

The Road
To
Ignominy

Aaron J Clarke

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For Linda and Jocelyn

whose friendship and help is greatly appreciated.

Chapter I

The chattering of the people, not to mention the banging of the Judge's gavel, awakened him from his daydream. However, despite that Hugh was determined not to show any signs of weakness, for the jackals would feast on his misery if he were foolish enough to wet his lashes with a tear. So he pressed his lips together, trying not to voice his terror at the verdict that was on the point of being articulated on the Judge's tongue. For a moment, he pondered his predicament and how it had led him to where he was now: standing in the dock with his head cast down out of shame. Then he closed his eyes, hoping once again to relive those prized periods when he would gaze lovingly into his lover's *beaux yeux*. Nevertheless, that moment had passed, and he was on the point of falling into the abyss that would be prison life. Hugh's mortifying eyes flashed at the Judge and then at the crowd, who had gathered to witness his sentence, after that the terror that he feared was given voice:

"Before I pass judgement, I need you to confess your guilt." The Judge saw the hint of contrition in the criminal's countenance and urged him with, "Your conscience will be cleansed of this perversion by confessing."

However, Hugh's scornful *coups d'œil* suggested to the Judge that 'you have no business prying into my life as I'm entirely innocent'. *Why does it matter to them who I love?* Even so, his position in society, not to mention his Cambridge education, shielded him from the harsh realities of living in a world where one must work for a livelihood. Nevertheless, Hugh's naivety as well as his inability or unwillingness to act according to what society deemed proper was what brought him before the dock. *If only he acted with discretion, if only he were clever enough to lie to everyone.* Alas, the poor man was too honest, yet, at the same time, too modern for Victorian decorum. Now Hugh was caught in the trap of scandal, a fate that he equated as being worse than death because in death, one can ask for forgiveness from a merciful God, not like the odious Judge, who waited for his response, and so he said *sotto voce*:

"I'm innocent."

"Speak up!"

"My conscience is just as pure as yours."

"You were caught *in flagrante delicto* with another man." Annoyed by the accused's audacious nature the Judge continued vigorously, "How can you explain that?"

He answered with what one could regard as suicidal, "Well such things are completely natural."

O what a ruckus his words had on the crowd for they were not expecting such impudence. At any rate, Hugh derived strength from the turmoil his words had created in the minds of the crowd who wanted him to be punished. Moreover, they wanted him to experience the indignities of prison in order to cure him of such deviance, and in so doing, he would no longer threaten their sense of propriety. And as the Judge droned on in the background, Hugh closed his eyes and the memories of his past flickered in the chamber of his consciousness...

...The softness of the fabric aroused a visceral response in the impressionable mind of the young boy, for its sensation was akin to the touch of human flesh. For a moment, the boy continued caressing the silken hem of his mother's dress, which had a certain *je ne sais quoi* that fascinated him, for within the rich profusion of colour lay the answer to his question. The question he was afraid to ask was something an innocent would say if they had the temerity to enquire, namely how one comes into being. Therefore, the child cautiously leapt from his seated mother, and ambled towards the large, white French doors on to which faced an Eden

of floral colour and hue, then he slowly retraced his steps back to the magnificent matriarch and said *sotto voce*, “Mama how do people,” Hugh paused afraid to continue because he noticed the displeasure his mother’s face seemed to radiate at him. Nevertheless, he bravely continued, “How do people come into being?”

Alarmed by his innocent question, she coughed nervously and without much consideration to the consequences to the child, she said, “Well that’s something I’m not prepared to answer because little boys needn’t know until they’re much older.” She noticed his face blush with shame, and then she snapped, “Besides a man must tell you.” With that act of censure, she arose from the divan and exited the room, leaving the poor child in a state of utter confusion, for he reasoned that whatever she was alluding to was something that was downright disgusting to a lady like his mother. O, he wanted to know what she was hiding, and so he sprinted down the corridor, almost colliding with a chambermaid, who snapped, “Master Hugh watch where you’re going.” With an apologetic reply, he continued his dash down the corridor, where he saw the silken dress of his mother trailing into the library, before the door was slammed shut. As Hugh approached, he heard the faint cries of his mother whose emotional distress impressed on the boy a sense of overwhelming shame for having hurt her with an unpleasant question. Even so, he wanted to know for the box that guards the secrets of adulthood was now within his reach. Eager to know the contents of that treasured box Hugh opened the door, and entered the room where he saw his dear mama sobbing in front of the picture of the father he never knew, and then he reasoned *that perhaps papa did something to her*.

He rushed over to her, pecked her wet cheek, and then declared, “Mama I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.” She pushed him away, and her eyes scorched him with contempt. For the first time in his life, he knew what it meant to be the object of derision; however, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of mortification for having had been treated in such a way. Therefore, he inflicted a wound on his mother’s pride by again asking that question she dare not answer, thereby causing the woman to slap him and bellow, “You mustn’t know such things. Because they will pollute your innocence as they have done to me that is why you mustn’t know.”

... Now Hugh understood what she meant, for carnality would corrupt whatever it touched with an overwhelming desire to which he had become addicted. Up until now, he drifted in the currents of sensuality upon whose waters he floated towards islands populated by Apollonian youths, and it was in these Arcadian lands their kisses and caresses had imparadised him: that if he were to leave, then the shock would surely send him mad. That was precisely the risk Hugh was taking as he stood in the dock, calculating a lie that would, in effect, save him from having to admit his predilection for men, especially to his mama, who sat in the public gallery with a look of surprised agitation. For a moment, he observed her murmuring what looked like a prayer as she usually did in times of supreme distress, and now her religious act deeply touched him. Nevertheless, Hugh knew that if he were to tell the truth, then the collar of captivity would be chained to his neck, and that he could not bear. And when the Judge stopped droning and waited for Hugh to reply, which was not forthcoming, he bellowed:

“You impudent dog you haven’t heard a word I said.” He noticed the effect his words had on him and what he saw delighted him, and he continued, “Haven’t you?”

Hugh echoed an affirmative. However, this act of submission did not placate the elder man, who continued his caustic cross-examination and when this did not suffice, the magistrate commanded the bailiff to “Bring in the witness.”

Daring not to look at the sun that scorched Hugh with yearning, he cast his eyes upon the worn wooden floor of the courtroom, which only invited more suspicions as was evident from his mama’s face whitening with worry. Nevertheless, Hugh persisted and when he was told to look his accuser in the eye, the poor fellow said in a staccato manner, “I, I, rather not.”

“In this courtroom you’ll do as I say,” bellowed the Judge.

Hugh nervously glanced at him, and then at the person whose presence caused so much consternation in Hugh's quivering body. Subsequently, the moment Hugh feared had now come to pass -- the rekindling of a dalliance -- the sole purpose of which was to blackmail him and when that did not transpire to entrap him through litigation. Deception and desire were something new to Hugh, and now he had the opportunity to practise it in equal measure against the alluring Adonis whose titian lips he wanted to kiss. At any rate, Hugh was afraid that removing the mask of propriety would lead ultimately to unpleasantness and for an instant, he felt helpless, unable to breathe. Even so, Hugh had to suppress such sentiments by acting blasé; however, this trick did not escape the notice of the alluring youth whose eyes beckoned him to marvel in his perfection. And as the young man told the court his name, which was William Smithson (a commonplace name for a unique specimen of manhood) he spoke in a manner that affected Hugh to the point at which his lashes were wet with tears. Hugh's demonstration of weakness was seen *ipso facto* as proof of his guilt and as such, his connection to the world would be terminated. What he feared most – captivity – was something, which could well become a reality if he did not regain his composure and save himself by telling an untruth.

...Yet the echoes of history whispered their dulcet sound in Hugh's ear, telling him it's all right to divulge his life story to you the unseen observer, who waits patiently in the courtroom gallery and into whose eyes he stares...

Mama's outburst of the previous day was a watershed in young Hugh's life, for it signified a mystery that only grownups knew, and for that reason, he wanted desperately to discover. He concluded that whatever it was it had a hidden, dangerous quality that if he were to understand its meaning, he too would be acting queerly like his dear mama. Nevertheless, he continued to observe, from afar, his mama's interactions with the people who visited their stately home. He noticed the way in which she resisted men whose magnetism was misaligned with hers, with a deriding laugh, which was usually followed by, "It was a pleasure talking to you. I'm afraid the other guests need my attention."

Whilst she walked away a flickering flame to ignite conversation in her guests, the boy overheard two men discussing his mama in language that he did not understand. So later that day, the boy wandered round the garden in search of Mr. Jarvis, a family friend, and when he spotted him sitting underneath a large maple tree, he crept towards the seated man. For a moment, Hugh was silent before venturing to ask, "Jarvis what does the word 'fuck' mean?"

Shocked, he counter enquired, "Who told you 'that' word?"

The child lied, "Well. I read it in a book. Please tell me what it means."

He said nervously, "I suppose you're old enough to know its meaning." The boy sat down whereupon he cautioned the child with, "But be warned you must never speak to a lady in that way."

As the child listened, his eyes widened with disbelief because what he heard was something that was repulsive, and he reasoned, "Small wonder mama could not tell me."

But before, Jarvis could finish his lecture to the child about the mechanics of copulation; he saw the swirl of a white parasol emerging from behind a fragrant camellia, whereupon he said *sotto voce*:

"Hush, not a word –" He recognised the owner of the parasol to be none other than Lady Lillian, and so he continued in a staccato manner. "Your mother approaches, so be silent."

As she drew closer, the boy instinctively withdrew, but before he did, he rushed towards her and said, "Mama, you look thirsty I shall fetch you a glass of lemonade."

Annoyed by the child's concern, she murmured, "If you wish to be of assistance to me, pick a sprig of lilac."

And with that imperial command, the boy dashed down the footpath that led to an array of flowers and trees whose beauty was unspoiled by the worm of sexuality. While the boy cut a sprig of lilac, Lady Lillian whispered, "He's acting strange. Just the other day he asked me—" Jarvis laughed, "About the relations between men and women."

"Did you tell him?" He was reluctant to tell, so she faintly cried, "I want to know!" "What if I did?"

Horrified by his flippancy, she sobbed and then quickly slapped Jarvis, who hastily tasted her lips. Lillian pushed him away then snapped, "He must not know of such things? Do you hear me, not a word?"

"If I didn't know you better, I would have guessed that you were shielding him from becoming a man."

"Why not?"

He counter enquired, "For what reason?"

"His father was perverse. He contaminated everything with his wantonness." Tears were on the point of flowing from her eyes, so she quickly dried them with her lace handkerchief. For a moment, they were quiet, before the stillness was disturbed by a faint cry, "If I had known him for what he was, then I—"

"You wouldn't have married the beastly man."

"Precisely."

"That's the first time I ever heard you admit such shortcomings."

"Well that's not true if you bothered to listen, then you would have heard a lot more." Her eyes were fixed on Jarvis, and that feeling of girlish helplessness infected her mind with a dull ache to taste those treasured lips. "Besides, I've waited to tell you something that's been on my mind for a long time." Ashamed of her temerity for having thought it – to reconnect with the man she previously idolised – the *grande dame* suppressed her embarrassment by saying quickly, "I don't know how to say this without appearing needy."

Oddly, her actions demonstrated to Jarvis a woman who was on the point of falling into an abyss of her creation and that abyss was a woman's wish to be kissed, caressed and most importantly to feel love. In the past, he would have provided such services. He was unsure whether he could give her what she wanted. Therefore, with unwonted haste, he said, "That you want to rekindle our relationship?"

Her silence answered his question, which was to the effect that they would once again continue their liaison, and with that silent understanding, she unfurled her parasol thereby providing privacy for the couple to kiss. For a moment, she was lost to a world of eroticism; however, the susurrus sound of trodden grass broke the enchantment, whereby she rapidly stood up and walked towards the virescent shrub, leaving poor Jarvis in a state of excitement, causing him to scurry away.

"Mama, mama I bought you a garland of lilacs."

Riled by her docile son who she wanted to strike for having ruined the blissful moment; however, Lady Lillian dissimulated such strong sentiments by feigning an interest in what the child prattled on about, which was to the effect that 'the beautiful flowers are God's gifts to man.'

Nevertheless, Lady Lillian could not stop her revulsion from surfacing which she directed at the child in the form of a rejoinder, "Stop talking. I've heard enough." Then her contempt was made more apparent to the startled boy when she added acerbically, "You're just like your father."

Hugh was about to ask 'in what way', but his mama silenced him with, "It would surely break my heart if you were to end up like that cur." Moreover, with that act of savage cruelty, Lady Lillian strolled away, leaving the poor Hugh in a state of surprised agitation for having upset his dear mama whose love he was beginning to question.

At any rate, Hugh tried, his best, to suppress such suspicions by acting as though the outburst was nothing more than an anomaly; however, he knew that he was deceiving himself, and no matter the justification for the said self-deception, he, in time, would equate this flare-up as a sign to tread carefully. ...The following day, the child observed her interactions with Jarvis through tinted glasses whose colouration shaded their interplay of words and gestures in, what is the word thought the boy, and then he realised, but was afraid to utter it, pretence. Life, according to Hugh, seemed to take on an operatic dimension, this was made apparent to the boy as his mama and Jarvis seemed to exclude him from their *tête-à-tête*, and this exclusion angered the forlorn boy whereupon he jumped up from his seat and dashed out the door.

Lady Lillian commented, "I told you he was acting queerly."

Jarvis asked, "Do you think he suspects?"

"That we're involved?" With a raised eyebrow she added, "No, Hugh's too stupid."

Although, Jarvis did not know the child like his mother, he still questioned the dismissive woman seated before him: "Yet there is always the possibility that he understands." He paused and then added with what one could regard as urgency, "Perhaps he is jealous."

"We mustn't give him a reason to be."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No." She leant forward and kissed his cheek. "I want you to stay and keep me company, for I can't stand to be left alone with Hugh." For a moment, they were quiet, lost in each other's eyes, and then she continued, "When Hugh was a baby, I loved him." She sighed then continued slowly, "Now that he is growing into a man; he will take my milk for gall."

"I wouldn't have believed you capable of behaving like Lady Macbeth, why do you hate your son?" She was reluctant to answer his question, and this was reflected in the way her attention was focused on a fly that buzzed around her teacup. "What reasons have you?"

For a moment, Lady Lillian was quite ashamed for having hinted her dislike of Hugh to Jarvis, who waited for an answer, which she gave in an emotional appeal, "He's too much like his father. I can see it in the way he acts, the way he speaks."

"Things would have been different if we were given the opportunity to marry."

"Don't you think that I haven't previously considered it?" Jarvis nodded and she added bitterly, "At the time you weren't rich enough, and for that reason, I was pressured in to marrying Sir Christopher."

He reached out and stroked her soft hand before entreating with, "Now that he is dead, what's stopping you at this time?"

"Honestly, I don't know."

He stammered, "Perhaps you're afraid?"

"Of what?"

"Captivity. You experienced it in the past, and that is why you're afraid to commit yourself to me."

Her attention drifted back to the filthy fly, and then with a swipe of the hand, she killed it and commented, "If I had the power to choose who could live, then I would have gotten rid of Sir Christopher before he could do me harm."

"What did he do?"

Afraid to answer his question, she quickly leapt from the seat. However, Jarvis gently grabbed her hand, whereupon she moaned, "I just can't tell you. It shames me." For a moment, they were silent then the stillness was disturbed by the maid coming into the room whereupon Lady Lillian snapped, "Go away, Adele." After she had scampered away, the *grande dame* said imploringly, "Perhaps with time I shall tell you. If I were to entrust you with my secret you must promise on your honour not to disclose it to anyone, especially Hugh."

"Without question my love, if that is what you want."

She nodded and pecked his cheek.

“Come, come into the garden with me,” commanded the charming woman and with that, they strolled towards a tunnel of interconnecting tree branches whose hue cast a sickly green upon their faces. Nevertheless, they were unaware of such effects of light and shade for they were lost in each other’s eyes, and this sentiment seemed to seduce them both into a state of sensuality. It was this feeling that Lady Lillian ironically wanted to suppress in her child, yet with the exchange of kisses, this would label her, according to the unseen observer, as being a hypocrite. Even so, she cultivated such carnality without forethought to the consequences that this would provoke in Hugh, who, at this very moment, entered the garden in search of flowers to decorate the capacious chambers of the marble manor. Fate held the child’s hand and directed him towards the tunnel, where he heard the faint laughter of his mother, and as he drew closer, he saw, to his horror, Jarvis and Lady Lillian kissing. Accordingly, the boy quickly retraced his steps around the mouth of the tunnel, and just waited, hoping to discern their treachery.

She moaned softly, “I must get rid of Hugh.”

“How can mama say such things,” soliloquised the boy.

Jarvis nibbled her ear and then asked, “What do you intend to do?”

She kissed Jarvis and then whispered, “Exile him.”

Suddenly, the boy felt undeniable anger towards the treacherous twosome, who he saw, for the first time, as without a morsel of decency. And as he listened, his rage threatened to erupt in the form of a loud wail, therefore, he bit his lip, and in the process, he drew blood.

“On a desert island from where he cannot escape?”

She laughed, “No, no I shall send him to a boarding school.”

“How could you mama? What have I done to deserve such treatment,” thought the boy.

O, how he wanted to strike the object of affection and derision his mother, Lady Lillian, whose machinations had caused him to suffer an emotional *de profundis* the likes of which would colour the events of the courtroom with every shade of scandal. Nevertheless, the said judicial events were more than ten years from occurring, but the poor child was ignorant of such facts that the seated observer already possessed. Yet if the boy were forewarned, then perhaps the iron collar of chivalry would not have been coiled around his thin, brittle neck, and as he watched the dubious duo, he felt it tightening to the point at which he gasped for air. Without thinking of the consequences to himself and that of his mother, he dashed into the manor, where he entered Lady Lillian’s chamber and proceeded to deface her image in the numerous photographs that lined the marble fireplace. Something profoundly disturbing gestated in Hugh’s mind, which he articulated in a moan, “Damn her, I shan’t go.” Then the moment he dreaded – being caught in the act of vandalism – was just about to occur when the doorknob twisted and wham Queen Boadicea entered her eyes glancing back and forth from the defaced pictures to the vengeful culprit, who waited suppliantly to be punished.

Startled by the child’s callousness Lady Lillian, unlike the old, English queen did not slay her enemy with a sword, instead she pointed at the door whereupon Hugh dashed out. Now she had grounds to remove that child, for he was transforming into his loathsome father. Therefore, according to Lady Lillian’s logic, it was a matter of survival because if she did not cage the savage lion cub, then it would essentially consume her. Moreover, as she sat at her bureau, writing a letter to Mr. Johnson, headmaster to Thorndike Academy, to take her child away to be educated and perhaps civilised, she feared her actions would enrage the savage cub. Nevertheless, she told herself, “He must conform to my wishes in short he must not behave queerly like his father.”

Later that night, after the boy had been sent to his room without having eaten a morsel of food, she said in a staccato manner to Jarvis, “Hugh’s just like Sir Christopher.” Then what she feared she would say was given voice, “God how I hate them both.”

“For goodness’ sake tell me what he did?”

Shocked by Jarvis's bravado Lady Lillian acquiesced, but before she disclosed her secret to him, she had to be certain of his honour as a gentleman, and so she implored him with, "Give me your word that you shan't tell."

He kissed her hand and replied rapidly, "Of course, my love."

She took his hand in hers, and they wandered into the drawing room, whereupon she closed and locked the door. Because her secret was so explosive that if it were exposed to society, then her reputation as a lady would be permanently destroyed, moreover, she feared that fate most in life. Therefore, she walked towards the fireplace and with her back towards him, she began nervously:

"I had to do it. I just had to." With tear-laden eyes she sobbed, "He made me."

Alarmed by the poor woman's distress he advanced, but before he had a chance to comfort her, she snapped, "Don't touch me!"

Then suddenly the realisation of what she was trying to say became conscious in his mind, whereupon he asked cautiously, "Did he ravish you?"

For a moment, they were quiet but when she turned around and gazed at him, he discerned her answer, by the way, in which her eyes lost their radiant hue for they seemed to him to be void of life.

"It happened in this room."

"Why did you not report him?"

"I couldn't. He, he had purchased my virginity by marrying me." Then she added acerbically, "To him, I was a prized cup from which to be drunk. Besides I cannot undo what has already happened, can I now?"

"If only you told me I would have -"

"I didn't want to involve you. Besides, it happened only once, and after I discovered I was with child he wasn't so obliging." She wiped her eyes and continued, "There's more to this story."

"I don't follow, what do you mean?"

As he caressed her shoulder, she withdrew, and then advanced towards a walnut cabinet, unlocking it, she pulled out a book, which rested beside a small revolver, and then she declared,

"Before he died, he was reading this book." The tome's title had a peculiar effect on Jarvis as if to suggest familiarity with the said book; however, he tried to hoodwink the poor woman by feigning ignorance, which caused the *grande dame* to moan lightly, "Did it do you good to lie?"

"What do you mean?" Her silence unnerved him, so he reassured her with, "Upon my word I have never-"

She snapped, "Stop it. We're beyond that."

"For goodness' sake tell me what you are insinuating, as I would dearly like to know."

O, God how she wanted to throw that book at him. However, she simply placed the object of her derision back in the cabinet and said scornfully, "That you, like my late husband, had read that disgusting work."

He laughed hoping to diminish the rage that was on the point of being acted out by the wild woman; nevertheless, when the diminishment of such rage was not forthcoming he said nonchalantly, "Well it was popular with male readers."

"How can you say that as if it were a triviality?" She cast her gaze downwards and sobbed, "It wasn't to me for it was the bible of his wantonness."

Then the penny dropped, illuminating in Jarvis's mind the horrors that the poor woman had experienced, for the book in question was a treatise on sexual licentiousness by the infamous Frenchman of the previous century whose name he dare not utter out of offending the weeping woman.

"Don't tar and feather every man for the actions of one."

Her silence suggested to him that she was not the kind of lady, who would easily forgive such crimes. Therefore, he implored her with, “You don’t think much of me to believe that I would act in such a way with you.”

Still, the poor woman was quiet, which only compounded his shame for having read the said book, so he advanced towards the door and said, “If you think me a cur, then unlock this door.”

“If I were to give myself to you-”

“What are you proposing?”

She drew closer to him, clasped his hand, and then murmured entreatingly, “That we marry.”

“What about Hugh?”

“Well he’ll agree to anything I tell him.”

“For example, sending him away?”

“He will yield under my motherly control. Besides, he’ll do so in order to-”

“Please you? Ah, Lillian he is not so stupid. More importantly, he is not weak perhaps in time he will disobey.”

“Then we must work quickly. That is why he leaves tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? You can’t be serious?”

“Never more so than now, but you must stay silent.”

Alas, how that act of cruelty, all those years ago, seemed to fester in Hugh’s soul, causing him to suffer the angst of unrequited love, where the love of a mother for her child was transformed into a deviant and dangerous amour with men. However, as Hugh listened to the accursed Adonis whose evidence bewitched the courtroom with the lascivious details of his life, Hugh closed his eyes and imagined his first day at boarding school and his journey to corruption...