

**A monologue by Benjamin Asquith
1856-1919**

The wall facing Victoria Road, Gladesville Hospital for the
Insane.

I'm fishing in my boat, listening to the waves break on Stockton Beach. My mind sees crescents of foam spreading on white sand and I hear the water sigh as it recedes into the black green ocean. In the west I see the town: moonlight glinting off tin roofs. The streets are dark; candles are snuffed for the night and I know that Sarah, my wife, and our bairns are saying their prayers. Soon they will be warm and asleep in our bed. In the firmament a host of weeping faces look down on me: they are the Family Dead, my nightly companions. While I fish, they tell stories of Death by drowning and shark attack, Death by fever and lung disease, Death by suicide...and I tell them the latest news, for I am The Witness, the one who is present at every christening, at every wedding and at every death.

Signing my name on every certificate. My net is cast and I have time to light a pipe, enjoying the movement of the boat as it rises and falls to the rhythm of the waves, the little wooden boat bequeathed to me by my family when I became a man. Clouds are gathering in a purple sky and the wind is picking up but I'm drifting and lost in thought.

Suddenly I'm aware: a Force, beyond the strength of any man, lifts me into the sky and throws me into the water! My oilskin and boots pull me down! I'm sinking like a ball of lead! Looking up, I see a wavering shadow, which must be the bottom of the boat and my fish in the net, their iridescent eyes staring as I struggle. I try to scream but my face is frozen by The Force that pulls me down; my lips are dumb and my arms and legs are locked in my winter gear. Then a ghostly form emerges, gliding rapidly towards me, wrapped in bandages that drift around a thin body. I tremble violently: it is my nephew, William Duncan. His face is terrible to behold, ravaged by disease, his skin loose and yellowed, his mouth flaccid and his eyes sunken caverns lit by a red fire from within. We are face to face when he moans, "Upon your life, remember...remember the vow you must keep." I remember clearly the promise I made when Will lay on his deathbed, that I would shoulder the burden of his mother, Cath Duncan, a Scottish harlot and her tribe of brats fathered by my brother, Bill. "Upon my life, I'll keep my word, Will," I say, then continue to fall at lightning speed, The Force propelling me to God knows where!

That is the dream, Doctor Manning,¹ the dream that I dream every night. I must know the meaning.

Why is it that I can never reach my boat? Why is my net full of fish that will never get to market? Why does that choir of skulls haunt me, every night? When asleep, I awake, crying out oaths and blasphemies, believing that The Apparition is Death come to claim me... and now it has stepped out of my dreams, wanting revenge, forcing me from my home and imprisoning me here in Bedlam Bay!²

One moment...Doctor...while I light my pipe... my hand is trembling so...

Since the first visitation I have spent nights in the Newcastle³ lockup. The constables say I chased a man who had stolen my tobacco. Would you not do the same? They brought me in when, they claim, I wandered the streets at 3 in the morning. "I'm on my way to consult my solicitor on a trifling matter," it is reported I said. And I see them laugh when I say I'm tired of Her Majesty interfering in my life! Why has she chosen me? Why can't *she* leave me alone?⁴ Doctor...I say It is the work of the Apparition.

These troubles are recorded against my name and I am an outcast in the town where I have lived since an infant. My brother, George, said men in Stockton fear for their lives when they see me in the distance mumbling at an unseen presence, throwing rocks at an empty space. "You fall down in the street," he says, "Insensible!"

"Why am I treated like a rabid dog, run out of town under the threat of death?" I plead, unable to refrain from sobbing like a baby."

"Just clear out!" he shouts churlishly. "The family is shamed and weary. Enough!"

¹ Frederick Norton Manning- died 1903- buried in the Hospital Cemetery, medical practitioner, Inspector of the Insane- *Who Lived at Gladesville Hospital?* Mental Health Commission of NSW. Prepared December 2019 by historian Janette Pelosi, based on research in the nineteenth century Gladesville Hospital records.

² The story of Benjamin Asquith's mental illness, passed down through generations of the Asquith family was related to me by Chris O'Sullivan, Asquith family historian.

³ A city opposite Stockton, at the mouth of the Hunter River.

⁴ Notice of Admission and Patient Records, NSW State Archives and Records, courtesy of Tony Asquith, Benjamin Asquith's oldest living descendent (his great grandson X3).