

Spirits of the Age

by Graham Masterton

Michael was sitting in Prince Albert's writing room when he thought that he could hear a woman sobbing. He sat up straight and listened. It was very faint, as if she had her face buried in a pillow, and after a few seconds it died away altogether, so that he couldn't be sure that he had heard it at all.

Outside, it was a blustery day, and for all its opulence Osborne House was notoriously drafty, especially when there were North Easterlies blowing across the Solent.

It could have been nothing but the wind, whining down one of the chimneys. It could have been water, quietly gurgling through the miles of elaborate nineteenth-century plumbing. But he stayed quite still, listening, and in the gilt-framed mirror over the fireplace his reflection listened, too-pale-faced, his glass tilted and his hair sticking up at the back.

After a long pause he went back to tapping at his laptop. It didn't take much to distract him. He was working as a research assistant for Buller & Haig, the art publishers, who were planning to bring out a lavish coffee-table book on all of Prince Albert's gardens. It wasn't the kind of job that Michael had ever wanted to do. He had left Middlesex university with a second-class English degree and ambitions of being a magazine journalist, the new Tom Wolfe, all coruscating adjectives and supercilious satire. But as one rejection followed another, it began to dawn on him that his entire university career had left him over-educated and out of touch. Magazines didn't want literary wasps any more. They wanted New Lads who told it like it was, with f*** in every other sentence.

The morning that his rejection letter from *Vanity Fair* arrived in the post, his girlfriend Sam called him to say that she was sorry, but she was leaving him for a Nigerian actor called Osibi with tribal scars on his face.

'He understands my *aura*,' she said, as if that explained everything, and put the phone down. He hadn't been to the Isle of Wight since he was eight. All he could remember was catching tiny green crabs in a bucket and peeing in the sea. But when his university friend Richard Buller had offered him this small research job at Osborne House, he had realized that it was just what he needed. Although the island was only a twenty-minute ferry journey away from Portsmouth, and was actually in sight of the mainland, it was strangely dislocated from the rest of England. It didn't just belong in the sixties, it belonged in some other sixties that had never happened anywhere else, except within the imaginations of retired folk who wore beige cardigans and lived in pebble-dashed bungalows called 'Meadhurst,' as well as a few hippies with odd burring accents and mongrels on the end of a string. A community with a tenuous grip on reality.

But Michael badly needed to convalesce, and to concentrate on something other than his stalled ambitions and his lacerated emotions, and the Isle of Wight was the very best place to do it.

Queen Victoria had fallen in love with the island's detachment, too. She had built Osborne House here between 1845-51 as a country retreat where she and her family could be free from state ceremonial. It was a huge, sand-colored building with two Italian-style *campanile*. It was

surrounded by woods and gardens, most of them planted and laid Out by Prince Albert himself; and to the east, it looked along a broad stretch of open land directly to the sea.

Usually, Osborne was filled with shuffling lines of white-haired sightseers, but it was off-season now; and Michael almost felt that the house belonged to him alone. There was a home for retired servicemen in the Household Wing, and occasionally one of them would wheel past him and raise a walking-stick in salute, but sometimes he could go for days on end and see nobody at all except a distant gardener tending a fire.

Some days, bored with his work, he would wander from one room to another, each of them overwhelmingly decorated in high Victorian Gothic, with gilded and molded ceilings and gilt-encrusted furniture and chandeliers made to look like giant convolvuluses climbing out a basket. He found the Durbar Room especially overbearing. It was the state banqueting room, designed in the Indian style by Rudyard Kipling's father Lockwood and a craftsman from Lahore, Bal Ram Singh. It had a deeply coffered ceiling, like the inside of a temple, and for some reason Michael always felt uneasy there, as if he were intruding on a culture that was not his own, as if he should take off his shoes.

It echoed, because it was empty of furniture, but it had strange dead places where it didn't echo at all.

Michael liked Albert's writing-room, though, where he was usually allowed to work. It was a modest size, with Adam green walls and early Renaissance paintings on the wall, as well as a portrait of Albert and his brother Ernest. Albert's presence was still remarkably strong. Everything around had been invented by him or designed by him, from Queen Victoria's shower to the fastidious engraving of Osborne House on his notepaper, of which there was still a great deal left.

Sometimes Michael found himself talking to Albert as if he knew him.

'God, you made a bloody fuss over that *magnolia grandiflora*, didn't you, Bertie? And those myrtles. And all that special Kentish mulch.'

It especially amused him when he found Out that Albert's idea of hands-on garden 'planting' involved him standing on top of one of the *campanile*, directing his gardeners by semaphore.

It was mid-December, and by three o'clock in the afternoon it was starting to grow dark. Michael decided to call it a day and go into Cowes to do some shopping. He didn't need much: bread, milk, and a newspaper. He packed up his laptop, but as he did so he was sure that he heard that sobbing sound again, and this time it was very much clearer.

He listened for a while, and then he called out, 'Hallo? Is anybody there?'

There was no reply, but the sobbing persisted. He walked across the swirly-patterned carpet to the door which led to the Queen's sitting-room. This had a semi-circular bay with tall windows that led to a balcony. There were no lights on, and the only illumination came from the pearly-colored fog outside.

'Hallo?' Michael repeated, but now the sobbing seemed to have stopped.

He walked cautiously into the room and looked around. In the center were two desks where Victoria and Albert sat side by side. Both desks were cluttered with framed portraits and memorabilia. On the side of the Queen's desk were three electric bell-pulls: one to summon Miss Skerrett, her dresser; another to call for a page; and a third to bring in Prince Albert's personal attendant. Michael pulled each one of them in turn, but of course nobody came.

Except that he heard someone walking across the Queen's dressing-room, next door. There was no mistaking it. A quick, furtive rustling sound.

He opened the door and he was just in time to see a black figure disappearing through the door into the Queen's bedroom. At least he thought it was a figure. It could have been nothing more than a shadow.

He hesitated for a moment, and then he went into the bedroom. There was nobody there. But as he walked around the high-canopied bed, he saw that one side of the pale, embroidered bedspread had been ruffled, as if somebody had been sitting on it. On the bedhead hung a pocket for the Prince Consort's watch, and a posthumous portrait of him, which Victoria had kept in every residence, so that she could touch his dear dead face before she slept.

Michael straightened the bedcover. He didn't know why. He looked into the corridor outside the bedroom just to make sure that there was nobody there. He even went out into the stairwell, where two flights of marble stairs led down to the floor below. A distorted, echoing voice reached up to him, and footsteps, but when he looked over the cast-iron railings he saw that it was only one of the cleaners.

He walked to the main entrance to catch the bus. The fog was much thicker now, and all the myrtle and laurel bushes hunched in the gloom. The only sound was the crunch of his footsteps on the gravel path, and the mournful cry of foghorns from the Solent.

He was passing the red-brick wall around the kitchen garden when he thought he heard somebody else's footsteps. He stopped, and listened, but there was nothing but silence. It must have been the echo of his own footsteps against the wall.

He walked a little further, and he thought he heard the footsteps again, off to the right, toward the little octagonal summerhouse where Victoria's children sometimes used to have their supper. He glimpsed a triangular black shape disappearing behind the summerhouse, so quickly that he couldn't be sure what it was. A dog? A badger? Or somebody trailing a black sack behind them?

'Hallo?' he called, uncertainly. There was no reply, only the lost and distant moan of the Portsmouth ferry. 'Hallo?' he called again.

He circled around to the front of the summerhouse. It was so dark that at first he couldn't see if there was anyone there. He approached it cautiously, and saw that the doors were five or six inches ajar. He had never seen them open before: the public wasn't allowed inside. Maybe it was a squatter, or a drunk, or somebody who needed some shelter for the night.

He climbed the first two steps and then he stopped, his skin prickling like nettle-rash.

There *was* someone there. A small figure dressed in black, with a black hood over her head, and a face as pale as a lamp. Michael couldn't see her very well. She seemed to be blurry, like a figure seen through greasy glass. She didn't appear to be frightened of him, though. She

stood still and silent, and he couldn't even tell if she was aware of his presence or not. But there was something about her that seriously unsettled him. Some coldness. But it was more than coldness. It was an aura of complete self-possession, as if she were unafraid of anything, or anybody.

'Are you - do you need some help?' he asked her. She didn't reply. It was hard for him to say how old she was. Pretty old, he guessed, by her small, stooped figure. But she could have been a dwarf; or a little child, or something else altogether.

'Are you lost? I can help you find your way out of here.'

'Not lost,' she said, in a small, dry voice. '*Lost*.'

'This is off-season. They don't have visitors here till Easter.'

'*Who* has no visitors?'

'They. The English Heritage people.'

There was a long pause - so long that Michael wondered if she were ever going to speak again.

'Lost,' she repeated. 'I expected to find him here.'

'I'm sorry. You expected to find *who* here?'

'This *is* the year two thousand, isn't it?' she asked him.

'That's right. December 16, 2000.'

'And the world has made many great advances, in the past hundred years? In science, in medicine, in saving human lives?'

'I'm sorry,' said Michael. 'I don't understand.'

He could hear the little figure breathing, but no vapor came out of her nostrils, not like his.

'*We have* found a cure for the typhoid fever?' she asked.

'Well, yes, as far as I know.'

'And has the way been found to galvanize the dead?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Has the way been discovered to restore the human heartbeat through electrical shock?'

'Well, yes.'

'Then where is he? I was assured that he would be here.'

Michael said, 'I think we'd better find somebody to help you.'

'I don't require help,' she said, in obvious distress. 'I just want *him*.'

'If I knew who you were talking about-' Michael began.

She stepped through the five-inch gap in the doors without opening them any wider. Even outside, her face was white and indistinct. 'I... was *assured*,' she said. 'I was assured that by the end of the twentieth century, all diseases would have been cured, and that the deceased could be cured of those diseases from which they had expired, and brought back to life.'

Michael tried to take hold of her elbow, but his hand seemed to pass through it like a velvet curtain. He was beginning to feel seriously alarmed now; and the fog didn't help; nor the utter silence. Even the foghorns seemed to have stopped.

'Listen, why don't you come back to the house? Perhaps we can call somebody for you? A daughter, maybe? Do you have any daughters?'

'I have to stay here. I can't go anywhere until I find him. He *must* be here. I was assured.'

'Who assured you?'

'Abdul Karim, my *Munshi*. He said that he could foretell everything that would happen in the future. He said that people would be able to send their spirits flying around the world while their bodies remained in bed. He said that we would all be able to cure our loved ones, and bring them back to life, just the way they were. Living, breathing, laughing! The way that Albert used to laugh!'

'*Albert?*' said Michael. 'You've come here, expecting to find *Albert*? Albert died 139 years ago.'

She looked up at him, and he could feel the cold electricity of disapproval. 'The Prince Consort built this house. His heart was here; and this is where Abdul Karim promised me that he and I would one day be reunited.'

'Reunited?' said Michael, shaking his head. 'You and Albert are going to be *reunited*?'

'Don't you understand who I am?' she demanded. 'Has a hundred years erased my memory so completely?'

'I know who you are,' said Michael, reassuringly. 'You're Queen Victoria, that's who you are. Now, why don't you let me walk you back to the main gate and you and me can talk on the bus up to Cowes.'

The small woman said nothing. But then she lowered her head and uttered a single sob of anguish, and turned around. She passed back through the doors of the summerhouse, and into the darkness of the summerhouse itself.

Michael followed her, flinging the doors open wider. The summerhouse was empty. He went all the way around it, feeling the walls, looking for any way in which the woman could have escaped. In the end he stood in the middle of it, his hand clamped over his mouth, wondering if he were starting to go mad.

Abdul Karim had come to Osborne in 1887 - first as a servant, and then as Queen Victoria's personal Indian Secretary. There was a fine painting of him in the Durbar Corridor. He was suave, handsome, with hooded eyes and a neatly-trimmed beard and moustache. Michael stared at him for a long time; but Abdul Karim had his eyes averted, and always would.

That evening, back in his room at the top of the Household Wing, Michael combed the Internet for all the information that he could find about Queen Victoria and her Indian servants. There was very little about Abdul Karim, even though he had been a minor celebrity famous in his time. But there was one book: *Queen Victoria's Mystic*, by Charles Lutterworth, brought out in a limited edition in 1987 by the Vectis Press - a small specialist publisher with an address in West Cowes.

Michael didn't sleep well that night. He kept seeing the summerhouse doors opening, and a pale lamp-like face watching from the darkness within. At 3:20 in the morning, his bedroom door opened, and he sat bolt upright in bed, his heart clamped with alarm. He went cautiously over to the door and opened it wider, and looked out, and he thought he saw a small dark shadow disappearing down the end of the corridor.

He closed his door and locked it. He lay back in his cold sweat-tangled bed but he couldn't sleep any more. Dawn found him sitting by the window, looking out across the woods and the first gray haze of light across the Solent.

He took the floating bridge across the River Medina to West Cowes - him and a motley collection of cars and vans and cyclists and women with baby buggies. The morning was sharp as a needle but bitterly cold. His breath smoked and he regretted that he hadn't worn his woolly hat.

He found Vectis Press down a sharply-sloping side-turning next to a fish-and-chips shop. It had the name Vectis Press Publishers & Stationers written in gold on the door, and a dusty front window display filled with curled-up sheets of headed notepaper, faded calendars and dead flies. He opened the door and a bell jangled.

Inside, there was a cramped office with stacks of books and files and boxes of envelopes. Through the back door he could see an old-fashioned printing press, as well as a new Canon copier. He shuffled his feet and coughed for a while, and after a while a red-faced, white-haired man appeared, wearing a ski sweater with reindeers running across it and a baggy pair of jeans.

The man cocked his head on one side and looked at Michael and didn't say a word.

'I'm - ah - looking for a book you published. I don't know whether you have any copies left. Or perhaps you can tell me where I can find the author.'

The man waited, still saying nothing.

'It's *Queen Victoria's Mystic*, by somebody called Charles Lutterworth. Published 1987.'

The man nodded, and kept on nodding. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes. I think I can help you there. Yes.'

Michael waited for him to say something else, but he didn't.

'I - ah - do you have a copy here? Could I - buy one?'

The man nodded. 'I've got eighty-six copies left. You can have them all if you like. Didn't sell very well, see.'

'Oh, well, I'm sorry to hear that.'

'So am I, considering I wrote it.'

'*You're* Charles Lutterworth?'

'Roger Frost, actually. Charles Lutterworth's my nom-da-ploom.'

He went over to an old oak-veneered cabinet and opened it up. It was crammed with books of all sizes. 'Let me see now...' he said, and at last managed to tug out a copy of a thin volume bound in blue.

'There you are. Six quid for cash. What's *your* interest in it?'

'I was doing some research. I came across some reference to Abdul Karim's belief in the resurrection of the dead. I sort of got the idea that Queen Victoria might have found it ... well, you know, that Queen Victoria might have been very interested in it, considering the loss she felt for Albert.'

Roger Frost tapped the cover of his book with an ink-stained finger. 'It's all in here. All meticulously documented. Chapter and verse. The trouble was, most of the first-hand information came from other Indian servants, and nobody believed what they said. Unthinkable, you know, that our own dear Queen was dabbling in Hindu mysticism.'

'Did she really think that she could bring Albert back to life?'

'That's what Abdul Karim led her to believe. He was more than her *Munshi*, her teacher - he was a highly respected holy man and mystic. It seems he told the Queen that by the end of the second millennium, all disease would have been wiped out, and your dead loved ones could be dug up, cured of what had killed them, and brought back to life.'

'And she believed him.'

'Well, why shouldn't she?' said Roger Frost. He hadn't realized that it wasn't a question. 'You've got to remember that Victoria's reign saw unbelievable strides in science and technology, and enormous advances in medicine, so it must have seemed like quite a reasonable prediction. She knew the story of *Frankenstein*, too - that was republished in 1831 - and if it could happen in a story, why not for real? After all, a lot of people still believe that resurrection is just around the corner - otherwise they wouldn't have their bodies frozen, would they? Idiots.'

'It was partly Albert's fault. He was so enthusiastic about science that he convinced Victoria that, with science, absolutely anything was possible. And if you combine that idea with the terrible grief she felt at losing him - it wasn't surprising that she accepted what Abdul Karim told her.'

'And what *did* he tell her?'

'Some of it's hearsay but some of it's documented, too, at Windsor, and in the library in Delhi. Personally, I think that Abdul Karim was doing nothing more than trying to console the Queen ... spinning her a bit of a mystic yarn, like, to help her recover from Albert's death. But he performed a Hindu ritual which would ensure that the Queen's spirit would reappear at the turn of the next century.'

'He actually left a letter attached to his will which required his executors and their assigns to resurrect Albert's body from the Royal Mausoleum at Frogmore as soon as it was scientifically possible, and to inform him that the Queen's spirit would be waiting for him on the anniversary of his death, at Osborne House, which is where they were happiest.'

'Why didn't he leave instructions for *her* body to be resurrected, too?'

'She wanted Albert to supervise *her* revival personally. After all, she was the Queen, Empress of India, and Albert was the only man she trusted to ensure that all went well. She didn't know how she was going to die, you see ... and she might have been taken by an illness that wasn't yet curable in the year 2000. In that case, she said, it would be enough to know that *he* had returned to life and vigor, and that she could remain as a shade at Osborne House to watch him fulfill his destiny.'

Roger Frost handed the book over. 'Unfortunately, as we all know, we still can't bring dead people back to life, no matter what they've died of, and no matter how much we used to love them. And I'm not saying that I don't believe in ghosts, but nobody's ever seen the ghost of Queen Victoria, have they?'

'I have,' said Michael.

'I beg your pardon?'

'There *is* a ghost of Queen Victoria. I saw her last night. I *talked* to her, for God's sake. How do you think I knew about Abdul Karim?'

Roger Frost looked at Michael for a while with his lips pursed. Then he said, 'It's all right. You can have the book for a fiver if you want to.'

'I saw her. She was crying in her bedroom. Then I met her in the children's summerhouse.'

There was a very long pause, and then Roger Frost said, 'You're serious, aren't you?'

It was eight o'clock, and dark. They stood together in Albert's writing-room, listening to the grief-stricken sobbing coming from the Queen's sitting-room next door.

'Do you want to see her?' asked Michael.

'I don't know,' said Roger Frost. 'I don't really think I do.'

Michael went to the door and eased it open three or four inches. He could see the small black figure sitting at the writing-desk, her head bowed. He beckoned Roger Frost, and after some hesitation, Roger Frost came to join him.

'Jesus,' he said.

Michael said, 'There's only one thing I can think of.'

'What's that?' said Roger Frost, wiping his mouth and putting down his pint. They were sitting in the Old Anchor in West Cowes, a noisy, smoky bar full of yachtsmen.

'Well, we can't just let her wander around Osborne forever, can we? I mean, Albert's never going to come back, which means that she's going to spend the rest of eternity grieving for him. We've got to find a way to put her to rest.'

'Loads of ghosts do that, what's different about her? Just because she's royalty.'

'I can't let her do it, that's all. I can't let her suffer like that.'

'So what do you propose? Get in a priest, and have an exorcism?'

Michael shook his head. 'I read your book last night. In the appendix, you've set out the Hindu ritual that Abdul Karim used to bring her spirit back.'

'That's right. That was in some of his papers. I had it translated. Thought it was cobblers, when I first read it.'

'Well ... supposing we use the same ritual to bring *Albert's* spirit back? Supposing we reunite them - not physically, we can't do that. But at least we can bring their spirits back together.'

Roger Frost sniffed and helped himself to another handful of dry-roasted peanuts, which he churned around his mouth like a cement-mixer. 'I thought you had a screw loose the moment you walked into the shop.'

In the Durbar Room, half an hour before midnight, Michael laid out a pattern of candles on the polished floor, and drew with chalk the *Shri-yantra*, a circular pattern filled with overlapping triangles. If you meditated on this *yantra* long enough, you could look back into the dizzying mouth of space and time, back and back, to the beginning of creation.

The room echoed, except for its dead spots, and the dripping candle-flames made it look as if shadowy spirits were dancing across the coffered ceiling.

Roger came quietly into the room and stood beside him. 'I can't guarantee this is going to work, you know, just because I printed it in my book. For all I know, Abdul Karim was nothing but a shyster.'

'Well, we can only try,' said Michael. He picked up the book and turned to the ritual, the *Paravritti*, the 'turning back up.'

He began to recite the words. 'We who are looking back into time and space, we call you to find the spirit of our lost son Prince Francis Charles Augustus Albert Emmanuel of Saxe-Coburg and carry him forward on the stream of creation. Let his spirit rise from where it lies asleep so that it can come to join us here.'

Roger Frost, with a very serious face, began to recite the "*Om*... There was a time when Michael would have found it ludicrous, but here in the Durbar Room, with midnight approaching, and the figures of Indian gods and goddesses leaping in the candlelight, it sounded sonorous and strange, as if it were a summons that could wake up spirits from days and years and centuries long forgotten.

'We call on our lost son Prince Albert to open his eyes and return to the house of his greatest happiness. We call him to rejoin the ones he loved so dearly.'

It was then that Roger touched Michael's arm. From the far door, a small dark shadow had appeared, a small dark shadow with a pale, unfocused face. It made no sound at all, but glided toward them across the floor, until it was standing just outside the circle of candles.

Roger said, 'I'm seeing things.'

'No,' said Michael. 'She's there.'

'What are you doing?' she said, in that tissue-papery voice.

'The ritual,' said Michael. 'Abdul Karim's ritual. We can't bring back the Prince Consort's body. We don't have the power to do that. But perhaps we can bring back his spirit.'

'What? What are you talking about?'

'You can have his spirit back here, at Osborne. You can both be together again.'

'What?' She sounded aghast. 'Don't you understand? Once you've called up a spirit, it can never go back.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that, once you've summoned him, he'll have to stay with me, whether he wants to or not, forever.'

'But I thought that's what you-'

Michael was interrupted by a sound like nothing he had ever heard before - a low, agonized moan that made him feel as if centipedes were running up his back. He felt a sudden draft, too - a draft that was chilly and smelled of dust and long-enclosed spaces. The candle-flames were blown sideways, and some of them were blown out altogether, so that the Durbar Room became suddenly much gloomier.

Out of the darkness, a dusty-gray figure appeared, so faint that it was almost invisible. It seemed to be moving toward them, but Michael couldn't be sure. The small shadow-woman took two or three steps away from it, toward the door. Michael stood where he was, his fists clenched tight, his breathing quickening, his heart banging harder and harder.

The figure stood still for a moment. It was no more substantial than a gray net curtain hanging at a window. Michael thought that he could see a luminous white face, and the indistinct smudges of side-whiskers, but that was all. But gradually, as it came nearer, its substance began to thicken, and darken.

By the time it was standing by the pattern of candles, it was clearly Prince Albert, a small portly man in young middle-age, deathly-white, with a sharp nose and an oval face, and drooping moustaches. He was wearing a dark uniform decorated with medals and a large silver star.

His image wavered, in the same way that a television screen wavers when somebody moves the aerial. He turned this way and that, as if he couldn't understand where he was or what was happening.

'Albert,' Roger whispered. 'It's Albert, you've brought him back.'

The figure opened and closed its mouth but didn't seem able to speak. Michael kept squeezing his eyes tight shut and opening them again, because he simply could not believe that this was real.

It was then that the shadow-woman walked around the *Shri-yantra* and glided slowly toward Albert with both arms outstretched.

'My love,' was all she said. 'Oh, my love.'

Albert stared at her. At first it was obvious that he didn't recognize her. She came closer, and took hold of both of his hands, and said, 'It is *I*, my love. They've brought you back to me.'

'Back?' he whispered, his voice thick with horror. '*Back?*'

'This is Osborne,' she said. 'You never lived to see this room. But this is Osborne. We can be happy again, my darling. We can stay here forevermore.'

Albert slowly pushed her away from him, still staring at her. 'What's happened to you?' he asked her. 'Can this really be you? What's happened to you? Your hair! Your skin! You've withered away! What kind of a devilish spell have they cast on you?'

Michael said, 'No spell, sir. Only time.'

Albert frowned at Michael like an actor peering into a darkened audience. '*Time?*'

'You died at the age of forty-two, sir,' put in Roger. 'Your Queen here was eighty-one when she went.'

Victoria looked up at him in anguish. 'I am still myself, my love. And I have kept my love for you intact, for so many years.'

Albert's mouth opened and closed, but he still couldn't speak. Something glistened on his cheeks, and Michael realized that he was witnessing an extraordinary spiritual phenomenon - the sight of a spirit, crying.

'I am still your darling,' begged the shadow-woman, reaching out again to touch him. 'I am still your wife and the mother of your children.'

'And they?' asked Albert, his mouth puckered with grief.

'Dead, sir,' said Roger. 'All long dead. I'm sorry.'

Albert gradually sank to his knees, and his head dropped as if he were waiting for an execution that would never come. The shadow-woman put her hands on his shoulders, but he was inconsolable. She had lost her young husband, when he died, but now he had woken from the dead to discover that he had lost his sparkling young wife.

'Can you not find it in your heart to love me, now that I am old?' asked the shadow-woman.

Albert couldn't answer. All he could do was bury his face in his hands and remain where he was, too grief-stricken to move, while the candles in the Durbar Room guttered and died.

Michael saw them only once more, on the afternoon that he was due to leave. He was carrying

his suitcase out to a waiting taxi when he happened to turn and look along the broad avenue that led to the shore of the Solent. It was difficult to see them, in the foggy half-light, but it looked as if they were walking very slowly toward the house. She was leaning on his arm for support. He had his face turned away from her.

Michael watched them for a while, then climbed into the taxi.

'Are you all right?' asked the taxi driver.

'Yes, why?' said Michael, and it was only then that he realized that his eyes were filled with tears.

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