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About the Book

Imprisoned in a dank cottage deep in the English countryside Arthur Doyle lies half-unconscious and at the mercy of his nemesis - Cream. Gathering all his dwindling strength he smashes a window and crawls to safety. With a sharp piece of broken glass he awaits his torturer's return, but the man has eluded him once more, leaving behind the rotting body of a local miser and thwarted in his attempt to obtain money for his 'deadly' cause. Securing the help of the remarkable pioneering criminal investigator Dr Joseph Bell the two men return to the scene of the crime but find few clues. London reveals little more except the possibility that their archenemy has gone to the Suffolk coast under the name of Dr Mere. Full of legend the local community fear the 'Dunwich witch' has returned with her evil curse. A man has died in suspicious circumstances and it seems many are unwilling to talk about it. More hideous crimes are yet to come as Dr Bell and Doyle move closer and closer to confronting Cream: Bell to capture a notorious villain, Doyle to avenge himself for a crime which robbed him of his future happiness. Dr Bell and Arthur Doyle are reunited once again in their quest to hunt down a criminal mastermind in a sinister tale of intrigue and violence, which reaches a terrifying and dramatic climax.

About the Author

David Pirie was a journalist and film critic before he became a screenwriter. Just a few of his numerous credits are the BAFTA-nominated adaptation for the BBC of *The Woman in White* and his collaboration with Lars Von Trier on the script of the Oscar-nominated film *Breaking the Waves*. David Pirie lives in Somerset. *The Dark Water* is his third novel.

Also by David Pirie

The Patient's Eyes
The Night Calls

For Burton Pirie

The Dark Water

The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes

David Pirie



arrow books

PART ONE:

THE PURGATORY



THE WAKENING

The room was in darkness. I felt that even without opening my eyes. Sometimes there were sounds, though none that meant anything. I had no sense of physical space. When proper memory threatened to drift into my consciousness, I resisted it at once, knowing how unwelcome it might prove. For the moment, I wanted only the dark.

So I slept again, I have no idea how long. Until at last, reluctantly, I opened my eyes. The room was black as I had anticipated and now I was forced to wonder where I was. As some sense of identity started to return, I guessed I had been taken ill with a fever, for the bedclothes smelt rank. But I could not be in the familiar bedroom of my house in Southsea: for one thing this place was too dark. And then I recalled the lodgings in London and my short-term position as a locum at a riverside practice.

Yet I was sure I could not be lying in the tiny bedroom I had rented from the Morland family. It was too quiet here and the bed was strange. After a time, I forced myself away from its lumpy pillow but was quite unprepared for what followed. My head throbbed with a violent pain. This was bad enough but what was worse, I suddenly recalled my last few minutes of consciousness.

Their climax was a face, the face of the only man I have ever met who deserves worse than the description 'evil'. I first knew Thomas Neill Cream in Edinburgh, indeed we had been friends until I discovered that he was a murderer. And then he murdered the woman I loved.

I swore to avenge her while my teacher at Edinburgh, Dr Joseph Bell – who had recruited me as his clerk and allowed me to help in his criminal investigations – declared a fight against the future of such crimes without motive. But in 1878, Cream disappeared into the American continent, sending only tormenting notes and, on one occasion, a lethal instrument that was designed to kill me.

Despite this, neither Bell nor I had forgotten our quest and chance had brought us together recently during a London case, when I became convinced Cream had returned to England. The Doctor disagreed. He was sure the strings were being pulled from far away and finally persuaded me he was right before he said his farewells.

I walked back to my lodgings at the Morland house, a safe haven where Sally Morland, whom I loved as a friend and greatly admired, greeted me with the news that an American uncle, whom she sometimes mentioned, had made a surprise visit.

I thought nothing of this at the time but now, as I recalled it, I felt the hair stand on the back of my neck. Once again I saw Sally's flushed excitement, her eyes laughing in the light that flooded the hall from the candles that celebrated the uncle's visit. She had, I remembered, given me a cordial, a green drink he had prepared, which she said was part of the surprise and which tasted refreshing and bitter.

Then I had entered the living room and her children were there, laughing, with their oranges and nuts, and a figure in the rocking chair had turned around, smiling to see me. It was Cream.

Just before unconsciousness, I grasped some of it. How months earlier he must have set in train the events that led up to this moment; how he had befriended the Morlands (for the 'uncle' was only a family friend) and discreetly provided my name to a nearby practice.

All of this I saw with a kind of passive awe before losing my senses. Now, lying here in the darkness, I felt terror.

Cream was an expert poisoner, indeed it was his preferred instrument of murder. If he had intended me to die, he could certainly have done it with his green cordial. Which could only mean his plans were more extensive. Was he somewhere beside me now in this black space?

The prospect was so awful I tried to gather my strength, forcing my head higher, opening my eyes as wide as I could. Still I could see nothing, only vague insubstantial shapes. There was a low noise from somewhere outside, perhaps a wind.

'Are you there?' The words came out as a whisper. My throat was parched and I began to sense body pains, no doubt masked by the poison. It occurred to me he could have done anything, even severed a limb. I tried to move my legs. They seemed to function, but then a man feels his legs long after they are amputated, so I touched them quickly. Thank God they were whole but my legs and arms were feeble. I noticed too that I was drenched in perspiration. 'Are you there?' I tried to shout. There was nothing. Absolute silence.

I knew I must try to move though I felt so weak, even the simplest movement was horrible. I forced myself up further. And for the first time I realised that I was still wearing clothes, a shirt and undergarment, and the blankets on me were heavy.

Shutting my mind to the stench of this bed, I forced myself into a sitting position. It was still dark but there was a slight movement in the shadows before me and I expected him to step forward. Again something moved, this time accompanied by a low sound. I decided it must be some kind of reflection, and when it came again I was sure. The sound was wind, the shadows were of branches. That meant somewhere behind me was a window. Perhaps I could reach it.

I summoned all my strength and pushed my left leg out from under the blankets. It found support below me but I

knew it would give way if I put any weight on it. I paused, not sure how to proceed, and suddenly had to endure a violent bout of shivering. This made me swing the other leg down. But, even with both feet on the ground, it was obvious there was no way I could stand and I sank quickly to a kneeling position, clutching the bedclothes.

My head was facing the bed, so if I crawled to my right I should come to the window that cast the reflection. I turned my body, registering the floor was stone and cold to the touch. If Cream were here, how he would be enjoying this humiliation. In London I had felt such an overwhelming presence of the man, now I could not sense him.

I began to crawl but it was painfully slow. As a distraction, I made myself think more about that last evening. My main dread was that Sally Morland and her children had been given the poison. I was sure my glass of cordial had been poured before I got there. Obviously he wanted everything to be normal, so no harm could have come to the Morlands up to that point. This gave me hope but I had also to face the plain truth, which was that Cream would think nothing of slaughtering them all.

Here was the worst possibility for me, far worse than the fact he might be watching me now. There had been nothing improper in my friendship with Sally Morland, whose world was built around her two young children and her husband. But she was so full of transparent joy and mischievousness, and reminded me so much of my first love, that when I began to suspect Cream had returned to the capital, I made a private pledge. Namely that if Sally Morland or her family came to harm because of me, then I must be better off embracing solitude, anonymity or even death. How could I do otherwise if all I brought was misery to those I cared for?

My movement forward was still agonisingly slow. As yet I had come to no furniture but sensed a shape ahead. Meanwhile, I took some small consolation from the

knowledge that even Cream could not have the slightest suspicion of my private thoughts about Sally Morland. Therefore, why should he bother with her? It was true he often killed for little reason but the wholesale slaughter of a respectable London family is not a common event. It would cause a full-scale alarm; and both of us would be key suspects. Would even Cream risk a manhunt on this scale when he merely needed to tell the Morlands I was in need of treatment and carry me anywhere he wished?

Of course I knew the answer. Yes he would happily take such a risk if he thought it would hurt me. It came down to that alone. And it was just at this point in my reflections that my hands felt cold stone blocking my way. I had reached a wall.

From above my head came the sound of wind. I succeeded in walking my hands up the wall till I was kneeling and finally, using this support, I pulled myself to my feet. At first I swayed and nearly fell but I had the wall to steady me and I leant against it, breathing heavily. There was cold air here, which cleared my head. I reached out and touched a curtain and then the ledge of a window. The material was rough and quite thick but I pushed it back. Outside there was just enough moonlight to show me I was at ground level and a dank overgrown wilderness lay beyond the window. A slight wind shook the branches of a small sycamore tree, the source of the moving shadow.

My last conscious memory had been of night-time, but I was sure this could not possibly be the same night. It was not just my pain and hunger. The air here was only mildly cold, yet the night at the Morlands' had been frosty, indeed there was snow on the streets. How long had I been unconscious and where was I?

As I stared, it did not even seem to me that I could be sure this was London. There was no gaslight, indeed not a flicker of artificial light anywhere. Of course I might be looking out on some large garden or park, but it hardly

seemed cultivated and there were no lights of any kind from other buildings.

I tried to open the window but it was nailed shut so I turned back to the room. The opposite wall looked to be bare and without openings of any kind. In fact, as I discovered later, there was a small high window on that side but nothing else. Beside the bed, I could make out an armchair and, beyond that, a table. I staggered forward and rested myself on the back of the chair, which was ancient and badly in need of upholstering. This was no smart establishment, it was a hovel and how many hovels in the heart of London could boast a large garden out of sight of any houses?

To my right, I saw an old screen of some kind. Past that I thought I could make out the outline of a door. Knowing I had to reach it, I took a pace and nearly fell but managed to keep upright. I staggered three more paces until I was there and the handle supported me. But the thing was solid oak with two huge locks and, of course, no keys. I tried a feeble tug, but I might as well have been tugging at brickwork. In my present condition there was no hope here.

From somewhere beyond the door came an evil smell and I staggered back to the armchair where it was less pronounced. As I sat, knowing my strength was nearly exhausted, a new sensation assailed me. For suddenly I smelt and then spied food on the table beside the chair. Here was a bowl of milk, a half loaf of bread, even a slice of bacon. It was not very fresh but I was ravenous and did not care. I lifted the milk with trembling hands and drank it down. Then I clawed at the bread, which was hard but otherwise good, before gnawing the bacon. I swallowed as much as I could, wondering if, now that I had some relief from my hunger, I could smash the window.

But I knew in my heart I was far too weak. Even lifting that bowl of milk had been an effort. Already, despite the food, I could feel consciousness ebbing away, and I

stumbled back to my bed. A little more rest, I told myself, allowing a chance for the nourishment to do its work, and surely I could get up enough strength to break that window and get out before he returned.

But now, once again, the darkness descended upon me. It was many hours before I regained consciousness and heard what I took to be the noise of rain. Outside it seemed night but not, I was sure, the same night. My head was heavy and I felt a curious lassitude. What did it matter in the end if he came back here to torture and kill me? Ultimately, whatever happened, I would die and sink into this. What reason on earth was there then to fight the sensation of numbness in my limbs?

It was only when I thought of my enemy that I began to distrust this feeling. Slowly I became aware there was a flickering in the room behind me. With some difficulty I turned my throbbing head around and found that someone had lit a candle, now almost extinguished.

A fear ran through me, which at least dispelled some of that hideous complacency. Yet I could see nobody. Using all my strength, I raised myself up. There was the armchair I had inspected previously, the table with the bread and milk, now replenished. And the screen. But nothing else. Was he hiding? There was no reason why he should bother and the candle had burnt a good way down.

Of course I wanted to slump back into the darkness, but the shock of knowing he had been here sharpened my senses. I had to eat and drink. So again I got my feet to the ground and now, with the benefit of light, I dragged myself to the table and slumped into the chair. Suddenly from somewhere came a sound, a soft rumbling clattering sound. I tensed, waiting for footsteps, and the turn of a key in the lock, but the noise receded. I decided it had been a cart on the road outside.

Turning back to the table, I got the milk to my lips and drank some of it down. It had been heavily sugared and I

was glad of it. Then I put out a hand and pawed the bread into my mouth.

Suddenly I stopped. The bread was rough-grained and wholesome, but I had begun to recognise a taste. It was a chalky bitter undertaste I knew only too well. With fury, I spat what was left of my mouthful on to the table and lashed out with my hand in an attempt to knock the milk jug to the ground. But - fortunately as it happened - the effort only made me lose my balance and I missed the jug altogether, falling hard to the floor.

How could I have been such a fool? Only my own ravenous hunger and the weakness of my mind could possibly have blinded me to what was obvious. Here I was, meekly accepting day after day the sustenance of an accomplished poisoner. The bread was certainly saturated in laudanum and the sugared milk would have contained even more. Little wonder every time I got up, I seemed to be slipping further into the darkness. As long as I survived on this fare, I was his prisoner and he could visit me whenever he wished and do whatever he wished. The diet would only make me weaker and weaker until I was a passive craving thing, entirely in his hands. No doubt he was looking forward to that, and would arrive soon enough to enjoy it.

In a feverish burst of activity, I determined now I must get out at all costs, even if I collapsed in the rain. I forced myself to my feet.

What I needed was an implement of some kind but there was nothing that I could see. The door was hopeless. The window must be the best opportunity and I turned back in that direction. But to my dawning horror I could already feel the effects of my meal. The black waters were rising in my brain and my feet felt like blocks of wood. There was no chance of fighting this. As it stole over me, I began to wonder if even my own memories were at fault. Perhaps this nightmare of Cream's return was some phantom

conjured up by the laudanum. Had I merely, as Bell once feared, succumbed to addiction?

But then my eye fell on the milk and the bread. What addict ever went to the trouble of lacing his food with the stuff or of hiding the precious bottles? No, this was his work and at all costs I must hold on to my reason.

The only point in my favour had to be the realisation of what he was doing to me. With the last of my strength I disposed of the bread under the bed and spilt some of the milk there too. Let him suppose I had consumed most of my meal, while in truth I had taken much less. This was my final desperate thought as I collapsed.

When I woke up, he was by my bed. And he was singing.



THE VISIT

And one could whistle
And one could sing
And one could play on the violin
Such joy there was at my wedding
On Christmas day in the morning

It was the cruellest thing he could have sung. Of course he knew it was a song Elsbeth and I had shared in Edinburgh. He had killed her savagely for no reason. And now he was above me as I lay there, carolling it in his soft voice. The features I saw as I opened my eyes were as handsome as ever, the thick black hair swept back from his face. I had always imagined by now that face would reflect all the cruelty and insanity of his acts but it did not. In fact, as I watched, his features shone with an almost innocent merriment.

‘Doyle,’ he broke off from his singing. ‘You recall the melody, I am sure.’ With some effort, because I could not bear to lie prostrate in front of him, I forced myself up.

He reached back for something behind him and I braced myself. At this point I was still so weak he could inflict any wounds he liked on me. But, when he turned back, there was only a cup in his hand.

‘I trust you are not too tired,’ he said. ‘You have had a strenuous time.’

‘Perhaps,’ I said at last, and the words came more firmly than I expected, ‘you could tell me why.’ It was daylight I

now registered, the sun was shining into the room, making his hair gleam.

He laughed. 'Why?' he said. He got up from the chair full of energy, the cup still in his hand, and took a few paces away and then back again. 'Because it was necessary to bring you here in the first place. That in itself took some trouble, though hardly yours. I had a good coachman but I had to carry you inside here myself, for, as you will recall, you were not well. In fact, you are still out of sorts. You must drink. I will have some too, the morning train here is tiresomely early.'

My head was clearer now but I knew it was important he did not see this; he must think me still under the influence. It was the tiniest of things, but it gave me a hope of deceiving him. As he sat down again on a chair he must have placed by the bed, I took the cup with a shaking hand. That shaking was real enough. Then I tilted it and pretended to drink the milk deeply, making sure some dribbled from the corner of my mouth. In fact, I took little but as I returned it, his eyes were not on the cup but on me. The hand was still shaking and I managed to slop a quantity on the floor, which was not difficult for I was so weak I barely needed to act it. Still he stared at me with concentration, as if I were a difficult case in his surgery.

'Again I ask why?' I said with a deliberate slur. I was happy to let him think I was weaker than I was.

'I think you must agree,' he said, 'it was the greatest joke in all the world. I wanted to renew our acquaintance. But I had no wish to be caught. So I befriended the Morlands. And it was a trifling matter to circulate your name to the practice.'

The mention of the Morlands sent a chill through me but the last thing I wanted was for him to see this. I lolled my head as if fighting sleep. 'What do you want?' I said.

He sprang up again and he laughed now. 'You have soiled your clothes, Doyle, do you know that? You are truly a

wretched man. Nobody cares for you, you have no loved ones at home waiting, nobody misses you. You could rot here for years and nobody would care.' He turned back, put his head close to me. 'No, not even your mother.'

My heart leapt; this was a new tone. I cursed myself, for he saw my reaction at once.

'Oh, she is at Masongill where Dr Waller keeps her very happy. They would hardly miss you.'

This was painful. Of course I knew Cream had heard of our family 'lodger', Dr Waller, but I never dreamt he would know Waller had entered into an affectionate relationship with my mother, a relationship even I did not understand or like to contemplate. I turned my head away, for I could not bear to see Cream's eyes burning with laughter.

'Oh yes,' he went on, 'I know. And as I say it leaves you with nobody, Doyle. Nobody except me.'

'I want no part of you.' The emotion in my words was genuine, for I saw I had been right about the drug. Breaking my body was too easy for this man, he wanted to break my spirit first and utterly reduce me. I tried desperately to take my mind off his words by analysing his motive. Something about me must have goaded him so deeply. Why otherwise should he have gone to such lengths to hurt me? There was a key here if I could find it.

His expression had become serious. 'That is a lie. You and your precious Dr Bell have tried to find me for years, you can hardly deny it, though I have to say it has occasioned me little inconvenience. Even in Edinburgh I was ahead of you both.'

'We rid the city of you.' It was feeble but to my amazement his mouth tightened a little.

'I do not understand how. Of course the man thinks he is so clever with his chemistry and his clues and his endless reasoning, yet how could he possibly understand me? How could you?' It was only a flash but it gave me something. He evidently felt he had been defeated by Bell and myself

in Edinburgh, for we nearly caught him and he had to flee. This explained some of his desire to hurt me, as did the fact we had once been close friends with a shared passion for the stories of Poe. Only, as I later realised, we came at them from opposite perspectives. He actually admired their cruelties and hoped I would join him in imitating them.

As I reflected on this, he was pointing out he could do what he wished with me. 'I can end your life now. Perhaps it is better I should.'

The sun gleamed on the bed and I noticed the angle of light was higher so it was rising, which meant that the window I had looked out of must face east. I was trying at all costs to find some distraction. I hated to give this man the satisfaction of observing my fear.

From his pocket he had drawn a surgical blade almost seven inches long with a short handle. He placed it against my neck and there was a stab of pain as he cut the surface skin. I had no time to defend myself even if I had the strength. But the blade stopped just at the edge of my windpipe.

'I believe I prefer another place to cut than the obvious,' he said, pulling down the covers. And, with a sweeping movement, he stabbed both my breast and stomach and then the top of my left leg. I cried out, for here he slanted the knife a little and went deeper, opening a real wound and causing a burning pain that made me writhe. Then suddenly he seemed to tire of it and pulled the knife out. For a while he watched me twisting in agony before he wiped the knife with a white handkerchief and returned it to his pocket.

'No,' he said, 'it will be far more fun to keep you a little while yet. After all, we have so much to talk about. Do you think I am mad?'

I was gasping for breath, but would not in any case have deigned him with a reply. I had no intention of satisfying his vanity or his need for debate. 'I can justify everything I do,'

he went on, 'and in a way neither you nor Bell can refute. Your country here is rotten, it is eroding before your eyes, eaten by the sea. Why, there are places literally collapsing into the water. A fine symbol of the corruption of England's soul. But there is far more to it than that. I am the future, you are the past. I am a child of the next century. I celebrate its freedom, you are imprisoned in the ludicrous codes and restrictions and superstitions of this one. When you are dead there will be many more like me; fifty years after your death ten times more than that. And their code is mine. I will tell you what it is: Do not dream it, live it.'

'We will fight it,' I said.

'Ah,' he replied. 'Yes there was some reference to that in a letter Bell wrote that I once saw. "The fight against the future." It sounds very grand. But you might as well stand on the seashore and fight the tides. Or howl at the moon.'

I was losing consciousness now and he smiled at me almost tenderly. 'I have enjoyed our little talk, though your life has been so wretched, you are less fun than you were at university. You must sleep now. I will see you soon enough. One more talk, perhaps two, before I kill you. Not with my knife. I was intending to take a limb today but I think instead I will roast you alive in the morning for your heresies. Then I might take the dish cold to your mad father and get him to eat you. The regime in such asylums is foul; I am sure he would eat anything so he might as well eat his son.'

Thankfully I lost him here, the drug and the shock of the pain had done their work and I went into the darkness. When I awoke, my leg was still throbbing but I reached down to find it had been neatly bandaged, and my other wounds, though more superficial, were tended too. Evidently he did not want me to die from loss of blood while he was absent. After a time, I decided from the evidence of the bed and from my own senses that I had not lost very much blood. The bandage of the deeper cut in my leg had

stanching the flow, while the other wounds would leave scars but were less deep.

My head felt clearer and I forced my legs out of the bed to the floor. I dreaded the wounded leg would give way. It nearly did and I had to put my hands on the chair to support myself. But after a time I was able to shuffle forward. There was still pain, but I thought I would be able to walk and, for the first time in my life, gave thanks for the expansiveness of my enemy's imagination. There would have been little hope if he had stuck with his original plan of taking a limb.

Outside it was dark, but the night was clear and the room, which I now felt sure was a cottage, was illuminated by moonlight. My first task was to conduct a proper search, above all I must try to analyse his movements to see if there was some pattern. From what I could understand, he always came in the morning, he had spoken of the tiresome morning train. That could only mean there were few other trains, for he would do nothing tiresome if he could avoid it.

I must hope, therefore, I had until morning and I moved quickly. The food had been left out for me again. I took the precaution of emptying the milk into a coal scuttle that was full of coal, for nobody had made a fire. I hid the bread at the bottom of it.

I was already sure there was nothing of consequence near where I slept and I had come to hate those stinking sheets, but I was uncertain about what lay beyond the screen. As I passed it, the same sickening smell returned to me, making me almost retch, but I could see nothing to tell me what was causing it for this side of the room was almost bare. I pushed my hands along part of the floor and found only a carpet nail from which I assumed someone had recently pulled up a carpet and removed it.

The door again proved hopeless as I already knew, which left the window behind my bed. Surely there must be

something in here to smash its panes. I returned to the coal scuttle, pleased my leg was becoming more malleable though I was still very weak. The lumps of coal in it were small but they could surely break a window. I got one in my hand and found I could lift it. At last, I thought, I could do something.

But, just as I got to my feet, there came a sudden noise, the last noise in the world I wanted to hear. The key had turned in the lock and now the door opened.



THE VIGIL

My first instinct was to face him with what little strength I had. At least I could fling the coal at his head. That was my thought as, for a moment, his view was blocked by the door which opened inside. But in that moment, I knew I would have no chance at all. I could not even surprise him, for he would see me long before I reached the door or even the screen. And, since he was fit, healthy and armed the only result would surely be that he would kill me at once. Though I hated it, my only hope must lie in deception. I dropped the coal and lunged into the bed.

I had only a few seconds but I was quiet and, because of the angle of the door and the depth of the shadows, I was sure he had not seen me. I lay under the covers, eyes shut, as he closed the door carefully behind him and walked over to inspect me. Then he lit a candle, put it on the table and examined the remains of the food. This seemed to satisfy him, it would certainly explain my immobile shape in the bed. I felt the light of the candle full on me and sensed him inches away, staring at my face. Perhaps, if I remained too rigid, he would see through me so I pretended to stir slightly. This was a mistake.

‘I hope you have had enough milk and bread,’ he said. ‘I am glad to see it is finished. Even so, you are not sleeping as deeply as I would prefer.’

I heard him opening something. And then I felt a bottle pressed against my lips. ‘I am sure you can hear me, Doyle. Swallow this down, swallow it now.’

Of course it could have been strychnine, but I soon recognised the sticky bitter undertaste of the laudanum mixed in with the alcohol. There was a greater concentration of the stuff here than in the milk and I knew I must not drink it, yet to show any resistance would be to give away the sole chance I had.

In the agony of this moment I pressed my fist together and felt a sharp stab of pain, it was the carpet nail I held. The pain cleared my mind. I took several apparent gulps of the liquid, allowed some to go down but kept most in my mouth as I slumped back in what I tried to pretend was total unconsciousness, my head lolled away from him, half off the pillow. I heard him put the bottle down, and the candlelight was no longer on me as I slowly spat that noxious mixture out into my pillow and the blanket. I knew the smell would never alert him, for it was just another foul odour in that bed and the pillow was in shadow.

After a time, I heard him walking about and noted – rather to my surprise – he was tapping the walls and moving back and forth around the space beyond the screen. He seemed a little out of sorts too. More than once I heard a muffled curse.

At last he came back to me. ‘You are a poor sort of opponent, Doyle. I can smell the blankets are soiled again, I had hoped for something better. In the morning, when I have time to make a fire, I will come back and kill you, for I have had quite enough of this place, which has yielded only the pleasure of torturing you. I believe it will be exquisite and I meant what I said about your father. He will have his son for dinner. I am sure he will relish it. And of course after he dines he will discover the nature of the meat he so richly enjoyed.’

There was a lull then, for he moved away and I heard no more of him. The laudanum I had swallowed caused me to sleep though, because of my evasions, not I think for very long. When I awoke it was still dark but my memory was

clear. I waited, but no sound came. Soon I was convinced he had left.

Slowly I raised myself up and found I was able to get to my feet and that I felt stronger. Partly no doubt this was because the effects of the drug were lifting but also because I was spurred by the knowledge that here was my last chance. I was ravenously hungry and my throat burnt, but I had taken only a few sips of laudanum in two days and I had a sense of myself again.

For the first time, I told myself that so far as hunger was concerned I had known this kind of want before and had got through it before. There was a time in my practice when there had been simply no money for food and I had gone for days without it. That had been hard but I had coped. Admittedly, I had wounds to contend with now but, thanks to his games, they were not crippling. My wounded leg was sore but it worked. I would just have to summon up all my courage in the battle to live. This notion reminded me of all the stories I was told as a child about my great-uncle who led the Scottish brigade at Waterloo and I rejoiced that, despite the pain, the hunger and even the thirst, at least I had been strong enough to throw off that awful weakness and passivity.

Not wishing to linger any longer by that disgusting bed, I found and lit the candle with matches that lay beside it. The bread and milk were there as ever but I did not even bother to pretend I had touched them. Taking up the candle, I made a quick tour but all was exactly as before, though the smell by the door had become so indescribably putrid that I began to wonder if Cream had slaughtered an animal and left it there as an additional taunt.

There was nothing here beyond what I already knew and I did not intend to wait. Going back to the bed, I stared down at the clothes and blankets heaped upon it and found to my joy some garments had been cast aside at the

bottom. No doubt he had thrown my shoes away on the journey but here was a pair of trousers and an ancient coat.

Once I had them on I felt far better but, for the moment, I would have to proceed barefoot even though my feet were becoming cold.

I turned back to the coal scuttle, seizing the largest lump I could find, and advanced to the window. Suddenly, a rattling sound came from outside. I felt a stab of terror. Was I again to be frustrated? I stood there, coal in hand, certain only that whatever happened now I was not getting back into that bed. But the sound receded. It had been a cart on the road outside.

This meant it could be later than I thought, perhaps nearly dawn, and I turned back to the window. Without any further delay, I raised my hand with the lump of coal, brought it back and hit the pane with as much force as I could muster. My arm jarred at the collision but the result was hopeless. No glass splintered. I pulled back and struck another blow. This time, to my great relief, it gave and I heard glass falling on the other side and felt the breath of cold air on my face. I waited but outside remained quiet. As I expected, there was nobody to hear the noise.

That gave me courage and I struck again more than once. When the pane had completely shattered I turned to the one beside it. I had to take another lump of coal for the original had crumbled away but soon the second pane too was gone and I went for the one above.

Finally, four were gone and I stood there, panting, listening again to see if my exertions had alerted anyone. The only sound was the wind.

All this activity had taken its toll but I knew the biggest tasks were still ahead of me. Somehow I had to use my weapon to break the middle of the frame and this would require much greater force than the glass. I put my hand on the wooden frame and to my great joy found it was old and not well cared for.

I summoned up all my strength, gripping the coal tightly, swung my arm back and hit the wood hard where it crossed. There was a horrible jolting sensation in my arm as the coal broke in tiny pieces, but the frame stayed quite intact.

I returned to the coal scuttle to see if there was a better lump of the stuff, only to find the other pieces were so small as to be useless. And then, for the first time, I began to think about the scuttle itself. It was made of some cheap metal, but it was still metal. I got it up and emptied the coal out without too much difficulty. Soon I was swinging it by its handle, marvelling to think how much better this was as a weapon than my feeble lump of coal and imagining the crack it would make if I smashed it into my enemy's skull. That cheered me and I was soon back at the window. I took a breath, gritted my teeth and swung the scuttle with all my might against the frame, loosening my grip at the point of impact.

I know I imagined Cream's head was in its way and the results could hardly have been more pleasing. The wood splintered and gave way while the coal scuttle itself hurtled out through the window on to the grass outside. Examining the damage closely, I was sure that, with a bit of effort, I could now clamber through the space I had opened, though I still had to contend with the remaining glass.

Uneasily aware that outside it was becoming lighter, I pushed every large piece of glass out of the window, but there was no hope of removing all the smaller splinters. I went back to the bed and got one of the heavy blankets, throwing it out of the window, making sure that its thick wool covered the base of the frame.

What followed was, as it turned out, the most difficult task of the night, for I had to hoist myself up and work my way headfirst through the window in one reckless move. The blanket and my clothes offered some protection but, despite this, the window was so narrow that, as I thrust