

As the night grew late, I set off homewards on the Godly Bicycle. At the corner of the old graveyard, however, I was astonished and slightly perturbed to see sitting on a gravestone a figure with huge wings which vibrated in the cool breeze. The figure was clutching in her hands a burning flame. I could not see how the flame was contained, but it seemed to live simply in the palm of her hands. For it was incontrovertibly a female figure, regardless of its tremendous height and the wings. I attempted to hurry past, no longer having the confidence in myself to deal objectively with strange manifestations. (I recalled a story told to me by my mother concerning a young man, in excellent health and with the most promising of prospects, who had been in the south part of Edinburgh one stormy St Andrew's Night and had had the misfortune to come across just such a figure as I now beheld, and – to cut a long story short, which my mother rarely did – who now lay in the Edinburgh Cemetery at Warriston under a gravestone with the epitaph that he had been “struck down suddenly while walking in a Suburb of Edinburgh”. At the age of six, this story had made a great impression on me, to the degree that I was most unwilling to pass by the gates of graveyards and cemeteries at night, lest some similar accident befall me, a reference to which would necessarily be included in my epitaph. The very Latin word “Suburb” even now holds layers of darkness and impending doom, which I cannot quite shake off in the clear light of Reason)

“Be not afraid,” called out the figure as I made my way past, “But step aside and speak with me!”

The voice was deep and sweet, strangely accented and comforting. Although my legs and heart screamed at me to continue my flight along the road to Braes, I felt myself obliged to dismount and turn towards the figure. Observing her more closely, I saw that she was much taller than me, perhaps six feet and three inches in height, with the tips of her wings fluttering over the back of her head.

“Speak your name,” said the figure.

I replied that I was known as Alexander Kininmonth.

“I shall name you Kinnymott,” said the figure rather grandly. “And you shall name me Ingeborg, the Burning Angel.”

I was about to protest on two accounts, but then stopped my words even as I spoke them.

“Be not afraid”, said the Angel again, in a manner which I considered to be rather patronising, “For I give you into no harm. I have come not to burn, but rather to bring peace to your heart. Come closer...come closer.” She gestured gently with her hands, in which yet the fire still seemed to live, impossibly, for I could see no container that would prevent the fire from burning her skin and causing her to cry out in pain. I approached her cautiously, picking my way slowly between the sharp head-stones. As I came close and looked up at her, I could see that her face was indeed that of an angel, so sweet and so noble. Her hair was of bright gold. She enfolded me in her arms – I forgot briefly the flames in her hands and gave no heed to possible injury to my back nor to the likely damage to the overcoat, which Mrs MacMahon would not forgive a second time – and,

lowering her face, she kissed me full upon the lips, which felt so hot as if they burned me first from without and then from within. The kiss lasted several seconds, almost long enough to become immodest, long enough for me to wish it to continue forever. And then the Angel thrust me back with such force that I tripped upon a slab and fell to the damp earth.

“Begone, the Kinnymott! Away, mortal sinner, and tell the world that you have been in the embrace of the Burning Angel and been found unworthy!”

And with that she came down from her seat and flew with giant strides into the night. All trace of the Angel’s fire had been scattered upon the ground where a dozen tiny flames now flickered and slowly died as I watched them. Long after the last trace of fire had vanished, I sat there and wondered what I had just seen. Perhaps there was indeed a Burning Angel – but, no, that could not be!

Disturbed, afraid, puzzled, I made my way home and retired to bed, reflecting on those embraces which might be modest and those which might be immodest. Should the immodest embrace of an Angel be considered as ‘beyond modesty’? Should the modest embrace of an unworthy person (I had not yet encountered a Devil, except in the shape of MacAulay, and the thought of his embraces was not one I could contemplate at all) be considered immodest? How would a rational man consider, for example, the immodest embrace of Miss Keir? I tossed and turned all through that sleepless night, remembering, pursuing fantastic notions, and considering the greater and lesser questions of Morality.