

The Tower of London

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During my two years of study in London, I visited the Tower only once. There were days when I thought to go again, but I refrained. I was invited by others on occasion, but I declined. It seemed not right to perturb my initial impressions with a second visit, and worse yet to efface them by going thrice. “The Tower,” I think, is something to see just once.

My visit was shortly after my arrival. In those days, I didn’t yet have my bearings and was very much on unfamiliar ground, like a Gotemba hare suddenly loosed in the hustle and bustle of Nihonbashi. In venturing out, the rush of the masses all but swept me away, and once back home, I feared that the trains would intrude with a crash through my very quarters. Morning to night, there was no peace to be found. Two years in this din and fray could reduce a man’s nerves to sinewy pulp. Max Nordau’s “Degeneration,” I thought at times, had hit indeed on the ultimate truth.

Furthermore, unlike most of my fellow countrymen, I arrived with no introduction to any who might assist me. I also, of course, had no former acquaintances residing abroad on whom I could call. I had no choice but to set out trepidly each day, whether to see sights or run errands, with only my map to guide me. I was not about to board the steam trains, and I couldn’t afford a carriage. Had I tried to use public conveyance, there’s no telling where I’d have ended up. These steam trains and carriages, these electric railways and cable cars that crisscrossed London in all directions, were of no use to me whatsoever. Having no other recourse, I would stop at each intersection, unfold my map as the throngs jostled past, and orient myself. When the map didn’t help I’d ask someone. When no one could help me I’d seek out a constable. When the constable couldn’t help I’d turn to others still, catching or calling out to as many as it took. Proceeding thus, I would get where I needed to go.

My visit to the Tower, as I recall, was made in those days and by these means. It may sound Zen-like to state that I knew not from whence I came or whither I went, but I still can’t say, to this day, which streets I followed to reach the Tower or which districts I crossed in returning home. All that I draw is a blank. The only certainty is the Tower. The scenes of the Tower are ingrained in my memory still. I’m lost as to what went before, nor can I relate what followed. However, I can state unequivocally that the interim, following that which was forgotten before and preceding that which was lost after, is perfectly clear. It’s as though a bolt of lightning flashed in the night, striking my brows with a blaze of intensity. The Tower of London is fixed within a dream, a dream that echoes from times long past.

The history of the Tower of London is the history of Britain. It’s the Tower that rends the cloak of the past and, from hallowed grounds, casts an otherworldly light across this twentieth century. It’s the Tower that defies the surge of time and remains to offer the modern a glimpse of the ancient. It’s the Tower that holds its ground in the rush of horses, carts, and trains, an unyielding coalescence of human blood, human flesh, and human sin.

As I stood on the Tower Bridge and gazed across the River Thames at this Tower of London, I lost myself in the sight. Was I still, I wondered, anchored in my own present age, or had I journeyed back to antiquity. It was early winter, and the day was remarkably still. The sky, ashen colored like well-stirred lye, hung low over the Tower. The River Thames, like a dull mass of wall plaster, inched imperceptibly seaward with neither ripple nor sound. A single lighter passed beneath the Tower. Its irregular three-cornered sail, hung out in the still air of the river, was like a white wing suspended in space. Two sculling boats moved upstream. Each had a lone oarsman at its stern, and these boats too seemed loath to advance. A white form flitted about the Tower Bridge balustrade, likely a gull. All before me was still. All was listless, dormant, bearing the weight of the past. Within this scene, projecting its cold disdain for the twentieth century, stood the Tower of London. “Run your steam trains, drive your electric trams. History knows that I alone belong here,” it seemed to all but assert. I was impressed anew by its grandeur.

The word “tower” is merely common convention. The construction, in fact, is that of a stronghold with multiple turrets. Its rising turrets are of various shapes, some round and others angular. All elements, though, are of the same cheerless ashen hue, and all seem avowed to perpetuate forever a remembrance of centuries past. If Kudan’s Yūshūkan were built of stone, and if one lined up twenty or thirty such structures together, then viewing the collective assembly through a scope, I imagine, would impart a similar impression. I continued to gaze at the Tower. I gazed vacantly through the heavy air, saturated with sepia-colored mists. As twentieth-century London gradually receded from my consciousness, the contours of the Tower rose before me, like an apparition, filling my mind with thoughts of ages past. I was back in a sleepy morning, where vapors rising from tea clip tailing ends off lingering dreams. After a while, a long arm seemed to stretch forth from the far bank and seize me. Stirred from my misty contemplations, I felt compelled to hurry over the river and on toward the Tower. The long arm strengthened its grip. I immediately set my feet into motion and crossed the Tower Bridge. The long arm pulled me forward. Quitting the bridge, I rushed to the Tower gate. I imagined myself a small scrap of iron, adrift in the modern age, drawn down by an ancient magnet, vast in size at twenty five acres. I stepped through the gate and glanced back.

Through me is the way to the city of woe.

Through me is the way to sorrow eternal.

Through me is the way to the lost below.

Justice moved my architect supernal. I was constructed by divine power, supreme wisdom, and love primordial.

Before me no things were, save those eternal, and eternal I abide.

Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.

I wondered if such words weren’t perhaps engraved somewhere. At this juncture normalcy had already deserted me.

Crossing over the dry moat on a stone bridge, I came to a tower. It was of stone construction in the shape of oil drums, one rising up on either side like gateposts 'fore a giant's lair. Passing beneath the connecting structure, I gained the other side. This was the Middle Tower. A little further on, on the left-hand side, rose the Bell Tower. When they saw the enemy approaching from the distance, his iron shields and steel helmets swarming over the plains like the shimmer of autumn heat, they rang the bells atop this tower. When a prisoner, on a star-black night, evaded the view of sentries on the ramparts and slipped from their downcast torch shadows to disappear into the darkness, they rang the bells atop this tower. When high-minded citizenry, unhappy with the governance of their ruler, marched on the tower and clamored loudly at its base, then too they rang the bells atop this tower. The tower bells rang for any and all occasion. At times they rang out earnestly, and at times they rang out intently. A forebear came and met his death - the bells rang. A holy man came and met his death - the bells rang. Where now are those bells that sounded so oft, that sounded on frosty mornings, on snowy evenings, on rain-soaked days, on blustery nights? I lift my gaze to the ancient tower, forlorn now and ivy-encased, where a hundred years' ringing is held in suspense.

A bit further on, on the right-hand side, is the Traitors' Gate. Above the gate, St. Thomas's Tower rises. The name Traitors' Gate alone evokes dread. Going back centuries, some thousands of transgressors were brought by boat under guard to this gate, there to join the living dead of the Tower. The moment they disembarked from the boat and passed through this gate was the last moment the sunlight of this world would fall on their shoulders. To them, the River Thames was the River Styx, and this gate the entrance to Hell. Rocked on waves of tears, they were rowed beneath the dim, grotto-like arch. On arrival at this spot, where the jaws of the whale gaped wide to draw in sardines, a thick oaken door swung on creaky hinges to separate them, for eternity, from the light of this world. Thus they fell prey to the demon of fate. The hour of their demise was known but to the demon. It might be the next day, or the day after, or ten years hence. What went through the minds of these transgressors as they sat in the boat that docked at this gate? Did they see in each bending of the oars, in each drop of water hitting the gunwale, in each motion of the oarsman's hands, their lives ticking down?

A man with a long white beard, loosely adorned in black vestment, climbs from a boat on unsteady legs. This is Archbishop Cranmer. The splendid man with a blue hood low over his eyes and wearing chain-mail under sky-blue silk must be Wyatt. Without reserve he springs from the side of the boat. Is that Raleigh there, with the brilliant feather in his cap, his left hand on the gilded hilt of a longsword, moving lightly over the stone steps in silver-buckled shoes?

I peer beneath the dim arch, stretching my neck in hopes of viewing the glimmer of waves on the stone steps of the opposite side. There's no water. Since construction of the embankment, the Traitors' Gate and River Thames commune no more. After swallowing so many transgressors and spitting back as many empty boats, this Traitors' Gate has lost now the sound of those ripples that lapped at its hems. All that remains is a great iron ring, hanging off the far wall of the Bloody Tower. This, they say, is where the boats' mooring lines were fastened.

I turn to my left and pass through the gate of the Bloody Tower. It's this tower that confined the countless many during the War of the Roses. It's this tower that mowed men down like grass, crushed men like game fowl, and piled corpses like stacks of dried salmon. The name Bloody Tower is duly earned. Below the arch

is a structure like a police box, and beside it stands a soldier with helmet-shaped hat and rifle at the ready. His expression is all business, but his physiognomy suggests that he can't wait to finish his duty, tip one back at the pub, and banter merrily with some certain someone. The tower walls are a thick construction of irregular stones, and their surface is anything but smooth. They're covered in places with ivy. High up are windows. Perhaps because of the size of the building, from down below here they're terribly small. They look to be covered with iron bars. The sentry stands like a stone statue, while in his mind he romps with his lady. I tarry by his side and gaze up at the high windows, shading my eyes with my hand. Faint sunlight shines through the bars and reflects back off the ancient stained glass. Finally, like smoke rising, the curtain lifts and the stage of the fanciful sweeps into view.

A thick bunting hangs in the window, and even at midday the room is dim. The wall opposite the window is unplastered, bare stone, built to stand till the end of days, isolating this one room from the next. Set in its midst is a single faded tapestry of twelve square yards. The fabric is grayish-blue, and the image of a nude goddess, in weave of light yellow, adorns it. The field surrounding the goddess is dyed in an arabesque pattern. Set against the stone wall is a large bed. Its thick oak is engraved deeply, clear to its core, with grapes and grape vines and grape leaves. Light reflects at the joints, but the carving is otherwise dark. Two children appear on the edge of the bed. One is thirteen or fourteen, the other about ten. The younger one is seated on the bed, leaning slightly against its post, with legs dangling listlessly. His right elbow and inclined head are set against the elder one's shoulder. The elder one has opened a large gilded book over the younger one's lap and his right hand rests on the open page. His hand is fair, like ivory rubbed to a soft finish. Both wear black tunics dark as crows' feathers, highlighting all the more the extreme whiteness of their skin. The color of their hair, the color of their eyes, the shapes of their brows and the builds of their noses, everything in the details of their dress, are nearly identical. No doubt because they are brothers.

The elder brother, in a voice clear and soft, begins reading from the book on the younger one's lap.

"Happy is he who sees the hour of death and affords time for reflection. Welcome each day and each evening the prospect of death. When finally you go before your Maker, what have you then to fear ..."

"Amen," adds the younger brother, with great sorrow in his voice. Just then, a cold wintry gust blows in from the distance, and for a moment the walls of the tall tower moan in response, as if about to yield. The younger brother draws closer and presses his face against his elder brother's shoulder. The elder brother resumes reading.

"In the morning, accept that death might come 'fore the night. At nightfall, wish not on the 'morrow. Resignation value over all. The greatest of shames is death without dignity ..."

"Amen," the younger brother adds again. His voice trembles. The elder brother quietly closes the book and walks over to the small window for a look outside. The window is too high for him. He brings a stool and stands on it tiptoe. A dark mist extends in all directions, repelling the rays of the weak winter sun. The land is bleak, as though tainted through with the blood of slaughtered dogs. "Thus ends another day," the elder states in turning back toward the younger. "I'm cold," is the younger's only response. "In exchange for our lives, I'd cede the crown to Uncle," the elder murmurs, mostly to himself. The younger says only, "I want

to see Mother.” In this moment, the embroidered image of the nude goddess on the tapestry flutters gently, despite the stillness in the room.

The scene suddenly shifts. I look and see a lone woman, in black mourning dress, standing before the tower gate. Her face is pallid and gaunt, but her air is refined. She’s a noble lady. After some time, the grinding of a lock is heard and the gate opens with a creak. A solitary man appears from within and bows respectfully before her.

“Am I allowed to see them?” the lady asks.

“You’re not,” the man replies with a look of pity. “Much as I’d like to honor your wish, the rules strictly forbid it. Please understand. You know, though, that I’m not wont to begrudge you my sympathy.” With that he suddenly falls silent and surveys the surroundings. A grebe floats up and breaks the surface of the moat.

The lady unfastens the gold chain about her neck and hands it to the man. “I only ask for a moment, even for just a glimpse. Only a heartless man would deny a lady as much.”

The man plays the chain over his fingertips, seeming to think it over. The grebe dives back below the surface. After a moment he pushes the chain back into her hand. “A prison guard is loath to breach prison rules. Return to your home, and be assured that your young ones remain in good care.” The woman doesn’t move. A metallic ring is heard as the chain slips to the paving stones below.

“Is there not some way you can allow me to see them?” she asks.

“I am sorry,” the guard states with finality.

“This black tower, these rigid walls, the men here cold as stone,” the lady incants as tears of sorrow flow down her cheeks.

The scene shifts again.

A tall figure, cloaked in black, appears in a recess of the courtyard. He seems to have materialized from the cold, moss-covered stone of the wall. Standing on the border of darkness and fog, he surveys the dim surroundings. Shortly, a second figure, cloaked likewise in black, emerges from the depths of the shadows. “The day has ended,” the tall figure states as he looks past the high watchtower to the dim starlight above. “We’ve no place in the light,” the other replies. “Many times have I killed, but today’s deed stings at my conscience like none before,” the tall one says in turning to the shorter one. “As we listened, from behind the tapestry, I nearly lost my will to carry through,” the shorter one confesses. “As we strangled them, how their lips like flowers did quiver.” “Purple veins arced cross their fair brows.” “I’m haunted still by their groans.” The black figures are sucked back into the dark night, and the clock atop the watchtower sounds.

The clock bell breaks my reverie. The sentry, who was standing like a stone statue, is now pacing over the stones, his gun at his shoulder. As he paces, he dreams of strolling, arm in arm, with some certain someone.

Passing beneath the Bloody Tower, I emerged into a lovely courtyard. The ground is higher in its center, and on that rise stands the White Tower. The White Tower is the oldest structure within the Tower grounds, and in ancient times it served as the keep. It measures about 24 by 36 yards in depth and breadth. Its height is 30 yards, and its walls are 15 feet thick. There are turrets at each corner, and a number of crenels, dating from the Norman period, can still be seen. It was in this tower, in 1399, that the citizenry assailed Richard II with thirty three grievances and demanded his abdication. It was here that he stood before priests, nobles, soldiers, and lawyers and proclaimed his abdication to the world. In that time Henry, the next in line for the throne, rose and made the sign of the cross over his forehead and chest. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, I, Henry, of rightful blood, with the grace of God and support of beloved compatriots, do humbly receive the crown and assume the sovereign reign of the Kingdom of England." What became thereafter of the former king was known to but precious few. When his lifeless body was delivered from Pontefract Castle to St. Paul's Cathedral, some twenty thousand thronged in and were shocked by the emaciated countenance. According to some, Richard was accosted by eight assassins. He seized the axe of one and used it to cut him down. He then felled two more, but a single blow from behind, at the hand of Exton, proved his bitter end. Others turn to heaven and swear, "Not so. Richard refused to eat, ending his life on his own terms." In either case, his life did not end well. The history of sovereigns is tragic.

It's said the Walter Raleigh, during his imprisonment, penned his History of the World in one of the downstairs rooms. I tried to imagine him, in Elizabethan breeches, with silk stockings fastened at his knees, crossing his left leg over his right and tilting his head as he pushed his quill pen cross the page. I was not able, however, to visit the actual room.

Entering through the south side and ascending a spiral staircase, I came to the hall of weapons. All of the weapons were well polished and gleamed brilliantly. Back in Japan, the weapons in history books and novels had never captured my interest, but it was a delight to see them laid out like this before my own eyes. On the other hand, it was a fleeting delight, and their impression has all but left me, so maybe they were, in fact, nothing noteworthy. The only thing I remember is the armor. There was one suit in particular, I believe it was worn by Henry VI, that struck me as most remarkable. It was fashioned of steel, with a number of insets, but what impressed me most was its size. The man who donned it must have been enormous, standing some seven feet tall. As I stood there in awe of this armor, I heard the sound of footsteps. They drew up next to me and stopped. I turned and saw a Beefeater. The term Beefeater might invoke images of a man who eats nothing but beef, but such is not the case. They're the guards of the Tower. They sport headgear like a squashed silk hat and uniforms like art school frocks. Their thick sleeves are gathered at the ends, and their waists are belted. Their coats are patterned. The pattern is nothing more than a simple collection of straight lines formed into rectangles, like the patterns on an Ainu short coat. On occasion they carry spears, with feathers hanging down from the end of a short handle under the tip. These spears could be straight out of Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms. One of these Beefeaters had come up behind me and stopped. "Are you Japanese?" he asked with a smile. I wasn't engaging here with a modern Englishman, but a visitor from centuries past. Either that, or I'd slipped for a moment into times of old. I said nothing, but nodded lightly. He asked me to come with him, so I followed. He pointed out an old suit of Japanese armor, asking with his

eyes if I'd seen it. I nodded in silence. He explained to me that it had come to Charles II, as a tribute, by way of Mongolia. I nodded a third time.

I departed the White Tower for Beauchamp Tower. En route was captured artillery, set out on display. Before the display was a small chained-off area with a placard hanging from the chain. The area is the former execution ground. One held underground in the darkness, away from the light of day, for two, three, or even ten years, is one day suddenly pulled up into the light, only to find that this frightful place awaits them. Their joyful reunion with the blue sky is, as their dazzled eyes work to resolve surrounding color, cut short by the swift blade of a white axe. The blood that spills from the victim is cold from the start.

A single raven descends. It draws in its wings and thrusts its black beak forward as it regards one. The resentment of a hundred years' cold blood has congealed, it seems, into the form of these strange birds that have guarded this ominous ground through the ages. An elm tree rustles in the breeze. I see a raven in its branches. Shortly, another arrives. I can't say whence it came. At my side is a young woman with a seven-year-old boy. She stands there and watches the ravens. Her Grecian nose, her lovely eyes like soft jewels, and the gentle undulations that shape her pure white neck, stir my heart in no small measure. The child looks up at her and points out the ravens with great interest. "The ravens look cold. I want to give them some bread," he entreats her. "Those ravens aren't hungry," she answers quietly. "Why?" asks the child. The woman's eyes, floating beneath her long lashes, are fixed on the ravens. "There are five of them," she says, disregarding the child's question. From her detached air, it's clear that she's lost in her own thoughts. I begin to suspect some curious connection between this woman and these ravens. She speaks of their feelings as though of her own, and she asserts that three ravens are five. Leaving the mysterious woman behind, I enter Beauchamp Tower alone.

The history of the Tower of London is the history of Beauchamp Tower, and the history of Beauchamp Tower is a history of misfortune. Those visiting this three-story tower, built by Edward III in the latter half of the 14th century, see immediately upon entering countless remembrances on the walls around them, the manifest form of age upon age of enmity. All the resentment, all the indignation, all the anguish, and all the sorrow, along with the solace arising from extremes of resentment, indignation, anguish and sorrow, are here in some ninety one epigraphs that chill the viewer's heart as keenly now as ever. Those who carved in these unfeeling walls with pens of cold steel, who chiseled away here, between heaven and earth, to tell of their misfortune and tragic fates, lie buried now in the bottomless pit that's the past, and it's only their vain words that still see the light of this world. One can't but wonder if self-mockery wasn't some part of their intent. There's a thing in this world called irony. White is said where black is meant, and small is recited to conjure thoughts of large. Of all ironies, none are so potent as those unwittingly left behind for future generations. Gravestones, monuments, medallions, and cordons are nothing more than vain reminders of bygone ages. Those who would be mourned after their passing, I think, are those who've forgotten that while their relics remain, they themselves do not. In bequeathing their irony to future generations, I believe, they disparage the transient flesh. When my time comes, I'll leave behind no parting verse. After I'm dead, I'll have no gravestone carved. When I've left this life, let my flesh be burned, let my bones be powdered, let all be scattered, under open sky, on the westward gale.

The lettering style of the epigraphs, of course, is not uniform. Some are done with meticulous care, in block-style letters, while others appear to have been scratched in haste by agitated authors. Then too, some carved family crests and inscribed within them classical lettering, and some drew shields with stylized, hard-to-read script tucked inside. The lettering varies, and the languages too are by no means consistent. There is English, of course, but there are also Italian and Latin. The words, "My hope is in Christ," over to the left, were carved by a monk named Paslew. This Paslew was beheaded in the year 1537. Close by is inscribed the name JOHAN DECKER. I have no idea who Decker was. Up the stairs, it says T.C. by the doorway. These are someone's initials, but whose I cannot say. A bit further on is a most meticulous work. On its right side is a cross adorned with a heart, next to which is carved a crest and bones. Further on is a shield with the following words inscribed. "Fate hath cast me cruelly to the cold wind. Let time crumble away. My stars are of sorrow, yet they pity me not." The next one reads, "Cherish all your fellow men. Love all things living. Fear God. Honor the King."

I tried to fathom the hearts of these writers. The most agonizing thing in this world, I suppose, is the agony of tedium. Nothing is so painful as a consciousness void of change. Nothing is so painful as an able body deprived of movement by unseen cords. Just as to live is to move, the suppression of movement renders the living lifeless. The pain of what one's lost is a pain worse than death. All who filled these walls have known this pain worse than death. Enduring all they could endure, and withstanding all they could withstand, they struggled against this pain. Finally, when they could take no more, they occupied themselves with a broken piece of metal or sharpened fingernail. For as long as they had, they poured forth their discontent, etching their troubles into these smooth walls. They were spurred on, no doubt, by unquenchable force of will, even after all cathartic means, be it words, symbols, lamentations, or tears, had been exhausted.

I let my fancy run further. Once a man is born, he cannot but live. Fear of death aside, he simply lives on. This will to live precedes Christ or Confucius, and it continues on unchanged. It's not a matter of reason. It's simply the case that the will to live compels one to live. All men must live. At the same time, they know that they're fated to someday die. The question of survival is never far from their hearts. Those who once entered this room were certain to die. Only one in a thousand ever returned to live in the light of day. Sooner or later, they were destined to die. Even so, the great truth, from down across the ages, exhorted them to live, to persevere come what might. With no other recourse, they sharpened their nails. With the tips of their sharpened nails, they scribed a line into these hard walls. When they had done so, the truth of the ages whispered to them to live, to live on come what might. When their tattered nails had regrown, they scribed another line. While anticipating the axe blade, tomorrow's flying flesh and broken bones, they yearned for life. They left in these cold walls a first mark, a second mark, a line, a letter. The various marks left in these walls are the essence of tenacity, the tenacity with which they clung to life. Having followed the thread of my thoughts thus far, I suddenly felt the chill of the room permeate the pores of my back. Unwittingly, I shuddered. I realized then that the walls were somehow damp. My fingers, as they grazed the surface, glided on condensation. I looked at my fingertips. They were deep red. Beads of condensation were trickling down from the corners where walls met ceiling. Looking down, I saw on the floor irregular patterns of crimson laid down by the drops. This must be the emergence, I thought, of 16th century blood. The sound of groans carried from inside the walls. As the groans came gradually closer, they changed to a dreadful night song.

There's an underground cellar with two men in it. A wind blows up from the realm of demons, through fissures in the stone, and whips the flame of their meager lantern, obscuring the already dark ceiling and corners with wisps of sooty lamp smoke. The sound of song, heard faintly before, belongs without doubt to an occupant of this cellar. The singer, with shirt sleeves rolled high, is intently grinding a large axe on a spinning whetstone. Nearby stands a second axe that's been laid aside. It's white blade at times, as the air currents permit, gleams in the lamplight. A second man stands with folded arms and watches the spinning stone. His face protrudes from behind his beard and is lighted, in profile, by the lantern. His skin in the light is a ruddy carrot color. "With the boats bringing more each day, we've work aplenty chopping off heads," says the one with the beard. "True, just grinding the blades is a task in itself," the singer replies. He's a short man, with sunken eyes, caked the color of soot. "Such a beauty, that one of yesterday," the bearded one sighs with regret. "A beauty yes, but that neck of hers was awfully tough. Took a chip clean out of my blade." He sets his wheel to spinning with abandon. It rings out as sparks fly. He raises his voice and starts into song.

"It can't be cut; A woman's neck; Hard by resentment made; It only breaks one's blade"

No further sound is heard but that of the spinning stone. The light of the lantern, dancing in the wind, flickers over the sharpener's right cheek. Its color is soot and cinnabar. "Who's on for tomorrow?" the bearded one asks after a bit. "Tomorrow's the old woman," the other replies without concern.

"A cheating heart; Hair turns gray; Slice the bone; Blood dyes it away"

He sings on in high spirits. The stone rings out as it spins, and sparks fly. "There now. That oughta do it." He holds up the axe and views it in the flickering light. "Just the old woman? No one else?" the bearded one asks again. "Then there's that other one, too." "That's unfortunate. It's time, is it? Such a pity." "A pity, yes, but what can you do?" He replies with eyes on the blackened ceiling.

In an instant, the cellar and the executioners and the lantern are gone, and I'm standing, lost, in the middle of Beauchamp Tower. As I come to myself, there's a boy beside me, the one who had asked to give bread to the ravens. As before, the curious woman is with him. "There's a picture of dogs!" the boy exclaims in surprise while looking at the wall. "Those aren't dogs. On the left is a bear, on the right a lion. That's the crest of the House of Dudley." The woman replies, as before, in a voice so sure that it seems a witness of times long past. Truth be told, I too had taken the creatures for dogs or boars, so I was duly intrigued by the woman's words. It occurred to me, too, that there was a certain force in the way she said "Dudley," as though the name she voiced might be her own. I observed the two with bated breath. The woman expounded further. "This crest was carved by John Dudley." From the tone of her voice, this John might well have been her brother. "John had four brothers, and those brothers have been carved into the flowers and leaves that surround the bear and the lion." I looked and saw that there were, indeed, four kinds of flowers and leaves, in a frame like that of an oil painting, surrounding the bear and the lion. "These are acorns, for Ambrose. This rose represents Robert. Below is honeysuckle, which corresponds to Henry. In the lower left is a clump of geraniums. This is for G..." She didn't finish. Her coral lips were seized in a quiver, as though they'd been shocked with a bolt of current. Her tongue was like that of a pit viper facing down a mouse. After a while she read out, with a clear voice, the epigraph that was carved under the crest.

Yow that the beasts do wel behold and se,

May deme with ease wherefore here made they be

Withe borders wherein

4 brothers' names who list to serche the grovnd.

She read it through in the sort of tone that seemed to say she'd recited it daily from birth. Truth be told, the writing on the wall was terribly hard to discern. To one like myself, try as I might, tilting my head this way and that, the words were indecipherable. I found the woman all the more enigmatic.

Having grown uncomfortable, I slipped past and went on ahead. At a corner with crenels, in a mass of disorderly scrawls was "Jane," scribed with careful strokes in small-form letters. My feet brought me to a stop. There's likely not a soul among students of English history to whom the name Jane Grey is not known. Rare is the soul, too, who hasn't shed a tear of sympathy for her sad fate and tragic end. Jane, owing to the ambitions of her father-in-law and husband, was led to the execution grounds, without fault and free from spite, at the age of just eighteen. A rose may be trampled, but the fragrance of the pistil persists, even from afar. In like manner, students of history, even to this day, are enthralled with Jane. It's told that she mastered Greek to read Plato, and in doing so rendered Ascham, the greatest scholar of her day, speechless. This tale, residing in the minds of so many, serves well to portray her poetic gift. I stopped in front of her name, and there I remained. In fact, I should rather state that I was powerless to move further. The curtains of fancy had already drawn apart.

At first, my vision was clouded, and I could discern nothing. Finally, a single point of flame broke through the darkness. The flame gradually expanded, and I sensed the motion of men in its midst. Next, it gradually brightened and, just as when one adjusts a pair of field glasses, drew clear in my sight. The scene expanded, flying in from the distance. As I regained my perspective, I saw in the middle a young woman, seated, and to the far right a man, standing. It hit me that both seemed familiar, and just in that instant they zoomed in closer, stopping some twelve yards before me. The man is the shorter fellow from the cellar, with sunken eyes and skin the color of soot, the one who'd been singing that song. He stands at the ready, his left hand leaning on the axe he's ground to a tee, and a ten-inch dagger hanging off his waist. In spite of myself I'm seized with fear. The woman is blindfolded with a white hand linen. She seems to search, with both hands, for the block on which she'll rest her neck. The block is the size of a wood-chopping stand used in Japan, and an iron ring is affixed to its front. Straw has been scattered before of the block. A precaution, it seems, against streaming blood. On the far wall lean several women overcome with sorrow, perhaps her ladies in waiting. A priest, in long flowing vestments turned back to reveal a white fur lining, is looking down and guiding the woman's hands toward the block. The woman's dress is white as snow. Golden hair spills onto her shoulders, and billows at times like an airy cloud. At the sight of her face I'm taken aback. I can't see her eyes, but the shape of her eyebrows, her fine facial build, and the supple lines of her neck are those of the woman from before. I want to run to her, but my legs have crumpled, and I can't manage even one step. The woman has found the block and holds it with both hands. Her lips quiver anxiously. They differ not in the least from before, when she explained the Dudley crest to the boy. Finally, she inclines her head and asks if her husband, Guildford Dudley, has already gone to the Kingdom of God. A lock of hair, sliding off

of her shoulder, undulates gently. The priest replies that of that he cannot say. “Are you ready yet to return to the true path?” he asks. “The path that’s mine, and that’s my husband’s, is true. It’s your path that’s false and misguided,” she replies firmly. The priest holds his silence. The woman seems more at ease now. “If my husband’s gone first then I’ll follow. If he comes behind then I’ll beckon. To reach the righteous Kingdom of God, one treads the righteous path.” With that she concludes and throws her neck, as if she’s falling, over the block. The short executioner, with sunken eyes and sooty skin, hefts his axe with a heavy spirit. Just as I fear that spurting blood will splash forth onto my trouser legs, the entire scene is suddenly gone.

I look around, and the woman and boy are gone without a trace. I quit the Tower with a blank look on my face, as one beguiled by apparitions. On my way out, I pass beneath the Bell Tower once more and catch in the high window a brief glimpse of Guy Fawkes. I can hear his voice. “If only but one hour sooner ... ‘tis a pity indeed these matches served me not.” Beginning to doubt my own senses, I hurry out of the Tower. On crossing the Tower Bridge and turning back, this day too, as seems the way of these northern lands, is suddenly turned to rain. Fine drops, like rice bran blown through the eye of a needle, are falling over the capital, washing out dust and soot, and knitting together heaven and earth. In the midst of this all I look up, and rising above me, like a shadow from the depths, is the Tower of London.

Still in a dream, I arrive at my lodgings. I tell my landlord that I went and toured the Tower, and he asks if there weren’t five ravens. I’m caught by surprise, and I wonder if he might be that woman’s kinfolk. He smiles and explains in an easy manner. “Those aren’t just any ravens. They’ve been kept there for ages. If one goes missing, it’s replaced, so their number is always five.” The first half of my fantasy, on the very day of my visit, has thus been crushed. When I tell him of the epigrams, his off-hand response is, “You mean those scribblings? Unfortunate they are, defacing a fine place. At any rate, the work of transgressors. My bet the greater part are a sham.” He is fully unmoved. Finally, I tell him of the lovely lady, describing in awe how she knew things we don’t, and how she read arcane writing with ease. His reply is heavy with contempt. “Of course she did. No one visits but hasn’t studied the guidebook. There’s no reason not to have known what she knew. You say she was stunning? London is full of stunning ladies. You’d best be on your guard.” The latter half of my fantasy has now been crushed as well, and the turn of conversation is not in my favor. My landlord is a twentieth century Londoner.

From then on I kept my impressions of the Tower of London to myself. Nor did I return to visit again.

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I’ve dashed off this work as though recording fact, but the greater part of it is imagined, and I hope that the reader will approach it accordingly. I’ve selected affairs of interest from the Tower’s history and woven them together, at times applying dramatic license. Flaws arise in so doing, and it’s inevitable that, in certain places, traces of inconsistency show through. Several scenes, where Elizabeth (Edward IV’s queen) comes to see the two imprisoned princes and where the two assassins reflect on the murder of the princes, are also depicted in Shakespeare’s historical drama Richard III. Shakespeare used direct prose to depict the killing of the Duke of Clarence in the Tower, and then used a suggestive style for the killing of the two princes, drawing on the words of the assassins to render the scene retrospectively. As I read Shakespeare’s drama, I

found this greatly intriguing, and I've applied the same device myself. However, the content of the assassins' exchange, as well as the description of their surroundings, are my own, of course, and have no connection to Shakespeare. I should add a word too on the song of the executioner as he grinds his axe. This idea comes entirely from Ainsworth's novel "The Tower of London," and I can claim no originality here whatsoever. According to Ainsworth, the axe blade was chipped on the neck of the Countess of Salisbury. In Ainsworth's novel, the scene in which the executioner grinds his chipped axe runs only a couple of pages, but it impressed me to no end. Furthermore, that casual singing of a crude song as he grinds is but a minor touch, yet I was struck with its power as a dramatical device. It brought to life the entire work. I've emulated that device here, though the song's words and meaning, the conversation between the two executioners, and the rendering of the dark cellar are of my own invention. As I've brought up the subject, I'll note here the song of Ainsworth's jailer.

*The axe was sharp, and heavy as lead,
As it touched the neck, off went the head!
Whir—whir—whir—whir!
Queen Anne laid her white throat upon the block,
Quietly waiting the fatal shock;
The axe it severed it right in twain,
And so quick—so true—that she felt no pain.
Whir—whir—whir—whir!
Salisbury's countess, she would not die
As a proud dame should—decorously.
Lifting my axe, I split her skull,
And the edge since then has been notched and dull.
Whir—whir—whir—whir!
Queen Catherine Howard gave me a fee, —
A chain of gold—to die easily:
And her costly present she did not rue,
For I touched her head, and away it flew!
Whir—whir—whir—whir!*

I had thought to translate all this, but it didn't go as hoped, and I feared it was too cumbersome, so I gave it up.

Regarding the scene with the two princes and the scene of Jane's execution, I should express my gratitude to the renowned painter Delaroche, whose works assisted my imagination in no small measure.

Among the prisoners disembarking from boats is one called Wyatt. This is the son of the famous poet, who summoned up troops on Jane's behalf. I mention this here because he shares his father's name, and the two are easily confused.

In order to invoke in the reader a sense of the Tower and its presence, I thought it necessary to describe it herein in some detail. At any rate, though, my purpose in touring the Tower lay not in such writing, and with the passing of months and years it's hard anymore for me to picture the place with clarity. As a result, I may be prone to subjectivity and repetition, and I wonder if some readers won't at times be put off. That being said, what I've written is what I've written.