

Owen's Conscience
by Douglas Herle

*I*t was nearing three o'clock in the morning, and Owen had just opened a bottle of Audrey Reserve. Normal circumstances did not dictate that he should open a bottle of anything at an hour that was far beyond what decent society considered modest.

Consider this though before passing any judgement. You see, the previous evening had been anything but normal for Owen, or at least the latter part ended in a way unusual to normal preference. In fact, it postulated something dreadful that left Owen's conscience pricked, not so much because he considered himself guilty of the preceded incident, but rather because of what it might do to his reputation.

If there was anything that Owen was, or had the pleasure of noting himself as, was a man of reputation. And this reputation to which Owen protected with the utmost vehemence, when called to do so, was based on his ability to rigidly adhere to honesty in business when lesser men had succumbed to temptation and failed to retain their prelapsarian state. That is to say, that which brought Owen esteem among his peers was his notable honesty and his equally noted distaste for dishonesty among men in business. So, it wasn't the haughtiness of pride that commissioned him to be respected as such a businessman, but rather his discernment in austerity and clemency, that endowed upon him the honor of an upright reputation. To have that stained over an incident, one nevertheless, that he considered a matter of mere unfortunate circumstances, was what kept him up at such an early hour, opening a new bottle of his favorite cognac.

As he sipped his cognac in his library and pondered on the day's events, there came upon the house a noise that echoed down the hallway and found its way into the library. It was a feint rapping sound, almost insignificant enough to be ignored. And so, Owen thought, he would ignore the noise. After all, it was no more than the likes of a mosquito buzzing around. Not that it sounded like a mosquito, but it bared only the significance of such a vexatious creature that made Owen believe it should be ignored.

Around his third sip, Owen took notice of a burning sensation in his stomach. It couldn't have been the drink to which he was more than accustomed. It was superb and of high quality and certainly tasted as it should have. Let us not even for a moment consider that it was the amount of drink Owen consumed, for as previously noted he'd just opened the bottle, and there was no other empty bottle nearby to suggest that he'd overindulged.

The burning persisted upon the next couple of sips, and so did the rapping, which seemed to grow louder and more intolerable to the point where Owen could no longer

ignore it. He sat up and leaned forward, resting much of his weight upon his cane. A cane, not needed for any impairment in his walking, but rather because he thought it added a certain statesmanship to his appearance when he moved about town.

After waiting in this position for a number of seconds that tested the strength and endurance of both his cane and forearms, he wondered whether his ears were playing tricks on him, before coming to the realization that the noise was someone knocking on his front door, and the rash knocking grew more and more demanding and even more sinister with every passing second, or so he thought.

“Who,” he asked himself, “in God’s high heaven would come calling at this hour?”

When Owen opened the door, two police officers stood before him. They were officers that he’d met earlier in the evening last. Their presence at such an unusual hour, he felt, was rather queer. It was only out of common decency, and also out of an attempt to keep his reputation secure from any future rancid deterioration, that he decided not to drive them away, but instead invite them inside. He led them down the hall to the library where they could discuss candidly any misunderstandings they may have had from his earlier comments. In doing so, Owen thought, he would remove all lingering insinuations containing his guilt that had accusation enough to soil his reputation.

Owen left them to wait alone in the library while he checked on his wife. As he approached the closed bedroom door, he noticed nothing stirring. His wife was not calling out, and no light slipped through the cracks around the door to indicate she had awakened. Knowing his wife was a light sleeper, and the knocking that stirred him from the library certainly should have woken her from any slumber and aroused her curiosity or possibly even frightened her, he was surprised the event did not jolt her upright in bed. All the better, Owen thought, as he didn’t have to assuage his wife’s concerns or fears or have to go into any long-winded explanations to remove any sinister thoughts that a woman is apt to have when police officers visit her husband at a time normally reserved for grave occurrences. Without need to say, Owen didn’t wake his wife only to have to go through the aforementioned conciliating soliloquy.

Back in the library, Owen offered the lawmen a glass of Audrey Reserve. He was quite happy when they turned down the offer and felt no guilt for feeling that way. You see, Owen’s reputation was not of an uncharitable man, but his cognac was to him a private reserve, which to him meant not to be shared, especially with early morning intruders.

Seeing that his own glass had been finished, he poured himself another before sitting down and placing his cane upon his lap.

Officers Cambridge and Wordsworth meandered about feigning interest in Owen’s extensive book collection, one that any owner would be proud of, but Owen knew, though his guests were conveying a sense of informality, they were watching his every movement with a searing attentiveness, a common procedural trick played by less experienced officers, so Owen thought.

It was in the early evening, nay one should say late evening to ensure a more accurate account, when Owen had given his testimony to these same two lawmen of how he ended up with the blood of a dead woman on his jacket. It was his unfortunate luck, Owen thought, that he’d stumbled over the dead woman lying in an alley just off

Dean Street. Being pulled into a mess like this, he'd hoped wouldn't get around town to irrevocably tarnish his reputation. In the event that it might, Owen knew he'd have to have a convincing argument to prove his innocence. But, Owen thought, in order to bring them about to civility, where these lawmen would be apt to listen reasonably to the events to which he was more than willing to lay out with perfect clarity and honesty, he'd have to first try the speech of common people, which he assumed them to be. First, he tried to talk of a recent sporting event he'd overheard someone mention at the club, and when that brought no more than a quick glance from the officers, he tried the weather. The latter only brought about a nod from the officers.

Owen, finding their silence unsettling, took a quick and harsh sip of cognac, which once again brought on a burning in his stomach. He'd wondered if it was an ulcer, but he never had an ulcer before, and the doctor's visit, only weeks ago, had him believe he was in near-perfect health.

Small talk not prevailing, Owen decided to speak sternly and to the purpose to the silent and rude officers, by reiterating his former statement, with no more or fewer details than before to ensure that the officers see the truth in his testimony, and with that, they could attend to the streets to find the real perpetrator.

"Your abstinence of speech," Owen said, "is rather rude and to think your childish silent treatment would lead me to admit guilt is beyond laughable. Do you know my reputation? It's something that I believe you should know, or at least have tried to have found out about before you came knocking on my door at this hour," Owen said, pointing to a clock on the wall with his cane.

When neither officer bothered to look at the clock, Owen realized his guests were not concerned with the hour, but carried on as though their mission need be fulfilled, regardless of time and place. This silently enraged Owen, but he realized that to show any anger would be a slip in what he deemed was one of his most charitable traits, his ability to endure boring and obnoxious people. However, he felt some indignation was to the purpose in this situation.

"I see you've come for a singular reason," Owen said and shook his head before standing up to top up his glass. Feeling confident in his up coming rhetoric, he took a sip, and this time it left no trace of burning.

"You meandering fools will now take note of what I say and be on your way. I've no such inclination to allow myself to go down to your station for questioning, as you would have it put. So, listen up while I repeat what I'd told you earlier."

Neither officer paid any attention to Owen, and he perceived that one even yawned with his back to him. Boorish proletariat, Owen thought. His next sip of cognac once again brought a burning, but not wishing to have the officers notice any discomfort, Owen simply smiled.

"So here it is, my early morning companions," Owen said cynically, while shifting his eyes between the two men, making sure to keep a wary eye on both. "It is, as I said before, I was heading home from the club two blocks over from Dean Street, where I spend many evenings, and you can, in fact confirm this yourselves, which would alleviate your suspicions about me regarding last evening's events. That is, if the time that you say the woman was stabbed is correct, then you'd know I was at the club enjoying a conversation with one of my dearest friends at the time of the incident. We were talking about some stock that he recently purchased, and he

would that I should also follow him. However, I've no interest in this stock, as I believe its recent surge is only temporary. Nevertheless, barring weather, I always walk home from the club. True, it is quite a distance, but on nice evenings, I enjoy the exercise and solitude that a good walk can bring."

Both officers now kept a close eye on Owen as he laid out his own witnessing of the event. Owen was happy that he'd now, at least, retained the attention of the officers. It was a nice change from their seeming indifference only moments prior. With this success, Owen took a sip of cognac and it went down without any burning. He'd decided to wait until he felt the cognac had settled in his stomach before speaking again. For he knew better than to speak before it had settled to the appropriate degree, as it was something he and his many companions had learned over at the club, that speaking before your drink had settled properly can only induce drunkenness. It helped to time and space one's sips and was the gentlemanly thing to do, so as not to become an unruly nuisance that drink was wont to do when one would let their guard down. You see, Owen was well aware of alcohol's advantage, in that it was a social inebriant, and without due care, the social aspect habituated one to speak more than a gentleman ought. As anyone who goes to the club knows, drunkenness can be humorously tolerated by a newcomer, but once, the second time, he'd be ignored. With this in mind, Owen felt sufficient time had passed to speak again.

"So then," Owen continued, "as I was enjoying the slight breeze that the evening had brought in, I made Dean Street with a carefree demeanor, and expected, as I had many an evening, that the feeling would follow me for the remainder of my walk. Perhaps it was the carelessness of too much enjoyment that made me lose any sense when I heard shuffling come from the alley. Normally I don't go poking my head in such dreary places. I leave that to the likes of criminals and homeless and prostitutes, and, if you don't find this too offensive, which you shouldn't, as I only mean that it is an unfortunate part of your job," he pointed at the attentive officers, "you."

Owen took another sip and was about to speak, but remembering the cardinal rule of drinking, he waited. He'd hoped this silence would bring about a question from the lawmen, but it hadn't. He knew their game of silence was an intimidation tactic. For he'd heard many such stories of police tactics from members of his club. Not that they'd had any involvement with such scenarios, they were more or less second or even third hand stories, but they were amusing as distant hearsay, and the distance from these tales was what made them amusing. He certainly didn't find it amusing that he was now implicated in such a scandal, and he would certainly not entertain his club members with this tale. Anyone thinking to regale members with a first-hand story like this, without a perceptible amount of shame, would certainly not be enjoyed company and would have their membership revoked in a unanimous count. With this in mind, Owen made sure to tighten his lips and speak only to the point, to which he assumed the lawmen stood before him, and upon completion of the review, he'd ensure that the police, satisfied with his account, would not allow this to get out into the community.

"So, as I was saying, I was in too much enjoyment of the evening's walk when I forgot myself and looked into the alley to where the noise was coming from. Well, when I saw the woman lying there, and I can only guess that she was a prostitute by her scant attire, I forgot myself even more and went to investigate. Perhaps it was

adrenaline. As looking back, I just should have called into the alley and when the answer was none, I should have gone off to find the law to investigate. I can assure you, I do know that the proper steps of a gentleman was to quarantine the alley and find the law. I wasn't planning on bringing any of my own investigative skills to the matter. While my business skills of perception are finely attuned, I've never subjected them to the aptitude of Sherlock Holmesian matters, nor do I wish to."

Owen, pleased with his attestation thus far, figured he was on his way of freeing himself from their suspicion. However, he didn't see the likes of this in their eyes, which brought about an attack of burning in his stomach. Still unwilling to let the lawmen have any advantage over him, he once again hid the discomfort and waited a moment to regain composure before continuing his testimony.

"So you see," he said, "In temporarily losing my senses, I let the tail wag the dog, and went into investigate the case of the woman lying on the ground. As it is dark in alleys, at least that much must be concurred upon, and with the admission that it was dark, that was the cause for my clumsiness. I never saw the misplaced pallet that I tripped over, which led me to land on the woman. I, of course, not sure of her state in that moment, apologized and got to my feet in haste. I offered my hand to assist her to her feet, but I immediately saw her inability to move for what it was. She was dead. I hurried out of the alley, of course, with my heart racing, as one would expect. It wasn't until I saw my jacket under the street light that I noticed the blood stain soaked into it. Well, so did that fool whom you call a witness to the events thus described, who no more witnessed the event than he let his imagination run wild, as simpletons do, when they see something their brain only configures to violence, blood. Indeed, were it not for my reputation as a gentleman, I'd have cudged that rodent of a man who claimed to have witnessed more than he did."

After Owen had finished his testimony to the personal terror he'd experienced, he'd assumed to have satisfactorily emancipated himself from any guilt the officers had projected upon him. Were that the case, however, the officers showed no sign of resignation to his presumed condition, and only immediately began meandering about the library once again. After several minutes of quiet and rather discourteous snooping by the officers, Owen was about to order them out of his home, when Officer Wordsworth snatched a book from its home, and by the amount of dust the officer had blown off the book, it was clear the book had been stationed in that spot for a long time undisturbed.

Under the dim light that the overhanging fixture offered, it was hard for Owen to see which book the officer had plucked off his shelf. It was only when the officer opened the book to read a passage that Owen assumed his Oxford education had given him advantage over the officer.

"Passion for Power," the officer read, shifting his eyes back and forth on the page. "The glowing scourge of the hardest of the heart-hard; the cruel torture reserved for the cruelest themselves; the gloomy flames of living pyres."

"You've read Nietzsche before?" Owen asked with some impertinence, while twisting the silver knob atop his cane. "If you had studied the philosopher's intent to the passage, you'd realize his meaning is far from the insinuation you apply to it. I've no time to explain the philosophy of that independent thinker. I'd just assumed you not touch any books, let alone read from them."

Officer Wordsworth said nothing, but placed the book back on the shelf carefully and in a manner that pleased Owen. Owen then took a sip of cognac, and assured by his recent victory over the impudent officer, he presumed no burning would follow his sip. He was wrong. A terrible burning sensation started upward from the stomach and carried into his chest. The discomfort left Owen bent over in his chair for a moment, and when he realized it may convey the false application of guilt, he sat up. Hiding his indignation that was being spurred on by both the incessant burning and the officers' neglect to mention the real purpose of their visit, Owen yawned hoping he would signify an indifference to their presence.

"I grow fatigued," Owen said. "What pertinent information do you have to add to the case that you would dare knock and intrude at this hour?"

The officers snuck a glance at each other. Owen interpreted that there was something in their furtive eye contact that was meant to undermine him. Then, as though the officers were reading each other's minds, they simultaneously turned their heads and made Owen the sole focus of their raw gaze. There was a moment in eyeing his antagonists where he could swear their physiognomy interchanged, but it was so brief that he withdrew his account of the event on the realization that he was tired.

"I would that a pair of obnoxious blatherskites stood here than obstinate mutes, wishing to engage me in a staring contest. Come, speak if you have tongues," Owen snapped.

Owen waited patiently for an answer, but the burning in his chest had only grown to where he worried it might become an interminable ailment. It was this combined with the officers' haunting presence and their repose that initiated a reaction from Owen that less than thirty minutes ago he would have thought unbecoming of any gentleman — He leaped out of his chair and shouted.

"Your noted silence will not make me confess to anything, if that is your intent. I refuse your silence as any condemnation of me. You've heard my side. You've brought no argument against me!"

The quick movement and outburst left Owen slightly dizzy and confused. He once again topped off his glass and quickly downed the entirety of his drink. Then a sudden pounding in his chest appropriated the peace he'd hoped it would bring, leaving him with the feeling that his chest was about to explode. He sat down and bent forward in his chair, hoping to ease the hellish indigestion. Owen didn't need a mirror to see the colour of his face. Red burned through the entirety of his body and soul, and he felt it. He pushed on his cane to sit up and assume a proper ergonomic posture. He desperately hoped his outburst would have aroused the tongues of the officers, but their silence haunted him, and they kept an infernal gaze on him. Sweat trickled down Owen's temple and faded somewhere on his cheek. He noticed a slight impertinent smile on both officer's faces. How dare they take delight in my discomfort, Owen thought.

"This is enough," Owen said. "I'm not feeling quite myself. So, you must tell me whether I stand accused of any crime or leave my house. Either way, I assure you, your insolence has been noted and will be relayed to your superiors."

At those words, Officer Cambridge took his eyes off Owen to look behind him and grab a book off the shelf. There was no dust to be blown off this book, as it had

been recently disturbed. Yet, once again, the dim lighting hampered Owen's visibility, leaving him unaware of which book the officer had snatched from its home.

"Which book are your fingers now defiling?" Owen asked. "I will not permit silence on this matter. That is my property you hold!"

Officer Cambridge turned to face Owen, and once again the appearance of Officer Cambridge had become that of Wordsworth and vice versa. Owen, knowing this mirage to be impossible, closed his eyes and took in a deep breath to compose himself. It should be noted that fatigue and pain are wont to induce fictional images that immigrate into the stressed mind, and it need only take a moment of calm repose to regain the advantage over a slipping mind. So, when Owen opened his eyes again, it was once again officer Cambridge holding the book and reading the passage:

"Then shall He speak to them in His wrath and vex them in His sore displeasure."

"Ah!" Owen shouted. "You dare try to prick my conscience with scripture. You scoundrel!"

Officer Cambridge turned towards the bookshelf. His hand reached into a spot between books left by the absent Bible, and it came out holding a bloody knife. He showed it to his partner, and they both nodded and stepped menacingly towards Owen.

"That is not mine. You... why you planted that! That shall be noted and easily proven. I've been forthright with you. The dead woman and I had no relations. It was only my misfortune that I stumbled over her dead body. That knife — that knife I've never seen before. I've had enough. I'm going to call in my lawyer to have you two chastised to the fullest extent of the law. You dare tarnish my reputation. You devils!"

The officers advancing slowly towards him, ignored Owen's second and more direct testimony. He now saw that their true intent from the beginning was to plant false evidence against him and arrest him. What had he done, Owen thought, that he would have his reputation ruined like this? It was intolerable. Owen jumped out of his seat, his heart now on fire.

"You shall not take me, ghastly law!" He shouted. "That woman meant nothing to me and nothing to decent society. She propositioned me and then demanded more upon completion of our contractual agreement. Her practice was to cheat an honest man, and then she dared to threaten my reputation. It was she being uncivil to me! Yet you take her side in order that you would ruin my reputation as an esteemed businessman and gentleman. Think of what you're doing!" Owen began swinging his cane to fend off the advancing officers. "I'll not go to jail over her!"

Just then, Owen heard a distant voice cry out. "Darling!" The cry came not from the officers he was fending off with his swinging cane. It came from out in the hallway. "Darling!" The perturbed voice rang out again. It was the voice of his wife. "Are you alright?"

"They've come to take me and sully my reputation!" Owen yelled back. His wife's footsteps pattered on the marble tile as she dashed down the hallway towards the library.

"Who..." his wife cried out frantically. "Who has come to take you?"

"The law officers!" cried Owen, holding back the infernal demons with a violent swooshing of the cane. Death, he vowed, would come before he'd permit his reputation to be eternally damned.

Sensing wife standing in the doorway and witnessing this horrid event, he looked to her. The terror beaming from her eyes shook Owen to his very soul. He lost all presence of being. The compounding chest pain crushed his strength, and, no longer able to bear the weight of his cane, he let it fall from his hand. The moment he expected the lawmen to charge at him was when his wife asked. “What law officers?”

At that moment, Owen’s heart seized and, gripping his chest, he dropped to the floor. His wife rushed towards him in a panic. “No!” she yelled out.

Kneeling beside him, she lifted his head and let it rest upon her lap. His lifeless eyes and gray, clammy flesh told her that he’d died. Through watery eyes, she saw the blurred images of the bloody knife and Bible lying next to his body.