

PRINTER'S DEVIL COURT, extract

1 Just before midnight I set off to walk back to the club. My route was the old one, but this corner of  
2 London had changed a good deal. Fleet Street no longer housed the hot metal presses and many of  
3 the old alleys and courts had long gone, most of them bombed to smithereens by the Blitz. Once or  
4 twice I took a wrong turn and ended up among new buildings I didn't recognise.

5 At one point, I retraced my steps for a hundred yards and suddenly I was thrown back in time. I  
6 realised that the old Printers Devil's Court, where I had lodged, had been laid waste and that the  
7 hospital club was now sited on part of the same ground. I thought little of it – Printer's Devil Court  
8 held no special memories for me, other than those last peculiar and unpleasant ones.

9 I was about to turn into the club when I noticed that there was still a passageway to one side and  
10 saw the tower of St- Luke's-at-the-Gate rising up ahead of me in the fitful moonlight. I stood stock  
11 still. London churches are always a fine sight and I was glad that this one, with a surprising number  
12 of others, had escaped destruction. The passageway ended at the back of the old graveyard, as  
13 before, and that seemed unchanged, the tombstones still leaning this way and that and even more  
14 thickly covered in moss.

15 And then I saw her. She was a few yards away from me, moving among the graves, pausing here and  
16 there to bend over and peer, as if trying to make out the inscriptions, before moving on again. She  
17 wore a garment of a pale silvery grey that seemed strangely gauze-like and her long hair was loose  
18 and free. She had her back to me. I was troubled to see a young woman wandering here at this time  
19 of night and started towards her, to offer to escort her away. She must have heard me because she  
20 turned and I was startled by her beauty, her pallor and even more, by the expression of distress on  
21 her face. She came towards me quickly, holding out her hand and seeming about to plead with me,  
22 but as she drew near, I noticed a curious blank and glassy look in her eyes and a coldness increased  
23 around me, more intense than that of the night alone. I waited. The nearer she came the greater the  
24 cold but I did not – why should I? – link it in any way to the young woman, but simply to the effects  
25 of standing still in this place where sunlight rarely penetrated in which had a dankness that came  
26 from the very stones and from the cold ground.

27 'Are you unwell?' I asked. 'You should not be here alone at this time of night – let me see you safely  
28 to your home.'

29 She appeared puzzled by my voice and her body trembled beneath the pale clothes. 'You will catch  
30 your death of cold.' She stretched out both her hands to me then but I shrank back, unaccountably  
31 loathe to take them. Her eyes had the same staring and yet vacant look now that she was close to  
32 me. But she was fully alive and breathing and I had no reason to fear.

33 'Please tell me what is wrong?'

34 There was a second only during which we both stood facing one another silently in that bleak and  
35 deserted place and something seemed to happen to the passing of time, which was now frozen still,  
36 now hurtling backwards, now propelling us into the present again, but then on, and forwards, faster  
37 and faster, so that the ground appeared to shift beneath my feet, yet nothing moved and when the  
38 church clock struck, it was only half past midnight.