

***Meredith, the painter.***

***by***

***Colin Pink***

When I first met him I must confess that I found Meredith Hamilton somewhat intimidating. His austere appearance, commanding presence and haughty good looks left me feeling distinctly inadequate without quite knowing why. In this I was not unique and found that several people were initially 'put off' by his manner. On a more extensive acquaintance, though, one found that a distinct charm lay just below the rigorous surface. In time you could say we became friends; though I was always vaguely conscious of playing Watson to his Holmes. It was only after I came to know Meredith far better that I realised, slowly and too late, just like Watson, that my first impressions had not misled me and, indeed, that Meredith Hamilton was a very dangerous person to know.

When we first met, in 1926, he already possessed a considerable reputation in society circles. He was renowned as a highly accomplished portrait painter, and the well placed and powerful had to form an orderly queue to obtain a portrait of themselves from him. Many waited in vain and were never lucky enough to be immortalised by his brush, for he worked very slowly and meticulously, and sometimes he worked not at all. He was, in any case, a man of independent means and his pictures commanded high prices for their skill and rarity, so he had no need to hurry to 'make ends meet'.

The most beautiful models of the day were more than pleased to pose for him and would drop other commitments at a moments notice if summoned by him. And it was the paintings he executed of them, wherein their natural beauty was raised to the nth degree, such that its ravishing perfection chilled the blood, which regularly stunned the visitors to the annual Academy show.

I could never fully understand what he saw in me. At the time I was a struggling

writer trying to impress the right people and not always succeeding. I can only think that he realised that I genuinely appreciated art, not a very common disposition in England, and that he knew my pen would pose no challenge to his paintings. Unlike many in that circle I did not attempt to force my attentions on him and, I think, for that very reason saw him more often than most people.

When he was working he was a very demon. How apt a phrase in many ways that is. His extended powers of concentration were remarkable, at once somewhat alarming and inspiring to behold. He was at his most intense when working at a painting. His powerful gaze seemed to rip through the surrounding atmosphere so that one felt the objects of his attention might melt under the scrutiny. When he focused on an object, animate or inanimate, he seemed to tear through a veil that interposed itself between the object and the viewer, so that one felt that he, and only he, could see the real thing; that he painted so well because he could literally see more than other men.

He liked nothing better, when he finished working, than to roam the town carousing until exhaustion overcame him. He was a strange mixture and many people thought him a 'queer fish'. I always had the impression that it was only by these Bacchanalian revels that he could tear himself away from the world he immersed himself in while working and regain the mundane terrain the rest of us inhabited, without any awareness that there was an alternative. I often accompanied him on these excursions, and frequently feared for his and my own health, when his debauches became too prolonged or intense. He was a man of contradictions; that was what made him so fascinating, at times so charming and at others so intolerable. One could never maintain a view of Meredith without being forced to revise it at a later date. I was not alone in this and many people, knowing I was a friend of his, came to me seeking explanations for his behaviour of one sort or another. I did not know, at the time, that he was possessed.

As far as I was concerned the only thing Meredith was possessed by was great

talent and great good looks. Not long after we met he started introducing me to his friends. They were a mixed bunch, the usual fellow artists, critics and socialites. But among their number there was also a group of people who did not seem to fit into any category except perhaps that of being 'characters'.

There was Paxton, for instance. He was a second-hand book dealer. Presumably Meredith had befriended him as a result of frequenting his shop. I could never understand my friend's fascination for these second-hand bookshops. The smell alone put me off. There was something about the smell of old books that reminded me of death. Whenever I opened one of those dusty tomes and the smell wafted up to my nose I would always half expect some disgusting slug or insect to come crawling out from between the pages and bite my hand. But Meredith had no such morbid feelings and would avidly search among the dusty and damp ridden piles, always in expectation that a pure nugget of excellence from the past would turn up. And sometimes they did. Sometimes I could tell from the look of suppressed excitement in his eyes and a slight tremor in his voice that he had unearthed something which, though hoped for, he had expected never to see. I suppose it was that which made all the searching worthwhile. I, on the other hand, would prefer to peruse the pristine wrappers of the latest novels in Hatchards, unsullied as they were by anyone else's greasy fingers. In contrast Meredith owned a large number of mouldering tomes that looked as if they were destined never to be read from one century to the next.

Paxton looked like a clerk; an unsuccessful clerk at that. His manner, on first acquaintance, was not one of confidence, and he had the irritating habit of looking around him as one spoke, as if he was constantly on the look out for a more interesting companion. It was rather off putting, but once I got to know him he proved to be a fount of knowledge on any number of arcane topics, each of which seemed to have nothing much in common other than their residence in Paxton's mind.

Then there was Cosway. At that time Cosway was still fairly well known among certain people as a skilled mountaineer. He had been on numerous expeditions and tales of his endurance, skill and courage had created a kind of aura around him. However, I wasn't aware that he had been on any expeditions lately and Meredith informed me he was writing a book. He once showed me some manuscript pages and I must confess I remained sceptical as to their publishability. I subsequently learnt, through discreet inquiries, that among the mountaineering fraternity Cosway was no longer regarded as an asset on an expedition and was shunned by most of his fellow climbers. I never found out why.

Cosway was certainly a very imposing fellow. He wasn't a big man but he had a big personality and no lack of self-esteem. He was the sort of person who tends to make me wilt in their company. I cannot help myself retreating, mentally, from their egos. He too was a fascinating conversationalist, provided one didn't make the mistake of contradicting him. Meredith seemed much impressed by him and I bowed to his opinion, while privately maintaining reservations of my own.

There were a few other acquaintances of this ilk. In particular an American heiress, called Helen Power, who dressed in slightly outlandish clothes and who hosted extravagant parties at which Cosway was usually the guest of honour.

Among the artists of Meredith's acquaintance I was especially surprised to find he was closest to Albert Spare. Spare worked mostly as an illustrator. He did the kind of illustrations that gave me nightmares as a child. I thought Meredith would have found him an inferior artist, but he held him in high esteem. I subsequently found that he too was a friend of Cosway and the American woman.

Gradually, over a period of months, I found myself drawn into their circle. An invitation to visit one seemed to lead inevitably to further invitations to meet the others. It did not occur to me that some sort of vetting process might be underway. Though I

always had reservations about them I yet found them fascinating, and the fact that Meredith so obviously enjoyed their company, and was keen that I should too, made me cast aside my doubts and succumb to their charm. And charming they were. They might not have had the social cachet of some but they were more interesting; they were good conversationalists and never bored one with stock opinions, but tended rather to excite one with provocative and unusual views on matters which, at first glance, I had thought needed no debate. Thus it was that by little imperceptible steps I became a member of their circle.

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It is my usual habit to peruse the newspaper while having breakfast. I tend to skim the news and spend longer reading the social and review pages. On this particular morning my eye was caught by an article reviewing my friend Meredith's latest show. It was written by their regular critic Sean Powell. Though I didn't always agree with his views - to me he seemed frequently either too trenchantly for or against something - I usually found what he had to say amusing. Not, however, on this occasion, for his piece was a long tirade against my friend's art. He accused it of being shallow, of sticking to the surface of things, of being coldly unemotional; a quality one certainly could not attach to Powell's review.

It left a sour taste in my mouth. I read it again, questioning whether I had perhaps misunderstood the tone. But on a second reading it seemed even tarter. I shuddered at the thought of how poor Meredith would feel if confronted with this review. And what was more it was so unjust. It seemed to me Powell had made a point of consistently misrepresenting my friend's art. It was, in short, a vindictive review, even by Powell's standards. It gave me pause for thought, and I asked myself, Why should he do this? It was then that I remembered overhearing Meredith referring to Powell a few weeks ago. He was telling Paxton how awkward it had been having to refuse Powell's

request for an invitation to one of Cosway's parties. He said something like, 'I was sorry to have to let the chap down, but really, Cosway would have made mincemeat of him if I'd brought him along.'

I felt sure that Meredith's refusal to do Powell this favour had prompted a revenge attack on him in print. An attack on the very thing which Meredith held most dear - his art. I saw Meredith a few days later but I didn't have the heart to mention the review. I didn't want to bring it up in case he hadn't seen it. However, Albert Spare soon turned up and lost no time in mentioning it; he even ventured to say that Powell should be punished for writing it. I had no idea what he meant. Meredith had seen it but he took a philosophical view, it seemed to me, preferring to ignore it rather than be drawn into argument. I remember thinking at the time how noble it was of him.

A few weeks later I happened to be passing his studio so I dropped in and was surprised to see, propped up in one corner, a freshly painted portrait of Powell. Meredith didn't look very pleased to see me. His painting equipment was scattered about, in an uncharacteristic disorder, and he had one of those old tomes propped up on his table open to a page covered in diagrams and hieroglyphs I couldn't begin to understand. I looked at the portrait while he packed away his things. It was very fine. Executed to Meredith's accustomed high standard. It was rather unusual since it eschewed the usual conventions of portraiture and depicted the subject standing in a relaxed pose in the middle of a country lane. Fields bordered by hedges spread about him and the landscape rose behind him to the distant horizon. The narrow road trailed off into the distance, curving up and down the hills in the background, now appearing now disappearing. In the middle distance he had depicted a car travelling along the road, I could recognise it as a Bentley. I said to Meredith:

'That's a very fine portrait.'

He looked a bit sheepish, I thought, and said, 'Do you think so?'

I looked at it in more detail and said, 'Yes. Very fine. What gave you the idea of setting it in the country with the subject crossing the road? It's very innovative.'

'I wanted to do something different. I'm bored with painting people in interiors, sitting on chairs or at their desks. It got tedious.'

'I'm surprised you should want to paint Powell's portrait after he wrote that nasty piece about you.'

'I'd already started working on it,' he said, dismissively. 'It would have been a shame to abandon it just for the sake of a few ill chosen words.'

'It's very magnanimous of you, Meredith.'

'Not at all,' he said, modestly. 'Once I start something I like to finish it.' And he smiled.

After that we went out and had lunch in a delightful little restaurant in Charlotte street.

As it turned out Powell didn't enjoy the portrait for long. A few days later, while out visiting relatives in the country he was run down by a car. Hit and run. They never caught the person responsible.

In an indirect way Powell's death did me a favour in that, with Meredith's help, I was offered the now vacant position of art critic for the Telegraph. I could do with the money, since my novelistic endeavours were not exactly bearing fruit in the way I had hoped.

By this time I was becoming increasingly involved with, I'm tempted to say absorbed by, Meredith's little circle of friends. I admit I felt flattered by all the attention. They held a great number of 'advanced' parties, to which I was invited, and having a penchant for the bohemian lifestyle I enjoyed them.

It was a time when people were searching for new spiritual paths. In the wake of the Great War many peoples' faith in the efficacy of the established religions was

shattered and they turned to alternatives such as Spiritualism, Theosophy and Mazdakism. The validity, or not, of these alternative beliefs was often discussed by Meredith's friends. I found their discussions interesting and their cast of mind seemed to me to be somewhat Manichaeian. They saw the world as divided up into a battle between good and evil. But what made them so interesting was that they did not allocate things to these two categories in the commonly accepted way. For instance, they placed Christianity and Patriotism in the evil camp, and sexual licence in the good camp. They had formed their own little sect, an exclusive one, to which I never heard them put a name, tending rather to refer to it as the 'true way' or the 'old way'. I think they envisaged themselves as an elite, much as the Perfecti in the Cathar cult. They felt they pathed the way for lesser mortals to follow. Like the Cathars the followers were not expected to live up to the demanding standards of the Perfecti, but to share their beliefs and support them. I felt that I was being cast in the role of one of those believers.

Cosway and Meredith were at pains to convince me how, over many centuries, the Christian religion had maligned earlier, older, forms of belief and attempted to obliterate any trace of them, absorbing their festivals into the Christian calendar and distorting their significance in the process. They spoke of an underground stream of 'old knowledge' passed on from generation to generation of true believers. This secret stream was a source of knowledge and power that only the Perfecti could understand and control. This knowledge, tempered in the flames of centuries of persecution, was very powerful, and very dangerous. It all struck me as a bit far fetched, and I thought of most of them as nothing but romantics looking back to a mythical past, but I was wrong, they weren't romantics at all, they were realists, it was I who was the romantic.

It sounds pathetic to say it now, but I simply enjoyed their company. They were glamorous and daring and it attracted me. Proximity to them made me feel more significant. And like a moth to a flame I drew ever closer.

I sometimes say to myself , What is morality? Whose morality? According to whose notions of right and wrong? It all depends. And seeing things through the eyes of the little group cast into relief the relativism of moral imperatives freely accepted without reflection by most people. And of course there were the parties. These parties took place at different locations around town, and sometimes at someone's country estate. They were exclusive affairs, and it was difficult for most people to obtain an invitation, but not me; as a friend of Meredith's I was always invited as a matter of course. I have always been something of a sensualist: fine wine, good food, stimulating conversation and the company of beautiful objects were the very things which made life worthwhile. And for a sensualist the refined debauchery of their parties was a rare treat. I confess I enjoyed them. I enjoyed them immensely, and the occult ritual that used to take place at them merely served, in my eyes, to heighten my anticipation of the exquisite sexual pleasure to come. Like most evil things they were very attractive on the surface. It was only when one looked below the surface that one realised the true nature of the beast, and that was something I did not care to do, distracted as I was by far more obvious aspects.

Why does mankind prefer to think, throughout the ages, that the ugly are evil while the beautiful are good, despite all evidence to the contrary? Is it merely wishful thinking? I feel convinced that if Satan walked among us, rather than the hideous monster of fevered imagination, he would be quite the most handsome, the most charming and courteous of men, and all the more dangerous for it.

I wasn't the only one to be attracted to the group. In fact people were attracted for all kinds of reason, not least of which was their relaxed, not to say adventurous, attitude to sexuality. Most of the people who attended Helen Power's parties primarily for a sexual reason I liked, but not all. Sebastian Ffooks, for instance, I took an instant dislike to. He had recently inherited a title and a large estate in Northamptonshire, and

his air of haughty superiority I found intensely irritating. I first met him at Meredith's studio, where he was posing for his portrait. I was puzzled why Meredith had agreed to paint such an uninteresting and disagreeable aristocrat. After the sitting was over and Ffooks had left I asked him about it. He merely said, 'I was at school with him,' which I hardly counted as an answer.

I looked at the portrait. It was coming along very well, though most of it was just sketched in. Ffooks was depicted full length standing in front of one of those elaborate gateways which lead into large country estates. I was pleased to see that he had captured the sitter's air of pompous self-importance very accurately.

'Is he pleased with the portrait?' I asked.

'Yes. I think so, so far,' said Meredith.

'He's not very self-aware is he,' I said.

Meredith laughed and said, 'All the more fun for us.'

'I bet he played a lot of sport at school,' I said.

'Spot on, Marcus. He was captain of the first eleven.'

'Yes. And he probably hasn't done anything remotely useful since he left school.'

'He doesn't need to. He is very, very wealthy. In fact, I was thinking of bringing him along to Helen's at the weekend, he's looking for a bit of excitement.'

I could see Meredith observing my displeasure with amusement.

'Do you think he'll fit in?' I said.

'Oh, I should think so,' he said, airily.

'Isn't he a dreadful bore?'

'He has his moments. Now, let's get something to drink. I've done quite enough work for one morning.'

Subsequently Meredith did take Ffooks along to one of Helen's parties and, since the others didn't seem to dislike him as much as me, he became a regular attendee,

when he visited town, usually to sit for Meredith, who was, as usual, taking an inordinate amount of time over his portrait.

Helen's parties were often elaborate affairs and, depending on how one looked at it, they were either occasions for pure sensual indulgence or for something a little more elevated. One of the objects of these little gatherings was to reach an altered state of consciousness. There are many means of getting there and one of them, favoured by some, was mortification, usually achieved through flagellation. There is, however, an optimum point, and to go beyond that is perhaps not wise. Because of this the participants were allocated a special word the utterance of which would draw the proceedings to a close.

On this particular evening Amelia, one of Meredith's women friends who had a very vibrant and passionate nature, and who had participated in the group on a number of occasions, was being whipped by Ffooks. Right from the start I sensed there was something wrong, but I dismissed the thought from my mind since I was aware that my dislike of the man coloured my perception of him. There was something about the way he moved that rang alarm bells in my head. Usually, on these occasions, the participants move in a slow and graceful manner which is reassuring to watch but Ffooks moved in a jerky way, each little gesture a little over emphatic, as if he was not quite in control of himself.

From the very start I thought his blows were unnecessarily severe. Normally one builds up gradually to these things, but Amelia was experienced and took it. I would say his whipping style was heavy handed and lacked grace and observing it was neither erotic nor educative. Because of the clumsy way in which he proceeded it was not long before I heard Amelia utter the magic word. To my amazement this was quickly followed by another loud crack of the whip as Ffooks dealt her another blow. I heard her say the word again and at the same time Ffooks swung again, even harder this time. I jumped

up and, shouting 'Stop!' approached Ffooks who turned to me, his eyes blazing, and swung at me with the whip, narrowly missing my face. Fortunately, Meredith and Cosway were nearby and grabbed Ffooks by the arms and bundled him out of the room. In the meantime I comforted Amelia, who was considerably distressed.

A few minutes later Meredith returned and explained that they had thrown Ffooks out and told him never to return. His face looked very set and I could see an immensity of suppressed anger burning in his eyes.

'He was always a bully at school,' he said. 'I thought he had changed. Evidently he has not. But this time he has bullied for the last time.' And so saying he collected Amelia and left.

A week or two later, when I visited his studio, I noticed that he had finished the portrait of Sebastian Ffooks. The finished work did look rather magnificent; slightly over life-size Ffooks towered over the spectator, swelled up with his own smugness. One side of his face was cast into shadow by the architecture of the imitation triumphal arch he stood beneath. Meredith had lavished a lot of attention on the structure, in fact a depiction of one of the gateways to Ffooks' estate. He had meticulously delineated the play of light across the surface of the rusticated masonry and rendered each ivy leaf, which twined up its surface, with great individuality. I was praising his work on the background when I noticed a long crack snaking its way down the masonry on the arch's superstructure directly above where Ffooks was standing.

'Marvellous attention to detail,' I said. 'You've even observed the weathering on the stone, and this frost damage up at the top,' and I pointed to the passage, 'is magnificent.'

'Yes. I was particularly pleased with that,' he said. 'I like the idea of the triumphal arch crumbling; it creates something of a memento mori effect, don't you think?'

I had to agree.

'I'm having it shipped up to Ffooks at the end of the week and, hopefully, that is the last I shall ever have to do with him.'

'Amen to that,' I said.

It was several months later that, turning to the obituary pages, I was surprised to discover a piece memorialising the sudden death of Sebastian Ffooks, Earl of Northampton. The obituarist lamented the tragic demise of the new Earl so shortly after taking up his responsibilities; responsibilities which one couldn't help feeling had weighed heavily on him, since his death was caused by falling masonry while out surveying the buildings on his estate. Dear, dear, what a loss, I thought.

It was about a year later, at one of the parties held at Helen Power's town house, that I was shocked into recognising the little group for what it was. During the ritual part of the evening a delightful looking young girl was brought in. As they brought her into the circle I looked into her eyes and I could tell by their glassy look and her blank expression that the girl had been drugged. It was not particularly unusual. Opium and cocaine were regularly used for recreational purposes and also as a means of opening the mind to other regions usually inaccessible to one in a mundane mental state. I myself used to enjoy the heightened awareness that I experienced after taking a limited quantity of cocaine. Despite her bemused state I found myself distracted by the extreme beauty of her pale form, so young and lovely, barely concealed under a translucent white gown. I remembered thinking that later in the evening I would enjoy taking my turn with her. But at the end of the ritual, when the chanting was over and the cockerel's blood had been splashed around and the incantations, which I was sure went on longer than usual, ceased, she didn't get up. She just lay there, perfectly still, *perfectly* still. And whereas usually at this point Helen would help the girl up and we would all join in a silly little

dance which was the cue for the evening to progress on to other things, this time everybody just filed away. But I just stood there looking down at her. Meredith came up to me and, grasping me by the arm said, 'Come away, Marcus, it is time to go.' And he looked me in the eye so strongly that I followed him, but as we were about to leave the room I turned back and looked at her and said to him, 'She's not breathing.'

'She's just sleeping.'

'No she's not, she's dead!'

'Don't get hysterical, Marcus. You'll draw attention to yourself, and I wouldn't advise that at the moment.'

'Don't you care?'

'Don't be silly, Marcus, of course I care. But it can't be helped. Accidents happen. It was just unfortunate.'

'Unfortunate!'

'Sometimes it is difficult to judge the dose. Cosway and Paxton will sort things out, there is no need to worry.'

'No need to worry!'

'Keep your voice down, for heaven's sake.' And so saying he ushered me out into the street and hailed a cab.

I still wonder whether I did the right thing. Or rather, whether I did the right thing from the wrong motives, for can we not be damned for that too? I knew that I felt guilty because during the moments when that young girl was dying I was busy having lustful thoughts about what I would do with her. And that guilt was too great for me to bear, it must be borne by everyone present, it was only by blaming the whole situation that I could absolve myself. Not very pretty is it? So I phoned the police. I told them about the parties. When they raided Helen Power's house they didn't find the girl but there was a lot of suspicious circumstantial evidence. As a result the little group split up.

Some of them went abroad, others just went to ground. I went round to Meredith's studio. I wanted to explain. I felt I owed him that. But he wasn't there. He'd vanished. A little later I read in the newspaper that his car had been found, conspicuously parked in the middle of Clifton suspension bridge. He had disappeared. He was presumed to have leapt from the bridge, but his body was never found, which was odd because usually, usually they turn up.

The weeks went by and I began to feel more and more uneasy. I felt like I was being watched all the time. I kept having this sickening certainty that Meredith was going to turn up. I tried to dismiss these feelings as mere paranoid delusions, another way for my guilty conscience to punish me. But I couldn't convince myself. I felt sure he was going to turn up. It is truly dreadful when one begins to fear the appearance of one's best friend. I began to drink heavily.

The weeks turned to months and the whole affair had blown over. Nobody could prove anything and it was soon forgotten. A few peoples' reputations, including my own, were tarnished but that was all. Things returned to normal. But Meredith had disappeared, vanished off the face of the earth. Even though I dreaded meeting him I made a few inquiries about him but nobody knew anything. And soon it was just as if he had never existed at all, except for his paintings.

It was almost a year later. I had got my drinking under control, I was feeling better, and still working as an art critic, when I went to a show at the New Contemporaries Gallery in Dover Street. They were holding a mixed show of British and European artists with the aim of showing that British artists were not isolated provincials but had a position within the context of European modernism. I made a point of going and was impressed and planning to write a glowing review when I stepped into the last room. This room was dominated by German artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit school together with Italian artists such as Felice Casorati. And then I saw it. Sandwiched

between a lascivious nude by Christian Schad and a crowded street scene by Georg Grosz was a painting by Meredith. A painting I had never seen before. A painting which, in my numerous visits to his studio I had never seen and which in countless conversations he had never mentioned.

I couldn't look at the picture without flinching. It depicted a nightmarish party where all the revellers - with accurately and cruelly delineated expressions of lust, abandon and plain buffoonery - were each accompanied by a figure of death, a leering skeleton shadowing each guest, peering over their shoulder or comically inviting them to dance. It was a parody of the medieval Dance of Death where representatives of all the different class of individuals, all ages and sexes are assailed by death. And here it was, death gatecrashing the party again. I wanted to turn away but forced myself to look closely at the picture and it was then that I spotted it: in the background, near the door, grinning idiotically, caught as if in a camera's flash light, was a depiction of myself; and coming through the door, immediately behind me, striding purposefully towards me was death, skeletal, grinning, emaciated death. And I remembered all those other paintings Meredith had executed, and what an appropriate word executed is, which contained the portrait of someone he disliked, and I remembered what happened to them. I stood there looking at the picture, determined to stare death in the face, even though I was aware that in the picture it was coming up behind me. Then, as I stepped closer to the picture, I could smell it - fresh paint.