

The Evil That Men Do - Paul Blake

Director Henry Parkes was engrossed in the 1851 issue of the J. S. Virtue, and Co. published magazine *The Art Journal*. He had read it, and his other surviving issues, many times over. However, the magazine still managed to enthral him. He was seated at his large Victorian-era oak desk, with its restored red leather desktop. An antique desk lamp provided a homely glow, scattering the dark morning gloom coming in from the window beside him. He glanced out of the window and saw the early mist was still there, above ominous black clouds portended to the weather for the rest of the day. *Will that mean more or fewer visitors? I still can never tell. Even after all these years. Will the weather drive them away or will the shelter of the gallery provide a haven from the elements? I'll find out soon enough I suppose.* The National Portrait Gallery was due to open in just under an hour, at ten o'clock. He returned his gaze back to the magazine, to read more about events in the art world in 1851.

His reading about the 1851 Exposition was interrupted by his office phone ringing. Parkes put down the magazine with a sigh and picked up the handset.

"Parkes," he said into the device with a bark.

"Director, it's Bev," Beverley Chambers was the Gallery's Curator of the 16th Century to Contemporary Collections. "Have you arranged for any new portraits to be installed on the first floor?"

Parkes thought for a second then replied: "No, the last addition was the oil on canvas of Sir James Brooke. What's this about?"

"Can you come to Room 23? There's something here you need to see. It's best if you come and see in person."

“You have me curious now. I’ll be there in...” Parkes trailed off as he calculated how long it would take him from his office on the third floor to Room 23 on the first floor. “Five,” he concluded.

Parkes came out of the lift on the first floor. He walked down the Statesmen's Gallery; it was lined on either side by a series of white marble busts on projecting plinths between painted portraits of eminent Victorians. The statues included Robert Stephenson, the greatest engineer of the 19th century; Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington and British Prime Minister; and George John Whyte-Melville, the poet and novelist’s walrus moustache carved in its full glory. The paintings included W. G. Grace, possibly England’s most famous cricketer; William Gladstone, Prime Minister and writer; and to show the Victorian era wasn’t all about old men, the singer Adelina Patti. Parkes had seen them countless times before. He entered Room 23; this room was dedicated to the Victorian period of expansion and empire. He was expecting to see the oil painting *Florence Nightingale receiving the Wounded at Scutari*. It was always the painting that immediately caught his eye upon entering. Miss Nightingale standing amongst a crowd of soldiers, the artist Jerry Barrett placing ‘the lady with the lamp’ in a visual spotlight through the use of contrasting darker dressed attendants beside her and by clearly defining her face compared to the others in the painting with their faces blurred with rough strokes. Today, however, in its place was an altogether different piece.

The landscape portrait of Miss Nightingale had been removed from the lilac coloured walls and placed neatly, standing on the floor leaning against the wall to the side of its original position. Taking its position was an unframed traditional portrait of a British Empire

soldier wearing the crimson uniform and the off-white, domed foreign service pith helmet as worn by Michael Caine in Zulu.

Beverley Chambers spotted Parkes at the room's doorway and walked across to him. Parkes' face was a picture of surprise like someone had slapped him with a wet fish.

"Director," she said. "I have no idea how this has happened. I have security checking the overnight tapes, they said they should have some information within the hour."

Parkes started walking to the painting, Beverley followed him. "Is there any indication who did this?" he asked.

"There was a card with the painting, Director." Beverley took a card from the folder she always carried and passed it to Parkes.

He looked at the card. It was a simple placeholder, cream in colour with a single line of text in black. It seemed like the same cards the gallery used for displaying information about each piece of work. The line on this card said, 'The evil that men do.'

"The evil that men do?" Parkes said. "That's a line from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. There is no name on the card, did they sign the painting?"

"There is a signature... of sorts. In the bottom right."

They stood about two foot away from the painting. The portrait was around three foot high by two foot wide. Far smaller than the Nightingale picture. Parkes' eyes started taking note of the work for the first time. It was an oil painting. The brush strokes used were small and detailed. Parkes thought that the artist had apparently taken some time to paint the work, befitting the break-in and substitution of the Nightingale.

The soldier was displayed from his chest up, against a taupe and forest green background as was typical of the time. He looked in his thirties with a moustache and bushy light brown, with slightly darker hues here and there, sideburns. His face was reddened with

sunburn but darkened by dirt and shadow. Parkes looked to the bottom right for the artist's signature and was surprised to see, instead of a scrawled name or initials, there was a symbol. It looked to Parkes like the Greek Omega symbol, Ω . *I don't know of anyone that signs their work with an Omega, I'll have to look into it back in the office.* The symbol was covering part of the tunic the soldier wore, Parkes leant in closer and could see a pattern in the red cloth. He moved in and saw, in a shade only slightly darker, were thousands of round circles.

"Sir, if you look through this," Bev passed Parkes a magnifying glass. "There is more than just a pattern there."

Parkes took the magnifying glass with a 'thank you' and looked closer at the painting. Instead of just circles, Parkes could see that each circle was a crudely drawn face, with the stub of a neck jaggedly drawn. Some of the faces had long hair, others short, or none at all. They were of varying sizes and shapes; however, they were all painted sideways as if they were lying down in stacks. Thousands of heads piled up against a wall of red. Parkes continued looking at the painting with the magnifying glass, the three gold buttons on the tunic had the British Pound, Euro, and the US Dollar symbols painted on them in an embossed effect to make them look they had been cast like that. The soldier's collar was a dark blue with golden embroidered insignia on each side. The insignia were different from each other: the first was of a cabinet with hinged doors, the artist had painted individual threaded spikes on the interior of the cabinet. The second insignia was of a stool with a pyramid on top. *A Judas cradle?* Parkes thought. Victims would be suspended above the stool and be slowly lowered onto the tip of the pyramid.

Parkes followed the line of the soldier's collarbone and shoulder; there were epaulettes on either shoulder. He examined the right hand one first. It was painted silver, however instead of the traditional looped rope design Parkes had seen in other paintings of the period, this one was twisted strands of razor wire, the edges red with blood. Parkes looked

across to the other epaulette, this one, also silver, was entwined chains with manacles at either end. Roughly made. The links of the chain uneven and irregular in size. *Slave chains.* Parkes glanced at Bev. She nodded at him to continue.

Parkes moved up to the partly exposed neck, the artist had not used any visual or hidden devices, the skin here was pink and coarse, and the occasional brown to indicate stubble of hair. Likewise the chin: lantern-jawed and strong. The large moustache, however, was made up of figures on poles above bonfires, hints of ginger, and red, amongst the blond, indicated flames. The sideburns descended to level with the earlobe. Through the magnifying glass, Parkes could see figures, their skin dark brown, with what appeared to be car tyres around their necks, the lick of flames coming from the tyre in hues of orange. He moved to the nose, straight and long, ending in a bulb, with large cavernous nostrils. Parkes moved the magnifying glass closer to the nostril and saw diamonds in each, painted ruby in colour.

“This painting is very cleverly painted,” he said to Bev. The first words he’d spoken in five minutes. “So many terrible things hidden underneath the surface.”

“It doesn’t stop there, Director,” Bev said, her voice tinged with sadness.

Parkes returned to the painting and worked his way up the long nose, tiny details appeared through the glass as shadows on the skin. Rows of people lined up in front of pits, men, women, and children. The soldier’s brow was furrowed, the creases in the skin looking like square bricked chimneys, the billows of smoke rising to form the eyebrows. The shadow covering the forehead below the brim of the helmet looked like ash on a barren field. Parkes looked at the eyes. They were brown with dark pupils. The brown ring within each iris contained hundreds of heads on spiked poles, the faces quite detailed, tales of horror, pain, and decomposition writ across each one. Within the pupil, there was a square of white to show the depth and life of the soldier’s eyes. With the glass, Parkes could see a symbol in each square. In the left one was a burning wooden cross, and in the other, the hooked-cross of

the Nazi swastika symbol. Parkes noticed in along the bottom of one of the eyes, the artist had painted the partial formation of a tear, the lower lid was redder on this eye than the other, with a watery sheen. Parkes moved up to the tea stained coloured helmet and noted that the helmet had a pattern, which like the tunic wasn't noticeable from a distance. The pattern looked like tusks placed beside each other, some inverted to fill the gaps. The tusks laid out like the walls of an igloo as they went up the helmet to the peak. In the middle of the tusk fortress was a gold coloured regimental badge, with laurel leaves on the outside of the centrepiece and the British Crown on top. In the centre, instead of the usual regiment number Parkes had seen on numerous other paintings from the era, there was a date painted in black: August 1945. Behind this painted as though etched on the badge was the shape of a nuclear mushroom cloud.

Parkes turned his attention to the background of the painting. Even without the magnifying glass, he could see the outlines of shapes on the brown and green backing, painted in colours slightly darker than the background itself. When he looked through the lens, he could clearly see hundreds, if not thousands, of skeletons laid out across the canvas. A mass painted grave. Bodies laid across each other, in rows to the canvas edge. Some were just the bones, others wearing rags of clothes in various stages of decomposition. Some skeletons were whole, others were partial. Parkes handed the magnifying glass back to Bev and stepped back.

“A very interesting piece,” Parkes said. “Very interesting indeed. Have it taken to the Conservation studio, for the time being, I’ll look into the artist and see what I can find out. Get the porters to rehang the Nightingale.” He removed his phone from his pocket and took photos of the picture, the signature and a few of the detailed parts, including the background skeletons, the tunic heads, and the spiked heads from the eyes.

Parkes was in his office at his computer. He was on artistssignatures.com looking for artists that used the Omega symbol for their signature and getting frustrated at his lack of progress. He picked up his office phone and called Beverley to ask if there were any updates from security.

“Not yet, Director,” she replied. “It shouldn’t be long now though.”

“How did they take down the Nightingale without an alarm sounding?” All portraits in the gallery were wired for tampering.

“Hopefully we’ll find out. Somehow, they managed to deactivate that system, but only for that one—” Parkes heard shouting in the background as Bev stopped in mid-sentence.

“Bev? Bev?” Parkes waited for her to come back. He could hear talking but couldn’t make out what was being said.

Beverley returned after a minute. She was breathing heavily as though she was walking fast. “Sorry about that Director. One of the guys from the Conservation studio came to get me. Something odd is happening with that painting. They were looking at the painting searching for clues to its providence when the eyes started leaking.”

“I saw that in the painting, very clever effect.”

“No Director, actually leaking. Black oil started running down the picture. I’m on my way there, they said it’s still happening, and they can’t figure out how to stop it.”

“I’ll be there asap.”

Parkes replaced the handset and left the office.

Parkes hurried to the gallery's Frame Conservation and General Conservation studio, which is located outside of the main gallery, on Orange Street. He was met at the entrance and escorted to the holding room where the picture was. In the room was Pierre Mercier, the head of the Conservation Department, and Beverley Chambers. The painting was laid out on a table in the centre of the room. Parkes could see that the surface of the painting and the surrounding tabletop were wet.

“So, tell me what happened?” Parkes demanded.

“We received the painting from the gallery; Ms Chambers explained its unusual appearance in the gallery, so when it came here we put it on the table to examine for clues to the artist's identity. Within a minute of the painting being laid down, oil started coming out of the eyes and covered the painting. The canvas is very slightly raised at the eyes to allow the oil to spread across the surface evenly. We immediately checked behind the canvas to find the source of the liquid to stop it, but there was nothing there. No mechanism or reservoir. Just a hollow space inside the canvas,” Mercier explained. “We turned the painting back around and saw the original paintwork had been covered. It's over there.”

Parkes walked over to the painting and saw that soldier was covered in a thick tar of black oil. A few features shone through the liquid: the ivory tusks on the helmet, the silver shoulder epaulettes, but the rest was buried beneath the viscous fluid.

“Is there any hope of cleaning it?” he asked.

“We'll try,” Mercier said. “It will depend on how the oil adheres to the surface of the painting. We'll begin by blotting up as much excess as we can and take it from there.”

“I'll leave you to it; I'm going to keep trying to find out who painted the damned thing.”

Instead of returning to his office, Parkes decided to head by Security to see what they had captured on the camera footage. He knocked on the door and waited for the guards to open it.

“Anything on the cameras from last night?” he asked the two guards in the small office, one wall of which was covered in monitors, with a large one central.

“I was just going to call Ms Chambers, there is something on the camera from...” The guard looked at the timestamp on the screen. “Eight forty-six.”

That was only fifteen minutes or so before Bev called me. Parkes thought. “Show me.”

The guard pressed a sequence of buttons, and a frozen image appeared on the main screen. It showed Room 23. The Nightingale painting was hanging on the wall in the corner of the screen.

“This is the best angle we have; most of the cameras are focused on different paintings. The time is eight forty-five, and as you can see, there is nothing untoward. I’ll play the video in real-time.”

Parkes watched the timestamp count through the seconds of eight forty-five and into eight forty-six. He leaned closer to the screen to see if he could see anything. At forty seconds into the minute, a figure entered the frame and walk towards the Nightingale. Without hesitation, it removed the painting from its spot and placed it leaning against the wall.

“No alarm was triggered,” the second guard said.

The figure lifted up the Soldier painting and hung it in position. Took one step back to look at it and then left the frame. The timestamp was eight forty-seven and ten seconds.

“That was quick,” Parkes said. “Thirty seconds or so? Rewind to the beginning of the figure entering.”

The guard smiled at Parkes’ use of ‘rewind’ and scrolled back to the moment the figure stepped into the screen. Parkes leant even closer. The figure appeared to be male and

wearing a form of armour, that glinted in the artificial light of the gallery. His outline was hazy and blurred. One other thing Parkes noticed, the figure's shadow started away from the feet, a gap between the man and shadow. *It's floating?* He kept watching the shadow. It never connected with the body at any point of the recording. Afraid to put his thoughts into words, he stood there mouth gaping.

END

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Paul Blake, December 2018.