

Alexander Alexander

by Algernon Blackwood

His Christian name and surname were the same, and the fact that he insisted upon their proper use, respectively, made things of ten most unpleasant. His sombre dignity forbade familiarity. If, greatly daring, I said “Hullo, Alexander!” using his Christian name, he would assume a stern and frightening air:

“*Alexander!* If you please,” he would say icily. “Use my right name.”

Herein lay, perhaps, the heart of that dark secret which deceived me for so many years, as also the essence of that horror his double masquerade concealed: Whereas, between Alexander and *Alexander* none knew which was which, he—alone of all the world—*he* knew!

To me, as a little girl, there was something portentous about him always. More than a common man, he was a Personage, a Figure. With the passage of the years my conception of him grew, for his bulk and stature grew at the same time, until, more than man, or personage, or figure, he became almost that emanation of legendary life—a Being. Although the original sharp outline remained, he spread himself out somehow over an immense, dim background, against which that first outline yet held itself fixed in vivid silhouette. I conceive him as both remote and very close, as shadow and substance, an unreality yet dreadfully composed of solid flesh and blood.

This confusion in my own mind added enormously to the mystery of his strange existence; but it was the mistake in the use of his name that remained chiefly serious, a crime of untold import, since it was I myself who first—christened him. To call him by a wrong name, therefore, was an insult to his actuality, a careless and unpardonable sacrilege that trifled with the essential nature of his personality.

I lived with an uncle, who was also my guardian, and this mystifying double role contributed, no doubt, an element to the birth of Alexander *Alexander*. Some childhood’s divination dramatised itself perhaps. If so, this earliest creative drama had a prophetic, even a clairvoyant, quality that enabled him to endure until he had fully justified his dark existence. Both Alexander and *Alexander* persisted through my girlhood. Only at the threshold of womanhood, when I came of age at twenty-one, did the

dreadful pair pass hand in hand to their final distressing dissolution.

He—*Alexander*—often came to see my uncle, who, I divined, was a good deal afraid of him—a fact that impressed me painfully. He was tall, dark, angular, and so thin that he always looked cold, even in the sunshine; as though, having left off his flesh, as others leave off their thick underwear, he was forever shivering in his bones. Of those mummied Pharaohs he reminded me. He had the great square jaw, deep eyes, heavy cheek-bones, and copious hair those gloomy figures of prodigious personality bear tirelessly with them down the ages. He walked on his toes a little, adding thus to the appearance of his height. He took, too, an immense and swinging stride, with an easy gliding motion that seemed to flow. His extraordinary swiftness of movement made me think of running water.

Oh, Alexander—or do I mean *Alexander*?—how you impressed me when I was about six years old! Which “Alexander”? I don’t quite know, to tell the truth. Years passed before I got even an inkling.

The names still flow, like parallel rivers, down and through my consciousness, to lose themselves in the depths of some mysterious dream-ocean where, at length and at last, they become merged, I believe, in one. There were certainly two of them—once. There was Alexander, and there was *Alexander*. I can swear to it.

It was his—*Alexander’s* copious hair that impressed me vividly at the age of six. It was smoothed down with shiny grease whose faint, but not unpleasant, aroma came into a room before its wearer, and hung about in the air long after he had left. Hair, perfume, grease, all fascinated me.

“That’s *pomade*,” explained my nurse, answering a question and using a strange new word. Then, fearful of some wrong use I might make of the information, she added: “and no business of yours, remember, either.” The queer word seized me; it remained hanging about my mind . . . pomade, pomade. How vividly, with what lasting depth and sharpness these early impressions score the mind of a child, so tenderly receptive. No wonder the psychologists dive after them to explain the irregularities of nerve and memory that emerge in later life. The name Alexander, to begin with, carried me away. It bore me along with it. There was movement in it. Jones, Green, Brown, one syllable names, are stationary and fixed; but “Alexander” had a glide. It was a watery move-

ment; I always connected it with water. It flowed round and through and under me. It bore me easily away with it. I saw a rapid stream, whose undulating surface had no actual waves, owing to its speed, but swept along in rhythmic rise and fall, like a brimmed rivulet across a sloping meadow. My feet gave under me, and I was off. "Alexander, *Alexander*, oh, why cannot you meander? "I used to murmur to myself, using another strange new word I had discovered, a suitable word since it was the name of a river that also flowed. I saw copious hair, pomade, a lean, dark, careering figure on its toes, swinging rapidly down my mind with a pulse of hurrying water.

He was a solicitor, I imagined, and the name only half understood, somehow to me suggested prison; and my uncle, who was also my legal guardian, I fancied had done something wrong. It was rather confusing having an uncle who was guardian too. It puzzled me. My uncle was reserved, secretive—that is, as "guardian," he was reserved, secretive; for as "uncle" he was affectionate, playful, kind, and very dear to me. I had this mingled fear and love.

The name had a strange power. I was, perhaps, nine years old when the goose frightened me in the yard behind the stables, and some undigested fairy-tale made me think its clacking beak was going to bite me into pieces. Pulling down my little skirts frantically to protect my bare legs, I found the bad rhyme instantly, though I may have shaped it actually a little later:

Alexander, *Alexander*,
Oh, come down into the yard!
For I'm frightened at the gander—
Oh, come quick with your pomade!

And he came. That was what lived with me for years, increasing enormously his influence. He came at once. The glass door of the conservatory opened, and out he poured with amazing swiftness, on his toes, turning his thin, dark face and head towards me. His great stride brought him up to me in a moment. He was, I believe, really looking for my uncle, who was in the stables just then, examining the horses. But it was in answer to my cry that he was beside me in a second. I caught the whiff of the pomade.

"Oh, Alexander—!" I cried, relieved, but also alarmed.

"*Alexander*," he corrected me sternly, his deep eyes staring, while the gander retreated and left me safe at once. Yet, when I turned round again from watching the retreating bird, he—Alexander—had disappeared, and my uncle—or was it my guardian?—was coming towards me from the stables with a smile. The incident, at any rate, left a deep impression on me. The use—the correct use—of the great name evidently carried away with its own movement.

I saw him only occasionally as I grew older; during holidays, when home from school, and later, from a year in Paris to improve my French and acquire manners and deportment. He was aged in the eyes, and skin, and gait. The stream of his name no longer brimmed its banks as formerly. But the spell remained. And the pomaded hair kept young as ever. My uncle, I now realised somehow, welcomed his visits, yet while dreading them. I thought of the two at the time, I remember, as driver and driven in some mysterious enterprise of financial kind. They were. But Alexander was the driven, and *Alexander* held the whip. And once, lying half asleep in bed, a horrible suspicion came to me that my uncle—or was it my guardian?—knew. Knew what? Why "horrible?" I could not say, I felt it, that's all.

A week after my return from Paris—I was to be of age next day—I was standing in the passage when he called. Thomas was leading the way. It was just outside the study door.

"Mr. Alexander to see you, sir," I heard him announced.

The visitor glowered with vexation. "Mr. *Alexander*," he rebuked the servant in a low tone, as he swung through the door on his toes into the study, where my uncle, or my guardian evidently awaited him. And as I heard the name, in the way *he* uttered it, a sudden wave of cold anxiety, more of acute distress, broke over me. As that lean, dark, pomaded head flowed round the open door with its extraordinary swiftness, and vanished, I felt afraid. The footman went past me with an expressionless face, but it seemed to me that his face was ghastly white. He disappeared in the empty hall beyond; I heard the green baize door into the nether regions swing to behind him with its customary gulp. But the draught of its closing came to me across all that distance; so that I felt it on my cheeks. And its touch was icy. I stood there shivering, unable at first to move or think. A vague dread and wonder held me. What were Alexan-

der and *Alexander* saying to my uncle and my guardian?

What steps to take I knew not. For I was aware that I ought to take steps at once. My hesitation was caused by an inexplicable fear. It was the fear of my guardian, but *for* my uncle. Is that clear? While dreading my guardian, I felt, I knew, that I must help my uncle. Two courses seemed open to me: to enter the room, or to follow the footman and ask him an awful question.

I chose the latter. In a moment I was through the green baize door that led into the servants' quarters; but, as I ran, a new suspicion fastened on me. It fastened on my spine where the shivering was. I was amazed and horror-stricken. For the suspicion was so complete that it must actually have lain in me a long, long time already.

"Thomas," I said, breathlessly; "the gentleman you showed in just now—who was it?"

"I beg pardon, Miss," he said, staring blankly. I asked the question a second time. "Showed in, Miss," he repeated stupidly.

"The tall, dark gentleman," I insisted, in a failing voice, "you just showed in to——" (I could not, for the life of me, say "my uncle's")—"into Mr. Burton's study—Mr.—Mr.—?" I stammered and stuck fast.

The man paused a moment, with a puzzled air. He stared at me. "I showed no gentleman in, Miss," he said, a trifle offended, his voice firm and decided. "Mr. Burton rang for——" (it was his turn to hesitate)—"for something to drink, Miss. And I just took it in to him."

I knew then. I knew it all at once, complete. I tore back. But my thought raced faster than my legs. An elaborate fabric built most carefully, and standing firm for years, collapsed into ghastly ruins. The footman's face, I remembered, was always white. My nurse, now dead, had always fallen in with my fancies. My uncle was tall and thin and dark, and had always worn pomaded hair. But it was only when I reached the study door that the final film cleared off, letting in the appalling light. For I suddenly remembered another thing as well; he acknowledged to a buried name. Hidden away among several others, he owned a name he never used. His full name, of course, was Frank Henry *Alexander* Burton.

I stood transfixed outside the door.

But precious minutes were passing. "Oh, *Alexander, Alexander,*" rushed down my mind. The childhood's rhyme was about to follow, yard, gander,

pomade and all, when a sound inside the room sent the ice again down my spine. It made my will tighten at the same time. I might be too late even now. Without knocking, I rushed into the room. The desk was strewn with documents and papers. A decanter of spirits stood beside them, with a half-emptied glass. The French windows were open on the lawn. The summer air came in. There was a faint aroma of pomade. But I was too late. The room was empty. "Oh, *Alexander!*" I gasped, petrified by the emptiness, and was about to add "*Alexander*" when a horrid weakness came over me and a blackness rose before my face. My legs collapsed. I fell into a dead faint on the floor. . . .

It was "by water" of course, and the verdict was death by drowning while of unsound mind. I saw the body next day. It was my uncle's, not my guardian's body. The hair, for the first time, I saw tangled.

Oh, *Alexander, Alexander!* Merged at last in one! You, *Alexander*, left me a pauper. But for you, *Alexander*, I have still kind memories of a weak, affectionate, and sorely tempted uncle. . . .

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