Montague Rhodes James

1862-1936

The Tractate Middoth

Towards the end of an autumn afternoon an elderly man with a thin face and grey Piccadilly weepers pushed open the swing-door leading into the vestibule of a certain famous library, and addressing himself to an attendant, stated that he believed he was entitled to use the library, and inquired if he might take a book out. Yes, if he were on the list of those to whom that privilege was given. He produced his card — Mr John Eldred — and, the register being consulted, a favourable answer was given. 'Now, another point,' said he. 'It is a long time since I was here, and I do not know my way about your building; besides, it is near closing-time, and it is bad for me to hurry up and down stairs. I have here the title of the book I want: is there anyone at liberty who could go and find it for me?' After a moment's thought the doorkeeper beckoned to a young man who was passing. 'Mr Garrett,' he said, 'have you a minute to assist this gentleman?' 'With pleasure,' was Mr Garrett's answer. The slip with the title was handed to him. 'I think I can put my hand on this; it happens to be in the class I inspected last quarter, but I'll just look it up in the catalogue to make sure. I suppose it is that particular edition that you require, sir?' 'Yes, if you please; that, and no other,' said Mr Eldred; 'I am exceedingly obliged to you.' 'Don't mention it I beg, sir,' said Mr Garrett, and hurried off.

'I thought so,' he said to himself, when his finger, travelling down the pages of the catalogue, stopped at a particular entry. 'Talmud: Tractate Middoth, with the commentary of Nachmanides, Amsterdam, 1707. 11.3.34. Hebrew class, of course. Not a very difficult job this.'

Mr Eldred, accommodated with a chair in the vestibule, awaited anxiously the return of his messenger — and his disappointment at seeing an empty-handed Mr Garrett running down the staircase was very evident. 'I'm sorry to disappoint you, sir,' said the young man, 'but the book is out.' 'Oh dear!' said Mr Eldred, 'is that so? You are sure there can be no mistake?'

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It was a wonder, this evil dream of arms, this omen of destruction. My brain turned traitor, reeling towards the ominous witchcraft of the moment. It was most like the deceitful hanging-tree of yore, with the evil ruined chest beneath. But there is no godless ruin, no fiend, more ominous than the steady drum that leads one forward. It is said that a vengeful fiend has a keen ear, alive to innocence as well as evil. The execution of superstition and the childish hope of innocence sticks fast in the face of peril. Yet superstition galls the mind with wickedness, making heaven a vengeful nightmare. It is Fate rather than treachery when innocent, harmless hearts end on hangman's gallows ropes. But, when the innocent suffer wicked dreams, it is the sign of the Evil Eye.

Ghostlike in the graveyard is a headstone lost in obscurity where a skeleton is pictured in a tomb-like attitude, laid out longwise; he is incorpsed in that kirkyard, an entombment for all time.

Some -thing or –one Unlucky. Twilight or dusk or half-light. Threat. Fortune (luck or treasure). Fire. Sickness. Severing (cutting or dividing). Hate. Night.

O = Omen/Ominous
N = Nightmare/Wicked Dreams
E = Evil/Wicked
T = Treachery/Treacherous/Deceitful
W = Witch/Witchcraft
H = Hang/Hanging
R = Ruin
F = Fiend
U = Ungodly/Godless
I = Innocent/Innocence
V = Vengeance/Revenge
S = Superstition/Superstitious
X = Excecute/Execution
G = Gallows/Hangman's Rope