

MR BONNER'S DREAM THE NIGHT BEFORE HIS EXECUTION

Emily Cleaver

The pictorial, which appeared in the *Illustrated Police News* the day after the execution, bore hardly any resemblance to what William Bonner actually dreamed about the night before he died. Even so, it was a fine piece of work. Given the notoriety of the case, the editor had devoted a double-page spread to it. Along the top in letters dripping with oozy water, suggestive of the canal where the body had been found, was the title. *William Bonner's Dream the Night Before His Execution*.

At the bottom of the illustration William Bonner slept on the narrow bed of a Newgate cell, his brow deeply furrowed. The artist, who had years of experience drawing murderers for the popular press, had given him a gaunt face and a weak chin overwhelmed by a moustache. His hands, grasping the prison blanket as he slept, were long-fingered and sinister. Above this, the tormented dreams of the condemned man were shown in a series of vignettes, each depicting a scene from the night of the crime. First, top left, Mr Bonner shouted at his wife. It was this argument, overheard by neighbours through the thin walls of the lodging-house room, that had convinced the jury to reach a guilty verdict.

In the next picture, Mr Bonner chased his wife from the house and into the night. In the murder scene his hands were at her neck, then he threw her body into the Limehouse Cut. The artist had skilfully captured the look of awful remorse as Mr Bonner

saw what he had done. Next: the moment the night watchman found Mr Bonner on the ground in a faint, the discovery of the body, the arrest, trial and guilty verdict. In the final scene, the hood was pulled down over Mr Bonner's face, the rope already round his neck.

Since his arrest Mr Bonner had not slept at night, but in the daytime sleep would attack him like a dark blanket thrown over his head. It would take him suddenly in his cell, or even while walking in the exercise yard. He would wake minutes or hours later, feeling that he had been attacked by an assailant. No scenes of the murder troubled him when he slept. Instead he was haunted by the white dog.

The white dog had been in his dreams since the sleeping fits started in his childhood. As a boy, Mr Bonner believed that the white dog itself brought the sleep, because it was always there inside it waiting. It was a large brute with broad shoulders and a heavy muzzle. Its coat was a blank sheet of paper. One of its eyes was crushed shut by a scar, and the other was a cloudy white marble with no centre. Sometimes when sleep hit him the white dog would be on his chest, paws on his shoulders. Other times it would be behind him, and he would twist and turn to catch sight of the flicker of its coat.

What troubled Mr Bonner as he grew older was the dog's one white eye. It seemed to him that if he could only understand the message in that void gaze, something imperative and terrible would be revealed to him. He felt he had just to ask the right question, but in his dreams he could never think what it was.

When he married Mary, the dreams of the dog had stopped. They would lie in bed at night with their feet together for warmth, and Mary would place her hand on his thin chest. She had a mouth that broke easily into smiles, and her shape made Mr Bonner think of songs danced to a fiddle. They slept tangled up, her hair a black splash on the pillow.

But work was hard to get, and they moved to a Stepney lodging house. Mr Bonner had never been much good for anything but the lowest clerks' positions, copying ledgers or writing bills. He spent

days at the agencies, shuffling up the hard benches as the queue moved. Often there was no work, and he would walk home, through streets crowded with carts and cattle and loud with the shouts from the markets, to Mary's silence. He would sit at the table with his head bowed while she clattered the pans on the stove, stirring the stew that would have to last another day.

That was when the dog had come back to his dreams. In them, he would be searching for his boots in the kitchen and the dog would appear at the window. Or, he would wait in the queue for work at the agency and when his turn was called the white dog would be sitting at the desk. In the worst dreams there would be nothing but the sudden gloom of dusk and the coat of the white dog gleaming.

There had been no work the day it happened. He had walked slowly back, planning his words. *No, nothing today.* He would say it lightly, as if it didn't much matter. *They say there'll be something tomorrow.* He opened the door to the rich smell of stewing meat. Too rich – they had had no meat that morning. Mary was at the table, her hair up around her rosy face and her hat still on. She was wearing a new red kerchief, bright against her drab brown dress. He looked around him, expecting a gap where some piece of furniture had been sold. Everything was in its place.

"Where did you get that?" he said, his voice sounding high in his ears.

"A present." She turned to him, her cheeks flushed.

"Who from?"

"Did you get work?" she said.

He was silent and she turned away. There were tears on his cheeks. "I would have got us money."

"I took care of it myself." She raised her hand to her hair where it had come loose under the rim of the hat.

The next part of the night had fallen out of his head.

Lying awake in the creaky prison bed, Mr Bonner often thought of his trial, and tried again to answer the prosecutor's key question.

"Your neighbours testify that your wife ran from the house, and that you went after her. What happened then?"

"I don't remember," Mr Bonner would whisper to the faint square of the barred window, turning in his bed to avoid the gaze of the jury.

"Ah yes, your lamentable lapses of memory," the prosecutor would say. "A common affliction in your household, it would seem. Your neighbours say your wife was sometimes inclined to forget she was married."

"That is a lie," Mr Bonner would shout, and the laughter of the court would mix with the howls and shouts of the men in the next cells.

As the weeks passed, Mr Bonner poked and probed that gap in his mind like a decayed tooth through every sleepless night, but though the ache hung over him each morning, he could not remember.

Then, on the night before his execution, Mr Bonner finally slept. He dreamed that he saw London spread out below him, murky in the dusk as if the city lay at the bottom of a blue-glass vase. He started to sink, plunked like a fizzing tablet into the watery sky. The streets and houses wheeled below him. He felt a sense of anticipation, of a date to keep down there in the darkening streets. Below him he saw the lodging house, and Mary leaving its door. He watched her out of view, and then he saw himself appear and follow behind her.

Then Mr Bonner was walking after his wife. She drew away, a dim smudge in the dark. And there was the white dog. It stood in a doorway and watched him with its one milky eye, its coat bone-coloured. The dog turned away and ran towards the canal. He could see it ahead of him like a hole in the night.

When Mr Bonner reached it, the whiteness seemed to be all around him.

"You are no man," said Mary, standing before him as the sky paled and drained.

He raised his white hands to her neck and a fierce shadow fell over him, a sleep within sleep.

In his dream, Mr Bonner stood on the towpath again and looked down into the water. Mary's face glimmered beneath the surface like a clean plate in a grimy sink. She called out to him

silently, her mouth open, her throat bruised. Her hand waved, stirred by some current.

Mr Bonner's dream stayed with him, the dank water of the canal tainting his last breakfast. The priest arrived and asked for his confession. The secret of the empty eye of the dog was poised on Mr Bonner's tongue like a communion wafer. He remembered what his wife had taken from him, and what he had taken back from her. But these are my last possessions, thought Mr Bonner. To give or keep as I choose.

"May you find peace with God."

"I have already found it here," said Mr Bonner, laying his hand on his forehead.

The warder came. Mr Bonner held his hands behind him to be tied.

"They're waiting out there."

"I understand," said Mr Bonner.

The prisoners yelled and hooted from their cells and the chapel bell clanged. Mr Bonner raised his face to the sky as he was led to the wooden shed. He felt the anticipation of his dream again, the sense of a meeting to be attended out there in the gloom of the winter morning. He fell and the rope tightened. Somewhere at the edges of spluttering sleep, Mr Bonner was aware of the white dog waiting for him.