

# Iris the Outsider

Simon Bucher-Jones  
(with HP Lovecraft)

"Wretched is she to whom memory brings only the bitter taint of lost loves and the sorrows of unhappiness. Desolate is she to whom childhood has only echoes of parties held in wastelands, and the constant mutter of the invisible sisterhood. Such a lot was mine, the lovelorn, the bittern, the twice-shy, the wallflower. (Do you see what I did there? That's a very clever pun on bittern, a mournful calling bird, and "once bitten" which precedes twice shy.)

And yet I am strangely content and cling desperately to those memories, when my mind momentarily threatens to reach beyond to the other, and the gin and splash runs low.

I know not where, or whether I was born, save that the Castle nursery was infinitely pink and infinitely vulgar, full of stenciled passages from Mother Goose, and having high ceilings where the eye could find only mechanical mobiles that shrieked and clattered. Flabby and detestable, the pigs and sheep in these mechanical torture-devices, grunted and baa-ed for the slaughter-house.

The plastic sheeting in the crumbling corridors seemed always hideously damp, and there was an accursed smell everywhere, as of the piled-up socks of dead generations. It was never light, so that I used sometimes to set fire to the curtains and gaze steadily at them for relief, nor was there any sun outdoors, since the giant and terrible toadstools, fenageek, and herbs grew high above the topmost accessible towers.

There was one pink tower, curse what I now know of symbolism, which reached above the toadstool-trees into the unknown outer sky, but that was partly ruined and could not be ascended save by a well-nigh impossible climb up the sheer wall, stone by stone.

I must have lived years in this place, but I cannot measure the time. Beings must have cared for my needs, yet I cannot recall any person except myself, or anything in the form of the living, but the noiseless plush toys and

cuddlies. I think that whoever nursed me must have been aged indeed, since my first conception of a living person was that of somebody mockingly like myself, yet shockingly unstylish.

To me there was nothing grotesque in the bone masks and shadow-gear that strewed some of the stone crypts deep down among the foundations, nor the rooms of costumes, and the portraits with their blank obsidian eyes. I fantastically associated these things with everyday events, and thought them more natural than the coloured pictures of living beings which I found in many of the nursery books.

From such books I learned all that I knew. No teacher urged or guided me, and I do not recall hearing any human voice in all those years - not even my own; for although I had read of speech, I had never thought to try to speak aloud, although I often tried to sing, and found the results pretty.

My aspect was a matter equally unthought of, for there were no mirrors in the castle, and I merely regarded myself by instinct as akin to the youthful figures I saw drawn and painted in the books. I felt conscious of youth because I remembered so little, and of beauty because of the ease of which I moved in my own skin, and in the tattered ball-gowns of the great wardrobes.

Outside, across the manicured grey-green fungus lawns and under the dark mute Toadstool trees, I would often lie and dream for hours about what I read in the books; and would longingly picture myself amidst gay crowds in the sunny world beyond the endless forests. Once I tried to escape from the forest, but as I went farther from the castle the shade grew denser and the air more filled with the cloying scent of lavender fear; so that I ran frantically back lest I lose my way in a labyrinth of fragrant silence.

So through endless twilights I dreamed and waited, though I knew not what I waited for. Then in the shadowy solitude my longing for light, grew so frantic that I could rest no more, and I lifted entreating hands to the single pink tower. I resolved to scale that tower, fall though I might; since it were better to glimpse society and perish, than to live without ever beholding day.

In the dank twilight I climbed the worn and aged stone stairs till I reached the level where they ceased, and thereafter clung perilously to small footholds leading upward. Ghastly and terrible was that dead, stairless

cylinder of rock; pink, deserted, and sinisterly mottled, but more ghastly and terrible still was the slowness of my progress; for climb as I might, the blank darkness overhead grew no thinner, and a new chill assailed me. I shivered as I wondered why I did not reach the light, and would have looked down had I dared. I fancied that night had come suddenly upon me, and vainly groped with one free hand for a window embrasure, that I might peer out and above, and try to judge the height I had once attained.

All at once, after an infinity of awesome, sightless, crawling up that concave and desperate precipice, I felt my head touch a solid thing, and I knew I must have gained the roof, or at least some kind of floor. In the darkness I raised my free hand and tested the barrier, finding it stone and immovable. Then came a deadly circuit of the tower, clinging to whatever holds the wall could give; till finally my testing hand found the barrier yielding, and I turned upward again, pushing the slab or door with my head as I used both hands in my fearful ascent. There was no light revealed above, and as my hands went higher I knew that my climb was for the nonce ended; since the slab was the trapdoor of an aperture leading to a level stone surface of greater circumference than the lower tower, no doubt the floor of some lofty and capacious observation chamber.

I crawled through carefully, and tried to prevent the heavy slab from falling back into place, but failed in the latter attempt. As I lay exhausted on the stone floor I heard the eerie echoes of its fall, hoped when necessary to pry it up again.

Believing I was now at prodigious height, I dragged myself up from the floor and fumbled about for windows, that I might look for the first time upon the sky, and the moon and stars of which I had read. But on every hand I was disappointed; since all that I found were bulky vehicles of red, bearing numerals, and cryptic destinations in archaic lettering, as it might be, Golder's Green, Putney, Marble Arch, or most odious of all Tooting Bec. I shuddered at the image of the desolate and whistling marshland this name evoked. What these vehicles were and how they found their way, without evident wings, to abide in this high apartment so many aeons cut off from the castle below, I could not conjecture.

Then unexpectedly my hands came upon a doorway, where hung a wooden door, rough with strange markings that I could not discern in the half light. Trying it, I found it locked; but with a supreme burst of strength I overcame all obstacles and dragged it open inward. As I did so there came to me the

purest ecstasy I have ever known; for shining tranquilly down in through a iron-grated door at the end of a short passage was the radiant full moon, which I had never before seen save in dreams and in vague visions I dared not call memories.

Fancying now that I had attained the very pinnacle of the castle, I commenced to move through the door; but the sudden veiling of the moon by a cloud caused me to stumble, and I felt my way more slowly in the dark. It was still very dark when I reached the grating - which I tried carefully and found unlocked, but which I did not open for fear of falling from the amazing height to which I had climbed. Then the moon came out.

Most demoniacal of all shocks is that of the abysmally unexpected and grotesquely unbelievable. Nothing I had before undergone could compare in terror with what I now saw; with the bizarre marvels that sight implied. The sight itself was as simple as it was stupefying, for it was merely this: instead of a dizzying prospect of toadstool-treetops seen from a lofty eminence, there stretched around me on the level through the grating nothing less than the solid ground of a deserted thoroughfare.

Half unconscious, I opened the grating and staggered out upon the white pavement that stretched away in two directions. From here I could see the wide and corrugated doors through which the red vehicles would have their ingress and their exits. To open them, somehow instinctively, was the work of a moment: my mind, stunned and chaotic as it was, still held the frantic craving for light; and not even the fantastic wonder which had happened could stay my course. I neither knew nor cared whether my experience was insanity, dreaming, or magic; but was determined to gaze on brilliance and gaiety at any cost. The controls of one of the red vehicles were simplicity itself to me, and I recognised it now as being an omnibus, a device which I knew from my latin texts to be capable of travelling anywhere in any manner. That this was not always true, I was to learn to my cost.

I knew not who I was or what I was, or what my surroundings might be; and consequently I wasn't the safest driver, though as I continued to roar along I became conscious of a kind of fearsome latent memory that made my progress not wholly fortuitous. I passed under an arch that was low enough to scrape the paint off the roof, and took a corner on two wheels. Soon I was out in open country; sometimes following the visible road, but sometimes leaving it curiously to smash through haystacks and barns full of chickens. Once I swooshed across a swift river where crumbling, mossy masonry told

of a bridge long vanished. I swear the wheels of the omnibus did not break the miniscus of the water.

Over two hours must have passed before I reached what seemed to be my goal, a building in a park, maddeningly familiar, yet full of perplexing strangeness to me. I saw that the castle of my memory had obviously been burned completely to the ground and replaced but never the less I recognised its identity at once. But what I observed with chief interest and delight were the open windows - gorgeously ablaze with light and sending forth sound of the gayest revelry. The words of an ancient chant imploring that the brown earth mother, raise her hallowed knees, reached me.

Advancing to the windows I looked in and saw an oddly dressed company indeed; making merry, and speaking brightly to one another. I had never, seemingly, heard human speech before and could guess only vaguely what was said. Some of the faces seemed to hold expressions that brought up incredibly remote recollections, others were utterly alien, particularly that of the white haired man in the frilly shirt to whom I took an instinctive liking.

I now stepped through the low window into the brilliantly lighted room, stepping as I did so from my single bright moment of hope to my blackest convulsion of despair and realization, and pausing only to brush broken glass off my dress. The nightmare was quick to come, for as I entered, there occurred immediately one of the most terrifying demonstrations I had ever conceived. Scarcely had I crossed the sill when there descended upon the whole company a sudden and unheralded fear of hideous intensity, distorting every face and evoking the most horrible screams from nearly every throat. Cries of 'Not again,' And 'Who let the dog out, who, who, who, who, who' resounded, although I later learned that that latter was a chorus in a popular hit of the time.

Flight was universal, and in the clamour and panic several fell in a swoon and were dragged away by their madly fleeing companions. Many covered their eyes with their hands, and plunged blindly and awkwardly in their race to escape, overturning furniture and stumbling against the walls before they managed to reach one of the many doors. The cries were shocking; and as I stood in the brilliant apartment alone and dazed, listening to their vanishing echoes, I trembled at the thought of what might be lurking near me unseen. At a casual inspection the room seemed deserted, but when I moved towards one of the alcoves I thought I detected a presence there but it was only a blue police-box. Then my eye fell on a hint of motion beyond the golden-

arched doorway leading to another and somewhat similar room. As I approached the arch I began to perceive the presence more clearly; and then, with the first and last sound I ever uttered - a ghastly ululation that revolted me almost as poignantly as its noxious cause - I beheld in full, frightful vividness the inconceivable, indescribable, and unmentionable monstrosity which had by its simple appearance changed a merry company to a herd of delirious fugitives.

I cannot even hint what it was like, for it was a compound of all that is uncouth, shambolic, half-made up, slovenly, and detestable. It was the mutton-dressed-as-lamb shade of decay, antiquity, and dissolution; the putrid, dripping eidolon of unwholesome revelation, the awful baring of that which the merciful earth should always hide. God knows it was not of this world - or no longer of this world - yet to my horror I saw in its flea-eaten-away and corset-revealing outlines a leering, abhorrent travesty on the human shape; and in its mouldy, disintegrating apparel an unspeakable quality that chilled me even more.

I was almost paralysed, but not too much so to make a feeble effort towards flight; a backward stumble which failed to break the spell in which the nameless, voiceless monster held me. My eyes bewitched by the glassy orbs which stared loathsomely into them, refused to close; though they were mercifully blurred, and showed the terrible object but indistinctly after the first shock. I tried to raise my hand to shut out the sight, yet so stunned were my nerves that my arm could not fully obey my will. The attempt, however, was enough to disturb my balance; so that I had to stagger forward several steps to avoid falling. As I did so I became suddenly and agonizingly aware of the nearness of the carrion thing, whose hideous hollow breathing I half fancied I could hear. Nearly mad, I found myself yet able to throw out a hand to ward off the foetid apparition which pressed so close; when in one cataclysmic second of cosmic nightmarishness and hellish accident my fingers touched the rotting outstretched paw of the monster beneath the golden arch.

I did not shriek, but all the fiendish ghouls that ride the nightwind shrieked for me as in that same second there crashed down upon my mind a single fleeting avalanche of soul-annihilating memory. I knew in that second all that had been, the bloody Doctor had left me in a stasis crib, with amnesia just so I'd miss the UNIT Christmas party, but more than that I recognized, most terrible of all, the unholy abomination that stood leering before me as I withdrew my sullied fingers from its own.

But in the cosmos there is balm as well as bitterness, and that balm is strong drink, perfume, cheap sex, and sheer, sheer gall. In the supreme horror of that second I forgot what had horrified me, and the burst of black memory vanished in a chaos of echoing images. In a dream I fled from that haunted and accursed pile, and ran swiftly and silently in the moonlight. When I returned to my bus, I realised how unerringly I had picked my true vehicle from where the Doctor had concealed it (in some purile version of Poe's the purloined letter it had amused him to leave my time-ship in a disused bus station). Bah, I swore he'd have reasons to hate bus stations after this!

Now I ride with the windows down and friendly traffic cops, wave as I steam passed, and I play by day amongst the jet-set and the novae rich (and that's not only a bad pun, all the best parties are at the end of the world) yet in my new wildness and freedom I almost welcome the bitterness of alienage.

For although these things have calmed me, I know always that I am an outsider; a stranger in this century and among those who are still tied to primitive ideas of fashion, beauty, and sexiness. This I have known ever since I stretched out my fingers to the abomination within that great gilded frame; stretched out my fingers and touched a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass."

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