

My Name is Simon Newell, Blacksmith ...

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My name is Simon Newell, Blacksmith and farrier Extraordinaire ! The angels from heaven cannot craft the work I crafted. The demons down in the sea look forlornly when a parade of MY horses rides forth – banners like flying snakes in the wind and the sun crashing its dazzle against the horns and helmets all bobbing...bobbing to the boom of the military marches. Then there are the children and their mothers waving flags speckled and spangled and crossed with stars and crucifixes; those flags of blue, red and white that tress the maypole of Satan... and it is my doing. MY DOING. Lead them on bravely, Dark Lord ! I can hear them cheering their way down to dusty death and that has become my contentment ; no living being can emerge from the abysses where a skeletal army gathers: the skulls that smile and the skinless arms that wield sabres that I have concocted out of the molten spit of the earth.

I have been incarcerated in this madhouse for too long and little do these people know who I am and what I have done and how prideful I feel. Me ! Simon Newell Blacksmith, farrier extraordinaire !

The sacrifice was great ... But aren't they all ! I made it to calm the itching fire that gnawed at my entrails. Respectability ! Religion ! Love ! Peace and happiness within my family and my good reputation ! Gone ... All gone and nary a regret. Just the stinging and hurtful suspicion that the Lord will not call on me in future years.

My name is Simon Newell, Blacksmith and farrier Extraordinaire. Incomparable. And living for the first fifty years of my life in a small village in the county of Devon, far from the strife of the common man. Because I am uncommon. My works at the forge were glorious. No one could shoe a horse better and faster than I could. No one could tame and coax the stupid rolling liquid metal into the most fantastic shapes and purposes imaginable by the human brain. The village of Dunley became renowned for my superb craftsmanship comparable only to the Oeuvres of Brunelleschi. My touch was divine : the grey green rivers gushing from my furnaces curled into the most graceful Moresque forms on the balconies of the lords' large country estates. My copper rivalled the October moon's amber in the dining halls where treaties and partitions were discussed and signed ! Steel, my steel : honest and unadorned, girded the factories, warehouses and shipyards for England's ever growing industries. My majestic bronzes rode across chimneys as horses and riders or nymphs and satires. My passion to make more beautiful, or in the case of weaponry, more lethal objects overwhelmed me. I worked , no, I slaved from dawn till dusk to achieve perfection and I know that I achieved it. The imbecilic doctors and jailers who preside over my imprisonment will very shortly have to recognize that fact.

My sacrifice was great as all sacrifice should be. My father and grandfather were of my profession. The county and parish records show that my people, all from the village of

Dunley, had the gift. My great grandmother was a master seamstress; the fine ladies of the town even as far off as London called on her to invent the most fantastic sleeves, puffs, curricles, bustles, fringes and whatever the female sex took into its frivolous head as high fashion. My father excelled also in our art; but, admittedly, he could not hold a candle to me. I was fortunate in everything. Fortunate because he taught me my trade then died before the apprentice became the master of his teacher. Fortunate that I was an only child so that no sibling jealousy or rivalry could hinder my progress and fortunate to marry the prettiest maiden in our county, Maria Foster. She's dead now; died in strange circumstances; but, it's untrue that I murdered her which is what the coroner and all my enemies – the jealous ones and the weak ones – say. But I'm coming to that. I insist. I did not strike her on the head that fatal night. It was my Lord.

Of my wife, I should speak here in this account. The fair sex has always been a secondary concern to me. At an early age, it became apparent that my art would be the great love of my life. For baser needs, I turned to the adequate venal sources. However, there came a time, in my early twenties, when the need arose to establish what the world calls marital respectability and assure my lineage. It was not without a certain fear that I addressed this insane notion of respectability. What sort of child would I produce? I feared my son would be his mother's child and fatigue me with his mother's sentimental musical and literary bent! Or worse, he would have my genius and would try to surpass me in the succeeding years! That thought was intolerable. Thus, I hoped for daughters. Maria disappointed me in that respect; she produced two fine healthy and bright lads, now twenty five and twenty two. They are both eager to expand my industry and change my original idea for it. This vexes me no end and thus this news of the Huns' sabre rattling overseas comes as a welcome guest: That will keep them occupied a certain time and out of my plans. Then they will return with a few

grains of sense knocked into their heads and will listen to me . The thought has occurred to me that they might not return; but there is no reason why that should happen to me. I am a widower ... and an accused murderer ! Bad enough ! I don't need more blood on my hands.

I had, with Maria, and my sons, Clement and Averell, a life that most people would call charmed. A wife as beautiful as the May dawn and two handsome strapping sons. Not that I wanted sons for they might take it into their heads to repeat my success. But; they'll be off soon. I can feel it in my bones and then my lineage will come to an end unless the Lord deems it otherwise. But I 'm rattling on here. I wasn't always so obsessed... or was I ?

Well, here I was the envy and emblem of all the village : a large and prosperous ironworks, beautiful and docile wife and two boys. And it was one April morning of this year 1914. I was, as usual, in my factory making adjustments and teaching those dolts I call apprentices to do my bidding. I remember we were making tests on a new type of wheel for the horseless carriage. I am being diverted here. It won't happen again. I was in the midst of a lengthy explanation with Peter Johnson, my factory steward, when all at once I felt a presence at my side. I told Johnson to carry on, I'd be with him in a short while, the time it should take to speak to the gentleman who was standing at my side. What irks me is that Johnson had no recollection of the conversation or the gentleman and therefore could not give the police sufficient evidence; but, here I'm running ahead of myself.

The gentleman - I should say the Monsieur – was indeed a fine specimen of a creature, all wrapped up in black and white city clothes. He had a fine long face shaped like an almond and bright black piercing eyes, a carefully groomed moustache and goatee. Quite a ladies' man was my impression and I thought it was another one of those rich ones wanting a

bronze cast of a nymph for their sweethearts' or their mothers' table. Little did I know that I would be mesmerised by this elegant city gentleman. He asked if our interview could take place in a quiet room and I led him up the stairs to my office, sat him down in my best chair and took a box of cigars to offer him one. He refused it and came down to business almost at once. I had a look at his marvellous Pan face, all elongated elegance and attentiveness and his bright eyes darting black arrows at mine whilst a whimsical smile flickered now and then on his rather full bow-shaped mouth. I first thought that this young sophisticate would be needing a bust of himself; I suspected he was horribly vain. So I was about to name my prices and come to terms for the sittings etc. However I was completely wrong; he wanted something else.

Before he spoke, he handed me his card; gold and vermilion it was on the edges and the best velum. A Mr Jamison Ashmodi was written on it. I inquired if the name was Italian and I believe he said Persian. That would account for his exquisitely dark looks. Then he started to talk business. To my surprise he wanted no complicated artistic bust or galloping nymphs. He was there for me to shoe horses. I was taken aback. I said that any ordinary village blacksmith could do that and he needn't have come asking that of me. Oh, but he said, these were special horses mounted by his special friends and no ordinary village forge would ever be able to remain alive after shoeing them.

“What's so special ?” I asked of him.

“You'll see,” he replied. Then he told me that he would pay me in solid gold for my trouble and that I could very well name my price.

I found myself, so thought I, in the presence of a raving maniac. He anticipated my thoughts when he said that the riders were men of extreme importance and that they needed shoes as they were to travel very far and wide and only the best of the craftsmen would suffice. There was a condition to all this nonsense : that if I consented to do the shoeing , it should take place that very night and that I should not look directly into the faces of the riders for if a man – or a woman for that matter – should look at them directly, he would surely die. He left telling me all the gold or precious metal in the world would he give me if I complied. He would return in the evening with his companions to learn of my decision.

Of course, I expected never to see him again. A raving maniac, as I have said. I put it quite out of my mind as I prepared to spend a quiet evening in the company of my wife, having sent my sons off to the sea side for their amusement. I remember the evening was still; only the crickets ‘ low chirping and a thrush or two sang in the distance. But, I had the feeling that night had separated the little village of Dunley from the rest of the world. The slant of the clouds in the evening sky, the overhang of moisture as if a storm had been gathering and could not break , the unusually thick swarm of flies about the sitting room window ... An energy charged the air and I had the odd feeling that a female was about to deliver and that female was the village itself. A mysterious notion, it was : the village - a pregnant belly of a solitary whore birthing ... what ? As I say, I am not a mystic but at times I have to prick myself to know if I am living or dead. As I tried to smoke my pipe and read my paper that night , I was constantly diverted by these thoughts and, to cap it all, my wife, Maria, busy at her handiwork, was singing a little tune – if I recall it was *The Ash Grove*

Down yonder green valley where streamlets meander

When twilight is fading I pensively rove.

Or at the bright noontide in solitude wander

Amid the dark shades of the lonely ash grove.
Twas there while the blackbird was cheerfully singing
I first met that dear one, the joy of my heart.
Around us for gladness the bluebells were ringing
Ah! then little thought I how soon we should part.

I bid her stop her racket; the song was saddening me and why should she be singing it ? I had an order coming in that would make me rich as a king and here was my lovely wife dragging my spirits down. Well, the woman contented herself with just humming and though I shot her a black look or two, the tune kept coming back into her mouth.

We stayed late that night in the sitting room and I was giving up all hope of seeing that fine young Persian when all at once, I heard a rapping at the window. Maria did not seem to hear or notice anything and kept busy at her sewing. I remember turning to her and asking if she had heard a noise and she answered not a thing. I looked at the tall clock and saw it was about midnight and in the glow of the candles, a fine almond shaped appeared by the window and I knew that my ship was about to come in. I told my wife I'd be taking a little walk around the forge by the river and she should not wait up for me. Then I left to join Ashmodi who was already walking to the river.

We walked in silence as clouds covered the sky and turned the moon into a pale peeping hole like the eye of a naughty child, full of shame as it turns its head away from the mischief it has done. I stopped in my tracks and Ashmodi foreseeing my hesitation threw me a bag of gold coins, more gold than I had ever seen in all my lifetime and said there'd be more after the work was done. Still, I wavered, fighting to chase away the horror in my brain. I had

underestimated my forces; the night was growing cold and I had left my coat in the house. Too late to turn back. We were at the forge down by the river.

“It’s over there,” Ashmodi cried and pointed to four of the strangest steeds I had ever seen. “Hurry !” he said. And crowding in a dark corner of the forge were four tall black-coated gentlemen, huddled together. I remembered not to look at their faces . I thought that they were bandits and did not want me to identify them; I was torn with fright; but, it was impossible to refuse. With Ashmodi’s help, I led the horses to the forge that I had maintained in great heat and I started my work. I cleaned each hoof with a pick, smoothed their bottoms, shaped their frogs, trimmed like a demon with the nippers, rasped each edge of the hooves and nailed nailed and nailed again. Worked like the devil that night. The horses were fearsome beasts – one would have said out of the bowls of Hades – but Ashmodi whispered something to each of them and they grew as calm as lambs as I threw myself into my task thinking that I had never shod any horse as fast and as well I shod those four that night. All the while I took care not to look at the four gentlemen as if my life depended on it.

I finished quickly. The best shoes I had ever fitted. As I led each horse out of the forge and to its rider, my great pride overwhelmed my fear though, if truth be told, the night had become most strange and menacing now. Mad white clouds streaked across the black sky stealing the show from the pale moon and the sky was lit up as if a bomb had been thrown across our village. Then the horror came. As I led the last horse to Ashmodi who took it upon himself to lead it to its rider, I saw Maria coming down to the river, my coat in her arms. I screamed - I swear I did - I screamed to my wife to stay, to turn away, not to look at the riders; but, all that was in vain. She saw them, each and everyone of them ! And stood horror-

struck and fixed in her tracks, dropping my heavy coat from her arms. Ashmodi mounted behind the last rider and laughed as he tossed me a heavy sack with,

“Your wages farrier !”

The sack landed not in my arms; but, on the head of my fair wife. It was a sack full of gold and it had become a rocket aimed at the head of my wife. She fell dead immediately. I swear I tried to revive her, I even called out to the riders; but, they were off as quickly as they had come. I carried her dead body to the village physician in the hope that ... But, there was no hope and then I wept.

The police came in and then the scandal. People testifying right and left. Peter Johnson my shop steward noted officially that I was excessively tired and talking lately to the thin air. The sacks of gold could not be found. I was tricked ; my name was dragged in the mud and my wife was a corpse.

Thus they incarcerated me and so I rot in this “internment centre” for the criminally insane waiting trial. The so-called murder weapon was a rock that I threw to stun my wife. I let the fools find their own mobile and they did ! My solicitor suggested that I was in the process of finding a new and cost saving method of enlarging the span of automobile spokes and was surprised by a burglar possibly sent by a rival craftsman. Johnson confirmed that we were working on that project and that held water: why else should I have been in the works at such an unearthly hour ? “Accidental manslaughter” they said. And I’ll leave it at that. My main mission is to get myself out of this prison and back to where my heart is. The village gossips were all rattling about how my time had come and “in every life, rain must fall.” My

one and only hope now is that the inquiry will prove my innocence. I must return to my shop and my works or I will really go definitely and completely mad !

II.

1934 Fribourg, Germany

My name is Hans Schwarztanzer, master chemist ...