

Ghosts of tomorrow in yesterday

By Sarah Pannowitz, Monte Sant' Angelo Mercy College

After dinner we retired to the drawing room, adjusted the gaslights and sat in front of the fire. It had been a splendid meal. Major Clennet was in fine form with his stories from India, while Professor Maxwell shared hilarious tales of university life. Lady Stinson entertained us with her African exploits and showed us one of the tribal idols she'd been given – the rest having been presented to our good Queen Victoria. Then, as was customary, we moved to the telling of ghost stories. In turn we told stories that chilled the blood – until one guest was left.

'Jamieson,' I asked, 'what about you?'

Rupert Jamieson was a young friend of Professor Maxwell's. I didn't know him well, but the professor had vouched for him, saying that his radical theories on high-energy wireless electrical power were dangerous but first class. The professor confided that Jamieson hadn't wanted to come to the dinner – he'd virtually dragged the lad from the laboratory where he'd been working so feverishly since the death of his fiancée.

Jamieson stood and it was then that I noticed he was trembling. 'I appreciate the invitation, but I really must get back to work'.

Naturally, this prompted a chorus of good-natured disapproval. A round of ghost stories simply can't be left incomplete.

Jamieson subsided into the armchair. He glanced at his pocket watch and then at the window. 'It's probably too late anyway,' he muttered – and he laughed unpleasantly. 'Alright then. How would you like to hear something really frightening?'

'Now, the story I'm about to tell you is a tale of a different kind,' Jamieson began, his voice barely above a whisper. 'I'm sure you are all familiar with the standard ghost story. The kind of tale that brings nightmares and monsters to life, leaving the

intended audience lying in their beds at night trying to convince themselves that the shadow on the wall is just a shadow and that the footsteps they heard was a figment of their imagination.

Well, what I am about to tell you may not involve the fantastical creatures of the night, but something far more frightening.

This story involves a world much like our own, inhabited by creatures much like you and me. In this world they made the impossible possible. They could listen to music from a tiny mechanism that could fit comfortably in the size of your hand, make books come to life through moving images in a box and access unlimited amount of knowledge through the touch of a button.

They were ingenious. Marvellous. Careless. They got so wrapped up in this material world filled with inventions and new ideas they forgot to look around them. They failed to see the damage they were doing to their world, and soon, things got out of hand.

The world they knew began to die, becoming smothered in the artificial environment these people had created. Chemicals seeped into the air, pollution and wastes built up in the atmosphere. Then the so-called 'natural' disasters came.

Volcanoes erupted, fires raged, tsunamis and earthquakes wreaked havoc across the land. But still, the people ignored the signs their world was trying to give them, they didn't listen to the message hidden within the catastrophes, Until it was too late.

People started to die, suffocating in the toxic fumes they had created for themselves. All too soon these chemicals seeped into their lungs, into their blood, into their brains. It messed with their heads. They began to mutate. Ordinary people just like you and me, with mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. They turned into the monsters that had so often featured in ghost stories told on nights very much like this one. Into something that was beyond recognition, as anything, but a monster.

Once the diseases got into their system, they began deteriorating. Fast. Attacking the few remaining survivors, feeding on anything they could get their hands on. They had no memories of their past lives.

Who they were. What they were. The people who loved and cared for them

Your best friend could turn on you.

Your wife. ‘

Not a sound was to be heard. Even Major Clennet, who had been raving on in drunken tones had quietened down until only Jamieson’s hitched breathing pierced the air.

‘So that’s it’ Jamieson’s voice cracked. ‘The end.’

The silence lasted for a moment longer until everyone erupted into cheers patting him on the back for a story well told before listening to more animated tales from Major Clennet of past voyages and adventures still to come.

With everyone’s attention diverted from him, Jamieson stood silently, gathered up his scarf and hat before slipping off into the night without even a word of goodbye.

On impulse, I hastily thanked Lady Stinson for the wonderful evening, grabbed my coat and followed Jamieson out the door.

I caught sight of him a few blocks down, running to catch up with his long, steady strides.

‘Wait!’ I gasped breathlessly, determined not to lose sight of his fast retreating figure.

Jamieson stopped and waited struggling to keep the impatience and grief from his face.

‘I know I haven’t formally introduced myself but I wanted to ask about the story you just shared with us at Lady Stinson’s,’ I paused to see if he would react at this last remark. His face remained blank.

‘You said that the story was real and that it was ‘too late’, what does that mean? You can’t possibly be suggesting that there is any truth to that, that fable...can you?’

My feeling of apprehension grew and a sense of foreboding fell upon me as Jamieson gave me a long measuring look, then sighed.

'I'm sure you have heard of the death of my fiancée,' he began reluctantly 'Jane.' I nodded eager to get some form of response.

'She was always so enthusiastic, full of new ideas and theories. About two years ago...she developed the idea of time travel. She was convinced it was possible to bend the folds of time and space, and worked tirelessly to prove her theory.

Six months ago, she succeeded. We went into the future together, thinking we would have the greatest adventure of all. We would be famous, immortal within the pages of a history book,' He shook his head and smiled at me, but it didn't touch his eyes, 'The sight we saw isn't one I will soon forget.'

Jamieson looked at me, his eyes unusually bright willing me to put the pieces together.

'So what your saying is,' I began slowly, 'the story I heard at Lady Stinson's house wasn't actually a story. It's what the future holds for us, that's what human kind will come to! I don't believe you!'

Jamieson laughed dryly. 'Believe what you want, it will happen. It's too late anyway. She's dead. We're all dead'

'It's too late' I murmured now knowing what he meant by that sentiment.

'Jane caught the disease didn't she? I whispered 'The chemicals found their way into her system and she...turned.'

Silent tears streaked down Jamieson's face 'She never even saw him coming,' he sobbed, 'he attacked her from behind, sinking his teeth into her. By morning the Jane I knew was gone and I...I had to...k...' Jamieson broke off leaving the sentence hanging, but I already knew.

'You had to do it. She would have wanted you to do it.' I took a steadying breath and placed a comforting hand on Jamieson's before he snatched it away

'How did you get back?'

Jamieson looked away once more trying to regain composure before reaching into his coat and handing me a pocket watch.

'This is it. The hour hand sets the century and the minute hand the year.

This little insignificant *thing* is what took my wife away from me, showed me humanity coming to an end '

I stared down at the clock for a long minute, studying its battered surface and simplistic design. I then looked Jamieson straight in the eye.

'You're wrong. It isn't too late. The future isn't set into stone and if we all work together we can change the world. It doesn't have to end that way. If we take care of our environment, and don't abuse it, future generations will be able to enjoy earth's wonder just as I have. *We can* save the world'

Jamieson looked at me wonderingly for a long time before giving me the first true smile I had seen him use.

'Where do I sign up?'