

THIS WAY TO THE EXIT

SARA DOUGLASS

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She writes: I was born in Penola, South Australia, raised in Adelaide by Methodist Ladies, condemned by apathy to the respectable profession of nursing, and escaped via the varied kindnesses of the Department of History at the University of Adelaide into the preferable world of writing.'

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The wonderfully dark and atmospheric story that follows takes place in 19th-century London during the age of the building of the underground railways.

Sara Douglass told your editor that 'One of the great problems with driving those tunnels under London (at least in *my* world) is that they tended to drive straight into forgotten and lost buried roman and medieval crypts... filled with all kinds of dark things.'

As you'll soon discover, gentle reader...

* * * *

James Henry Greathead, chief engineer for the City & South London Railway, rose to his feet as the footman showed the two gentlemen into the club's drawing room. He was relieved the men were reasonably well dressed and didn't gawp at the rich fittings. It had been a risk inviting them to the Athenaeum Club, but the club afforded privacy, and before anything else Greathead wanted privacy for this meeting.

The company could not afford the inevitable financial setback if word he had met with the crypt hunters alarmed the shareholders.

'Mr Kemp? Mr Gordon? So good of you to attend.' Greathead gestured to the two men to sit, then nodded at the waiter to bring two more glasses of whiskey. 'I trust your journey from Windsor was without trouble?'

'Quite, thank you,' said Kemp. In his late fifties, Kemp was the slightly older of the two men, but they both shared the careworn and pale visages of those who habitually worked late at night at their books.

Or who habituated the dark underground basements of cities.

They were both very still and calm, regarding Greathead with direct eyes, and Greathead found himself uncrossing, then recrossing his legs, before smoothing back his hair.

He hated it that necessity brought him to these men.

'It surprises me you do not live in London,' Greathead said, 'as so much of your, um, work is here. Why live in Windsor?'

'You can perhaps understand,' Kemp said, his gaze still very direct, 'that we prefer the tranquillity of Windsor for our wives and children, as well as our own peace of mind. London can be unsettling. Windsor has no —'

Greathead suppressed a wince.

'— discontented underground spaces,' Kemp finished.

'Quite,' Greathead said.

The waiter returned with the whiskeys for Greathead's guests, and while the waiter fussed Greathead took the opportunity to study Gordon and Kemp further. They were unusual men, not so much in background, but for where they had gone in their lives. Gordon had been a vicar who had immersed himself in the study of the churches and monasteries of the

medieval and Dark Age periods. He quit the Church of England, quite suddenly, in his early forties. It was about that time that Gordon had met Kemp — Kemp had been a private scholar with a bent for the arcane and mysterious — and they had made a name for themselves speaking at antiquarian functions about southern England.

They had an astounding knowledge of the ancient crypts and vaults and cellars, often dating back to pre-Christian times, that lay under London.

They also had an astounding understanding of what continued to inhabit these ancient crypts — the memories, the terrors, and the wandering ghosts and ambitions of men and gods who refused to remain entombed. Greathead was not quite sure what the men did inside these crypts — they never allowed anyone else in while they were working — but they could somehow manage to desensitise them and make them safe for whoever was trying to push through a railway tunnel or a new sewer or water line.

Underground London was not always quite benign, nor were its forgotten spaces always quite dead. Many tunnellers — whether railway or sewer men — had been lost in the strangest of circumstances. Often the only way the railway or sewer bosses could keep projects on schedule — and workers in the tunnels — was to employ the services of Gordon and Kemp.

The waiter left, and Greathead took a deep breath. 'No doubt you have heard of my latest endeavour.'

'Of course,' said Gordon. 'We understandably took some interest when we heard Parliament had authorised your project. A new railway line for southern Londoners, yes? Travelling deep under the Thames to connect their suburbs directly to the City.'

'It will be the first deep underground railway system in the world,' Greathead said. 'Look here, see.' He drew a linen-backed map from a satchel to one side of his chair, and unfolded it across the table before Kemp and Gordon. 'We are running the line direct from Stockwell in the south, up north through the Borough of Southwark, under the Thames just west of London Bridge, then through the city, deep underground, at least sixty feet deep, through to Moorgate. It is a great enterprise.'

Kemp and Gordon exchanged small smiles.

A great enterprise, and fraught with difficulty. There was so much which had been forgotten lying in the railway's path.

‘It will be a great deal of work,’ said Gordon. ‘All that tunnelling, and, aye, yes, I know of your patented tunnelling machine, and how wonderfully it shall slice through the London clay for you ... but still, a great deal of work. When do you hope to be completed?’

‘1890,’ said Greathead. ‘The Prince of Wales has agreed to open the line for us.’

‘That is not long distant,’ said Kemp. ‘You are surely already hard at work, and thus —’

He paused, holding Greathead’s eye, and Gordon finished his companion’s sentence.

‘And thus we are here,’ he said. ‘You found a ... problem.’

‘The City & South London Railway, whom I represent,’ Greathead said quietly, ‘does not have problems. We have only challenges — which we overcome with skill and ingenuity. *Thus* you are here.’

Kemp’s mouth curved in a small cynical smile, which he hid as he took a sip of his whiskey.

It was very good, as was this club, but then Greathead had made a fortune with his innovative and daring engineering work on other railways, and doubtless could afford the luxuries of life.

‘Well,’ said Greathead, ‘we have started work in several locations, working tunnels in different directions, that they may meet up within months.’

‘What have you found?’ said Kemp, and Greathead glanced irritably at him.

‘As I was saying,’ Greathead said, ‘we are working in several locations. Here,’ his finger stabbed down at Clapham, ‘here,’ now the finger stabbed down at the northern end of London Bridge, ‘and,’ the finger lifted, hesitated, then dropped to the corner of King William Street and Arthur Street East, a few blocks to the north-east of the bridge, ‘here.’

Kemp and Gordon shared another glance, and this time there was no amusement in their expressions.

‘That is right by the Monument,’ said Gordon.

The Monument, erected to mark the exact spot where started the Great Fire of London of 1666. It was an inauspicious omen. Later tragedies were often caused by ancient disturbances below.

Greathead sat back in his chair. 'I had heard of your work with the Metropolitan and District Lines,' he said. 'You smoothed over some considerable difficulties they experienced.'

'Few people know of our work with the Metropolitan line,' said Gordon. 'It was all very — necessarily — secretive.'

'I make it my duty to know of your work,' said Greathead. 'Secretive or not, I made a point of discovering the names of everyone who might be useful to me. Gentlemen, I intend this railway to succeed.'

Kemp gave a little shrug. 'And now you have encountered one of your little obstacles at the Monument site?'

'It is the site of one of the underground stations,' said Greathead. 'We are naming it King William Street Station, after the street on which it stands. There is already a commodious building on the site, which will serve as the city offices of the City & South London Railway and as the entrance into the underground station. While there shall be stairs winding down to the platforms sixty feet below, we are installing two large electrified lifts to carry passengers to and from street level. The entire project, gentlemen, shall be electrified, even the trains.'

Greathead paused, expecting his guests to remark on this extraordinary innovation, but they continued to regard him calmly with their direct eyes.

'Yes, well,' Greathead went on. 'We started to sink the shafts through the basement of the building six weeks ago. Work proceeded as planned, then ...'

'You found a crypt,' said Gordon. 'Perhaps an ancient vault. Yes?'

'We always expected to find *something*, at some point,' said Greathead. 'London has been occupied for thousands of years, city built atop city. Naturally we expected an extra basement or two.'

'The Metropolitan and District Line gave us much work and worry,' said Gordon. 'Two crypts, one ancient rotten mausoleum, and one rather

dark space which somewhat befuddled us for a day or two. What have you found for us?’

‘Nothing that whispers,’ said Greathead. ‘Just a ... space.’

The faces of Kemp and Gordon relaxed slightly.

No whispers.

‘Nonetheless, I warrant it a space that has caused you to suspend all further work on the shafts and summon us,’ said Kemp.

Greathead sighed. ‘The workmen broke into it five days ago. Two of them took down lanterns and explored. When they came back up — well, that was when I wrote you to come to London.’

He picked up his whiskey glass, then put it down again. ‘Look, we are not far distant from King William Street. It would be easier, perhaps, if I showed you our difficulties.’

* * * *

Gordon and Kemp stood at the foot of the twenty-five foot diameter shaft that stretched down from the basement of the building above. It would one day house two lifts, but for the moment they were surrounded by iron reinforced walls, a muddy floor, half a dozen workmen standing about leaning on their spades and pick-axes, and Greathead.

At their feet was a three foot diameter hole, with a ladder stretching down into the gloom.

One of the workmen handed Kemp a lantern on a rope, and Kemp lowered it carefully down into the darkness.

Everyone standing about — Greathead, the work crew and their supervisor — leaned closer.

‘What can you see?’ Greathead said.

‘Not much,’ Gordon replied, leaning back a little. ‘It’s a big space, though.’

‘It will save us a great deal of money and time if it is usable,’ Greathead said. ‘The cavern is at the precise level we need to build the

station. Both I and the board of the Railway pray for good news.'

The lamp hit the bottom of the cavern, and Kemp allowed the remainder of the rope to slide down to join it. He looked at Greathead, then locked eyes with Gordon.

A moment later Gordon began the climb down the ladder, Kemp following directly after.

* * * *

Kemp held the lantern aloft as the two men stood, staring about. They ignored the faint sounds of the men far above them in the shaft, and instead concentrated every sense on the cavern about them.

'It is not... "bad",' Gordon said very softly. 'Not like the crypt under Westminster station. That...'

That had been pure evil — something small and weaselly and chattering that had inhabited the small chamber since well before Christianity had established its hold on England.

Their efforts to remove the lingering malignancy had almost killed them. Even now Gordon continued to have problems on his shin where the thing had bitten him, and both suffered constant nightmares over the episode.

'No,' said Kemp, 'it is not "bad". But what *is* it?'

The space they stood in looked like a natural cave, although the walls and roof had been obviously man-worked at some time in the ancient past to give the rock a smoother finish. It stretched perhaps some forty or fifty paces from east to west, and, as the two men explored, they discovered that about twenty paces from the eastern end it appeared almost as if another cavern, or tunnel, had intersected with the one in which they stood. On both the northern and southern walls of the main cavern archways had been crudely hewn out of the rock, and passageways extended north and south — if only for a few paces each way before rock falls blocked their progress.

In the very centre of the main cavern, at the intersection of the two smaller passages, stood a pale-stoned cross, almost seven feet tall. The top of the cross had been enclosed within a circle, revealing its ancient

pagan origins.

Gordon and Kemp exchanged another glance.

‘It’s a Long Tom,’ Gordon said, naming the ancient cross in the manner of countless generations of English peasants. He raised the lamp, and both men muttered soft exclamations.

Set into the circle of stone about the top of the cross was a ring of human teeth.

‘I have never seen that previously,’ Kemp said.

‘Nor I,’ Gordon said. ‘What do you suppose it means?’

Kemp gave a small shrug. ‘Perhaps they are the teeth of robbers, or bandits, set here to dissuade others from similar pursuits. In all my studies, I know of no other possible relevance.’

‘You are likely right,’ Gordon said, then turned the lamp towards the passageway that had once led south. ‘These side passages have been blocked off a long, long time ago.’

Kemp was still examining the cross in the dim light.

‘A crossroads marker,’ he said. ‘Long Toms always stood at crossroads to protect travellers.’ He gestured about the main cavern, then at the two side passages. ‘We are standing on the site of a very, very ancient crossroad.’

‘London straddles the junction of several of the ancient roads through England,’ Gordon said. ‘This,’ he indicated the main cavern stretching east to west, ‘is likely part of the original Waecelinga Straaet,’ he said, using the ancient Celt name for what was now known as Watling Street. ‘And this,’ he indicated the intersecting, narrowed tunnel, ‘one of the lesser tracks leading north and south.’

He looked up once more at the roof of the cavern. ‘This has always been enclosed — under a hill, perhaps? Or a man-made tor?’

‘Possibly,’ said Kemp. ‘This area was once riddled with hills and caves, most imbued with some esoteric significance. Gordon, my friend, this place was not *just* a crossroads. You can feel it too, yes? There is something ... a gentle pull of some description.’

Gordon gave a nod. 'But is it *dangerous*?'

Kemp shifted from foot to foot, chewing a lip.

'I don't think so,' he said after some consideration. 'There is nothing *bad* about this, nothing unsettled. It is a passageway, a throughway. Very ancient, very well travelled — if not in the current millennia — but benign. Even the Long Tom, with its strange circle of teeth, has no feel of malevolence about it.'

Gordon gave another nod. 'I agree. There is nothing for us here to do. No malignancy to expunge, no sadness to purge. Nothing dangerous.'

'Nothing dangerous,' said Kemp, 'so long as the trains travel through. This cavern will be put to the same purpose for which it has always been used. It will be appropriate, somehow. I doubt the cavern will be unsettled by its updated purpose.'

They spent another ten minutes inspecting the cavern, then they climbed back to an impatient Greathead.

'Well?' he said.

Gordon and Kemp exchanged a look.

'The line is going through to north London, isn't it?' Gordon said.

'From Stockwell to Moorgate,' Greathead said. 'King William Street Station will be the first station north of the river. From there the line travels to Bank, thence to Moorgate. *Well?*'

'The cavern below is an ancient crossroads,' said Gordon. 'You are lucky. There is nothing malignant to remove, just some old rock falls ... your King William Street Station is virtually hollowed out for you. There is an old cross down there that you might like to donate to some local antiquarian society, but, overall ... neither Kemp nor myself foresee any problems for you. Just make sure you take those trains through.'

Greathead had begun to smile halfway through Gordon's speech — now he was beaming. He shook each man's hand heartily. 'Gentlemen, I thank you indeed. You bring good news. Come, let us climb back to the surface, and we can arrange your remuneration.'

Gordon suppressed a cynical smile.

The railway engineers were always pleased to see the back of Gordon and Kemp.

* * * *

Eighteen months passed. Greathead called Gordon and Kemp down to London on one more occasion in January of 1890 to investigate something near the London Bridge station, just south of the Thames, but that turned out to be even less of a concern than the King William Street Station cavern. While they were inspecting this latest site, Gordon and Kemp asked Greathead about the ancient crossroads cavern.

‘The site is almost complete,’ Greathead said. ‘The workmen are laying the last of the tiles, the platforms need a sweep, but other than that...’ He gave an expressive shrug.

‘There have been no problems at the site?’ Kemp said.

Greathead hesitated for just an instant, then smiled. ‘None at all! Now, is there anything else with which I can assist you?’

* * * *

On the morning of 5th of November, in 1890, Gordon sat at his breakfast table reading the morning paper. There was extensive coverage of the opening of the City & South London Railway line. The Prince of Wales had officiated, and a good time was had by all. Unfortunately, there had been some technical problems with the engine meant to draw the carriages containing the prince and his entourage from Stockwell in the south through to the northern-most station on the line, and eventually everyone had to abandon the railway carriages for the more reliable horse-drawn vehicles on the streets above.

Gordon was grinning broadly by the end of the article. He could easily imagine Greathead’s embarrassment at the failure of the train engine. *Dear God, what could he have said to the Prince of Wales?* He folded the paper and put it back on the table, thinking that if it remained fine, then later this afternoon he would make the brisk walk through the frosted streets to Kemp’s home so they could share a glass of wine and their amusement at Greathead’s discomfiture.

But by noon steady rain had settled in, and Gordon put to one side his

plans to visit Kemp.

* * * *

Christmas came and went. Gordon and Kemp spent some days together, but they did not discuss the City & South London Railway, Greathead, nor their visit to the cavern that was now King William Street Station. Largely they left their London work in London: it was one of the best ways to maintain their serenity.

On a frosty morning in early February Gordon was once again reading his paper at breakfast. His wife had just risen from the table, and he could hear her in the hallway, discussing the evening's meal with their cook, Matilda. There was little of interest in the paper, and Gordon was skimming it somewhat irritably when the headline to a minor paragraph on one of the inner pages caught his eye.

Third person reported missing at King William Street Station.

Gordon fumbled in his haste to fold the paper that he might the more easily read the article, then cursed under his breath as he upset his cup of tea over the pristine tablecloth. Hastily sopping up the mess with his napkin, he read the rest of the article.

On Tuesday last, Mr Arthur Bowman, of Hill End, alighted from the train at King William Street Station. His companion, Mr Charles Marbrock, alighted with Mr Bowman, but lost sight of him in the crowded tunnel leading to the exit. He was not waiting at the entrance foyer when Mr Marbrock exited the lift. A thorough search by station staff provided no clues. Mr Bowman is the third person to go missing from the exit tunnel of King William Street Station since the New Year.

That was it. Nothing else.

The third person to go missing from the exit tunnel of King William Street Station since the New Year?

Gordon rose suddenly, tossing the newspaper down to the table and further upsetting the now-empty tea cup. He strode into the hall, disturbing his wife and Matilda, and grabbed his heavy coat from the hall stand.

'I'm going to see Kemp,' he said to his wife. 'I doubt I shall return before late afternoon.' With that he stomped out the front door.

* * * *

Late afternoon saw both Kemp and Gordon in the train station at Windsor. It had been a cold walk down almost deserted streets, and both men were pale, their faces pinched by the cold.

They stopped at the ticket box. 'Do you have a map of London Underground?' Gordon asked the ticket collector, and thanked the man as he handed one over.

Kemp and Gordon retired to the station fire to look at the map. Neither had been back to London in many months but, since they'd read the news this morning, both had a growing fear that they'd need to return very soon.

Gordon traced a gloved finger over the diagram until he came to the City & South London Line. It was drawn in black to differentiate it from all the other Underground lines currently in service, and Gordon ran his finger up the line from Stockwell to King William Street Station.

The line terminated at King William Street Station.

'It was supposed to go further!' Kemp said. 'All the way through to Moorgate!'

'That cavern was a throughway,' Gordon hissed. 'A *throughway*, not a terminus!'

They walked back to the ticket office, where the ticket collector sat looking bored.

It was freezing weather, and not many people had wanted tickets to London today.

'Good man,' said Gordon, 'do you know why the City & South London line only goes so far as King William Street Station? We were hoping to catch this line through to Moorgate ... we thought...'

'Heard they had troubles with water seepage north of King William Street,' said the ticket collector. 'Several buildings collapsed over where they were trying to push through the tunnels.' He gave a slight shrug. 'Stopped work north, it did. Line now terminates at King William Street Station. But if you want to get to Moorgate, then you can walk to Mark Lane Station, and from there ...'

Gordon and Kemp paid him no mind.

The line terminated at King William Street?

'Why did we never check?' Gordon whispered. 'Why did we never ask?'

'And where are the missing people *going?*' said Kemp.

'Pardon?' said the ticket collector.

* * * *

The next day, just after noon, the two men stood on the pavement outside the entrance to King William Street Station on Arthur Street East. Passengers were coming and going through the great double doors. Nothing appeared untoward.

Gordon and Kemp exchanged a look, then they went inside, purchased their 2d tickets, then walked through the turnstile to the lifts.

They rode down in silence, not meeting any of the other passenger's eyes. As the last time they had descended this shaft, both men had nerves fluttering in their stomachs. This descent, they knew their nerves would not be easily quelled as previously.

From the lift they took one of two tunnels that led to the station platform. The tunnels were some six feet wide and perhaps eight tall, the white-tiled ceiling curving overhead in an elegant arch.

The platform itself was enclosed in a circular tunnel, again white tiled, and lit with the warm glow of gas lamps. Some fifteen people stood about, waiting for the train from the south to arrive. The tunnel continued a little way north of the platforms, and Gordon and Kemp could see a signal box straddling the track.

Beyond that was a blank brick wall.

The two men turned their attention back to the platform area, trying to orientate themselves with what they remembered of the cavern. They studied the twin tunnels leading to the lifts. Above each tunnel workmen had painted chubby gloved hands, each one with its index finger pointing to the tunnel below.

Between the two chubby gloved hands were the words: *This way to the exit.*

Gordon shivered, although he could not for the moment understand why.

‘Gordon?’ Kemp said. ‘D’you see?’

‘See what?’

Kemp nodded at the tunnels. ‘These tunnels are in precisely the same spot as was that south leading tunnel we found. You know the one, with the Long Tom lying half buried a few paces in.’

‘My God,’ said Gordon, momentarily forgetting himself in his shocked realisation.

‘The original tunnel likely led to a pathway leading to a ford over the Thames,’ said Kemp, ‘and from there to one of the roads leading to the south-east and the coast.’

‘Is that —’ Gordon began, but broke off as he heard the sound of the train approaching.

It stopped at the platform — a little grey and cream engine pulling green carriages. None of the carriages had any windows — the City & South London Railway Company had refused to pay for glass when there was nothing to see on the entirely underground line.

Gordon thought they looked like green coffins, and was not surprised to see people bundle out of them in a rush.

He’d be keen to alight, as well.

The disembarked passengers all headed for the exit tunnels, and Gordon and Kemp joined them, mingling among the crowd.

They entered the right hand tunnel and were not four or five paces inside it when both men felt a strange tingling. Kemp, a pace or two behind Gordon, lunged forward and grabbed his friend by the elbow. ‘What —’ he began, then stopped in absolute horror as the person in front of them, a young woman in a fashionable tartan bustled skirt and matching hat, simply faded from view.

Both men staggered in shock, then were pressed against the wall as the tide of passengers continued through the tunnel, heading for the exit.

Buffeted and breathless, they were finally left alone in the tunnel, staring about as if they could miraculously find the woman lurking in the shadows.

* * * *

They paused for a restorative whiskey in a pub on Arthur Street East, then they headed back to the station building which housed the London offices of the City & South London Railway.

There they demanded to see either the chairman of the company, or Mr Greathead, the chief engineer.

As it transpired, both men were in and, after Kemp had shouted a little at the chairman's secretary, both agreed to meet with Gordon and Kemp.

'What in God's name were you thinking,' Gordon said, not even waiting to be introduced to the chairman, 'not continuing the line? That cavern was a throughway, a *throughway*, not... not...'

'Not a terminus,' Kemp finished.

'If I may?' Greathead said. He waved the men towards a group of chairs by a fire, but neither moved.

Greathead sighed. 'May I introduce Sir Charles Grey Mott,' he said, then murmured, 'Mr Gordon, Mr Kemp,' as Sir Charles stepped forward to shake the two crypt hunters' hands.

The chairman was a tall, elegant man whose very manner seemed to calm Gordon and Kemp somewhat.

'There is a problem?' Sir Charles said. He sat down in one of the chairs, crossing his legs with such grace that it could only have been bred, not learned, and after a moment both Gordon and Kemp took chairs as well.

Greathead repressed another sigh and joined the others.

'That cavern was a throughway,' Gordon said. 'An ancient crossroads.'

It would have been safe had the train continued on its journey, but as it is, the train stops, and people have to go somewhere.'

Sir Charles regarded him patiently.

'People have been going missing,' said Kemp. 'We saw another, today. She vanished before our very eyes. Doubtless there will be a report in tomorrow's Times. If it is of any concern.'

Sir Charles flickered a glance to Greathead but otherwise his expression did not alter.

'There were problems in continuing the tunnel north,' said Greathead. 'Water began to seep in and —'

'Yes, yes, so we have heard,' said Gordon. 'What are you going to do about the station? There are people going missing! On their way to the exit! You *must* continue the tunnel!'

'That is impossible,' said Sir Charles. 'We simply cannot do it. Instead, in April we shall begin construction on a diversionary tunnel that will run just east of the current line leading into King William Street Station, and bypassing the station entirely. The soil is more stable there, and we should have no problems driving the line north. We anticipate that we can be finished by the end of the year.'

Kemp opened his mouth to speak, but Sir Charles continued on smoothly.

'You assured Mr Greathead that the space was safe to be used. You said —'

'That it could only be used if the tunnel continued through!' Gordon said.

'I don't recall you saying that,' Greathead said. 'In fact, I am sure that you didn't —'

Sir Charles raised a hand for peace. 'What is happening to these people, gentlemen? I can assure you, it *is* of concern to me.'

'We don't know,' said Kemp. 'They are travelling *somewhere*, but not to the exit they desire.'

'You need to close the station,' said Gordon.

'That's impossible!' Greathead said. 'King William Street Station is our one and only station currently north of the Thames. If we close it then our entire purpose of building a line from the southern suburbs under the Thames into London is defeated. We might as well —'

'Close the entire line,' said Sir Charles. 'And if we do that then the company will founder, and thousands shall be left destitute.'

Gordon made an impatient noise. 'You *must* close it,' he said.

'There is nothing you can do?' Sir Charles said. 'This is, after all, your speciality. It is what we *paid* you for.'

Gordon narrowed his eyes at the tone of Sir Charles' voice and began to shake his head, but Kemp put a hand on his arm.

'There might be something,' Kemp said. 'The Long Tom.'

'The ... *what?*' Sir Charles said.

'There was an ancient cross in the cavern,' Greathead said. 'Gordon and Kemp called it a Long Tom and told me to give it to some local antiquarian society.'

'It might help,' Kemp said, 'if it went back into the station. It might protect the passengers.'

'*Might,*' Gordon muttered.

Neither Greathead nor Sir Charles heard him.

'Where is it now?' Sir Charles said. 'Greathead, do you remember where it went?'

Greathead looked a little embarrassed. 'Ahem ... it currently stands in the grounds of my Devon house.'

'Good!' Sir Charles said. 'It shall be no trouble to restore it, then. Kemp, you are certain this will work? We only need to keep the station open eight or nine months.'

'I cannot be sure,' Kemp said, 'but —'

He stopped. Sir Charles and Greathead were engaged in a conversation about how to transport the Long Tom back to King William Street Station, and from there how to explain its presence to passengers.

Kemp looked at Gordon. *Who knew if it would work?*

And then ...

What exit were the missing people taking?

* * * *

Mrs Frances Patterson stepped out of the tunnel and stopped dead, her mouth hanging open.

This was not what she had expected to see.

Instead of streets bustling with horse-drawn vehicles and pedestrians, and footpaths strewn with vendors, all she could see for miles and miles was low rolling hills. To her right stretched what she supposed might have been the Thames, save that it was three times too wide, and where there should have been embankments and warehouses, piers and ships, was nothing but waterbirds and rushes.

A movement before her caught her attention.

Three men stood some fifteen paces away. They wore nothing save woven plaid cloaks and trousers. Their faces and naked upper bodies were daubed with blue woad, their long hair was plaited with what looked like bits of copper, and their eyes were narrowed in suspicion. Each of them carried a long spear.

They were not very tall and looked underfed, and Mrs Patterson vaguely wondered if they were prisoners escaped from one of the city prisons. Newgate, perhaps. Or perhaps native Americans, transported to London's docks by one of the tea clippers.

She cleared her throat. 'Is this ...' She had to stop and start again. They were so rude to stare at her in such fashion! 'Is this the way to the exit?'

The three men exchanged glances, making their decision.

One of them leaned his weight on his back foot, and hefted his spear.

* * * *

Sir Charles Grey Mott sat in his office, looking down at the plan of King William Street Station sitting on his desk.

It had been ten months since he had spoken with Greathead, Gordon and Kemp in this office. In the week following that conversation workmen had restored the ancient pagan cross to the platform, just between the entrances to the two exit tunnels. A little sign attached to the cross had said that it was an artwork on loan from one of the county antiquarian societies.

For two months it appeared to have worked. No one else went missing from the exit tunnels.

Then, very gradually, people started to vanish once again. One every fortnight or so, then the numbers began to increase: one a week, then two a week.

Sir Charles had kept it from the press only because of his extensive contacts, a few bribes, and one rather vicious threat made to the editor of London's largest newspaper. The City & South London Railway was only a very new company, still with only one line, and Parliament could withdraw its consent for the company's continued operation at any time.

There could be no hint of what was going wrong.

So Sir Charles and Greathead pushed their work crews as hard as they could to open up the diversionary tunnel. They found, thank God, no further caverns (if they had, Sir Charles thought he may have taken an early retirement to Panama).

Yesterday the new tunnel through to Moorgate had opened.

Yesterday King William Street Station was finally, thankfully, closed.

Sir Charles would have gone down himself to turn off the gas lamps and smash the damned pagan cross to pieces, save he didn't want to have to risk using the exit tunnels.

He sent the foreman of one of his work crews instead, and, thankfully, he had come back.

Sir Charles stared a long time at the plans, then he reached for his pen, dipped it into the inkwell, and in large black letters wrote across the plan: *Closed due to an engineering blunder.*

Then he pushed back his chair, rose, straightened his vest and jacket, and went back to his wife and family awaiting him in Chelsea. He would have a good evening meal, and relax later in his study with a whiskey.

It was all over and done with.

* * * *

The wind whistled across the marshes surrounding the sacred hills that sat on the bend of the Thames. A small village sat close to the northern bank of the Thames, near a ford, and near to where, one day, London Bridge would stretch across the river. It was only a small village, with eight or nine circular huts, most with smoke drifting from holes in their apex.

Just to the east of the village stood a low hill, one of the sacred hills. The hill had four low arched openings that were centred on each of the cardinal directions.

At least, the hill had *once* had four openings. Now all but one of them were closed over with rubble and turf. A group of six men moved towards the entrance, their steps slow, their shoulders burdened with a tall stone cross, its head enclosed within a stone circle.

Two shamans walked behind the six men and their burden, their heads bowed, murmuring incantations. They had carved the cross between them over the past cycle of the moon, working into it all the protective magics they could.

To one side stood the remainder of the villagers, watching proceedings. Their faces were a mixture of sorrow and relief. They had once revered the sacred hill for the mystical journeys it had enabled them to take, but they had spent the past few months in increasing terror at the evil spirits the hill had begun to spit forth.

They watched the men and the cross vanished within the hill, then the shamans after them. The villagers shuffled a little in their tension.

They hoped the shamans were powerful enough to successfully combat the evil spirits.

After a short while the six men returned, their burden left within the hill. They stood to one side on the entrance, eyeing the tools and the great pile of stone and rubble that stood waiting.

Once the shamans returned (*if they returned*), the men would seal off this remaining doorway.

* * * *

The two shamans stood in the centre of the crossroads, deep within the hill. They were illumed by two small burning torches and the very faint patch of light that made its way inside from the entrance at their backs. Before them stood the stone cross, the Long Tom.

The shamans regarded it silently for a long moment, then the older of them, the senior shaman, stepped forward. He began to murmur an incantation, at the same time running the fingers of both hands lightly over the teeth set into the circular stonework. The younger shaman bowed his head, remaining silent, concentrating on sending his elder all the strength he could manage.

‘It is done,’ the senior shaman said eventually. He stepped back from the Long Tom, his hands trembling with his weariness.

‘The evil spirits will not return?’ the other shaman said.

‘Not so long as this cross stands here to protect the passageways,’ said the senior shaman. ‘We will seal the entrance, and it will never be moved, and our land and people will be safe, for ever more. Now, come, let us leave this place.’

* * * *

Once outside the senior shaman nodded to the villagers standing anxiously, to let them know it had been done, then murmured a word to the six men waiting with tools and stone. The men bent down immediately, beginning to shift the stones.

By morning the entrance would be sealed for evermore.

The two shamans moved down to the river bank. There waited an earthenware pot. The younger man bent and picked it up, then unceremoniously broke the pot against a rock and tipped its contents into

the water.

Creamy-grey dust and crushed bone fragments — the cremated remains of all the Londoners who had taken the wrong exit — scattered over the water, creating an oily film that slowly moved away from the river bank into the current to drift eastwards toward the sea.

It was not, all things considered, the exit the chubby gloved hands had promised.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

I have long entertained the idea of writing about one of the abandoned stations in London's Underground. I thought I would need to create a fictionalised station for this story, but when I was doing the research, I came across the strange tale of King William Street Station, destined to be closed due to 'an engineering blunder' less than a year after it had opened; it was the first London Underground station to be abandoned. I did not need to look further.

King William Street Station still exists. You can reach it via the emergency stairs leading down from a manhole in the basement of Regis House which stands on the corner of King William Street next to the Monument. The gas lamps are still there, as is the signalman's box with its twenty-two hand-operated levers, and most of the Victorian white tiles used to line the ceiling and walls. The twin exit tunnels remain, as do the chubby gloved hands helpfully pointing the way to the exit.

I would advise you not to visit, nor to attempt the way to the exit.

— *Sara Douglass*