

**Escape**

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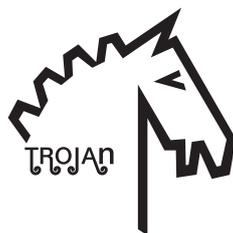
**Mini mags**

*Escape* (2004)

*Hallucination before departure* (2006)

# Escape

Chester Eagle





‘It’s one thing to escape,’ Harold said, ‘but where do you want to end up?’

Marlene had an answer. ‘I want to be where wisdom is.’

‘You want to be wise.’

‘I’ll never be wise. I’m too run-around, ragged, and stupid. I want to be where wisdom is.’

‘In the presence of truth.’

‘That’s where I want to be,’ she said. The men in the tiny bar wondered what the district’s richest man saw in this plain woman – nice body, though – with ragged hair and clothes culled from op-shops or left by people she’d lived with – when she had lived with people; it was said she’d had a year on an island, alone, alone, all alone. What had she done for conversation? Shrieked at the birds, or whispered to fishes, lurking beneath the waves? It was rumoured that she’d told someone, ‘Clouds were my friends: clouds and storms.’ She was a nut. She’d hitched a ride to their town and now she was talking to the only man mad enough to see anything in her: Harry Trethewan, who wanted to be called Harold, though only his family could be made to do it. It was typical of his arrogance, they thought, that he should find the most worthless woman who’d ever entered the place more interesting than they were. Insufferable bastard!

‘And you came here? Wisdom, if you look at the denizens, won’t be easy to find.’ He was amused, in a kindly way; her foolishness was on a scale that pleased him.

‘It’s a step to where I’m going.’

‘And where’s that?’

‘I have first to decide what wisdom is. My search is pointless if I don’t know it when I see it.’

He screwed up his eyes as if to look into her. ‘I’m having one more drink, I’m buying a few supplies, then I’m going into the mountains. If you come with me I’ll show you your stepping-off point, a place lonely enough to drive you mad, on a ledge near a spring, with the remnants of a hut. You and I could fix it together, I’m sure you’re capable of improvising. It’s a place acquainted with infinity, and it has all the space the human brain ever needed. The place I’m offering you has the potential to let you find everything or anything you want. That’s the good prospect; the bad is that you’ll go mad with misery, yearning, and human need.’

‘That,’ she said, ‘will never happen. Show me this place. And when we get there you must be honest enough to tell me why you’re giving it to me.’

A wry, sarcastic jollity ran through him. ‘It’s a dialogue I’m looking forward to. Will you take alcohol into the hills?’

She watched him pick up her glass. ‘If you bring it, I’ll drink it with you. Apart from that, I’ll abstain.’ He thought her answer good.

**I**n the weeks that followed, they worked, she, when she had materials to work with, he, when he had time. They repaired the hut. They gave it a new roof of slightly less rusted corrugated iron. They stopped the more obvious holes where wind could get in. They built a tiny mezzanine under the roof, and cut steps – footholds, really – in a pole to give her access to the mattress where she would sleep. He brought piping so that spring water came to the hut. He surprised her one morning by bringing on his truck a copper for washing clothes, and a large green bath. She expected it to smash as he tried to get it down, but he had expertise with ropes that she hadn’t dreamt of. Loosing, tying, levering the gross thing with a crowbar to avoid trunks in its way, he got it down the steep slope to the ledge – it was no more – where she was to live. Together they pushed, rolled, pulled and dragged the bath to the spot he designated then they put rocks under and beside to stabilise it. ‘You want for nothing now,’ he said, puffing, and looking at her with his X-ray eyes,

‘except wisdom. Who knows where that will come from?’ he asked, rhetorical in performance though Marlene, by then, had sensed a trouble beneath his grandiloquence as if he was at one and the same time yearning for her to see behind his mask and doing everything he could to make it impossible.

‘I ought to thank you, and I do, but you’re doing it for yourself. This,’ she said, ‘is the place where you want to live, and I’m to do it for you. Come when you can, and I’ll report.’ He thought, then he said, ‘We’ll have rules. I haven’t thought of them yet, but they’ll come. If we want the freedom to explore, we must accept restrictions. This place is your restriction; what mine will be, I don’t know yet. You can think about it perhaps.’

She shook her head. ‘By placing myself here I’m accepting myself as a problem to be worked on. Your problems are yours alone.’

The last word – alone – joined them in a way they didn’t expect. He pointed to a basket in the doorway of the hut. ‘You can leave that at the top of the slope. There’s a notebook. Write in it whatever you want. I’m going now. Don’t watch me climbing out. My gammy leg’s not a pretty sight.’ She went inside the hut. He heard her, as he climbed, cracking sticks to throw on the fire. She would drink, if she made tea, alone. He reached for trunks, saplings, to pull himself up; she watched him, despite his order, through the crack between door and wall, knowing that if he’d let a part of himself live where he wanted to be, she, in turn, was escaping in some way with this wealthy, eccentric man whose wife, she felt, had nothing for her but pity and uncertainty. Harold’s wife, Emily, saw her, she knew, as an experiment in loneliness that had eventual failure built in. ‘Wrong!’ she called to the trees hemming in her patch of grass. It was a scream of defiance, an assertion that successes were possible amid the imperfections of the world, and that she – alone – might bring one of them about, so long as an escape from what she was committing herself to was ever so slightly possible.

**Sitting** inside on a chilly day, she said, ‘Light the fire under the copper. It’s time to share truth with each other.’

‘Truths,’ he corrected.

‘All truths are joined,’ she said, ‘in a great, inner, outer, unknowable truth that pours light onto everything that reaches it.’ Watching him, she added, ‘Is that too difficult for you?’

‘Far too hard! I’ll do as you say with the bath!’

He lit the fire. He lifted the pipe from the spring so it fed into the copper. He added wood, building the fire carefully. When he came back to her, he was preoccupied.

‘You’re afraid.’

‘I am a little. It’s taken me by surprise.’

‘Courage is another name for foolishness. Fear’s in the brain, sensing when something it doesn’t understand is close.’

‘True. But what’s coming to make me afraid? If a lion had me by the leg, or a rhino was charging, I’d have a reason. But ...’ He waved his hand at the world outside, the trees still, the sky quiet. She said, ‘It’s knowledge about ourselves we fear. We want to stay as we are. A realisation is a change. To know something new is to become something different.’

‘I think you’ve put your finger on it. What is it I don’t want to know?’

‘You’ll tell yourself, and I’ll listen.’ Her eyes turned momentarily to the bath, in a clump of snowgums. ‘You’ll get used to the cold,’ she said. ‘On the island I stripped for the windiest days.’

Strangely, I felt warmer with nothing on. My body responded to the cold by lifting its temperature. When I realised that, one of my fears dropped away.'

'How many of them are left?'

Marlene said, 'I'm not afraid of anything, but my capacity for fear is still there, working away inside. All sorts of things can stir it up.'

'Like?'

She looked at him. 'Betrayal. Ignorance. The wild acts of uncertain people who do decisive things because they hate the uncertainty at the basis of their lives.'

The landholder said, 'You say betrayal. I suspect you think I might betray you.'

Marlene said, 'You might. Who could possibly tell why you would do it? You may not do it. But if you entertain the idea of betraying me, I will know before you realise yourself. You will see treachery in my eyes, and you will not allow yourself to realise that it is your intention reflected. We must avoid this if we can, but if it is our karma there will be no avoiding. Both of us will suffer.'

Not answering, he stood. He went outside to feel the water in the copper. Then he shifted the pipe so it began to fill the bath with icy water. 'It's too slow,' he said to himself more than to her. He began to throw leaves and sticks against the metal bath. Watching him, she realised what he had in mind, and emerged from the hut, radiantly, to help. They stacked combustibles against the tub they were about to share, poked dry leaves under the copper, then applied them to the snowgum scraps heaped against the bath. Fire sprang up. Something wild took them over. They rushed about the little clearing, clutching handfuls of leaves and fallen branches. Everything they picked up went onto the flames surrounding the bath. He bent to feel the water. She watched his reaction as if salvation might be advanced by what he said. 'It's pretty nippy, but what's a little discomfort? We're underway, Marlene! We're making this place our own!' He began to strip for the bath, she pulled off her clothes and flung them towards the hut. He picked up a rock and placed it so they could step over the edge of the bath without putting their feet in the fire. Looking at her, he saw admiration in her eyes; in him, she felt, there was a wild delight which she alone, of all the humans he'd known, had been able to release. She took his hand. 'Yes!' She stepped in, pulling him, not looking, but knowing he would follow. 'Yes!' he called, loudly, wanting an echo that didn't come. 'Yes!' he shouted again, and louder with every call, 'Yes! Yes! Yes yes yes!' Marlene squatted, then unbent her knees, the water reaching the hair between her legs. 'Be ready, wisdom!' she announced. 'We're not far away!'

Legs pressed together, water to their chins, they took it in turns to speak. Marlene began with, 'Om mane padme hum' in reverberant tones, wanting to imitate the sound of a deep brass bell. Inclining his head, Harold listened, as if these words from another world would draw a response, and they did: birds of the Australian forest flitted from one tree to another, saying things to each other, and the world about them. 'I wonder,' he said, 'if they ever feel displeased with themselves? Or can't they reflect? Are we ...' he sighed '... the only species that can look on itself and find what it sees not to its liking?' She waited, unready to make another pronouncement, then something prompted him to go on. 'It's my burden, my fate, to be unpopular. They hide it well enough, because I employ them. And they need me to make donations to the well-meant and not so well-meant local causes. They let me know, as if I need to be reminded, that my donation is the first. If I give a hundred dollars, the next biggest will be ten. If I give ten dollars, they'll give one. Or fifty cents. I set the standard. So they hate me. But that's not the real cause. My crime in their eyes, making me an irritant they'd love to be without, is that I think. I weigh things up. They can't stand

it. They want to be whatever comes naturally to them. If anyone makes them look at themselves, they detest him. Me. What's so bloody unfair about it is that civilisations are made by people like me, and people like them are just ...'

He hesitated, because saying it aloud committed him.

'... expendable. Fodder. Fuel for the fire.' He glared sourly at the burning branches around their vessel, then looked to his companion.

She spoke. 'Achievement rests on discontent. Happiness is quiescent. Contentment chews its cud.' She paused, reflecting. 'Fumbling in the dark means we pretend to see what we're doing, when we can't. The person who calls for more light makes liars of those who say they can see what they're doing.'

He nodded, then it occurred to him that the woman in the water with him would never become pregnant and give birth. He reached for the submerged breast on the side of his right hand: her left. 'There's a great sadness in a woman not becoming a mother.'

Speaking over his shoulder, addressing, he felt, the rocks on the mountainside, she intoned, 'Continuing the human species involves declaring your membership. I left it years ago. She added, whimsically, 'Resigned. Let my papers lapse. Stopped paying my dues. I put myself into the silence to see what I could hear.'

They listened. The very presence of mountains is a song. Orchestral air murmured about them, and a wind, high above, moved clouds to let a beam of light brighten the other side of their valley. He wanted to ask her questions, but knew it would break an unspoken rule.

'My wife understands my position exactly, but she can't remedy it, because she can't take out of existence that nagging, gnawing part of the brain that disquiets me. I'm sure she thinks I'd be better without it, so she lulls me as much, and as best, she can. It's ever so comforting, and I love her for it. No man ever had a better companion, but – and she understands this – I don't particularly want a companion. What I want, I think, is someone whose restlessness is as great as my own.'

Another movement of cloud took the light from their valley. She splashed her face, ran her hands through her hair, then rested her head on the end of the bath, staring at the leaves above, or the sky beyond them, silent for so long that he wondered if she'd gone into meditation, then she spoke again.

'Yearning is a form of cheating. A hope that someone else will do the work we have to do ourselves. The mountaineer feels inspiration on seeing a peak, but if he wants to stand on it, he has to put one foot after another, day after day, until he's done the work of getting his body where his eyes desired to be. Advanced spiritual states require that we work to reach them. The problem is to know which actions, which thoughts, take us up, and which ones lead us down. The problem is easy to express, impossible to solve.'

He stood up. She looked at him, naked above her. 'Out now,' he said. 'That's the end of our first session. We won't know for a long time whether it was any use or not. I think that promising is the best thing we could say about it. I want some tea, and a leg of that chicken, before I go back to work.' She stood up, water dripping from her body, solid and less bony than his, a woman beside a man. 'Papageno, Papagena,' he tried to sing. She laughed, then put an arm around him. He chuckled. 'Get dressed again, get that kettle on. I've got things to do.'

The next time he arrived, the bath was full and the copper boiling. He accepted this without surprise. A trace of amusement flitted about her eyes, pleasing him: this was an intimacy long

desired. He sat on a rock at the door of her hut to take off his boots; she watched as if everything was happening by agreement. Socks were next, then he stood to remove trousers, shirt, underwear. Naked, he let her study him. Her eyes roamed over him, tenderly, though with curiosity and an understanding of the effects of pain when she studied the scar tissue on his upper leg. 'I fell off a horse. Bloody fool that I was, I deserved it. I'd have died if I hadn't been rescued by a man who was supposed to be somewhere else. But that's another story. Getting in, my dear?'

She stripped, and followed him. Before she lowered herself she stood so he could examine her. His acceptance of her body – of what it looked like, and the passions and thoughts it housed – was a rare balm for her. 'My turn?' he asked. She nodded.

'When my wife told me we were expecting our first child, she knew in advance what my reaction would be, and she was, of course – why of course? – right! Predictable, ever so predictable Harold Trethewan! I would be pleased for her, I would feel proud for myself, a proper man at last, and I would dig in hard against the flood of change it would bring. I write poems, I don't think I've told you. In my ideal poems, everything is stated in the title, a nice big black bold heading! You know? The Lost Child. The Favoured Son. View from the Future. Never Look Back. Ugh! You can tell from the titles that I write rubbish. Why wasn't I a real poet, one of those men with the tongues of angels? Why wasn't I given what I grasp for?' Tears ran down his cheeks. His appeal was pulling her to give the all-consuming, all-endowing love he craved. 'Anyhow, my poems,' he went on. 'I thought you could state your theme in the title, then develop it as you intended. My wife, who couldn't put two lines of verse together if she had a month with nothing to do but sharpen pencils ...' frustration was stiffening his calf muscles '... said to me that I was wrong, that the title was the part where the man who thought he knew what he was doing would have his little say – raised the flag of his intention, so to speak – and then the poem would develop according to its own needs, responding, perhaps, to forces inside itself that even it, the poem, didn't know about, and only when the last full stop was in position – if there was one; god, what they do these days! – only then would this poem's meaning have shown itself. "It's like giving birth, my dear," she said to me. Giving birth! She rubbed her tummy where our first child was growing, and with eyes of considerable strength she forced me to rub there too, and I knew what she was saying – that life is magic, mystery, is in fact giving birth, and that even the fiercest, most rational use of our intellects is no more than taking a few sensible precautions during a process we'll never understand!' His body stiffened as he resisted this idea, this outlook that had bested him years before but which to that morning he had been resisting.

Marlene looked at him, waiting for him to finish. 'She was right, I was silly, and it's taken me thirty years to admit it, and the admission was made, you'll notice, to a stranger, not to my wife. What does that say about me?'

This time it was Harold who rested his head on the back of the bath and stared into the trees above, the sky beyond. 'Is there any mercy, any release? A gift of some sort from a kindly, well-disposed creator? Don't tell me the answer, I know already.' Tears poured from him again. 'There's nothing, no comfort, but I can't stop wanting it!'

She sat in silence for a long time, then she stood. Anxiously he lifted a hand to stop her, but she was doing no more than adding a bucket of hot water, right in the middle, before she got back in.

When she spoke, it was in a whisper. 'What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties ...' The rhythm of the words gave her voice nobility. He wanted to say he envied the famous playwright but forced himself to be silent; it was her turn: that was their under-

standing. He wanted to remind her that she was whispering the words of a play where the women fared badly, but he saw that she was layering his complaint, his agonies, with complexities, ironies, that made every problem insoluble. She was denying him the release he'd called for by telling him it didn't exist. She paused, then began a long stretch of blank verse he didn't recognise until the very end when a reference to the unattainable feminine told him it was Goethe's Faust. When it ended, she repeated the last lines in German, then:

'You see, according to the greatest minds, we don't exist yet. How can you, a man, have the final answer you desire so strongly, when you haven't even allowed us to take the first step? Our first step together? You have to go back to the beginning, and start all over again. Define everything anew. That should keep you busy for a lifetime or two.'

Glumly he looked at the woman who was exacerbating his pain by prescribing endless eons of the same thing, an absence of the pain he'd thought he hated, and a sharing of her distress, which was worse. 'You win,' he said. 'You're right. I didn't expect you to turn the tables on me, but you did. Fairly and squarely, if that's the way to say it. Let's sit for a while. We'll continue this next time we're here.' Marlene took a slab of soap from the edge of the bath, slid her hand along the inside of his leg, and began to rub the skin where broken bone had pierced, most of a mature man's lifetime before.

**T**he next time, a fortnight later, it was Marlene who was reluctant, and Harold who lit the fire and sat by her in silence until there was enough warmth in the water. Even then he was in the bath for several minutes before she took off her clothes to join him. 'Your turn to start,' he said.

Initiating nothing, she put her head against the rim and looked into the trees. After a minute Harold suspected she'd been planning to leave, and was having trouble bringing herself to tell him. 'What is it?' he said. 'Have I done something wrong?'

She spoke softly. 'I've been thinking of moving on. It wouldn't be your fault, but it would be an effect of you.' He waited. 'I'm not used to anybody listening to me. I prefer to write on walls.' He knew this; there were chalked and pencilled snatches of thought – the Bible, mystics galore, the cryptic Foucault – on the beams of the hut, the walls, even in blobs of paint on the roof. 'How have I had the effect of dislodging you from the ideal place to meditate?'

'A place is no better than the thinking, the personal development, that happens there. I've reached the peak of what I can achieve here. It's your place. You claim it every time you drop in on me. You're curious about me. That has an effect. It unsettles me to have you noticing things. In charting my progress you're preventing it.'

'You need to be surrounded by complete indifference, then?'

'It's cold, and heartless, but it's what I need.'

'Otherwise?'

'I become dependent, and that's something I rejected years ago.'

Harold said, 'We're all dependent. We all want something from other people. It's why I come here, and leave, I'd like to tell you, deeply satisfied. My wife, who isn't jealous, would tell you it was doing me oceans of good.'

'Then that's a drain on my energy. You're taking psychic drive I ought to be putting into myself.'

'We don't belong to ourselves alone. I realise that means that some people will make net gains and others net losses, because some of us demand more than we give, but if you think about it, looking across the spectrum of the whole of humanity – and that's surely the plane for people like

us – it evens up: ingoings equal total outgoings. They must, otherwise there's a gain, or loss, in the system. I believe in the indestructability of psychic energy, so I have to think that none of it is ever lost. It just moves around a bit. Each of us has seasons when we're gainers, and others when we're losers. I suppose I think we don't change much in the course of our lives, once our characters are set. The same old bundle of characteristics takes new forms, we don't entirely recognise ourselves, and we think we're getting older and wiser.' Suddenly his voice became stronger. 'Oh what rubbish it all is, this thinking! This trying to work everything out! I wish I'd brought some wine so we could get drunk! We could get giggly, and roll all over each other, and wake up feeling stupid, and tell each other we could start again. Don't you think that'd be a good idea? Eh? How does that sound to you?'

He knew as soon as he'd said it that he'd driven her away, that one day when he came to the hut it would be deserted. 'You can come again,' he said. 'I refuse to believe that the universe is infinite. There's an end to it somewhere. Travel to the limit, but come back, Marlene, come back! I'm incapable of saying please. I have to couch my most urgent needs as orders. Nothing in that will deceive you because you've seen into the core of me. Come back. I'll leave the hut here. No campers, no busybodies taking photos. It'll always be undisturbed for you.'

'I don't own anything,' she said. 'It's not good for me.'

'Where will you go?'

'A tropical island, somewhere lush, with new distractions to conquer before I get back to the innermost struggle I keep losing, and keep postponing because – this is the truth of me, now, really, at last – I don't want to reach any final nirvana. I don't want extinction, I need to struggle, it's the last thing that keeps me human, and – you must have seen this – though I hate my humanity, there's no way I can afford to lose it. I don't want to be discovered by some nosy bushwalker as a body on a floor, dismembered by dogs.'

Harold said, 'I know I'm breaking every rule. I shouldn't cut in on what you're saying, but I can't stop myself. I want to protect you. I want to provide for you. I want to give you the circumstances you need of privacy, even isolation, of meagre but sufficient supplies, a resting place for your body so your mind, your spirit, can journey on ...'

He could tell when she'd turned him off in her brain. 'Marlene? What do you say to that?'

'In giving me perfection, you create imperfection. If everything's provided, I've got too much. Given what I need, I'm imprisoned. The solitary path is a painful one, and has to be. The trap of perfection is what everyone says it is – a gilded cage. I'm moving on!'

Against her anger, her defiance, he was weak, and full of pity for himself. She felt it, and stood up proudly, strongly, conquering him. Sensing his defeat, he had to make terms on some sort of decency. He stood too, water dripping off him, as it drained down her body, man and woman, facing each other from the ends of the bath they'd shared. 'A true contest,' he said sadly. 'Your instinct for the struggle, and what it involves, is deeper and surer than mine.' Then his rhetorical strain fell away. 'Who gets out first, Marlene? Eh? Tell me that. Do I get out first, under duress from you? Or do I tag along weakly behind your strength?' He was searching for other ways to say it when she said, 'Kings and queens had courtiers to tell them their rights of precedence. I'll have no such rubbish. Out we get together, come on Harold, you and I, one leg at a time.'

Stepping out of the bath, he realised that he'd put his damaged leg first, something he never did. 'Do you want me to dry you?'

‘No,’ she said, ‘we’ll walk in the air until it dries us. I don’t want you to touch me, in case it makes me foolish, but I don’t want to stop seeing you just yet.’ They walked in the shaded, mottled clearing until their bodies were dry.

**H**e filled her basket twice more, then, the third time he called, it wasn’t under the fallen log where she left it, and, when he looked, there was no smoke rising from the chimney. He wondered, making his way down the slope, where she was, when she’d gone ... and above all else, what message she’d left.

The hut was tidy, though possums had been inside. The tins and jars of rice and flour were as she’d left them. Her broom stood by the fireplace, wanting to be used. The teapot was empty and upside down; no mouldy leaves to signal the departure of Marlene. Her books were there; she’d written her name on none of them. He wondered when she’d last signed anything, then remembered the social security form that brought her – after the bureaucracy’s delays, and checking – her fortnightly pension. The pots and pans they’d bought with the first cheque were there beside the broom, neat, clean, as abandoned as he was. A terrible yearning filled him to have her back, to set themselves fresh goals to strive for, to give them fresh moments to express what was in their minds. Never again! He knew that despite his call to return she would never fill his void again.

He looked out the door, as if her spirit could be called, transparent ghost among the trees, from the high world where he liked to think he belonged, to this withdrawn hideout where deeper, more significant thoughts could emerge from the darkness of the brain.

Sick with loneliness he read all over again the hundred and one messages she’d written on the hut he’d given her; it was hers forever now, until a forest fire – the inevitable destruction – came to take it. ‘As it takes us all,’ he whispered, looking at the bath, and the neat stack of wood by the copper, ready for a fire that would never be lit. He knew he should get in the water to continue their exploration, but he knew, too, that he wasn’t any good on his own: how desperately he needed someone to prod him, suggest to him, query, block, object, somehow to overcome the barrier-building which was his brain’s most persistent activity, and make his humanity common.

For a moment he felt an urge to grab a piece of charcoal and write ‘Dirt! It’s all I am and will ever be!’ on the wall, and then it occurred to him, again, that there must be a parting message somewhere. He looked. In a box near the fireplace were some crumpled scraps of paper, torn from an exercise book. He put the box on the bench and flattened the pages. They only repeated the tags, the fragments, the symbolic direction-givers already pencilled or chalked on the walls. The last, he felt as he opened it, must be her message. He pressed it with his palm, his fingers. In black biro she’d written, ‘Those who say we die alone forget that we live alone. Companions, though destructive of our solitude, make it bearable. The next step – the need – is to identify that part of the companionship that helps and doesn’t destroy. Every lame soul needs a stick. The trick to learn is to get up on our feet using the stick, and then to discard. There may be joy along that path.’

And, he thought, there may be delusion, desperate acts, attempts to get back ... but a process, once begun, must go forward. Marlene was gone. ‘I’m very lucky,’ he said to the hut. ‘Not as lucky as I would have liked, but luckier than most.’ Then his loss overwhelmed him and he sat on her chair, eyes streaming with grief. Eventually, glumly, he became aware that something was expected of him: no, that he expected better of himself. He stood. He put a match to her message, and, as the flame died on the blackened paper, he said to it, to her, ‘Go in peace!’