

THE RESTORATION

by Colin Pink

It was a bad day for Stephen Rossner. In the morning his resident girlfriend informed him, without previous warning, that she was leaving him, though she did not put it that way. Chris was a Social Worker by profession and said she needed to 'move out for a while', that she needed 'more space to find herself'. Stephen decoded these comments as meaning, 'I have found someone else.'

What had made it worse was that he was sure she had not intended to tell him anything at all. He had woken early, his sleep interrupted by her movements in the house as she packed her things. It was only when he asked her what she was doing that she told him she was leaving. He had tried to discuss the matter with her but she refused to talk about it. He was reduced to following her from room to room as she packed, making comments to which she did not respond. She explained her reluctance to talk by saying she needed to think things over first but it seemed to Stephen that she had already done plenty of thinking and her mind was made up; it was he who was confused.

Chris soon finished her hasty packing and, muttering something about coming back for the rest of her things later, descended the stairs and walked out of the house closing the door firmly behind her. Stephen was sitting in the kitchen, morosely pondering this piece of domestic treachery, when the doorbell rang. Irritably he answered the door, half hoping it was Chris returning. A courier stood on the doorstep holding a flat package. Stephen signed for it with as much civility as he could muster and went inside.

He dumped the envelope on the kitchen table and made some coffee. He sat down with the fresh coffee and sipped it, willing the caffeine to jerk him out of his bemused state. Then he opened the package which contained some x-radiographs of a painting he had recently acquired.

Stephen worked as a picture restorer and he also liked to collect paintings on the rare occasions when he could afford the purchase price. A few weeks ago he had been idling away some time in one of his favourite antique shops when the owner, who knew him quite well, had ushered him into the back room of his shop to show him a picture he'd obtained at a house clearance sale. The owner knew Stephen sometimes purchased paintings and wondered if he would be interested in it. The antique dealer specialised in furniture and had only come into possession of the painting as part of a job lot; any paintings he acquired he usually passed onto colleagues who specialised in such things but as Stephen was there he might like to see it. Stephen would.

The painting depicted, in portrait format, an angel, dressed in armour and brandishing a lance, who stood, or more accurately floated, above several anguished demons who writhed, crushed beneath his feet or impaled on his lance. Stephen identified the angel as the archangel Michael engaged in defeating the powers of darkness. The theme of the painting was then, broadly, the triumph of good over evil. A worthy subject, but not very well executed. The painting was rather battered and very dirty. The surface was dull, obscured by years of grime that clung to it, draining life from the figures and depriving the colours of light. The execution of the figures was no more than competent. There was about the painting an air of haste, as if the painter had felt there was little time in which to achieve his purpose. Subsidiary areas were very sketchily executed and overall there was a lack of care in the finish which was surprising for a painting that looked very old indeed.

'The figures are rather crudely painted,' Stephen remarked, turning it over. The painting was executed on panel, an examination of the back suggested almost certainly oak, and the framing mouldings appeared not to be applied separately to the panel but to be integral to it which would suggest the object was very old, probably dating from the fifteenth century. Stephen could feel the first stirrings of avarice in his breast. Like a true poker player he did his best to disguise his interest in the picture. After some desultory negotiations with the antique dealer, in which the crudity and even incompetence, albeit charming naivety, of some of the work was stressed, while no mention was made of the significance of the support and the framing elements, Stephen had come away with the painting for a sum that, though not as small as he might have wished was, he felt, a bargain.

Chris, needless to say, had viewed the acquisition of the archangel Michael picture with the jaundiced eyes of one who perceived how substantial quantities of hard cash had in an instant been transformed into a rather ugly and creepy looking picture. 'Don't hang that thing anywhere I can see it, it'll give me nightmares,' she had said.

But Stephen had no intention of hanging the picture anywhere for a long time. First he was going to clean it. After thoroughly examining it and consulting comparative material in several reference works he was of the opinion that the painting was quite a find. It was in all probability a work from the circle of Jansz de Vries, a fifteenth century Netherlandish painter whose works were very rare. The image before him was clearly not the work of the Master but one of his workshop assistants, probably based on an original drawing or painting of the same subject by Jansz himself. The value of the work was, accordingly, insignificant compared to its value if it had been from the hand of the master. Nonetheless it had considerable

interest as a product of the workshop and because the original, on which it was based, almost certainly no longer existed.

A few days after purchasing the panel of the Triumph of Good Stephen started work on cleaning the picture but soon afterwards he had stopped. In the process of removing the old discoloured varnish from a section of the sky he had realised that his solution, though very weak, was removing the pigment along with the varnish and this had revealed another image below the one on which he was working. Where there had once been a uniform piece of sky a fierce eye now stared out. He had arranged to have the panel x-rayed to discover what kind of picture lay beneath the surface before proceeding. Now here were the x-radiographs.

He spread the ghostly images out on the kitchen table, and arranged them so that they gave an overall impression of the picture. The hidden picture was in landscape format and consisted of numerous small figures in a rural setting. He could make out the shadowy verticals of what looked like trees. The figures seemed to be engaged in some kind of procession and in the centre of the picture was what looked like an elaborately decorated cart, such as might transport a king or emperor in a triumphal entry.

As far as he could judge from the x-radiographs there seemed to be a complete picture below the image of the Triumph of Good. The fragment he had so far uncovered appeared to be executed in a minutely detailed manner of a far higher quality than the painting on the surface. He was puzzled by why such a masterly work should have been painted over with an inferior image. Now he had to decide whether to risk sacrificing the workshop painting in order to discover a possibly greater work underneath. He went upstairs to his workroom and turned the painting around on the easel so that it was now in the correct orientation for the hidden picture; Michael's pose looked absurd and grotesque when viewed from the side. He contemplated the picture for some moments, gazing into the single eye he had uncovered which seemed to beckon to him, to plead for release from the encompassing pigment.

A wave of sadness hit him as he remembered the look on Chris's face as she walked out on him. He knew from experience that by working he could push his personal problems out of his mind. To Stephen work was a therapy for the wounds life inflicted. The beautiful objects that he worked with were an antidote to the ugliness of reality.

He resolved to remove more of the surface image so that he could judge more accurately the quality of the original picture. He began to apply more cleaning

solution to the panel, working slowly around the eye. The head began to emerge more clearly, another eye, a snout and bulbous cheeks; it was the head of a demon.

Over the next few days he worked steadily at uncovering the original picture. At first he was surprised at the ease with which the pigment of the second painting was lifting off the surface of the original. Then he became convinced that the ease with which he was accomplishing his task was no accident, that the old varnish had been designed in such a way that, like a delayed action fuse, any attempt to clean it would remove the hasty covering and reveal the hidden image.

As he uncovered more of the painting Stephen's conviction grew that in sacrificing a minor workshop product he was unveiling a masterpiece that had lain dormant ever since it had been painted hundreds of years ago. As he worked he felt a healing bond develop between himself and the picture; he could offer no rational explanation but he felt the painting speak to him, encourage him, urge him on and long for release from its imprisonment beneath the pigment.

By the end of the week he had uncovered a substantial part of the hidden picture. It was in utter contrast to the painting that had covered it and was clearly by the hand of Jansz de Vries himself. The small number of generally accepted works attributed to Jansz de Vries were all on religious themes, except for one believed to be a self-portrait. Four were in municipal museums in Bruges, three were in the Prado and a handful had found their way to various public and private collections in the U.S.A. Though the themes were familiar they were often treated in a slightly different way, so that the artist was noted for his imaginative, even quirky, treatment of well known subjects. How far this approach was appreciated in his own time is difficult to judge, though Stephen vaguely recollected that the artist was sometimes referred to as Jansz the Mystic.

The first picture had been a broad single image but the new picture was full of minute detail and teemed with strange figures in a panoramic landscape. Whereas the covering picture had been of a conventional subject the one beneath was strikingly original, indicating an astonishing imagination at work. Within its shallow luminous surface the picture was a writhing pattern of malignant figures. Stephen was gradually succumbing to exhaustion, his eyes, through long periods of staring at the painting, had difficulty in focusing so that the figures swam before him appearing to shift and pulsate. He blinked and the images cohered once again into their set pattern. He left the workroom realising the futility of working while in such a state. He walked down the hall to his bedroom and sank, with relief, onto his bed. Before he could raise himself again to undress he fell asleep.

That night he dreamed of whirling figures cavorting in an absurd and obscene dance. His body felt as if it was no longer his to control, a lonely passenger within himself, he stared out helplessly from behind his own eyes as he was drawn inexorably into the circle. In the centre of the circle stood a stern faced man who looked strangely familiar to Stephen, though he could not place him. The man remained the one immobile spot in the swirling mass of bodies; detached and yet all pervasive, controlling, touched by none yet the focus of all. The dance slowed down as the man in the middle slowly turned in a small circle, and the people bowed down to him until Stephen was the only one left conspicuously standing. The man turned to him with a vindictive smile.

Stephen opened his eyes and the light, seeping through the thin bedroom curtains, shot through to the raw centre of a searing, throbbing headache. The clothes he had slept in felt immensely heavy. He remembered his nightmare, and shuddered, as he stumbled to the bathroom and splashed water over his face to jerk himself back into reality.

Feeling slightly recovered he went to get breakfast but before going to the kitchen he had to step into the workroom and take another look at the painting; it stood there just as he had left it. It looked magnificent. He had been worried that in his haste over the previous days he might have damaged the delicate object but a brief examination of the panel confirmed that, despite working longer hours than was advisable, he had done a good job. Reassured he went to the kitchen, turned on the radio and prepared breakfast. The radio was tuned to a pop station and the D.J. chattered inanely. What do you know about anything, thought Stephen, do you know that a masterpiece is being returned to the world? After a record the news came on. The news reader's voice droned on in the back of his mind recounting international miseries. His attention was caught by the last news report:

...fire chiefs are this morning investigating a number of unexplained fires in south London. A spokesman for the police stated that arson could not be ruled out. And now for the travel news...

Stephen switched off the radio.

After breakfast he decided to continue work on the painting at a more controlled pace. The first step, before continuing any further, was to refresh his knowledge of Jansz de Vries. He drove into town to use the Warburg library. On the way he passed the charred wreck of a nearby school. He slowed down as he drove

past; blackened beams pointed like accusatory fingers at the sky. Stephen felt somehow responsible. He put his foot down on the accelerator and sped on wiping his mind clean of the unsettling sight.

In the Warburg Stephen consulted a number of books and articles on Jansz de Vries. In one of the less self-consciously scholarly he read the following:

Not many facts are known regarding the life of Jansz de Vries though stories and opinions abound. We know that he was born in the prosperous market town of s'Hortenbusch c1440. The next fact that we have is that he was a master painter practising in the town in 1466. De Vries's career was brought to an abrupt halt in 1489 when he was arrested. The unfortunate painter was subsequently tried and burnt as a heretic. Nearly all the records of his trial were destroyed in a fire so most of the details of the charges and his defence have been lost, there is, however, much speculation. Some contemporary accounts relate that he was lured into a trap by an unscrupulous patron and that the whole affair was an elaborate plan to get rid of him hatched by powerful enemies. Other accounts state that he was accused of being a member of the heretical Adamite sect, of practising sorcery and the conjuring up of demons. All of the accounts, however, both for and against appear to be pure speculation, the truth of the matter will never be known.

Stephen came away feeling more confused than before. He felt certain that he had the greatest painting of Jansz de Vries sitting in his workroom but why should the painter allow an assistant to conceal his greatest work and leave it for future generations to discover?

Back at his house he immediately set about completing work on the painting. Over the following days steadily more and more of the painting was revealed and he was constantly fascinated by the discoveries he was making about the strange and haunting picture that was emerging before him. By now he had uncovered virtually the whole of the painting, except for a small patch in the bottom right hand corner. He stood back to admire his work and take in all the picture at once.

Whereas the assistant's painting of the Archangel Michael had been still and even serene, if a little clumsy, this other picture was full of fire and fury, a seething

mass of realistically invented forms, like a glimpse into Pandora's box, a catalogue of the misfortunes of Man. The left hand side of the painting was a vision of devastation. All had been laid to waste, towns and villages blazed amid a landscape of carnage; tall posts topped with cart-wheels held rotting corpses up to the sky where large black birds circled like omens. Death, in the form of a skeleton army, rode on emaciated horses, scything down helpless victims while winged demons hovered in the sky above waiting like vultures for carrion souls. In the centre of the picture a ponderous cart, its sides covered in magical symbols, dominated the scene, in it stood a stern faced man surrounded by human and non-human adjutants. The cart was drawn by huge insect-like monsters. Demons cavorted like Bacchantes around this strange vehicle. Beneath the wheels of the cart and strewn behind and before it lay the detritus of a smashed civilisation, examples of music, learning, art and commerce, broken and abandoned. In the top right-hand corner of the picture the artist had portrayed a pleasant scene of tranquil fields and a sleepy looking village, as yet unscathed by the onslaught of the apocalypse. A river, stained red with blood, swept diagonally across the picture, bloated bodies floated near its banks and a solitary bridge blazed. It was a sobering sight. He stared at the painting feeling a combination of admiration at the masterly execution and horror at the subject matter. As he looked at the picture he seemed to see, magnified in the painting, the writhing turmoil of his own soul, a wriggling carcass rank with maggots. And he wondered, who can look with honesty into their own soul and remain sane? He wrenched his gaze from the figures, shuddering, there was something so unwelcome, so truthful about them; their veneer of dignity gone, like parents naked.

Stephen decided it was time to rest, he was becoming too absorbed in the painting, after working tirelessly on it for weeks he had an unpleasant sensation that it was taking him over, that it was becoming more real than reality itself; after all it is just one man's vision, he said to himself. What was so unsettling about the painting was the convincing realism of the fantastic and grotesque scene; it appeared not to be imagined but rather a glimpse of some terrible reality.

He felt a wave of exhaustion sweep over him reminding him of how hard he had been working on the picture. He left the house and walked into the garden to get some fresh air. A chill wind blew across the garden and an evening coolness descended around him. He paced the garden trying to clear his mind of thoughts of the painting but it clung to him, like a bubble it enclosed him, sealing him off from the rest of the world. He had to finish work on the picture, it was calling him back, demanding his attendance. With inexplicable feelings of remorse he returned to the workroom like an addict reaching for a fix.

All that remained was to uncover the lower right hand corner of the picture and then he would be released from his task. It was a small area and would not take long to do, then the whole picture would be revealed, retrieved from the oblivion of time; a kind of resurrection. As the light began to dwindle and die beyond the window panes the final portion of the picture was revealed. In the corner the artist had painted a marble plaque on which was illusionistically incised a Latin inscription. With a struggle Stephen slowly translated the words:

This is your Reward, Fire and Pestilence
Famine and War.
The Key has Turned, the Gates of Hell unlocked
Never will be Closed.

As he read the words they seemed to click into place in his mind as if he half knew them already. He beheld the painting and realised that it was not an imagined fantasy but a predicted future that was presented. His gaze was drawn to the central figure, standing proud and erect in the apocalyptic cart and finally he recognised the man. He rifled through the pages of an art book until he found a reproduction of the self-portrait of Jansz de Vries and there was the face, stern and unmoving, a relentless visage with eyes that shone with a kind of megalomaniac power, here was the mystical painter, in the midst of his creation, but it was not the Triumph of Good, it was the Triumph of Evil.

Gradually the surface of the picture began to move, a subtle loosening out of the figures from the ground as the illusion of three dimensionality became an illusion no longer. Stephen backed away from the panel, a cold fear gripping his stomach. He crouched in the corner staring across at the painting sitting on its easel like a squat sentinel. He could feel the painting becoming stronger, soaking up energy from the atmosphere. Slowly the head of the long dead painter turned and looked at him, the eyes fervent, the expression one of immense satisfaction. Without realising it Stephen started to pray, makeshift, unpractised, desperate prayers tumbled from his lips as he sank to the floor. The demon army marched forward, swords and halberds swished and clattered, victims screamed and the sweet stench of burning flesh filled the air.

He burst from his corner and ran from the room, screaming in terror like a child trapped within a nightmare, not noticing in his panic, a small demon leap from the picture and cling to his back as he ran past. He fled down the stairs searching for some place to hide, eventually wrenching open the cellar door and locking himself

inside. He sank down at the top of the cellar stairs, panting in the dark, trying to convince himself he was safe.

In the workroom the colours of the painting seemed to glow as its life throbbed and pulsed in the room. The scaly body of a demon leaped to the floor. Its horned head swivelled on its shoulders as it looked about the room. Behind it the river of blood flowed across the landscape and accumulated in the bottom corner of the picture where it swelled and dripped over the edge of the easel to splatter on the floor.

Stephen crouched behind the cellar door, his heart beats thundering in his body as he strained to listen, willing there to be silence; but he thought he heard something. There it was again, the sound of something coming down the stairs, the sound of footfalls crossing the hall, footfalls accompanied by the sharp rattle of claws on the wooden boards, like the sound of a big dog whose nails needed trimming. As he listened, appalled, he became conscious of something crawling on his back and hot breath on his neck and before he could cry out sharp taloned hands gripped him around the throat.

The following morning Chris hesitated on the doorstep of Stephen's house wondering whether she had chosen the right time to return for more of her things. She turned her key in the lock and entered. In the hallway she called out, 'Stephen?' but there was no reply. At the silence she relaxed, ascended the stairs and started to pack. He had not altered anything. Her clothes hung exactly where they had always been. Not for Stephen the enraged ripping up or defenestration of clothing; so like him, she thought, to do nothing.

She hurriedly packed her things, hoping to get everything she needed before he returned. With an effort she squeezed shut her suitcase and walked out onto the landing. Out of curiosity - one last peek, she told herself - she put her head around the doorway to the workroom where Stephen had always been so engrossed, so that she had felt her rivals not to be other women but old paintings; which was far more insulting. The room was deserted so she entered it. His work things lay scattered about as if he had just taken a short break. She looked at the picture that sat on the easel. Her brow furrowed as she stared at a completely blank panel. Down stairs the door to the cellar slowly and silently opened and a dishevelled form emerged from the blackness beyond. Chris was still puzzling over the blank picture when she heard the footsteps on the stairs.

'Oh, no,' she thought, 'he's come back, now we're in for a scene I suppose.'

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