

A LITERARY GOTHIC StudyGuide

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"An Eddy on the Floor" by Bernard Capes

This story was first published in Capes' collection *At a Winter's Fire*, 1899.

General Considerations:

Notice how often the word "will" is used in this story, and how the Major's discussions of prison reform and the treatment of prisoners (these discussions can be dense reading, but they're worth some extra effort) contrast not only with earlier Victorian practices, but with the Major's behavior as recounted in the letter that Johnson writes on his death-bed.

Abbreviations used in this StudyGuide:

OED = Oxford English Dictionary

"An Eddy on the Floor": an "eddy" is a swirling, circular movement of wind or water.

"H. M. Prison, D—": "Her Majesty's Prison," since the monarch in 1899 was Queen Victoria; when the monarch is male, it would be "His Majesty's Prison." The "D—" is standard C19 practice for indicating a place that a writer doesn't want specifically to name. A prison is a jail is a gaol, by the way; "gaol" (which is pronounced the same way "jail" is) is a variant spelling still in wide use in Britain. Here's a good website on [typical victorian prisons](#).

Major Shrike: shrikes are birds of prey; while many eat only insects, some shrike species feed on small rodents, and at least one species (the "butcher bird") is known to impale its prey on thorns.

"a cockney in appearance": much is made of Major Shrike's "cockney" appearance and poetry in this tale. "Cockney" is a term (often used in a derogatory sense) referring to those born in a particular section of the east side of London, often specifically said to be within earshot of the "Bow Bells," the bells of St. Mary-le-Bow church. (In fact these bells are heard more widely, and, according to the OED, "'within the sound of Bow-bells' has come to be synonymous with 'within the City bounds.'") People born in this section of London were often regarded as lower-class and less cultivated. The British Romantic poet John Keats (1795 - 1821) was a "Cockney" in this sense, and was grouped, along with a few other "upstart" poets of his time, in the so-called "Cockney School" of poetry, much looked down upon by the literary establishment of the day. It is likely that Capes had John Keats in mind, since Keats's first volume of poetry was, like Major Shrike's, viciously attacked in the press, and it was popularly (if mistakenly) believed that the brutal review of his work contributed to Keats's ill-health and early death.

"a Cruikshank etching": [George Cruikshank](#) (1792 - 1878) was a very popular caricaturist and political

cartoonist.

"lingering beside the mark": delaying in getting to my point.

"my solecism in manners": my departure from accepted norms of behaving/speaking. Is the Major referring to his comments upon Lady Barbara Grille, which verge on the impertinent, or on his remark, apparently made with a tone of emotional indulgence, about the nobility of poetry?

"story of Coleridge and the horse collar": [unknown]

"*in nuce*": in a nutshell (Latin).

"it falls 'all oblique'": according to the Major's theory of criminology, the "tactical spirit" (the planning capacity of a criminal mind, that is) is not properly directed or developed, and so leads to actions that are misdirected, not "straight" (oblique of course means "Having a slanting or sloping direction or position; declining from the upright or vertical, or from the horizontal; lying aslant; diverging from a given straight line or course" [OED]). In this challenging paragraph the Major is laying out the theoretical basis for his system of prisoner reform, a system that, in its apparent compassion and humanity - notice that he refers to his prisoners, at one point, as "my patients" - will provide a sharp and disturbing contrast to those events recounted in Johnson's letter: in his treatment of the grey-faced man Shrike seems to violate just about every principle and value he puts into practice in his prison reform.

"I eliminate cant and hypocrisy": while "cant" can mean jargon in the technical sense of that word, it usually, as here, means something very much like "bullshit" in the common American sense of that term - fancy language designed to obscure the speaker's lack of sincerity or lack of knowledge.

"By intercourse--": that's the older sense of "intercourse," meaning to talk with.

"I am fortunate in private means": the Major has independent income, such as from an inheritance or trust fund, in addition to his salary as a warden.

"in no pharisaical spirit": that is, hypocritically; the Major means that when he sends a freed prisoner out into the world, that prisoner truly has been equipped to succeed in regular life. The Pharisees, in the Bible, are hypocrites, people who appear to be full of piety and who strictly observe religious forms and rituals, but whose hearts are lacking in religious spirit.

"peccadilloes": misbehaviors or minor offenses.

"ticket-of-leave men": a ticket of leave is official permission for a prisoner to leave the prison before his sentence has been fully served - a parole, of sorts. Since these are the men who are most likely to return to prison, the Major is suggesting that his system is quite successful, that the only prisoners who go out and return to a life of crime are those who have not gone all the way through his reform process.

"the reversion of the post": "reversion" is a legal term meaning "The right of succeeding to the possession of something after another is done with it"; notice that the position the Major is offering to the narrator won't be vacant for another month.

"the seven-league boots of success": referenced in various folk- or fairy-tales, seven-league boots are boots that allow the wearer to cover seven leagues (21 miles) with each step; the narrator is thus referring to a stroke of luck that allowed him to make a significant professional advance in a very short time.

"a devastating epidemic of typhoid": typhoid (often "typhoid fever") is a disease characterized by fever and delirium, and is often associated with unsanitary and crowded conditions. Typhoid fever is caused by the infamous *Salmonella* bacterium.

"something of an officially petted reformer": that is, he was indulged by his superiors.

"the insensate barbarism of crank and treadmill": this alludes to the cruelty of hard physical labor which convicts would often be forced to perform; being forced to walk on a treadmill was a common punishment in Victorian prisons; such treadmills (or, in other cases, cranks turned by prisoners) would be used to power mills or other on-site facilities. The treadmill was banned in Britain in 1902. Solitary confinement (referred to in the next sentence in the story) was commonly used in C19 prisons, as was the "silent treatment," in which prisoners were denied the privilege of speaking for weeks or months at a time.

"a spiritualistic medium, convicted of imposture": the popularity of spiritualism in the 1890s (séances, fortune-telling, ouija boards, etc) was accompanied by a great deal of fraud ("imposture").

"Not a tittle": not even the tiniest amount.

"A sheet and a turnip": in Great Britain, where Halloween began, the vegetable of choice for making a jack-o'-lantern was originally a turnip, not a pumpkin; the Major is here saying that spiritualism is nothing more than superficial posturing and deception - thus the reference to "a hawker's opportuneness"; the Major sees "spiritualistic mediums" as nothing more than con artists. The discussion at this point in the story is acutely interesting given what happens later in the story, in cell 47.

"we'll cart it wholesale" = move it in large quantities; get rid of it in its entirety. The Major is saying he will reform the alleged "medium" by getting rid of his desire to prey upon people by exploiting their faith in the supernatural. This discussion helps reinforce the Major's skepticism regarding the supernatural, which, again, is very interesting given what happens later in this story.

incubus: an evil spirit, typically understood as a male spirit that visits women in the night for sexual purposes.

"to learn to shiver, like the boy in the fairy tale": [unknown]

"I'm not trying to sauce you": to speak impertinently or inappropriately to, perhaps "to fool."

"a game of piquet": piquet is a two-person card game.

"a man without encumbrances -- as a severe conservatism designates the *lares* of the cottage": that is, the Major is unmarried and has no children; *lares*, a Latin word (pronounced LAHR-eez), refers to household gods; the usage here is a satirical reference to "wife and children."

"tasting' his books": looking through various volumes for interesting passages, but not reading books in the

usual manner. This helps to establish what aspect of the Major's character?

"Francis Bacon, who screwed his wit to his philosophy": Sir Francis Bacon (1561 -1626), a Renaissance writer, courtier, philosopher, and scientific theorist. The phrase "screwed his wit to his philosophy" refers to Bacon's completeness as a thinker, blending his personal insights and acute understanding of humanity to his intellectual theories. The passage read by Major Shrike is from Bacon's "[On Revenge](#)" (1625). What do you make of the fact Major Shrike reads such writers as Bacon? That he's reading an essay entitled "On Revenge"?

"picking oakum now": picking oakum means untangling or picking apart old ropes; the resulting material was used as stuffing. This was a very common task assigned to prisoners in the C19.

"we have left Nature in the thicket": we have left our instincts behind us and are no longer motivated purely by primal urges. The Major's next statement indicates he disagrees with this belief.

"not foxing, in my opinion": not attempting to deceive or fool me.

lurcher: typically referring to a petty thief (which may be part of the Major's intention), the term is also a slang reference to a "bumbailiff," itself a slightly contemptuous term for a "bailiff," a minor police official responsible for serving warrants and making arrests.

rigor mortis: stiffening of the limbs in death.

"brass *repoussé* work": referring to metalwork, *repoussé* means "raised or beaten into relief, ornamented in relief, by means of hammering from the back or reverse side" (OED). What does it say about the Major's character that he would have a relatively fancy item like this in his rooms?

"heard him guggling": babbling; making a sound similar to that of gurgling water.

"the trap in the door": that is, the small trapdoor, at about face level, set into the prison cell's door. Here's [a good photo of the typical "trap"](#) on a C19 prison cell door.

"will-o'-wisp": the 'will-of-the-wisp' (there are lots of variations on this name) is also known as the *ignis fatuus*, or "fool's fire." Literally referring to the flashes of glowing light given off by the slow oxidation or burning of swamp gases, the term is more commonly used figuratively, referring to anything "that deludes or misleads by means of fugitive appearances" (OED). This latter sense is delightfully captured in the 1900 poem by Canadian poet Annie Campbell Huestis, "[The Will-o'-the-Wisp.](#)"

"'In the dead waste and middle' of a certain night...": The phrase is from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act I, scene 2), when Hamlet's friend Horatio explains to the Prince that two castle guards have seen the ghost of Hamlet's father.

monomaniac: someone obsessed with a single idea. The term occurs frequently in Poe; see, for example, "Berenicë."

"for any toad of ugliness that listed to 'sit at squat' in" : to 'sit at squat' is simply to squat or sit on one's

haunches, a reference to the typical sitting posture of frogs and toads. The narrator is saying that he was plagued by a number of disturbing thoughts.

“dazed and white-livered”: cowardly (as in “lily-livered coward”). From the ancient belief that a pale liver was caused by a lack of bile or “choler,” the bodily essence supposed to convey vitality, spirit, and courage

“There’s summat wrong...”: there’s something wrong. Johnson’s speech patterns indicate a lack of education and “breeding” or culture.

“a man Jack of us”: a common informal British expression for “any of us” or “every last one of the group.”

“Don’t go anigh...”: don’t go near.

“He stood, spruce...”: “spruce” means neatly or smartly dressed.

“slipped the key into the wards”: “wards” are ridges on the inner part of a lock that prevent keys without the correct notches from functioning.

“a swingeing push” : a powerful or forceful shove.

locum tenens. “One who holds office temporarily in place of the person to whom the office belongs, or who undertakes another’s professional duties during his absence; a deputy, substitute” (OED). That is, the narrator is staying in his room not so much because he needs to, but in order to stay out of the way of the substitute doctor.

“to cosset”: to indulge.

“the saner medicus”: the ‘saner’ doctor, the neighborhood physician filling in for the narrator.

“bicipital muscles”: the biceps.

angina pectoris: chest pain due to coronary heart disease; a “heart attack.”

“a certain house we wot of”: we knew of. Why do you think Capes is using this deliberately archaic language?

“Then did my love awake / Most like a lily-flower” = original with Capes?

“Age with stealing steps hath clawde me with his crowch” : From [“The Aged Lover Renounceth Love”](#) by the C16 poet Thomas, Lord Vaux. “Crowch” is sometimes rendered as “crutch,” sometimes as “clutch.” In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* one of the gravediggers sings a few lines from this poem (V.i).

“yews root in my heart”: yew trees have long been associated with cemeteries.

“apoplectic seizure” : “A malady, very sudden in its attack, which arrests more or less completely the powers of sense and motion; it is usually caused by an effusion of blood or serum in the brain, and preceded by giddiness, partial loss of muscular power, etc.” (OED); a “fit.”

“my erst weak-knee’d collapse”: “erst” means former, earlier.

“a sheet and an illuminated turnip”: see the note, above, to “a sheet and a turnip.”

“gillyflowers...Mary buds”: gillyflowers are carnations or related plants with fragrant flowers; “mary-buds” refers, variously, to marigolds or buttercups.

“in the Punjab”: the Punjab is a region in the north of what, in 1899, was the British colony of India; today it is divided between Pakistan and India.

subaltern: a junior officer (below the level of captain).

“nocked up a friendship”: struck up a friendship.

skip-kennel: a lackey, a flunky.

“the mess got wind of it”: a “mess” in this sense is “Any of the groups into which a military unit or ship's company is divided, the members of each group taking their meals together” (OED).

“he became hart and liver from the moment”: a hart is a male deer, a buck, although this could be intended as a variant spelling of “heart”; either way, the phrase is meant to suggest Major Shrike’s grim resolution to carry on.

“one Bluebeard chamber”: from the grim fairy tale; Bluebeard murdered his wives and kept their bodies in a locked room in his castle. The most well-known version is that by [Charles Perrault](#).

Alsirat: (Al-Sirat al-Mustaqeem) from Islamic tradition, a seven-part bridge to heaven over the pit of hell, razor-sharp.

“buried him in quicklime”: quicklime (calcium oxide) is limestone which has been heated; among its many uses, it helps to hasten the decay of dead bodies.

First posted online: all soul’s.03

[MLA Style citation](#) of this page:

Voller, Jack G. "Study Guide to Bernard Capes' 'An Eddy on the Floor.'" *The Literary Gothic*. 15 January 2008. {your date of access here}.
<http://www.litgothic.com/Texts/eddy_StudyGuide.pdf>.