The Woman in Black by Susan Hill

As I neared the ruins, I could see clearly that they were indeed of some ancient chapel, perhaps monastic in origin, and all broken-down and crumbling, with some of the stones and rubble fallen, probably in recent gales, and lying about in the grass. The ground sloped a little down to the sea shore and, as I passed under one of the old arches, I startled a nesting bird, which rose up and away over my head with loudly beating wings and a harsh croaking cry that echoed all around the old walls and was taken up by another, some distance away. It was an ugly, satanic-looking thing, like some species of sea-vulture - if such a thing existed - and I could not suppress a shudder as its shadow passed over me, and I watched its ungainly flight away towards the sea with relief.

As I stood watching its retreat, the last light went from the sun, and the wind rose in a gust, and rustled through the grass. Suddenly conscious of the cold and the extreme bleakness and eeriness of the spot and of the gathering dusk of the November afternoon, and not wanting my spirits to become so depressed that I might begin to be affected by all sorts of morbid fancies, I was about to leave, and walk briskly back to the house, where I intended to switch on a good many lights and even light a small fire if it were possible, before beginning my preliminary work on Mrs Drablow's papers.

But, as I turned away, I glanced once again round the burial ground and then I saw again the woman with the wasted face, who had been at Mrs Drablow's funeral. She was at the far end of the plot, close to one of the few upright headstones, and she wore the same clothing and bonnet, but it seemed to have slipped back so that I could make out her face a little more clearly.

In the greyness of the fading light, it had the sheen and pallor not of flesh so much as of bone itself. Earlier, when I had looked at her, although admittedly it had been scarcely more than a swift glance each time, I had not noticed any particular expression on her ravaged face, but then I had, after all, been entirely taken with the look of extreme illness. Now, however, as I stared at her, stared until my eyes ached in their sockets, stared in surprise and bewilderment at her presence, now I saw that her face did wear an expression. It was one of what I can only describe – and the words seem hopelessly inadequate to express what I saw – as a desperate, yearning malevolence; it was as though she were searching for something she wanted, needed, must have, more than life itself, and which had been taken from her. And, towards whoever had taken it she directed the purest evil and hatred and loathing, with all the force that was available to her. Her face, in its extreme pallor, her eyes, sunken but unnaturally bright, were burning with the concentration of passionate emotion which was within her and which streamed from her.

 Whether or not this hatred and malevolence was directed towards me I had no means of telling – I had no reason at all to suppose that it could possibly have been, but at that moment I was far from able to base my reactions upon reason and logic. For the combination of the peculiar, isolated place and the sudden appearance of the woman and the dreadfulness of her expression began to fill me with fear. Indeed, I had never in my life been so possessed by it, never known my knees to tremble and my flesh to creep, and then to turn cold as stone, never known my heart to give a great lurch, as if it would almost leap up into my dry mouth and then begin pounding in my chest like a hammer on an anvil, never known myself gripped and held fast by such dread and horror and apprehension of evil. It was as though I had become paralysed. I could not bear to stay there, for fear, but nor had I any strength left in my body to turn and run away, and I was as certain as I had ever been of anything that, at any second, I would drop dead on that wretched patch of ground.

It was the woman who moved. She slipped behind the gravestone and, keeping close to the shadow of the wall, went through one of the broken gaps and out of sight. The very second that she had gone, my nerve and power of speech and movement, my very sense of life itself, came flooding back through me, my head cleared and, all at once, I was angry, yes, angry, with her for the emotion she had aroused in me, for causing me to experience such fear, and the anger led at once to determination, to follow her and stop her, and then to ask some questions and receive proper replies, to get to the bottom of it all.