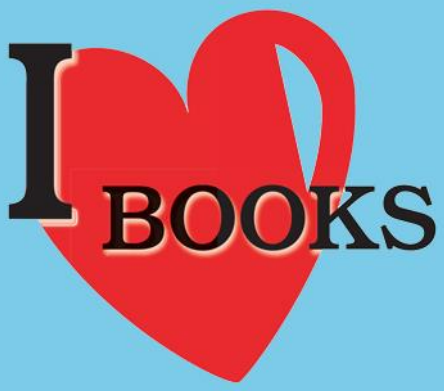


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Opening extract from

The Evil Within

Written by

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Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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First published in 2017 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

Text © 2017 Catherine MacPhail
Illustration © 2017 Barrington Stoke
Illustration by Dominik Nawrocki

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-587-8

Printed in China by Leo

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"A Fine Bogey Tale"- Strange Beginnings

The creature loped along the cobbled streets of the Old Town, darting between shadows, a thing of the dark. A cat was sheltering in a doorway when it caught sight of the creature and leaped to its feet. Its fur stood on end. It arched its back in anger, and in fear. It hissed as the creature reached out a hand with long, dirty fingernails to grab it. The cat was too fast tonight. It skidded on wet cobbles and disappeared into the foggy darkness.

The creature moved on.

A light appeared in a narrow window as a tattered curtain was drawn aside. A woman

looked out. The creature didn't hide. There was nothing for it to be afraid of. Its bold eyes moved to where the woman stood. She held her candle closer to the window and peered out into the gloom of the old close. Her eyes grew wide with fear, her mouth opened and she screamed.

"It's here! The monster is here again."

Candles appeared in other windows, other faces looked out. By then the creature had moved on, a dark shadow flitting fast along the narrow streets.

No one doubted the woman. Too many had seen that same creature on other nights to doubt her. It was hard to say if it was human. Its shadowy form was too twisted to be sure, but many had seen it creep along in the darkness, bent and twisted, like a creature out of a nightmare.

As the woman screamed the cry went up from street to street.

"The Beast is among us!"

☽

“It was a monster,” she says, “with fangs and claws and everything.”

Our young maid Mary Cole has come home with the story, and now she stands in the kitchen telling it to Mrs Kerr the cook with glee.

“But when the men went searching for it …” Mary snaps her fingers. “It was gone. Disappeared into the fog, like a spirit. The Old Town is alive with talk of it.”

“You said yesterday it was like an ape, with long arms dragging on the ground,” Mrs Kerr reminds her.

“I’ve not seen it myself,” Mary says, for she is an honest girl. “I’m just telling you what other people have seen.” She pauses for a moment. “But if it is a monster, maybe it can change its shape. Become anything it wants. An ape, a wolf, anything. And everyone agrees on one thing …”

Mary pauses again. She is truthful but she knows how to tell a story. Her tales bring the creature to life, here in our warm kitchen. "It isn't quite human," she says at last.

Mrs Kerr shakes her head and smiles. She likes Mary. Everyone does.

"You and your wild stories, Mary," she says. "You know the young master has terrible nightmares about this thing that's supposed to be roaming the Old Town."

Mary breaks in. "There's no 'supposed to be' about it, Mrs Kerr," she says. "It *is* wandering the streets ... hunting its prey."

Now Mary has gone too far. Mrs Kerr gives her an angry look. "The mistress does not want anyone talking about it," she says. "Not in this house."

Mary turns back to the dirty dishes. "I won't say another word about it then, Mrs Kerr," she says. "My lips are sewn closed like a corpse's shroud."

Mrs Kerr laughs. “I know you too well, Mary Cole,” she says. “An iron bolt welded across your mouth wouldn’t shut you up for long.” Then she grows serious. “But no more talk of this creature who walks the dark streets, not in this house. We do not want the young master to hear of it.”

But the young master has already heard.

I have been standing hidden, listening at the kitchen door. I want to hear the stories of this ‘creature’, as they call it, this Beast, this monster, this not-quite-human thing. Even if in the night these stories bring me nothing but terror.

☽

I wake up screaming, again. Sweat soaks my nightshirt and my sheets. In that moment between sleep and waking I am still half in the nightmare, half out. Something was chasing me. When I looked behind I could see nothing in the darkness, but I could hear pounding footsteps coming closer.

I shake myself awake, and look around my room to make sure I am home, safe. Early-morning light peeks round the heavy curtains at my window. My room is as it always is, my dresser is in the corner, the mirror is on the wall. I can see my own face in it. How afraid I look, sitting up, my face pale and thin. I tell myself over and over that I am home. I am safe. But, for all I know this, I cannot shake the terror I felt in that dream. The terror that someone was after me, that some strange creature was at my heels, almost upon me.

Then my heart sinks as I realise there was something else, some other terror I couldn't face. But what was it? The nightmare is never clear. Just as I am about to remember, the memory is snatched from me, like a scrap of paper blown away by a sudden wind.

My mother has heard my screams and comes running into my room. She draws back the red velvet curtains, and the grey light of an Edinburgh morning seeps into the room.

“Harry, Harry.” She comes and folds her arms around me to comfort me. “You’re safe now. Safe at home.” I lay my head on her shoulder. “It was only a dream, Harry,” she says. “One of your nightmares.”

How tired she must be of finding me, awake and shaking, but with no real memory of what has scared me.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” I say.

She tuts. “It’s not your fault – you have nothing to be sorry for. It’s that silly girl, Mary. She’s always carrying stories here from the Old Town. I’ve warned her before. I will dismiss her this time.”

“No.” I sit up and grip her soft hands. “You mustn’t do that, Mother. You can’t blame Mary. It’s my fault.”

It is true. I listen to Mary’s stories even when I know they are no good for me. I cannot get them out of my mind. They affect me so. I have too much imagination, my mother says. But how

could I not listen? These stories are wonderful for a boy and I cannot resist.

By day, the stories thrill me, fill me with such a sense of adventure. I see myself as the hero who would be the one to find the monster. The only one brave enough to challenge him. In my mind's eye I see myself run after him into the fog. I am on his heels, almost upon him. I trap him in one of the dark closes. He tries to escape, but I battle him with my bare hands, and I win. I am a hero, the one who saves my city.

But then it is night, and darkness falls, and I have no control over my dreams. Then it is only terror I feel when I think of the strange creature in the Old Town. In my dreams, I do not chase him. In my dreams, he chases me. There is something else too, some feeling I cannot quite understand. Try as I might to remember it, that feeling is always gone as soon as I wake, before I can catch hold of it.

"This time I won't dismiss her," my mother says, as if she is granting Mary a pardon. But I know she would never dismiss Mary. Like Mrs

Kerr, she likes her too much. “I wish she was not such a chatterbox,” my mother says as she stands and smooths her skirts.

After Mother has gone, I get up from my bed and stand on my stone terrace to breathe in the morning air. I love that my bedroom has this terrace that looks onto our walled garden with the fountain hidden among the flowers. No one can see me here. I am invisible, all alone, yet still in the heart of this splendid city. If only I could banish the nightmares, I would be so very happy.