

THE BODY SNATCHER¹

(R.L. Stevenson)

Every night three of us sat in the small bar of The George Inn: the landlord, an old drunken Scotsman called Fettes and myself. Whatever the weather, we three were always there.

Fettes was obviously an educated man; a wealthy one too, since he did not work. He had come to our town years ago, while he was still young, and had lived there ever since. On his nightly visits to The George he always sat with a glass of rum in his right hand, drunk and unhappy.

We called Fettes 'the Doctor', because people said he had some special knowledge of medicine. Occasionally he set a broken bone for someone or advised on an illness. Beyond this we knew nothing about his character or background.

One dark winter night there was a sick man in the George. A wealthy local landowner had suddenly become ill that afternoon. The landlord had made the great man comfortable, and telegraphed his still greater London doctor to his bedside.

The landlord came down to the bar some time after nine. 'Dr Macfarlane has arrived,' he announced.

Fettes was now drinking his third rum, and staring stupidly around him. When he heard the name 'Macfarlane' he seemed to awaken. He repeated it twice, quietly the first time, but then with sudden passion.

'Yes,' said the landlord, 'that's his name. Doctor Wolfe Macfarlane.'

Fettes became instantly sober. His eyes awoke, and his voice became clear and loud. We were all startled by the change in him.

'Did you say Wolfe Macfarlane?'

'You know him, Doctor?' I asked.

Fettes shook his head, 'It cannot be the same man,' he said. 'But I would like to see him face to face. Tell me, landlord, is he old?'

'He is not a young man,' said the landlord. 'And his hair is white. But he looks younger than you.'

Fettes slapped his hand on the table. 'He is many years older,' he said. 'It's the rum you see in my face - rum and bad conscience.'

There was a terrible pause and then a door closed loudly.

'That's the doctor,' cried the landlord. 'Quick you can catch him.'

¹ A body snatcher is a person that steals or takes corpses from cemeteries or graveyards.

‘Have you seen it again?’

We followed Fettes out into the hall, just as Dr Macfarlane was hurrying down towards the door to the street. The two men faced each other at the bottom of the stairs.

Dr Macfarlane appeared to be a respectable gentleman. He wore expensive clothes and carried on his arm a fur overcoat. His shirt was made from the finest white linen. Both his spectacles and his watch were gold.

‘Macfarlane!’ said Fettes loudly.

The great doctor stopped on the fourth step. He seemed to come from a different world to that of the bald, dirty old drunk now standing in front of him.

‘Toddy Macfarlane!’ repeated Fettes.

The London man almost fainted. He stared for a second at the man before him. Then he glanced behind him. ‘Fettes!’ he said, in a startled whisper. ‘It’s you!’

‘Yes,’ said the other, ‘it’s me! Did you think I was dead too?’

‘No, no!’ cried the doctor. ‘I am delighted to see you but for now we can only say hello and goodbye. Unfortunately my carriage is waiting and I must catch the train. But give me your address and you shall hear from me soon. We must do something for you, Fettes. I fear that your financial circumstances are difficult.’

‘Money!’ cried Fettes. ‘Money from you! The money that I had from you is still lying where I threw it in the rain.’

A horrible, ugly look appeared on Dr Macfarlane’s face. ‘My dear fellow,’ he said. ‘I did not mean to offend you. I will leave you my address - ‘

‘I do not want it,’ interrupted the other. ‘I heard your name and feared it might be you.’

For a moment there was a dangerous look behind the gold spectacles. Then the doctor became aware that we were all watching him. He moved quickly for the door to the street. As he was passing, Fettes clutched him by the arm and whispered, ‘Have you seen it again?’

The great London doctor cried out aloud. With his hands over his head, he ran out of the door, dropping his spectacles. The next moment the carriage moved off towards the station. The fine gold spectacles were left broken on the road.

‘God protect us, Mr Fettes,’ said the landlord. ‘What was all that about?’

Fettes turned towards us. ‘You don’t know how dangerous that man Macfarlane is!’ he said. ‘What I am going to tell you must never leave this room.’

A young medical student

When he was a young man Fettes studied medicine in Edinburgh. He did not work very hard, but his teachers picked him out as a talented student. They saw that he listened closely and remembered well. It appears he was also - and this seemed strange to me - a handsome young fellow.

There was, at that time, a man who came from outside the university to teach anatomy. Mr K, as I shall call him, was a popular teacher with the students. He liked to live well, enjoying good food, expensive clothes and clever conversation. Mr K also liked intelligent and obedient students. Fettes quickly became one of his favourites.

By his second year, Fettes had become the second assistant in Mr K’s class. It was his job to supply, receive, and dissect the bodies used in Anatomy classes. Mr K arranged accommodation for him in the same building as the dissecting rooms to help carry out this work.

Every morning, in the early hours before dawn, a special signal called Fettes out of his bed to open a side entrance. -The two men he showed into the dissecting room looked like criminals, and their names are now infamous throughout the land. Fettes accepted their deliveries and paid them for their ‘goods’. Then he returned to bed for a couple of hours sleep before his first class.

The supply of corpses was a continual problem in that large and busy class. Mr K asked no questions in his dealings with the trade. ‘They bring the body, and we pay the price,’ he used to tell his two assistants. ‘Ask no questions.’

So Fettes did not ask questions about the freshness of the bodies that were delivered before dawn. Though his doubts grew stronger, he did his work. He turned his eyes away from any evidence of crime.

Then one cold, frosty November morning the men arrived later than usual. They seemed nervous and even more than usually anxious to leave quickly. Fettes, who had been awake all night with a toothache, showed them into the dissecting room.

Sick with sleep, Fettes leaned against a wall while they took the body from the sack. He had to wake himself to find the men their money. As he did so, he saw the dead face. Startled, he took two steps nearer, and held his candle above the body.

‘My God!’ he cried. ‘That is Jane Galbraith!’

The men did not answer, but they moved nearer the door.

‘I know her, I tell you,’ Fettes continued. ‘She was alive and well yesterday.’

‘Sir, you are completely mistaken,’ said one of the men.

But the other looked Fettes in the eyes. ‘Give us the money!’ he demanded.

Terrified, Fettes counted out the money. The moment his visitors departed he looked at the body again. It was Jane Galbraith! And she had been the victim of a violent attack.

In great distress, the young student ran upstairs and locked himself in his room. What was he to do? Mr K had warned him not to ask questions about the bodies; it would be dangerous to interfere in such a serious business. Fettes decided to await the advice of the senior class assistant: a young doctor named Wolfe Macfarlane.

‘Why do anything?’

Dr Macfarlane was a great favourite among all the students. He was very clever and an excellent sportsman. He even owned his own horse and carriage.

Fettes and Macfarlane spent a lot of time together. When the class was short of bodies they would go out at night in Macfarlane’s carriage, driving far into the country until they found a lonely graveyard. There they would dig up a body and take it to the dissecting room before dawn.

On that particular morning Macfarlane arrived earlier than usual. Fettes met him on the stairs, and told him about the girl. They went into the dissecting room, and Macfarlane examined the marks on her body.

‘Yes,’ he said, with a nod, ‘it looks suspicious.’

‘Well, what should I do?’ asked Fettes.

‘Do?’ repeated the other. ‘Why do anything?’

‘Someone else might recognise her,’ said Fettes. ‘She was well known around the city.’

‘Let’s hope not,’ said Macfarlane, ‘and what if somebody does recognise her? That doesn’t mean you did.’

‘But -’

‘This has been going on too long, Fettes. If you say anything, you’ll get K--- into terrible trouble. And what about you and I? What could we say? It’s obvious that all our subjects have been murdered.’

‘Macfarlane!’ cried Fettes.

‘Come now! You must have suspected it yourself!’

‘Suspecting is one thing -’

‘And proof is another. Yes, I know. I’m as sorry as you are about this.’ Macfarlane tapped the body with his walking stick. ‘But the best thing is for me not to recognise it. And I don’t,’ he added calmly. ‘I think a man of the world would do the same.’

Above all things young Fettes wanted to be ‘a man of the world’. He agreed to imitate Macfarlane. The body of the unfortunate girl was dissected, and demonstrated in the class. No one appeared to recognise her.

‘Look at the face’

One afternoon, when his day’s work was over, Fettes visited a popular tavern. He found Macfarlane sitting with a small, pale, dark stranger named Gray. Fettes quickly saw that Gray was a very unpleasant, and rather stupid fellow.

‘I’m a bad fellow myself,’ Gray remarked, ‘but Macfarlane is much worse. Toddy, get your friend another drink.’

‘Don’t call me that name,’ said Macfarlane.

Gray laughed. ‘Toddy hates me,’ he said. ‘Oh, yes, Toddy, you do! He would like to cut me up with a knife.’

‘We medical students have a better way than that,’ said Fettes. ‘When we dislike a dead friend, we dissect him.’

Macfarlane looked up angrily. It was obvious that he had not enjoyed the joke.

The afternoon passed, and Gray invited Fettes to join them for dinner. He then ordered a huge meal, which he insisted on Macfarlane paying for.

It was late before they separated. Gray was completely drunk, and Fettes was only slightly less so. Macfarlane said little. He did not respond to Gray’s continual insults, and paid for everything. But there was a murderous look in his eyes.

Fettes left the other two and walked home soon after midnight. The next day Macfarlane was absent from the class. Fettes smiled to himself as he imagined Gray and Macfarlane still out drinking together.

After class he went back to look for them, trying several different taverns across the city without success. Eventually he returned to his rooms and went to bed early.

My Own Resources ESL/EFL

At four in the morning the familiar signal awoke him. Going down to the door, he was astonished to find Macfarlane with his carriage. In the carriage was one of those long and terrible packages he knew so well.

‘What’s happened?’ he cried. ‘Have you been out alone? How did you manage to carry it?’

But Macfarlane silenced him. ‘Help me carry this in,’ he ordered.

They took the body upstairs and laid it on the table. Macfarlane hesitated, ‘I think you should look at the face,’ he said.

Fettes stared at him in astonishment. ‘Where did you find it? When? How?’

‘Look at the face,’ was the only answer.

Fettes looked from the young doctor to the body, and then back again. Finally, he forced himself to look at the face.

It belonged to the man they had drunk with the night before.

‘You can't begin and then stop.’

For a moment Fettes stood staring down at the floor unable to look his friend in the face. He had no voice he could use or words he could say.

Macfarlane broke the terrible silence. He came up quietly behind Fettes and laid his hand on his shoulder. ‘You must pay me,’ the murderer said. ‘Your accounts must be right.’

‘Pay you!’ Fettes cried. ‘Pay you for that!’

‘Yes, of course. This is another case like Jane Galbraith’s. Where does old K---- keep his money?’

‘There,’ answered Fettes, pointing to a cupboard in the corner.

‘Give me the key then,’ said the other, holding out his hand.

For a few seconds Fettes hesitated. Then he handed Macfarlane the key. Now there was no turning back.

Macfarlane breathed more easily. Opening the cupboard, he brought out the pen and ink from one compartment. Then he removed the accounts book and some money.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘Enter the payment in your book, and we will both be safe.’

Again Fettes hesitated before writing in the accounts book. Above all he did not want to argue with Macfarlane. The older student terrified him.

‘You can keep the money,’ said Macfarlane. ‘I’ve had my share already. But it’s important that you be careful. Don’t buy expensive class-books, or pay off old debts. Borrow, don’t lend.’

‘Macfarlane,’ said Fettes. ‘They’ll hang me for helping you.’

‘Helping me?’ cried Wolfe. ‘You are doing this in self-defence. Suppose I got into trouble? What would that mean for you? You can’t begin and then stop.’

The unhappy student listened with horror. ‘My God!’ he cried. ‘What have I done?’

‘My dear fellow,’ said Macfarlane. ‘What a boy you are! Nothing will happen to you if you keep your mouth shut. In life there are two groups of us - the lions and the lambs. If you’re a lamb you’ll end up on these tables like Gray or Jane Galbraith.’

‘And if I am a lion?’

‘You’ll live and drive a horse like K or me. My dear fellow, you’re clever and you’re brave. I like you, and K likes you. Three days from now you’ll laugh at this.’

And with that Macfarlane left, leaving Fettes alone. The young man knew he was in a terrible situation but what could he do? The secret of Jane Galbraith and the entry in the accounts book closed his mouth.

‘The important thing is not to be afraid,’

Hours passed, and the class began to arrive. The parts of Gray’s body were passed out to different students. Nobody in the class noticed anything unusual.

Over the next two days Fettes slowly began to relax. Before the end of the week he was no longer frightened or troubled by his conscience.

He saw little of Macfarlane outside the class. At times they spoke a word or two, and Macfarlane was always friendly. But he always avoided talking about their common secret. Even when Fettes whispered to him, ‘I’m now with the lions!’ Macfarlane smilingly put his finger to his lips.

Some weeks later there was an occasion that brought them together. Mr K was again short of corpses, and the students were becoming unhappy. At the same time there came news of a burial in a Glencorse, deep in the country. This cemetery was far from the nearest village or town. It was an ideal location for the body-snatchers’ evil work.

Late one afternoon Fettes and Macfarlane set off for that quiet and green place. They wore heavy coats and carried a large bottle of brandy. It rained all

the way to the village of Pencuik, where they stopped at a tavern. Here they ate an excellent meal with fine wine in front of an open fire.

With every drink they became friendlier. Soon Macfarlane offered some gold coins to his companion.

‘This is for your help the other morning,’ he said.

Fettes took the money. ‘I was a fool until I knew you and K,’ he said. ‘Now I realise that the important thing is not to be afraid.’

Macfarlane felt a little alarmed at these words. Perhaps he had taught his young companion too well.

‘Now between you and me,’ Fettes continued, ‘I don’t want to hang. But I don’t care about God or Hell or the Devil. These things may frighten boys, but not men of the world like you and I. Here’s to the memory of Gray!’

Into the darkness

By this time it was getting late so the young men paid their bill and called for their carriage. It was brought round to the door with both lamps shining brightly.

‘Where are you going?’ asked the landlord.

‘Peebles,’ said Macfarlane, and they drove in that direction until they were clear of the last houses of the town. Then they put out their lights and turned down the road for Glencorse.

They travelled in complete darkness, accompanied only by the sound of rain. After some miles the road narrowed and worsened, forcing them to light one of the lanterns. Finally, they came through the trees and arrived at their gloomy destination. It was now surrounded by huge and moving shadows.

They began digging up the grave. After only twenty minutes they reached the coffin. As they did so, Macfarlane hurt his hand on a stone. Angrily, he threw it above his head where it hit the lamp they had placed above the grave.

The sound of breaking glass quickly died away. Soon they could only hear the whispering of the rain and the wind. Their task was almost completed so they decided to finish it in the dark.

They pulled out the coffin and broke it open. Then they put the body into a sack and loaded it onto the carriage. With Fettes holding the sack in place, and Macfarlane directing the horse, they drove back to the town. Both men were now wet through to the skin.

My Own Resources ESL/EFL

The rain was getting worse, making the road very bad. As the carriage bumped up and down, the sack between them fell: now on one, now on the other. This had a severe effect on their nerves.

Fettes became very distressed. He looked at the sack and to his horror it was somehow larger than before. And from all over the countryside the cries of farm dogs accompanied their journey.

A terrifying idea grew and grew in his mind. Had some change had occurred in the dead body? Was this why the dogs were making that terrible noise?

'For God's sake,' he said, making a great effort to speak. 'We must have light!'

Macfarlane stopped the horse without replying. He got down and tried to light the remaining lamp. The rain was still pouring down and it was not an easy task in the wet and darkness.

At last he succeeded in lighting the lamp. It was now possible for the two men to see each other. They could also see the thing they had along with them.

The shape of the body was clear in the wet sack. The shoulders, the body and the head were all distinct. And yet both men stared in disbelief at what they saw before them.

'That is not a woman,' said Macfarlane, in a low voice.

'It was a woman when we put her in,' whispered Fettes.

'Hold that lamp,' said the other. 'I must see her face.'

Fettes took the lamp. Macfarlane untied the sack and pulled down the cover from the head. When the light revealed its features, a wild cry went up into the night.

The face before them had appeared in the nightmares of both young men.

'My God! It's him!'

They jumped down onto the road, knocking over the lamp. The noise of it falling and breaking frightened the horse into running away. It raced off towards Edinburgh, carrying with it the dead and long dissected Gray.