous other-worldly. A common thread that binds all of them is a constant quest to delve deeper into the mystery of a seemingly existing life beyond the peripheries of our mundane, every day paraphernalia.

It is this quest, this irresistible attraction for the unknown and mysterious, the allure for fantastical fictional narratives which compelled Dr. Santosh Bakaya and me to collaborate with our other fellow writers to produce this book.

The journey of delving into the murky, the haunting had first brewed in the fertile brain of my prolific co-editor Dr. Santosh Bakaya. *The Boulder*, the first story of this collection written by her has an unmistakable gothic appeal in its vivid narration where the spine-chilling presence of three mysterious, ambiguous souls sitting on a boulder and the even more ambiguous presence of a writer scrutinizing these "spookily monstrous" creatures and recording it all, pulls the readers in a haunting, riveting saga. Her story, in its essence, paves the way for an immensely exciting, roller-coaster journey taking the readers through the cascading ripples of eerie tales that will intrigue, tickle your senses with their synesthetic appeal, while leaving you grappling with the haunting terrains of their climaxes.

The power and allure of darkness and these extra-terrestrial beings among us has been celebrated in the book in diverse ways. We have compiled the very best stories submitted to us for our 'Weave a Ghost Story' contest, for which our talented pool of writers wove richly innovative

tales beginning with the line: "She woke up to find a figure seated on the only chair in the room, looking weirdly at her", and incorporating ten very unique prompt words. While we have published the award-winning stories of the contest, we have also added some astonishingly eerie tales based on a picture prompt of a bench which stands secluded in a desolate setting. Each story woven around the theme added its own unique voice and essence, as did the stories with other themes, settings and dimensions. It has truly been our honour and privilege to compile all these tales written by authors dispersed all over the globe, and unleash the creativity of these storytellers.

Come, smell the murky, weird, esoteric flavor of this assortment of stories and brace yourself for chills and thrills galore on the journey! There won't be any dull moment while on the ride, we assure you...

Volume 1

The Boulder and Other Stories

The Boulder

Dr. Santosh Bakaya

The trees were sloughing away to the notes of some eerie music. The sky had an ominous air and the moon reflected in the water had the look of a petrified child, as if it had just witnessed a ghost, and the river rippled and roared, in spurts of sinister mischief.

There were three people sitting on a boulder, and the moonlight fell on them, sheathing them in silver light.

A sallow looking man, an obese man, with an intensely funereal air and the third man whose face was the least privileged, being deprived of the magnanimity of the moon. There was a certain coarseness and roughness about the threesome. The river rippled and roared again, guffawing with overtones of cruel enjoyment.

I watched the threesome from my tent. Did I tell you, I am an incorrigible wanderer, always on the lookout for adventure? Also a writer, who has churned out three bestselling thrillers, and right now, am on the fourth? Writing away in a tent, in the middle of the wilderness, at the dead of night. Eerie, is it not?

“It was spooky.

It was monstrous.

And it was coming straight at me. I bit my lip, relaxed my grip, and panicked.”

As I typed away on my laptop, the jungle resounded with a huge guffaw, and the clouds rumbled in slurred whispers.

The owls hooted frantically, and the bats fluttered frenziedly, as happens in ghost stories.

Was I in the midst of a ghost story? Ghost story or no ghost story, in all this confusion, I myself started feeling like a ghost. How do I know, how a ghost feels? Did you say? Oh come on, don't jump to conclusions. Believe me, I am no ghost, but I almost felt light and invisible, maybe that is how ghosts are supposed to feel. I tiptoed up to the tiny window facing the river, where the threesome were having a whale of a time sitting on the boulder.

Or so I thought.

I craned my neck a little and caught a glimpse of a dog. It was of the sheep dog variety, and had a long, rough coat. I shuddered. Had Semillante of Guy De Maupassant's short story, *The Vendetta* made its reappearance, and now, any moment the threesome would order him to, "Go, go eat him up! Eat him up", taking revenge for some long-forgotten crime of mine?

"Stop, stop panicking. Panicking never helps, take a deep breath, take a deep breath," I repeatedly told myself, eyes fixed on the spookily monstrous thing which was heading straight for me. Would it crush me? Make mincemeat of me?"

I had hardly finished writing this, when I heard a menacing growl. The starving dog was gearing itself to tear me to shreds, I was sure. Any moment now, it would pounce at me and sink its fangs into me. I almost howled in anticipatory pain.

The dog was continuously looking in the direction of my tent.

Suddenly my eyes caught two hooded figures shoveling mud in a trench. Or was it two? I could not make out.

"Every end has a beginning. Every beginning an end." They said loudly and then broke into a maladroit dance, I was afraid they would fall into the trench with the vehemence of their dance steps.

Or whatever they were doing, swaying the shovels this way and that, and shaking their limbs in all directions. Soon their prosaic lines, morphed into poetry, and became a song, the notes of which started wafting towards me, slurring and stumbling along the way, meandering drunkenly, while the river continued to hum out its secrets.

I went back to my laptop which I imagined [ah, the perils of a fertile imagination!] was looking at me with the hurt expression of a small child.

Well, almost.

“The monstrous thing was coming towards me, yeah, it was coming. What was it? A truck? A crane? A tractor? Suddenly clouds rumbled and lightning flashed and in this flash of light, I caught a glimpse of the man driving the contraption. Then with a gasp of horror, I noticed that the contraption’s tires were gripping nothing, but the chilling, brace of mountain air. Would it hurtle down the cliff?” Before I could write more, I was again distracted.

It was the song outside beguiling me with its crass cacophony. What insolence! I had come to the wilderness looking for some peace! Will I never be able to finish this manuscript of mine? My masterpiece?

“Beginning. End... end beginning... end beginning...” A few crickets, a couple of owls, one sleepy bird and howls of the dog or wolf, or whatever, provided the background score, and hey presto, the song was a hit.

Hitting my ears.

Suddenly a voice also hit my ears, travelling on the wings of the nocturnal breeze.

A high-pitched treble.

Being hit so many times in quick succession, my ears defiantly went on auto-plug but the treble’s high pitched resilience won, hitting me with a new vigor.

“Shouldn’t have taken sahib’s car that day. Without

permission," said the high treble.

"It was a day of December, very cold, Sahib was lounging in his old wicker arm chair, with a book in his hands, he was always reading. Always."

His eyes lit up on seeing me.

"Have not seen you around, were you unwell? You look so low." He asked with a smile.

"Low?" I almost sniggered. "On the contrary, I was high... had just downed a couple of drinks... ah... I feel so bad..."

"Oh, what is the point of crying over spilt milk?"

"Yes, no use, no use."

The voice trailed into a series of whimpers, in a sympathetic gesture, probably, the dog or wolf, or whatever, walked up to him, and started licking him all over, the two shovellers stopped whatever they were doing and peered closely at him, muttering... "Beginning end... beginning end..."

One of them, I noticed, was a burly man, with a hammy face, short, stumpy midget legs, and the other had the look of a haunted man with scars that ran far deep to endure. Oh, damn! My hyperactive imagination again at play!

Losing all interest in the whimpering man, the dog-wolf walked towards the shovellers with a fluid motion. Would they now have a tussle with the wild beast? Oh, time was running out, I had to finish my masterpiece, I could not afford to make haste slowly. I could not. I had to make haste fast... Pretty fast.

"No, the contraption did not hurtle down the cliff, but with a screech and swerve of tires, was miraculously back on the road. Displaced rock and dirt dribbled over and were immediately scattered in the swirl and whirl of the maddening wind. The contraption, I noticed was a black car, what make, I could not see, but what I could see, was that it was coming straight, no, not straight, but was lurching and swerving towards me, as though drunk."

The high-pitched treble, the howls of the dog-wolf, and the singing shovellers were proving too much of a distraction. Was I right in coming to this wilderness to finish my story... had always been in a hurry to finish things... always.

Suddenly I heard some whimpering, right outside the tent door. I lifted up the flap of the tent door, and gasped.

What was I expected to do with this brazen intruder?
And her progeny?

Lying outside was a mother cat, suckling five kittens!

Damn! How Mary hates me using such words, hut, I am a free bird in this wide, wacky, and yes, weird world, I can curse to my heart's content. Damn, damn, damn!

Mary was not around, but the feline family, taking Mary's place, purring its displeasure, scurried away, perhaps scared that I would damn them into eternity.

What if the dog-wolf suddenly came racing towards me, barking, snapping, and teeth snarling? What if vampires hiding in the jungle barged towards the tent, fangs glistening, black capes swirling, while the dog-wolf howled away and the shovellers sang, 'beginning... end... beginning... end?' Damn! Damn, damn! Ah, what a sense of freedom, I experience here – in this wilderness! Hey, what is that in the distance, a huge tree stretching out its branches towards the skies, or the Blute-Fin Windmill of Vincent Van Gogh? Oh, damn! Damn! My fertile imagination again going into overdrive! Better make haste, better make haste, my birthday is just round the corner. High time, I finished my tour de force... High time...

"What if the drunken contraption came straight to me and mowed me down completely? Made mincemeat of me? I could see there were three men sitting in the car, one the driver, one sitting in the passenger seat and one behind. Earlier, I had caught a glimpse of the driver, and he had looked familiar. They were singing at the tops of their voices – that is, if their drunken incoherence could be called

singing!”

I had hardly finished penning this down, when the wind started billowing, the owls’ hoots became more lusty, the shovellers’ song more vigorous.

Why couldn’t I get rid of this feeling that hidden eyes were watching?

Before I could laugh away my fears, I felt icy fingers touch my neck.

I shuddered, and gasped.

Sheepishly, I realized the fingers were my own.

Ice cold.

They had inadvertently curled round my neck when I heard those weird noises echoing in the wilderness. I removed the fingers from my neck, my nerves on edge.

I continued peering through the window, intrigued by the midnight festivities unfolding before me. Soon the threesome lit a log fire and started preparing something over it.

Was it Irish stew similar to what the Three Men in a Boat of Jerome K Jerome had prepared? Would the wolf-dog now bring a dead rat as his contribution to the stew? The absurdity of the thought made me smile. By the way, what was the name of that dog in Three Men in a Boat? Montgomery? MacDonald? Merlin?

Mary is always so miffed with my tip-of-the-tongue syndrome. How irritated she gets when I wake her up in the middle of the night, to ask her something which is on the tip of my tongue, but I cannot recall it. But how come, I remember everything so clearly now?

Now more words hit my ears. Words drenched in liquor, having a life of their own. Dancing, pirouetting, twisting, sizzling words.

“That man was walking right in the middle of the road. I shouldn’t have taken Saab’s car in my sozzled stage. I don’t know, what got over me, under the pretext of washing his

car, you know, I do it every Sunday, I picked the car keys from the key holder, and calmly sneaked out... no one noticed."

Why was I trying to procrastinate? Wasn't I supposed to finish my masterpiece? Here I was in the middle of the wilderness, eavesdropping on the stories of absolute strangers, totally forgetting my story. Let the stories of these nocturnal creatures go to the dogs, let me finish my story.

"The black monstrosity was definitely heading towards me. My eyes suddenly caught the powerful glare of the sun reflecting off the tin-wrapped wheels of a wagon standing outside a house, and my right hand shot up to shield my eyes. I don't know why I suddenly remembered the dessert I had had last night, deep fried apple segments rolled in cinnamon. Ah."

"Beginning ...end...beginning ...end," the shovellers mumbled, and the sound of tssch-tssch , accompanied by the fluttering of bats' wings rent the air.

The dog-wolf let out a huge howl, and I shuddered.

Enough of these sounds, I am famished, better finish that left-over sandwich – the cheddar sandwich, yes it was heavy on mustard, with a leaf or two of lettuce, and an inch-thick slab of fresh tomato. Ah I salivate, therefore, I am! Ha! Oh no! Once again my hyperactive imagination. There is no sandwich, only witches and wizards. Just remembered the dog's name of Three Men in a Boat... it was, M... hey, what is that sound? A woodpecker pecking? A headless horseman going on a canter?

Had I landed in Washington Irving's sleepy hollow? Was I subject to trances and visions? I had wanted to steal away from the madding world to do some writing, but how can one write with so much background music? Were all these characters walking in a continual reverie, sometimes silent, sometimes noisy? Ah, who can read the thought of these inscrutable creatures?

"The car looked so inviting, well-scrubbed and gleaming.

With a confidence, I did not feel in my stomach, though, I hopped into the car, put the key in the ignition, ah, the feeling, the absolute feeling of freedom and accelerated. Remember, I called you too and you also joined me in the car... Wah! What fun we had, singing away, joking and guffawing..."

The man was again talking, blabbering rather.

"Stop it! Will you?"

"Let us enjoy our rum, you bum!

Come one, come all, let us hum."

And soon they were dancing around the log fire, humming and guffawing, disturbing the nocturnal birds. But I swore, not to be disturbed, and once again put pen to paper. Time was running short, very short.

"When she had served me the dessert last night, I had noticed that something was moving in her eyes, some shadowy form, which she tried to hide behind the brightness of her smile. The wind was changing, like a soprano breaking into a hoarse bass... And the car was coming straight for me. Hey, hey, what are you doing, what? Stop, stop."

"EndBeginning, beginning... end," the shovellers mumbled, as the threesome hummed and rumm-ed away.

The lone owl in the boughs was getting disturbed by the antics of the threesome. It hooted its displeasure, the threesome stopped flinging their limbs around, once again sat on the boulder, and started eating what they had cooked, my eyes kept going to the looming black outline of the mountains in the distance.

Why, oh why did I feel the presence of evil around? Why did I feel that someone was about to suffer a horrible fate? Why? The river which had been quiescent for some time, suddenly started roaring with ominous overtones. The trees cast their reflections in the moonlit waters, looking like skeletal ghosts, the ghostly branches trailing their fingers in the water.

“End... Beginning... end... beginning... end...,” the shovellers continued the refrain. The owl, absolutely bored by the refrain of the shovellers fluttered its wings frantically, breaking into a string of toohoos.

The flaps of my tent suddenly seemed to have a life of its own, and started fluttering frantically. Would it uproot itself in one spirited surge? Was it trying to warn me about some mishap?

Hush, what was that sound? Someone pounding on some metal with a large mallet?

The wind roared and blasted down the trees, with a lusty whoo-who, stopped, as though weighing the possibility of roaring again, and then with another powerful gust repeated the sound .

Whoooo WHOOO it went, and tooo-hooo went the owl.

Unfazed by the tumultuous wind, and the hooting, the three gluttons again fell to hogging and guffawing in another burst of back-slapping bonhomie.

“This was amazing!” said the first glutton.

“Indeed it was. Like old times,” rejoined the second, smacking his lips.

“What a feast!” said the third one, rubbing his bloated belly.

I had not been able to see the third one so far, as he was in the shadows.

But suddenly the moonlight fell right on his face.

And I gasped.

I gaped speechlessly at the man.

He was the one who was... he was the one who... He had the looks of a pirate, not that I have ever seen a pirate, but with an eye patch, he would look every inch like one... What is he saying? What? I eased forward a few steps to

peer outside and listen to the man, more clearly.

In the moonlight, I glimpsed a black raven suddenly rising out of a tree and heading towards the river, and the river suddenly recovered its loquacity and roared and roared. The man was speaking incoherently:

"I suddenly swung the wheel, the car bounced and fishtailed along the highway, then miraculously swerved back on to the asphalt. Sweat glistened on my forehead, and I heaved a sigh of relief, alas, a bit prematurely though...

And I mowed down that man. He had just shifted into the neighborhood - a thorough gentleman. I had met him many times, and whenever he saw me, he would always smile in my direction. But wh...at... c...o...uld I do? He was walking right in the mid...dle of the r...oad."

"You mowed him down, and killed us too!" The other two hissed at him.

"But, I was killed too, wasn't I? I, a drunkard! A good-for-nothing, as Meena calls me."

The blood was pounding in my veins.

I had no ears and eyes for sweet-smelling evergreens, flowering bushes and ferns which suddenly seemed to be full of vibrant life, along with the rabbits scurrying around in the bushes.

"End... beginning... beginning end," the shovellers once again started their maladroitness as the raven cawed its displeasure.

And the flaps of my tent fluttered, like lost spirits wanting to be set free.

"And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain

Thrilled me - filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before."

Yes, he was the one who was driving the black car that day... he mowed me down, killing me on the spot... I died with many a story lost within me. The fourth thriller, this one,

which I was writing was indeed a tour de force. Ah, how I wanted to finish it before my birthday which was a week away, and present it to Mary. It's a week since I died... ah! Wonder how Mary is coping with this... Ah Mary, Mary, quite contrary.... So lost was I in mulling over the denouement, that I started walking right in the middle of the road. "Look at little Johnny there. Little Johnny, head in air." That is what Mary used to say. "Little Johnny, head in air!" Ah! Dust to dust... Dust to dust... Now back from where I came... back, back... dust to dust....Hey, who is that ?

A sudden flurry of sounds.

Make haste slowly, Mary says. Is it Mary, coming in my direction?

Mary? Is it Mary? Mary, Mary, quite contrary... How does the garden grow? I do not have the heart to look at her. Heart? Ha ha, what a fool I am, I mean, was. My heart stopped beating long back, let me vanish, let me vanish... I don't have the heart, oh not again... to look at those violet blue eyes of hers, or those dark shadows lurking within. By the way, just remembered the name of the dog in Three Men in a Boat, was MONTMORENCY! What a name! Why am I suddenly feeling so hungry... so hungry?

'Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
... shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.'

"Ah sleep... I was to teach The Tempest, the next day... But alas, sleep beckoned... and I came... Eternal sleep..." Now to sleep some more... some more..."

All of a sudden, the back-slapping bonhomie of the

threesome stopped, and they slowly slid behind a tree.

To peer at the intruder.

The girl, who was indeed Mary, headed towards the grave with a cake.

She lovingly traced the contours of the name on the gravestone JOHN MATTHEWS. Tears streaming down her face, she kept the cake on the grave, and gasped.

Her fingers had touched something.

On the grave was a manuscript.

She peered closely at it.

The title page said The Last Sigh.

From behind a tree, the shovellers watched, their mumbles in abeyance, and slowly they also vanished into thin air, their teardrops also disappeared before they could fall to the ground.

The threesome also slowly slid out from behind the tree and walked away, shoulders stooped, eyes moist.

The air kept vibrating with the sounds of End... beginning.... End... beginning... and the owl hooted. And the dog howled.

Clutching The Last Sigh close to her heart, Mary walked away.

What remained was just the boulder sheathed in moonlight.

"End, end, end". The wilderness echoed, and then silence fell.

The silence of the grave.

The silence of John Matthews's grave.

End of the sample preview.

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