

CLARE CLARK

THE

NATURE OF

MONSTERS

'Meets the eighteenth century on its own terms;
knocks its wig off, twists its private parts and spits
in its eye ... will draw in fans of Sarah Waters'

Hilary Mantel, *Guardian*



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The Nature of Monsters
by
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Prologue

September 1666

Everyone was agreed that the fire would burn itself out before it reached Swan-street. In Tower-street they had embarked upon the blowing-up of houses for a fire-break. She had felt the shocks of the explosions in the soles of her feet as she bent over her mending, but, although the glass rattled in the windows, she had not been alarmed. On the contrary, her mood had been one of tranquillity, even contentment. The pains that had dogged her throughout her seventh month had eased. When the child kicked, she had stroked the dome of her belly with the palms of her hands, moving them in reassuring circles, her lips shaping lullabies so old and familiar that they felt as much a part of her as her own breath. That night she slept deeply, without dreams. Even when the night-lantern thundered upon the door of the shop, shouting that the fire was coming, that those who remained abed would surely burn alive, she remained untroubled. Quietly, she eased herself to her feet and settled her shawl about her shoulders. For all that it had been a hot, dry summer it would do the infant no good if she were to take a chill.

The bird must have sought refuge in the chimney. Its high-pitched cry caught in the mortar, setting the irons shrilling in echo before it plunged into the empty grate, its wings brilliant with fire, setting wild shadows thrashing against the wall. Bright scraps of flame spiralled upwards as the bird lashed and twisted, its bead eyes lacquered with terror. Beside the grate the stuff spilled from her sewing basket, spangled with sparks. Languidly, as though wearied by the very notion of combustion, a pale scrap of muslin smouldered. When at last it caught it did so with a burst of flame and a sucked-in gasp of surprise. The blaze took quickly. From beneath the stink of burning feathers came the distinct smell of roasting meat.

Then she was down the stairs, outside, running, the skirts of her nightgown bundled in her arms. The streets were filled with people, twisting, screaming, pushing. Above them the fire was a vast arch, grimed

with oily black smoke. The wind bayed and twisted amongst the flames like a pack of dogs, goading the blaze, urging it onwards. Suddenly she turned. Mr Black. It had not occurred to her to think of her husband. Sparks gusted upwards, swarming like maddened bees around her face. In their frames panes of glass shrivelled to yellow parchment. Someone screamed, falling against her with such force she was almost knocked to the ground. Hardly thinking where she ran, she stumbled away, fighting against the current of people spilling downhill towards the silver sanctuary of the river. Above her, birds wheeled and shrieked, twisting arcs of flame. The dust and smoke burned her eyes and throat. It hurt to breathe.

On the great thoroughfare of Cheap-side the kennel ran scarlet with molten lead, the liquefied roof of the mighty church of St Paul's. The noise was deafening, her cries drowned out by the crowds and the screams of horses and the crack and rumble of falling houses and the howl of the wind as it spurred the flames forward. Behind her the wooden beams of a church tower ruptured with a terrible crack. Time ceased as she turned, her hands before her face. A column of fire, as high as the mast of a ship, swayed above her. The flames billowed out behind it like a sail. There was a rolling roar of thunder, like a pause, before it groaned and fell in an explosion of red-gold and black, throwing thousands of brilliant fire-feathers into the air.

The fit of terror that possessed her then palsied her limbs and shrivelled the thoughts in her head to ash. She could do nothing, think nothing. The breath smouldered in her lungs. In her belly, the child thrashed madly but though its elbows were sharp against her flesh, it could not rouse her. All sense and impulse banished, she stood as though bewitched, her eyes empty of expression, her face, fire-flushed, tipped upwards towards the flames. Had it not been for the butcher's wife who grasped her arm with one rough red hand and dragged her bodily to the quay, she would doubtless have stayed there and burned.

Years later, on one of the few occasions when he had permitted himself to speak of her, his father had told him that afterwards, when it was all over, she had confessed that she had thought herself dreaming, so detached was she from the physical mechanism of her body and the peril of her predicament. In the extremity of her fear she had ceased to occupy

herself but had gazed down upon her own petrified body, observing with something akin to detachment the calamity that must certainly ensue and waiting, knowingly waiting, to discover precisely the nature of the agonies that awaited her.

She had waited, but she had not prayed. For she had known then, as surely as she had known that she must perish in this searing scarlet Hell, that God was not her Father in Heaven but a pillar of fire, vengeful and quite without mercy.

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Afterwards, when I knew that I had not loved him at all, the shock was all in my stomach, like the feeling when you miscount going upstairs in the dark and climb a step that is not there. It was not my heart that was upset but rather my balance. I had not yet learned that it was possible to desire a man so and not love him a little.

Oh, I longed for him. When he was not there the hours passed so slowly that it seemed that the sun had fallen asleep in the sky. I would wait at the window for whole days for the first glimpse of him. Every time a figure rounded the corner out of the trees my heart leaped, my skin feverish with hope even as my eyes determined it to be someone to whom he bore not the slightest resemblance. Even Slack the butcher, a man of no more than five feet in height and several times that around the middle, whose arms were so pitifully short they could barely insert the tips of his fingers into the pockets of his coat. I turned my face away hurriedly then, my cheeks hot, caught between shame and laughter. How that beer-soaked dumpling would have licked his lips to imagine the tumbling in my belly at the sight of him, the hot rush of longing between my thighs that made my fingers curl into my palms and set the nape of my neck prickling with delicious anticipation.

In the dusty half-light of the upper room, breathless against the wall, I lifted my skirts then and pressed my hand against the slick muskiness within. The lips parted instantly, the swollen mouth sucking greedily at my fingers, gripping them with muscular ardour. When at last I lifted my hand to my mouth and licked it, remembering the arching fervour of his tongue, the perfect private taste of myself on his hot red mouth, I had to bite down hard upon my knuckles to prevent myself from crying out with the unbearable force of it.

Oh yes, I was alive with desire for him, every inch of me crawling

with it. A whiff of the orange water he favoured, the touch of his silk handkerchief against my cheek, the remembrance of the golden fringe of his eyelashes or the delicate whorl of his ear, any of these and less could dry my mouth and melt the flesh between my legs to liquid honey. When he was with me my sharp tongue softened to butter. I, who had always mocked the other girls for their foolish passions, could hardly breathe. The weaknesses in his face, the girlish pinkness of his damp lips, the irresolute cast of his chin, did nothing to cool my ardour. On the contrary, their vulnerability inflamed me. Whenever I was near him, I thought only of touching him, possessing him. There was something about the untarnished lustre of his skin that drew my fingertips towards him, determining their movements as the earth commands the sun. I had to clasp them in my lap to hold them steady.

The longing intoxicated me so I could barely look at him. We sat together in front of the empty fireplace, I in the bentwood chair, he upon a footstool at my feet. My mother's knitting needles clicked away the hour, although she kept her face turned resolutely towards the wall. For myself I watched his hands, which were narrow with long delicate fingers and nails like pink shells. They dangled impatiently between his legs, twisting themselves into complicated knots.

It never occurred to me to offer him my hand to hold. Slowly, as though I wished only to make myself more comfortable, I adjusted my skirt, exposing the white flesh of my calves. His hands twitched and jumped. I lifted my petticoats a little higher then. The fingers of his right hand stretched outwards, hesitating for only a moment. I could feel the heat of them although he did not touch me. My legs trembled. And then his fingertips reached out and caressed the tender cleft behind my knee.

The ungovernable swell of desire that surged in my belly knocked the breath from my lungs and I gasped, despite myself. Silently, he brought his other hand up to cover my mouth. I kissed it, licked it, bit it. He groaned softly. Beneath my skirts his right hand moved deftly over my skin so that the fine hairs upon my thighs burst into tiny flowers of flame. I slid down towards him, my legs parted, and

closed my eyes, inhaling the leather smell of his hand on my face. Every nerve in my body strained towards his touch as inexorably, miraculously, his hand moved upwards.

Unhooked by longing, my body arched towards him. When at last he reached in to touch me, there was nothing else left, nothing in the world but his fingers and the delirious incoherent frenzy of pure sensation they sent spiralling through me, as though I were an instrument vibrating with the exquisite hymns of the angels. Did that make him an angel? My toes clenched in my boots and my belly held itself aloft in a moment of stillness as the flame quivered, perfectly bright. I held my breath. In the explosion I lost sight of myself. I was a million brilliant fragments, the darkness of my belly alive with stars. When at last I opened my eyes to look at him, my lashes shone with tears. He raised a finger to his lips and smiled.

Oh, that smile! When he smiled, his mouth curved higher on one side than the other, dimpling his right cheek. That dimple spoke to me more eloquently than his eyes, for all their untroubled blueness. And it was surely one hundred times more fluent than his speech, which was halting at the best of times and ruttled with hiccupping and frequently incomprehensible exclamations. Even now, when so much time has passed and I must squint to recognize the girl in the bentwood chair, the recollection of that tiny indentation can unsettle me. Back in those days, it was as if, within its perfect crease, there was concealed a secret, a secret of unimaginable wonder that might be known only to me. For like everyone who falls for the first time under the spell of corporeal desire, I believed myself a pioneer, the discoverer of something never before identified, something perfectly extraordinary. I was god-like, omnipotent, an alchemist who had taken vulgar flesh and somehow, magically, rendered it gold.

Had you asked me then, I would have said I loved him. How else to explain how desperately, ferociously alive he made me feel? It was only afterwards, when the lust had cooled, that I saw that I was in love not with him at all but rather with myself, with what I became when he touched me. I had never thought myself

handsome. My lips were too full, my nose insufficiently imperious, my eyes with their heavy brows set too wide apart. I was denied the porcelain complexion I secretly longed for. My face seemed always to have a sleepy, bruised look about it, as if I had just awoken. But when he touched me I was beautiful. It was only afterwards, as he offered his compliments to my mother and prepared to return home, that I became a girl once more, commonplace, cumbersome, rooted by my clumsy boots to the cold stone floor.

He patronized my mother from the beginning, his address to her exaggeratedly courteous, a pastiche of itself. As for her, she bridled at every unctuous insincerity, her habitually suspicious face as eager as a girl's.

'I am but your humble servant, madam. There could be no greater privilege than to oblige you,' he would say, bowing deeply before throwing himself into the bentwood chair and allowing my mother to loosen his boots. He did not trouble to look at her as he spoke. His tongue was already moistening his lips as he smiled his lazy smile at me, his eyes stroking my neck and the slope of my breasts.

I'm ashamed to say that at those moments I cared not a jot for her humiliation. He could have called my mother a whore or the Queen of Sheba, it would have been all the same to me. The pleasantries were a necessary chore to be endured but my heart beat so loudly in my ears I hardly heard them. I thought only of the tug of my breath inside my chest, the shimmering anticipation between my thighs. As long as he touched me, as long as he smiled at me and caressed me, his fingers drawing a quivering music from my tightly strung nerves, my mother's dignity was not a matter of the least concern. As long as that tiny indentation in the corner of his mouth whispered its secrets to my heart and to my privities, he might have unsheathed his sword and sliced off my mother's head and I would have found reason to hold her responsible for his offence.

If I allowed my desire for him to obscure his failings, then so too did my mother, though her desires swelled not between her thighs

but in the dark recesses of her purse. They were at least as powerful as my own and they sent her into shivers of breathless anticipation. Once, just once, I mocked him for his creaking courtliness. Well, I was peeved. He always refused my mother's offers of food, declaring himself quite without appetite while gazing at me with a greed he did not trouble to disguise. On this occasion, however, he smiled at her – at her! – and set about the plate of victuals she put before him with gusto and extravagant praise.

'The finest mutton you have ever eaten?' I echoed scornfully. 'Do you think us such knuckle-headed rustics that we would swallow such claptrap? Still, I suppose we should be grateful to have anything to swallow at all. A handful of empty compliments – shall we make a dinner of them, Mother, now the meat is gone?'

He said nothing, only raised a languid eyebrow and continued to eat, his chin greasy with meat. But my mother shot me a look of such brutal force that it might have brought an eagle down from the sky.

Afterwards, when he was gone, she struck me about the head and told me angrily that it was time I learned to hold my tongue. Was it beyond me to learn a little humility? The boy was the son of the wealthy Newcastle merchant, Josiah Campling, whose own father had made a notable fortune in the shipping of coal to the port of London and who himself had expanded the family business to include the more lucrative trade in Negro slaves. This was not his first-born, it was true, but there was enough money to ensure that he would be settled well. The family lived in a fine new house, some five miles from our village. It was close by there that I had met him for the first time, when he had dismounted from his horse to watch the bringing-in of the first harvest. The day had grown hot and, when we stopped to take our midday meal beneath the shade of the oak trees, the dust from the threshed corn hung like a gauzy shawl against the blue sky. Laughing, he had called out that he was parched and surely we could find it in our hearts to spare him something by way of refreshment. When one of the girls offered him a drink of apple cider he took it, his eyes fixed upon me as his lips caressed the neck of the earthenware bottle.

Determined not to blush, I held his gaze. When at last he lowered the bottle he smiled. I knew then that I was lost. That evening, as dusk silted the hedgerows, he walked with me along the white lane and kissed me. Around us cow parsley floated on the deepening darkness like soap bubbles, exhaling its thick, licentious scent. He did not tell me his name. He did not need to. I knew who he was. We all did. We knew about the collection of Chinese porcelain that the maids were expected to dust daily. We knew their livery, their carriage, that they owned a lake stocked with exotic golden fish. We knew that all of the children would be expected to make propitious marriages.

As for us, my mother was but the village midwife, respected and respectable still then, her hand clasped by the curate after the Sunday service and a few words exchanged as to the weather, but as foreign to the Camplings as a tiger to a fly. My father had been curate himself until he died and my mother had always struggled to manage the expenses of a family on his meagre stipend. She had been helped in this by the unwitting cooperation of my seven brothers and sisters who, perhaps more sympathetic to her difficulties than I, had none of them chosen to burden her for long. I alone among her children had persisted in life beyond my fifth birthday. I remember my father as an anxious face beneath the shadow of a round-brimmed hat and a voice that clung to the cold stone of the church like cobwebs. He was no sermonizer. Rather, he spoke of God with wary circumspection, as an exhausted manservant might speak of his capricious master. More than anything he feared enthusiasm and religious fervour, reserving particular abhorrence for the onion-munching papist peasants of France. When he died, succumbing to a pleurisy when I was perhaps seven years old, and my mother told me that God had taken him up into Heaven, I felt a little sorry for him. Despite my mother's insistence that Heaven was a paradise of eternal joy, I could not shift the picture I had of my father, his face creased into its usual expression of weary fortitude as he coaxed flames from the Heavenly fires and sponged the angels' starched wings ready for them to put on in the morning.

After that it was only my mother and me. Ma Tally, as she was commonly known, was more than just a midwife. Renowned for the efficacy of her medicines, she was consulted frequently when conventional physic had failed to bring the patient to health. She mixed her recipes from waters, herbs and roots that she gathered herself, mindful of the very best time and place to collect each one, and knowing instinctively, without recourse to scales and measures, the precise amount of each ingredient required for each of her numerous draughts and ointments. So effective were many of them that she might, if she had been a man, become rich upon the profits of them.

As it was, however, she, like all midwives of her sex, was prevented by law from charging for her services and was forced to rely upon presents from her patrons, a precarious business since their generosity was inclined to run in inverse proportion to the fullness of their pockets. From time to time there had been money enough to allow me to attend the village school. I learned my alphabet and the rudiments of reading. By the time I was grown I had mastered the words in all of the school's small library of chapbooks and my handwriting was adequate, if not elegant. But there had never been anything to spare for a dowry. In her more cheerful moods my mother gave me to believe it did not matter. My face, she observed consideringly, might not be handsome in a conventional manner but it had a wantonness about it that might serve me well, if I used it carefully. Fine-looking girls, she asserted, might be divided into two categories: those that men liked to display in glass cabinets like figurines and those that they preferred to handle. I, my mother assured me, was one of the latter type. A man might do a great deal against his better judgement on the promise of a face like mine.

I believed her less because I thought her right than because I had little or no interest in the matter. I had thought nothing of marriage before I met him. What dreams I had were all of Newcastle, a magnificent town many miles from the petty limits of our small parish. I was perhaps sixteen, a woman who should perhaps already have been pushed out to make her own way in the world had my

mother been ready to relinquish me. Headstrong and opinionated, I was none the less young for my years and had yet to learn the shaded skills of subtlety or prudence. I occupied the present moment entirely; my mood was jubilant, or it was desolate, and there was little of anything in between. It was easy for a girl of that nature to pin such extremes of feeling upon the simplest of precepts, and I did. With him I was joyfully, entirely alive; without him the days dragged, as bleak and dreary as winter fields. The simplicity of it entranced me.

It occurred to neither of us to speak of the future. He declared me enchanting, delightful, delicious, and I only placed my finger upon his lips, wishing them silent, only warm and insistent against mine. He brought me gifts of clothes but it was my mother who clapped her hands with astonished glee when she saw them, a scarlet cloth petticoat with a broad silver galloon lace to it and a black scarf lined with blue velvet. She hung them in the press and her brown face creased like an old apple. As for the sonnet he penned in my name, which I hastened to burn before I might find some clumsiness in it to offend me, she insisted upon folding it in a clean rag and placing it in the tin box on the dresser.

‘We shall have him,’ she murmured to herself, the words ripe with triumph. ‘Oh, my girl, we shall have him, all right.’

It was a gamble for her, I understand that now, and I do not blame her for it. She knew that the risks were considerable, and that the price of failure was high. But she knew too that time was running out, for her as well as for me. They had already begun, you see, the whispers and the nudges that were to be her undoing. It was not unusual, when a woman grew old and sour and there were fears she might become a burden on the parish. My mother sought no charity but the gravel in her urine made her snappish and disagreeable. Even her own carefully pounded preparations did little to ease her discomfort.

It should have surprised neither of us that fingers began to be pointed in the direction of our cottage. Already some of the village children had been strangely affected with unknown distempers. One, the son of the baker with whom my mother had exchanged

angry curses, had vomited pins; another was frightened almost to death by nightly apparitions of cats which all of a sudden would vanish away.

It made no difference that the second was a child my mother barely knew and with whom she had no quarrel. There were rumours that she kept a lead casket beneath her bed in which she concealed the caul and afterbirth of infants she had delivered so that she might use them to revenge herself against those who crossed her. Osborn the grocer claimed that the balance of the scales in his shop was sent awry whenever she set foot in the store. It was not long before several of the village women who could afford the extra expense contrived to send for the man-midwife when it came to their lying-in. When one of the infants refused to suckle it did not take long for the gossips to agree that it was Ma Tally who, in a fit of jealous temper, had stolen away its appetite.

Not everyone shunned her. Her remedy for dropsy, made to a secret recipe that claimed seventeen ingredients including elder, betony and foxglove, remained sought after. But there was a wariness now, a faint sharp whiff of fear and suspicion that rose up off our neighbours like the smell of unwashed skin from a child sewn too long into its winter clothing. My mother dismissed such foolishness, declaring that words were only words and could not harm her, but she was too shrewd not to be afraid. And so it was that she narrowed her eyes and set about securing her future, hers and mine together. An opportunity like the Campling boy came along once in a lifetime and then only if you were very lucky. She had no intention of losing him.

The second harvest was brought in, despite heavy rains. His lips grew hungrier, his hands more insistent, and I strained towards him, crushing myself into his embrace. Beneath the canopy of her shoulders, my mother's knitting needles clicked faster, louder, the whistling of her breath almost a hum. Then, one blowy afternoon, he cleared his throat and suggested she find something with which to occupy herself in the other room. My mother turned, her expression unnaturally bland, her knitting needles held aloft.

‘But what of my daughter’s virtue?’ she asked placidly. ‘Of course, sir, there is another way.’

The ceremony took place less than a week later. He did as he was bid but made no attempt to conceal his amusement. My mother fixed him with a beady gaze as she spoke the necessary words. As a midwife she had baptized many infants too weak to cling to life until the parson might be brought. Over the years she had perfected a tone of affecting piety that might have put many a loose-toothed Sunday sermonizer to shame. My mother’s cousin, who acted as landlady at a half-respectable inn on the turnpike a few miles north of our village, had been persuaded to leave the business for a day or two and sat as witness in the window seat, her wattles shaking appreciatively as she pressed her handkerchief against her mouth. I wore my scarlet petticoat and a bodice that my mother had cut down and retrimmed so that it might show the pale swell of my breasts to best advantage. Even as my mother laid the broom upon the floor and we jumped backwards over it, our fingers woven together, my palms were damp and I could think only of his mouth upon my nipple, his hand between my thighs. Afterwards we drank the French champagne he had brought. As the wine took hold of me, trailing its golden fingers over my skin, I desired him so acutely I could barely stand. My mother begged him to say a few words but he shook his head, declaring her charming country ritual observance enough. Instead, he bent to kiss me. His eyes were blurry with lust and I saw myself reflected in them as I melted against him. Then, bowing to the two old women, he took my arm and, guiding me to the adjoining room, the bedchamber I shared with my mother, he closed the door.

I had once overheard an aunt mutter to my mother that it was worth enduring the indignity of marriage only so that one might enjoy the privileges of widowhood. When I recalled those words, as I tore off my petticoats, I pitied her. She had never had a husband for whom she ached with unrestrained longing. She did not know what it meant to take a husband into her arms, so that she might close her eyes and lose herself, time and again, in the perfect sphere of her own private ecstasy.

My memories of that afternoon are sharp-edged, bright and deceptive as the shards of a broken looking-glass. I remember it grew dark and he lit a rushlight which he set upon the floor, casting strange shadows upon the draperies that hung around the bed. I remember the salty reek of the burning fat, saved from the skimmings of the bacon pot, and the sweet scent of the bed linen which I myself had laundered and starched and set to stand in the pine chest with bunches of drying lavender. Most of all I remember the dismal twist in my belly as I saw him naked for the first time. As girls we had liked to hide by the river on summer evenings so that we might spy upon the farmer's boys as they stripped to swim. Their bodies had been hard and wiry, the round muscles moving like unripe fruit beneath the sunburnt skin of their arms. The apricot sunlight had dappled their brown shoulders and tangled itself in the dark triangles between their legs.

He by contrast was pale as milk, his flesh as pliable as a child's. The hair upon his groin was blond and sparse, and from it his yard rose thick and pink as a stalk of rhubarb. I closed my eyes hurriedly, pulling him beneath the covers, straining for the explosive rush of lust in my belly in which I had come to place my faith. The flesh of his buttocks was yielding and slightly sticky, like bread dough. I caressed them warily. I had never touched his skin before. Now he barely touched me. He was greedy and rough and it was quickly over. Soon afterwards he returned home, where business associates of his father's were expected for supper.

We were married.

The night-lanthorn calls eleven of the clock, I should to bed. My hand aches & my stomach too (the calomel has not eased it & my turds were hard as gravel) but not my heart, not tonight, despite the lateness of the hour. My discourse sits before me virtually complete, the title page so creamy bright in the glow of the candle it seems that the light comes from within the pages themselves.

**UPON THE MOTHER'S IMAGINATION: A TREATISE
BY GRAYSON BLACK.**

How it thrills me to think of it in the hands of fellow men of science, its meticulously chosen words pondered, deliberated & – let it please God – praised. If modesty permits me, I must confess to believing the analysis of the physiological effects of imagination masterly. Of course the raised temperature of a woman's blood when in a violent passion must heat the fluid parts of the body. & of course, when those passions duly weaken, the salts contained within those fluids must be deposited within the body, precisely as salt marks the interior of a cooling cooking pot. Where else could they then collect but in the unshed blood of the menses? It is inevitable, then, that, when the menstrual blood is ingested by the child for nourishment, the salts impress themselves upon the as yet unhardened muscle & bone of the foetus. And so the child bears the imprint of the mother's passions as sealing wax receives the imprint of a stamp.

There is a beauty in the simplicity of it that touches me even as I write. Does the thesis not share the characteristics of the greatest scientific discoveries: so lucid, so plain, that it seems impossible, once it is set down, that it was not always known?

Of course I cannot deny that there remain imperfections, though hardly of my making. My fieldwork in the parish has yielded little but frustration. The difficulties lie in the women themselves who, despite my repeated imprecations, seem unable to remember the particulars of their activities from one moment to the next & are as careless of their hours as flies. For all that I tell myself that I must be patient, that the

nature of such women can never be altered, I confess I grow discouraged. It was with some considerable envy that I watched on Friday last the anatomization of a live dog at the College of Surgeons, while I seem unable to compel my women so much as to open their mouths. Surely the exchange of one for another, appreciated by so very many, would be regretted by none!