

The Fear

by Adam Casalino

Alastair the butler always walked fast as he crossed the open courtyard where he watched his former masters die. The thick, marble floors had been long scrubbed clean of the stains, the walls were painted afresh, and even the grotesque, ancient fountain was removed--but in the dark none of that mattered. A winter wind chilled the aperture, whipping up small pieces of debris and shuddered the gnarled tree that climbed up the North corner. In Alastair's mind it was happening all over again.

His trembling hands lifted the iron bar across the far door and he feverishly stepped through. He let the door clanging loudly shut; for a moment his sensibilities were dwarfed in the panic. Alastair composed himself, waited for the trembling to subside, and continued with his duties. In the beginning the perfunctory tasks that filled his day kept his mind from wandering to where it wanted to go. After so many years that was not enough, so began numbering the steps he took in the vast mansion.

One hundred and forty steps from the antechamber to the guest rooms. Fifty steps as he tidied the beds and furniture. Every groan and creak was well-catalogued in his mind; nothing took him by surprise. The wind in the chimney moans every ten minutes; the first and fifth steps on the West stairs creak subtly; the mirror in the server's corridor reflects the image of Madam Susan, bleeding from the throat.

Alastair dropped his serving tray. Instinctively he bent down, collecting the scattered silverware and broken dishes. Mustering a crazed courage, he turned back to the mirror. Only the image of a small, shaking man, stared back into his eyes. His hands trembled again as he retrieved a handkerchief from his chest pocket. They trembled as he wiped his face and lifted the tray from the floor.

The furnace in the basement was malfunctioning. Alastair put in his tattered gloves and slunk through the gray, dusty chamber. There the shadows were deepest in all the house. His meticulous mind could not abate the glaring eyes that watched him from the dark corners. The heater was at very back of the basement, rattling and grumbling cantankerously. Alastair wrestled with it casing. He stopped to glance over his shoulder, just missing sight of the figure darting back into the recesses of the room.

Outside by the back entrance the woodcutters left a mess again. Alastair, missing his gloves, grappled with the stray lumber, wearily stacking them into piles. A frosty, autumn wind was moaning through the trees. In his right ear, he heard the voice of Master Thomas groan in agony. Alastair left the wood and rushed into the house, letting the back door crash shut.

The main corridor was the dirtiest and Alastair always seemed to be sweeping it. The scratching of the broom filled the lonely silence, met only by his footsteps. He reached the far end of the hallway with his large pile of dirt. At the other end he heard

high, clicking steps, slow and rhythmic, moving towards him. Alastair dropped the broom and stared down the corridor. He saw no one. The steps grew louder. He left the dirt where it was and fled the hall.

It was the Fifteenth of December and Alastair could not work. He laid in his bed, gripping the covers with his frozen, white hands. Almost eleven-thirty; it would be ten years since the day. He clenched his teeth and shut his eyes tight as the sounds grew around him. Alastair held his breath and told himself it was all in his mind, when they started to speak.

First they called his name. Alastair rolled in bed and convinced himself it was the wind in the timbers. There came steps from outside his bedroom door. He pulled the covers over his head. The doorknob slowly turned and the door creaked open. Two pairs of footsteps walked into the room. They called his name again.

The sweat covering Alastair's face chilled at the sound. It dripped down his spine, freezing his back. Master Thomas said his name. He did not answer. Madam Susan spoke; her voice was garbled from wound in her throat. Alastair did not move. Finally Master Thomas' voice rose to a shout. Alastair's blankets were pulled from the bed. He sat up and he saw them.

They stood at the end of his bed. Master Thomas wore his neat, black suit. The tie was undone and his shoes were covered in mud. The side of his skull was still smashed; the left side of his face dark and sunken in. Madam Susan was still in her white evening gown, stained down to the feet in her blood. She still was trying to speak, though little sound was heard.

"Why did you not answer us, Alastair?" asked Master Thomas.

"I cannot see you this way, sir" Alastair moaned.

"But you are our servant," Master Thomas replied, "we have need of you."

"No... you do not need me anymore. You have need for nothing."

"Alastair," Master Thomas said, a tinge of sorrow in his voice, "what are we to do?"

"You must leave me alone. I am no longer your servant."

Master Thomas and Madam Susan grew silent. They stared at Alastair dejectedly, their dead eyes cold and searching.

"If that is what you wish, Alastair," said Master Thomas, "we will go."

Slowly, his former masters left the bedroom. Alastair followed the sound of their footsteps until they reached the end of the servants wing and disappeared. Cautiously,

he gathered his blankets from the floor and crawled into bed. That night the noise in the chimney was only the wind.

Alastair the butler returned to his methodical tasks in the large, empty mansion. He ceased counting his steps. The furnace stopped malfunctioning. The woodcutters even stacked their lumber. Quietly he swept the main corridor; no footsteps came. The giant house was calm and undisturbed. Alastair grew unsettled.

On the fifteenth of December Alastair found himself in the courtyard. It was dark and the wind whipped wildly. Alastair just stood silently in the opening, waiting for something, but it never came. He sighed to himself and shook his head. Slowly he crossed the courtyard, opened the outer doorway, and left the mansion. He never returned.