



# THE 15TH FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT GHOST STORIES

Fearsome tales of ghosts and ghouls by Somerset  
Maugham, E. Nesbitt, Sir Richard Burton and  
others – selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes.



**THE FIFTEENTH FONTANA BOOK OF  
GREAT GHOST STORIES**

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*Ed. R. Chetwynd-Hayes*

THE FIFTEENTH FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT

# Ghost Stories

Selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes

FONTANA/Collins

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## INTRODUCTION

I am of the opinion that to write a successful ghost story, the author must believe in the existence of ghosts. I do – although I have yet to experience any form of psychic phenomenon myself – and cannot understand why anyone should harbour doubts. Surely it is inconceivable that such a complicated being as an intelligent man or woman ceases to be once the chains of corporeal life have fallen away. And if we are granted a state of continuous memory, then it must follow that regrets, awareness of incompleted tasks, a burden of guilt that may well be the result of misdeeds spread over several lifetimes, might compel certain of us to linger in this vale of tears.

One does not usually associate W. Somerset Maugham with ghost stories, but I have found two: *The Taipan*, which appeared in the 13th Ghost Book and *The Man from Glasgow*, which I am including in this collection. I have not been able to discover Maugham's own views on the hereafter, but he certainly tells a most convincing ghost story, which suggests he at least had an open mind on the subject. The wretched man who came from Glasgow was hitting the bottle pretty hard, and really one can scarcely blame him. So would I if subjected to what murdered his sleep every full moon.

*Master of Hounds* by Peter A. Hough has a subtle suggestion that Colonel Mandersby is haunted by a guilty conscience, which may be the reasons why the ghost-pack comes up out of Dingley Wood Swamp and eventually . . . Heaven forbid that I should give the game away, for this is a beautiful, spine-chilling slice of the macabre. I will hazard a guess and say that Mr Hough believes in ghosts.

That indefatigable writer of Victorian ghost stories, Anon, has come up with another terrifying nightmare, *The Dead Man of Varley Grange*. It was published some time in the 1880s, but who the author was I have not the faintest idea. But I suspect he was a well-endowed young gentleman with a military background and a welcome visitor at country houses, where he scared the pants off his fellow guests by relating gruesome stories. Of course I

might be wrong. Anon could well have been a respectable middle-aged lady who hugged her ghastly secret – pandering to the public's depraved taste – to her bombazine-clad bosom. I must say the house guests are a pretty tough lot, for after witnessing this:

*'We all turned round, and there . . . stood a man leaning over the rail of the gallery, staring down at us.*

*. . . He had a long tawny beard, and his hands, that were crossed before him, were nothing but skin and bone. But it was his face that was so unspeakably dreadful. It was livid – the face of a dead man!'*

Three characters exclaim:

*'It must be a delusion of our brains,' said one.*

*'Our host's champagne,' suggested another.*

*'A well-organized hoax,' opined a third.*

I will concede that four of them:

*. . . received by the morning post – so they stated – letters of importance which called them up to town by the very first train.*

Even so the remainder decided to sweat it out.

Daphne Froome invents some extraordinary plots and *Christmas Entertainment* is no exception. A Pepper's Ghost no less. This was an invention of Professor Pepper who first demonstrated it in the nineteenth century; a matter of cunningly placed mirrors that appeared to make a ghost appear, then vanish on the stage. For a time, plays which featured his ghosts were all the rage and one is inclined to wonder why some enterprising producer does not revive the practice. Of course Mrs Froome cannot let well alone and her Pepper's Ghost develops some interesting complications.

*John Charrington's Wedding* by E. Nesbit was first published in 1893 in a collection called *Grim Tales*. Some people may say that getting married is a grim business at the best of times, but Mr Charrington's belated appearance at the church was enough to send the most resilient of brides running home to mother. I find myself wondering what took place between the unhappy couple when they were shut up in the carriage together.

Margaret Chilvers-Cooper – as I have stated in earlier collections – lives in Falmouth, Massachusetts, and never

ceases to send me well written, brilliantly descriptive ghost stories. *The Primrose Connection* is a smoothly running stream of unpretentious writing that carries the reader out of the sunlight and into shadow-haunted valleys, where the unexpected is waiting to pounce. Again – as in *Only Child* – the story is told from a child's point of view, but the ghost companion is not so much a playmate as a doppelgänger, created by an unbalanced mind.

We all know (or should do) that Sir Richard Burton was the first Englishman to reach Mecca, had a go at discovering the source of the Nile and translated *The Arabian Nights* into English. He also discovered one of the strangest of ghost stories ever written. *The Saving of a Soul* is reputed to be an authentic account of a haunting that took place in the Castle of Weixelstein in 1559. It would seem that the ghost was extremely garrulous and granted several interviews, a form of spectral behaviour that I find to be very unusual.

Rosemary Timperley has an uncanny knack of turning out a story with a devilish twist in the tail. *No Living Man So Tall . . .* has an ending that I can only liken to a bucket of cold water thrown in the reader's face. When I first read it I kept thinking: 'Where is the ghost?' then *wham!* – there was my answer.

Everyone associates 'Sapper' with Bulldog Drummond – a large hairy man who drank a lot of beer – and it comes as a shock to discover that he could turn his hand to writing a very plausible ghost story. *The House by the Headland* is shudderingly good and written in a neat, crisp style. I understand this story was one of the author's favourites and certainly he had no reason to be ashamed of it. The reinactment of a long-ago murder is handled with professional skill and total conviction.

W. Macqueen-Pope was an acknowledged authority on the history of the English stage and in *Drury Lane Ghost*, he tells the true story of the famous ghost that has been seen many times walking in or near the upper circle during the hours of 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. No one knows who he was, although Mr Macqueen-Pope gives us a rational explanation as to why this gentle apparition has haunted the old theatre for close on two hundred years.

We gather that Roger Bateson had not been married very long when he set out in *The Night Walkers* by Sydney J. Bounds to explore an old canal, and his matrimonial problems were not improved by what walked the banks and clearly desired company. This story borders on the horrific, but is none the worse for that. I can now understand why some of our canals have been so sadly neglected in recent years.

We are informed right at the beginning of *The Business of Madame Jahn* by Vincent O'Sullivan that Gustave Herbout had taken to the rope. In other words he had hanged himself; and you may well decide that he had very little alternative. This story was first published in a collection called *A Book of Bargains* by Leonard Smithers back in 1896 and Mr Smithers undoubtedly got his money's worth when he decided to accept it. Gustave is a marvellous study in degenerate villainy and certainly did not bargain for the result of his homicidal actions. Vincent O'Sullivan is best remembered for his brilliant *When I Was Dead* which was published in the 4th Fontana Ghost Book, but this offering is no less gripping. I love the following exchange between Gustave and his aunt.

'You have been very kind to a lonely old woman tonight, my Gustave,' said Madame Jahn, smiling.

'How sweet of you to say that, dearest aunt!' replied Gustave. He went over and passed his arm caressingly across her shoulders, and stabbed her in the heart.

Well – at least she died happy.

James Fisher lives in Edinburgh, is sixteen years old, and has been sending me stories for the past two years. I have always been impressed by his original plots and never more so than when I read *Here Today* . . . I defy anyone to guess the ending before they reach the last page – and not to be shocked beyond their wildest hopes. If this young man keeps writing he will one day make quite a name for himself.

*White Christmas* by David E. Rose is short. A mere thousand words, but not one wasted. Beautifully written, interest maintained from first to last – this is not so much a story as a prose poem.

The next story is also told from a child's point of view and illustrates the point that children often see much that escapes the attention of their elders. It is possible that Piers, in *Only Child* by Frances Stephens, did not fully realize the exact nature of his playmate who resided in the attic, but he had no doubt as to his existence. But the reader – being a non-comprehending adult – can, if he or she so wishes, arrive at any number of other conclusions. The boy is lonely, Mr Abrahams is a very nasty man, and as for the mother, I am of the opinion that a session in the attic might have done her some good.

I understand that Fritz Hopman wrote *The Bearer of the Message* some time towards the end of the last century, but that is all the information I can give you. His writing is uncomplicated for that period, which makes me wonder if this version is a translation as Mr Hopman appears to have been a Frenchman. I would be grateful if anyone can enlighten me on this point. The plot is deceptively simple and therefore does not prepare the reader for the shock ending. But the author has drawn a realistic picture of Russia in 1869, which makes one assume that he must have been there around that time.

Altogether a nice, tight little story with disturbing undertones.

To my knowledge, Meg Buxton is a newcomer to the grim business of writing ghost stories and if *The Herb Garden* is a typical example of her work, she should soon have some claim to fame. The main character – Mrs Petherick – is a charming creation, while the Reverend Jeremy Ballantyne is one of the most pathetic I have ever met. I was completely enthralled by the realistic atmosphere, the beautiful country garden that just had to be haunted by gentle ghosts.

*The Hanging Tree*. Yes, I wrote that. A few people may recognize the setting, but I hasten to add that this is the only authentic part about it. I am always seeking new names for my characters that will in some way fit into their personalities. Movita slid into my brain, and yes, it did undoubtedly belong to the sad, rather sweet girl who saw the walker of the haunting path from her bedroom

window. But where on earth did the name come from? I have never known a girl called Movita and so far as I can ascertain no one else has either. So maybe I have invented a new name, which I venture to suggest is no mean achievement.

Happy haunting.

R. CHETWYND-HAYES

## THE MAN FROM GLASGOW

*W. Somerset Maugham*

It is not often that anyone entering a great city for the first time has the luck to witness such an incident as engaged Shelley's attention when he drove into Naples. A youth ran out of a shop pursued by a man armed with a knife. The man overtook him and with one blow in the neck laid him dead on the road. Shelley had a tender heart. He didn't look upon it as a bit of local colour; he was seized with horror and indignation. But when he expressed his emotions to a Calabrian priest who was travelling with him, a fellow of gigantic strength and stature, the priest laughed heartily and attempted to quiz him. Shelley says he never felt such an inclination to beat anyone.

I have never seen anything so exciting as that, but the first time I went to Algeciras I had an experience that seemed to me far from ordinary. Algeciras was then an untidy, neglected town. I arrived somewhat late at night and went to an inn on the quay. It was rather shabby, but it had a fine view of Gibraltar, solid and matter-of-fact, across the bay. The moon was full. The office was on the first floor, and a slatternly maid, when I asked for a room, took me upstairs. The landlord was playing cards. He seemed little pleased to see me. He looked me up and down, curtly gave me a number, and then, taking no further notice of me, went on with his game.

When the maid had shown me to my room I asked her what I could have to eat.

'What you like,' she answered.

I knew well enough the unreality of the seeming profusion.

'What have you got in the house?'

'You can have eggs and ham.'

The look of the hotel had led me to guess that I should get little else. The maid led me to a narrow room with whitewashed walls and a low ceiling in which was a long table laid already for the next day's luncheon. With his



back to the door sat a tall man, huddled over a *brasero*, the round brass dish of hot ashes which is erroneously supposed to give sufficient warmth for the temperate winter of Andalusia. I sat down at table and waited for my scanty meal. I gave the stranger an idle glance. He was looking at me, but meeting my eyes he quickly turned away. I waited for my eggs. When at last the maid brought them he looked up again.

'I want you to wake me in time for the first boat,' he said.

'Si, señor.'

His accent told me that English was his native tongue, and the breadth of his build, his strongly marked features, led me to suppose him a northerner. The hardy Scot is far more often found in Spain than the Englishman. Whether you go to the rich mines of Rio Tinto, or to the *bodegas* of Jerez, to Seville or to Cadiz, it is the leisurely speech of beyond the Tweed that you hear. You will meet Scotsmen in the olive groves of Carmona, on the railway between Algeciras and Bobadilla, and even in the remote cork woods of Merida.

I finished eating and went over to the dish of burning ashes. It was mid-winter and the windy passage across the bay had chilled my blood. The man pushed his chair away as I drew mine forwards.

'Don't move,' I said. 'There's heaps of room for two.'

I lit a cigar and offered one to him. In Spain, the Havana from Gib is never unwelcome.

'I don't mind if I do,' he said, stretching out his hand.

I recognized the singing speech of Glasgow. But the stranger was not talkative, and my efforts at conversation broke down before his monosyllables. We smoked in silence. He was even bigger than I had thought, with great broad shoulders and ungainly limbs; his face was sunburned, his hair short and grizzled. His features were hard; mouth, ears and nose were large and heavy and his skin much wrinkled. His blue eyes were pale. He was constantly pulling his grey moustache. It was a nervous gesture that I found faintly irritating. Presently I felt that he was looking at me, and the intensity of his stare grew so irksome that I glanced up expecting him, as before, to drop his

eyes. He did, indeed, for a moment, but then raised them again. He inspected me from under his long, bushy eyebrows.

'Just come from Gib?' he asked suddenly.

'Yes.'

'I'm going tomorrow - on my way home. Thank God.'

He said the last two words so fiercely that I smiled.

'Don't you like Spain?'

'Oh, Spain's all right.'

'Have you been here long?'

'Too long. Too long.'

He spoke with a kind of gasp. I was surprised at the emotion my casual inquiry seemed to excite in him. He sprang to his feet and walked backwards and forwards. He stamped to and fro like a caged beast, pushing aside a chair that stood in his way, and now and again repeated the words in a groan. 'Too long. Too long.' I sat still. I was embarrassed. To give myself countenance I stirred the *brasero* to bring the hotter ashes to the top, and he stood suddenly still, towering over me, as though my movement had brought back my existence to his notice. Then he sat down heavily in his chair.

'D'you think I'm queer?' he asked.

'Not more than most people,' I smiled.

'You don't see anything strange in me?'

He leant forward as he spoke so that I might see him well.

'No.'

'You'd say so if you did, wouldn't you?'

'I would.'

I couldn't quite understand what all this meant. I wondered if he was drunk. For two or three minutes he didn't say anything and I had no wish to interrupt the silence.

'What's your name?' he asked suddenly. I told him.

'Mine's Robert Morrison.'

'Scotch?'

'Glasgow. I've been in this blasted country for years. Got any baccy?'

I gave him my pouch and he filled his pipe. He lit it from a piece of burning charcoal.

'I can't stay any longer. I've stayed too long. Too long.'

He had an impulse to jump up again and walk up and down, but he resisted it, clinging to his chair. I saw on his face the effort he was making. I judged that his restlessness was due to chronic alcoholism. I find drunks very boring, and I made up my mind to take an early opportunity of slipping off to bed.

'I've been managing some olive groves,' he went on. 'I'm here working for the Glasgow and South of Spain Olive Oil Company Limited.'

'Oh, yes.'

'We've got a new process for refining oil, you know. Properly treated, Spanish oil is every bit as good as Lucca. And we can sell it cheaper.'

He spoke in a dry matter-of-fact, business-like way. He chose his words with Scotch precision. He seemed perfectly sober.

'You know, Ecija is more or less the centre of the olive trade, and we had a Spaniard there to look after the business. But I found he was robbing us right and left, so I had to turn him out. I used to live in Seville; it was more convenient for shipping the oil. However, I found I couldn't get a trustworthy man to be at Ecija, so last year I went there myself. D'you know it?'

'No.'

'The firm has got a big estate two miles from the town, just outside the village of San Lorenzo, and it's got a fine house on it. It's on the crest of a hill, rather pretty to look at, all white, you know, and straggling, with a couple of storks perched on the roof. No one lived there, and I thought it would save the rent of a place in town if I did.'

'It must have been a bit lonely,' I remarked.

'It was.'

Robert Morrison smoked on for a minute or two in silence. I wondered whether there was any point in what he was telling me.

I looked at my watch.

'In a hurry?' he asked sharply.

'Not particularly. It's getting late.'

'Well, what of it?'

'I suppose you didn't see many people?' I said, going back.

'Not many. I lived there with an old man and his wife who looked after me, and sometimes I used to go down to the village and play *tresillo* with Fernández, the chemist, and one or two men who met at his shop. I used to shoot a bit and ride.'

'It doesn't sound such a bad life to me.'

'I'd been there two years last spring. By God, I've never known such heat as we had in May. No one could do a thing. The labourers just lay about in the shade and slept. Sheep died and some of the animals went mad. Even the oxen couldn't work. They stood around with their backs all humped up and gasped for breath. That blasted sun beat down and the glare was so awful, you felt your eyes would shoot out of your head. The earth cracked and crumbled, and the crops frizzled. The olives went to rack and ruin. It was simply hell. One couldn't get a wink of sleep. I went from room to room, trying to get a breath of air. Of course I kept the windows shut and had the floors watered, but that didn't do any good. The nights were just as hot as the days. It was like living in an oven.

'At last I thought I'd have a bed made up for me downstairs on the north side of the house in a room that was never used because in ordinary weather it was damp. I had an idea that I might get a few hours' sleep there at all events. Anyhow it was worth trying. But it was no damned good; it was a wash-out. I turned and tossed and my bed was so hot that I couldn't stand it. I got up and opened the doors that led to the veranda and walked out. It was a glorious night. The moon was so bright that I swear you could read a book by it. Did I tell you the house was on the crest of a hill? I leant against the parapet and looked at the olive trees. It was like the sea. I suppose that's what made me think of home. I thought of the cool breeze in the fir trees and the racket of the streets in Glasgow. Believe it or not, I could smell them, and I could smell the sea. By God, I'd have given every bob I had in the world for an hour of that air. They say it's a foul climate in Glasgow. Don't you believe it. I like the rain and the grey sky and that yellow sea and the waves. I forgot that I was in Spain, in the middle of the olive country, and I opened my mouth and took a long breath as though I were breath-

ing in the sea-fog.

'And then all of a sudden I heard a sound. It was a man's voice. Not loud, you know, low, it seemed to creep through the silence like - well, I don't know what it was like. It surprised me. I couldn't think who could be down there in the olives at that hour. It was past midnight. It was a chap laughing. A funny sort of laugh. I suppose you'd call it a chuckle. It seemed to crawl up the hill - disjointedly.'

Morrison looked at me to see how I took the odd word he used to express a sensation that he didn't know how to describe.

'I mean, it seemed to shoot up in little jerks, something like shooting stones out of a pail. I leant forward and stared. With the full moon it was almost as light as day, but I'm dashed if I could see a thing. The sound stopped, but I kept on looking at where it had come from in case somebody moved. And in a minute it started off again, but louder. You couldn't have called it a chuckle any more, it was a real belly laugh. It just rang through the night. I wondered it didn't wake my servants. It sounded like someone who was roaring drunk.

' "Who's there?" I shouted.

The only answer I got was a roar of laughter. I don't mind telling you I was getting a bit annoyed. I had half a mind to go down and see what it was all about. I wasn't going to let some drunken swine kick up a row like that on my place in the middle of the night. And then suddenly there was a yell. By God, I was startled. Then cries. The man had laughed with a deep bass voice, but his cries were - shrill, like a pig having his throat cut.

' "My God", ' I cried.

'I jumped over the parapet and ran down towards the sound. I thought somebody was being killed. There was silence and then one piercing shriek. After that sobbing and moaning. I'll tell you what it sounded like, it sounded like someone at the point of death. There was a long groan and then nothing. Silence. I ran from place to place. I couldn't find anyone. At last I climbed the hill again and went back to my room.

'You can imagine how much sleep I got that night. As

soon as it was light, I looked out of the window in the direction from which the row had come and I was surprised to see a little white house in a sort of dale among the olives. The ground on that side didn't belong to us and I'd never been through it. I hardly ever went to that part of the house and so I'd never seen the house before. I asked José who lived there. He told me that a madman had inhabited it, with his brother and a servant.'

'Oh, was that the explanation?' I said. 'Not a very nice neighbour.'

The Scot bent over quickly and seized my wrist. He thrust his face into mine and his eyes were starting out of his head with terror.

'The madman had been dead for twenty years,' he whispered.

He let go my wrist and leant back in his chair panting.

'I went down to the house and walked all round it. The windows were barred and shuttered and the door was locked. I knocked. I shook the handle and rang the bell. I heard it tinkle, but no one came. It was a two-storey house and I looked up. The shutters were tight closed, and there wasn't a sign of life anywhere.'

'Well, what sort of condition was the house in?' I asked.

'Oh, rotten. The whitewash had worn off the walls and there was practically no paint left on the door or the shutters. Some of the tiles off the roof were lying on the ground. They looked as though they'd been blown away in a gale.'

'Queer,' I said.

'I went to my friend Fernàndez, the chemist, and he told me the same story as José. I asked about the madman and Fernàndez said that no one ever saw him. He was more or less comatose ordinarily, but now and then he had an attack of acute mania and then he could be heard from ever so far laughing his head off and then crying. It used to scare people. He died in one of his attacks and his keepers cleared out at once. No one had ever dared to live in the house since.'

'I didn't tell Fernàndez what I'd heard. I thought he'd only laugh at me. I stayed up that night and kept watch. But nothing happened. There wasn't a sound. I waited

about till dawn and then I went to bed.'

'And you never heard anything more?'

'Not for a month. The drought continued and I went on sleeping in the lumber-room at the back. One night I was fast asleep, when something seemed to happen to me; I don't exactly know how to describe it, it was a funny feeling as though someone had given me a little nudge, to warn me, and suddenly I was wide awake. I lay there in my bed and then in the same way as before I heard a long, low gurgle, like a man enjoying an old joke. It came from away down in the valley and it got louder. It was a great bellow of laughter. I jumped out of bed and went to the window. My legs began to tremble. It was horrible to stand there and listen to the shouts of laughter that rang through the night. Then there was the pause, and after that a shriek of pain and that ghastly sobbing. It didn't sound human. I mean, you might have thought it was an animal being tortured. I don't mind telling you I was scared stiff. I couldn't have moved if I'd wanted to. After a time the sounds stopped, not suddenly, but dying away little by little. I strained my ears, but I couldn't hear a thing. I crept back to bed and hid my face.

'I remembered then that Fernàndez had told me that the madman's attacks only came at intervals. The rest of the time he went quite quiet. Apathetic, Fernàndez said. I wondered if the fits of mania came regularly. I reckoned out how long it had been between the two attacks I'd heard. Twenty-eight days. It didn't take me long to put two and two together; it was quite obvious that it was the full moon that set him off. I'm not a nervous man really and I made up my mind to get to the bottom of it, so I looked out in the calendar which day the moon would be full next and that night I didn't go to bed. I clasped my revolver and loaded it. I prepared a lantern and sat down on the parapet of my house to wait. I felt perfectly cool. To tell you the truth, I was rather pleased with myself because I didn't feel scared. There was a bit of wind, and it whistled about the roof. It rustled over the leaves of the olive trees like waves swishing on the pebbles of the beach. The moon shone on the white walls of the house in the hollow. I felt particularly cheery.

'At last I heard a little sound, the sound I knew, and I almost laughed. I was right; it was the full moon and the attacks came as regular as clockwork. That was all to the good. I threw myself over the wall into the olive grove and ran straight to the house. The chuckling grew louder as I came near. I got to the house and looked up. There was no light anywhere. I put my ears to the door and listened. I heard the madman simply laughing his bloody head off. I beat on the door with my fist and I pulled the bell. The sound of it seemed to amuse him. He roared with laughter. I knocked again, louder and louder, and the more I knocked the more he laughed. Then I shouted at the top of my voice.

"Open the blasted door, or I'll break it down."

I stepped back and kicked the latch with all my might. I flung myself at the door with the whole weight of my body. It cracked. Then I put all my strength into it and the damned thing smashed open.

I took the revolver out of my pocket and held my lantern in the other hand. The laughter sounded louder now that the door was opened. I stepped in. The stink nearly knocked me down. I mean, just think, the windows hadn't been opened for twenty years. The row was enough to raise the dead, but for a moment I didn't know where it was coming from. The walls seemed to throw the sound backwards and forwards. I pushed open a door by my side and went into a room. It was bare and white and there wasn't a stick of furniture in it. The sound was louder and I followed it. I went into another room, but there was nothing there. I opened a door and found myself at the foot of a staircase. The madman was laughing just over my head. I walked up, cautiously, you know, I wasn't taking any risks, and at the top of the stairs there was a passage. I walked along it, throwing my light ahead of me, and I came to a room at the end. I stopped. He was in there. I was only separated from the sound by a thin door.

'It was awful to hear it. A shiver passed through me and I cursed myself because I began to tremble. It wasn't like a human being at all. By Jove, I very nearly took to my heels and ran. I had to clench my teeth to force myself to stay. But I simply couldn't bring myself to turn the



handle. And then the laughter was cut, cut with a knife you'd have said, and I heard a hiss of pain. I hadn't heard that before, it was too low to carry to my place, and then a gasp.

"Ay!" I heard the man speak in Spanish. "You're killing me. Take it away. Oh God, help me!"

He screamed. The brutes were torturing him. I flung open the door and burst in. The draught blew a shutter back and the moon streamed in so bright that it dimmed my lantern. In my ears, as clearly as I heard you speak and as close, I heard the wretched chap's groans. It was awful, moaning and sobbing, and frightful gasps. No one could survive that. He was at the point of death. I tell you I heard his broken, choking cries right in my ears. And the room was empty.'

Robert Morrison sank back in his chair. That huge solid man had strangely the look of a lay figure in a studio. You felt that if you pushed him he would fall over in a heap on to the floor.

'And then?' I asked.

He took a rather dirty handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his forehead.

'I felt I didn't much want to sleep in that room on the north side, so, heat or no heat, I moved back to my own quarters. Well, exactly four weeks later, about two in the morning, I was waked up by the madman's chuckle. It was almost at my elbow. I don't mind telling you that my nerve was a bit shaken by then, so next time the blighter was due to have an attack, next time the moon was full, I mean, I got Fernàndez to come and spend the night with me. I didn't tell him anything. I kept him up playing cards till two in the morning, and then I heard it again. I asked him if he heard anything. "Nothing," he said. "There's somebody laughing," I said. "You're drunk, man," he said, and he began laughing too. That was too much. "Shut up, you fool," I said. The laughter grew louder and louder. I cried out. I tried to shut it out by putting my hands to my ears, but it wasn't a damned bit of good. I heard it and I heard the scream of pain. Fernàndez thought I was mad. He didn't dare say so, because he knew I'd have killed him. He said he'd go to bed, and in the morning

I found he'd slunk away. His bed hadn't been slept in. He'd taken himself off when he left me.

'After that I couldn't stop in Ecija. I put a factor there and went back to Seville. I felt myself pretty safe there, but as the time came near I began to get scared. Of course I told myself not to be a damned fool, but, you know, I damned well couldn't help myself. The fact is, I was afraid the sounds had followed me, and I knew if I heard them in Seville I'd go on hearing them all my life. I've got as much courage as any man, but damn it all, there are limits to everything. Flesh and blood couldn't stand it. I knew I'd go stark staring mad. I got in such a state that I began drinking, the suspense was so awful, and I used to lie awake counting the days. And at last I knew it'd come. And it came. I heard those sounds in Seville – sixty miles away from Ecija.'

I didn't know what to say. I was silent for a while.

'When did you hear the sounds last?' I asked.

'Four weeks ago.'

I looked up quickly. I was startled.

'What d'you mean by that? It's not full moon tonight?'

He gave me a dark, angry look. He opened his mouth to speak and then stopped as though he couldn't. You would have said his vocal cords were paralysed, and it was with a strange croak that at last he answered.

'Yes, it is.'

He stared at me and his pale blue eyes seemed to shine red. I have never seen in a man's face a look of such terror. He got up quickly and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

I must admit that I didn't sleep any too well that night myself.

## MASTER OF HOUNDS

*Peter A. Hough*

He could hear them somewhere outside, perhaps in the shrubbery. Now the pat, pat, pat of small feet on sodden grass, followed by the crisper, sharper sound as they reached the weed-encroached gravel drive. There a pause – a pregnant silence – while the old man struggled to disperse the last vestige of sleep and sit up in the large ancient bed.

In the wan moonlight his anaemic face looked like a death mask, Eyelids fluttered like moth wings and his mouth sagged at one side, exposing the gaps between his teeth. He waited, afraid, straining his ears to pick up the slightest sounds, knowing what would come next.

The howling invaded the tired house; raced along the echoing corridors, up the great staircase and into his room.

As his blubbery fingers gripped the sheets he prayed that they would not find their way into the house.

Colonel Mandersby paused in the cold conservatory and turned the collar of his overcoat up around his skinny neck. His eyes wandered across the iced lawn – the grass over long so that it resembled a head of silver grey hair – and then he gripped his stick in gloved hand and started to walk round to the rear of the house. Nowadays he rarely used the front entrance.

He passed the stables, now dilapidated with neglect, then stopped, poised like a lost child as he stared into the damp interior of the end stall. The wooden slats of the door were impregnated with mildew and felt slimy beneath his touch. He moved closer, noticing with pleasure that the smell of horses still clung to the old place. It stirred up nostalgic memories of the hunts organized from Dover House, when he had been Master of Hounds and Anderson Field Master. Then he remembered something else and his expression froze again as he hurried on.

At the bottom of the drive he turned right into Stocks

Lane. There had been a time when he and his friends had ridden down that same road, full of mirth and brandy. His friends, in keeping with his money, had slowly melted away.

A car came into view and noisily passed by, forcing him on to the grass verge. The high thorny hedgerows slipped away and presently gave way to the familiar flat landscape – a blank tableau of irregular fields laced with trees raped of their summer glory by the winter winds.

He climbed a stile and down into the field beyond, then paused for breath in the cold, still morning. Mist draped the countryside, distorting the sun into a pale yellow diffused ball of light. With deliberation he set off along the edge of the field towards the distant woods.

He felt more relaxed among the trees. The smell of rotting leaves reminded him that his own departure could not be long delayed, and he decided it was the manner of his passing that mattered, not its inevitability. Eventually he came to his favourite resting place; a tree struck down by the fury of a storm, now plagued with cancerous fungi. The ground was sodden and around him the web of branches played a steady dirge of drip, drip, drip. There was also life in the woods that moved yet remained unseen.

Colonel Mandersby produced a pipe and began to fill it, then as clouds of blue smoke filtered up through the trees, recalled the first time he had entered Dingle Wood. Then the trees had been a blur on the periphery of his vision, as his eyes had been firmly directed on the path ahead.

He could again hear the thunder of hooves, then far away, across twenty years or more, a bugle cry followed by: 'Ware hound! 'Ware hole!' Forgotten, the pipe went out, gripped tightly in his hand.

After a while he stood up and took a path that branched away from the one he had followed. Soon the trees thinned, and he stopped where two decades before he had pulled up his mount in alarm and astonishment – thirty yards from the edge of Dingle Wood Swamp.

When he turned to leave, Mandersby thought he heard the distant howling of a dog.

The following day Dover House received an unexpected

visitor. When Anderson, the sole survivor of a once teeming staff of servants, opened the back door, he saw a young man dressed in jeans and an anorak. He stood sideways, with his back against the wind which was heaving a dirty white blanket of sleet against the house.

'Afternoon - Paul Garner from the *Norfolk Echo* - I've come to see Colonel Mandersby.'

'Have you an appointment?' Anderson inquired, as though it were the old days when the house had callers all the time.

'Well yes - that is I wrote to the colonel a week ago explaining that I would like to visit him. When I had no reply I thought that everything was okay. The GPO said that you weren't listed so I couldn't check with the colonel.'

Realization slowly dawned on the old manservant's face. The only mail that came these days were bills and those were ignored for as long as possible. The young man's letter must have shared the same fate.

The old man stood to one side. 'You'd better come in, Mr Garner. But I'd better warn you that Colonel Mandersby is taking his afternoon nap, so you may have to wait until he's ready to see you.'

He led the visitor through the hall - bare save for a hat stand - along a dingy corridor, then up a flight of stairs to a small room with book-lined walls. A large aspidistra plant in a huge urn lurked in one corner. It seemed colder in the house than outside.

'Wait here,' Anderson ordered, before opening a door set in a far wall and closing it carefully behind him. Left alone the young man wandered round the room, took note of the thick coating of dust that appeared not to have been disturbed for a very long time and visualized the atmosphere he would build up in his article.

Twenty minutes passed before the door reopened and a man in his late sixties entered; an upright, imposing figure with a bulldog face and sagging jowls. Garner came forward and offered his hand which was taken into a cold, clammy grip.

'Good afternoon, Mr ...'

'Paul Garner, sir.'

'Anderson tells me you're from the local rag. Have to excuse us, we don't get many visitors these days.'

'That's all right, sir. I'll be grateful for any time you can spare.'

The colonel motioned him to a chair. 'Can I get you a drink? Brandy maybe?'

Garner nodded and watched the old man walk to the sideboard and pour a generous measure of brandy into two glasses from a cut glass decanter. When they had both taken an appreciative sip of the mellow liquid, the colonel asked:

'Now then, young man, how can I help you?'

'Well, as I mentioned in my letter, the *Norfolk Echo* is doing a series of articles on the large country houses that used to be the focal point of county society. You know the kind of thing—how the rich lived. And we thought that Dover House would be a good starter.'

Colonel Mandersby took a deep swig from his glass, then shook his head.

'Not for me, I'm afraid. Sorry and all that, but the past is best left buried.'

Garner narrowed his eyes and stared at the lowered head reflectively. So the old coot did have something to hide. The problem was, how the hell did one get him to open up? Straightforward questioning certainly would do the trick, whereas if he was riled, then—just maybe—the floodgates might open. It was worth trying.

'Pity, I was hoping to write an interesting story—particularly if the rumours have any basis in fact. Still, if you'd rather not . . .'

The white head jerked up and the harsh voice snapped out words with the ferocity of a machine-gun.

'Rumours! What on earth are you talking about?'

Garner assumed an expression of acute embarrassment.

'Sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned them. You know how these stories get round. Idle chatter mostly. Something about a super-dog that was supposed to be a devil hound or some such rot. Vicious brute by all accounts.'

The colonel's mottled face turned to an interesting shade of purple.

'Damn you, there was nothing vicious about Thor.'

Finest foxhound in the country. Lord Welling once offered me five hundred pounds for him, which was a hell of a lot of money in those days. But he was not for sale to anyone.'

'Just goes to show it doesn't pay to listen to gossip,' Garner murmured. 'But of course, if the true story were published, then . . .' He shrugged and cast a sly glance at the colonel. With a bit of luck the old devil would swallow the bait. Mandersby emptied his glass, then rose and went over to the sideboard for a refill. Rather belatedly he shot his guest an interrogative glance.

'Another?'

The younger man shook his head.

'Not for me, thank you.'

The colonel sank back into his chair and for a while appeared to be lost in thought, then he said in a quieter tone of voice:

'I would want to vet whatever you write.'

'Naturally. And I dare say we could arrange some kind of fee. Nothing great – but useful.'

The old man grunted and visibly relaxed.

'Very well, I will tell you about Thor, although I doubt if either you or your readers will believe a single word. Are you going to take it down in shorthand?'

Garner grinned and produced a small tape-recorder from his coat pocket.

'No fear. Much too complicated for me and I'd never be able to read it back afterwards. This thing will record your every word, so there'll be no question of you being misquoted.' He switched on the machine. 'Ready when you are.'

The colonel settled back and began to speak in that clear, precise tone of voice that everyone uses when knowing that their words are being recorded.

'Twenty-odd years ago this house was the centre of hunting society. If you didn't belong to our select group, you weren't worth knowing, as the saying goes. I retired early from the army and settled down to the life of a prosperous country gentleman – and all that that definition entailed. Anderson, who had been my batman, came with me and when I was made Master of Hounds, he became

Field Master. Everything was fine for a few years, right up to the fifteenth of August twenty years ago.'

Mandersby paused to fill his pipe and Garner tried to remain unobtrusive, patiently waiting for the narration to continue. The old grey eyes seemed to stare past him to the petrified fields and woods beyond. The harsh, cultivated voice spoke again.

'I'll never forget that day as long as I live. It was cold for the time of year, with the promise of an early autumn. The hunt was due to start at two in the afternoon, and just before lunch one of the hunting staff asked me if I could spare a moment, as Anderson wanted to speak to me. He was down at the stables, grooming the horses and attending to the hounds.

'“It's the dogs, sir,” Anderson explained, “they won't respond to any command. I don't know what's got into them.”

'I did. I looked at Thor – and damned if we didn't glare at one another. He had made himself leader of the pack, and I knew without any possible doubt that the other dogs were obeying his unspoken command to ruin the afternoon and make a fool of me. That may sound ridiculous, but Thor was the most intelligent animal I have ever known and possessed a quality of leadership that would put many a general to shame.

'Believe me, without him the pack was a shambles and would follow him blindly wherever he chose to lead them. And now he was using them to get his own back.'

'Why?' Garner inquired.

'I'm about to tell you. A week before, for the first time in months, he had lost the fox. Normally this wouldn't have mattered – you can't win every hunt – but that day I had an important member of Parliament with me, and I'm sorry to say I lost my temper and struck Thor with my riding-crop. I realize now that that thoughtless action destroyed all the trust – affection if you like – built up over a period of three years. Afterwards, Anderson belatedly informed me that the hound had injured its belly on some barbed wire.

'Now the brute just sat and stared at me, refused to budge when I called him, and I went over and kicked him



hard in the stomach. He didn't cry out or even so much as flinch, but God, you should have seen the gleam of pure hate in his eyes. For a moment I thought he was going to attack me, but after a while he just settled back on to his haunches as though nothing had happened.'

The old man ceased to speak and re-lit his pipe which had gone out. Outside the curtainless windows the short winter's day was drawing to a close and the room was becoming impaled with even darker shadows. The only cheerful aspect was the glow from the gently hissing gas fire that stood on the hearth of a fine old marble fireplace. Garner took a sip of his brandy as he waited for the colonel to continue.

'We set off just after two, and quite soon the hounds picked up a fresh scent. I was relieved that everything was progressing normally and even believed that my chastising kick had taught the dog a lesson.

'Soon the hounds were giving tongue and we knew they were gaining ground rapidly. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the pack swerved from the trail they were following and headed for nearby Dingle Wood. I knew then that something was dreadfully wrong. With a burst of speed I took after them, leaving the rest of the hunt behind.

'For a moment it seemed as if the woods had swallowed them up, but I followed the sound of snapping bracken until the trees thinned out. Then I saw the pack ahead of me and stared in disbelief and horror as they continued at full speed towards the infamous Dingle Wood swamp ...'

Colonel Mandersby clutched his white head between shaking hands, as though he were reliving that experience of twenty years before.

'What happened, sir?' Garner ventured to ask. 'Did any of the dogs survive?'

The colonel looked up and shook his head slowly, while something resembling a smile haunted his thin lips.

'Not one. Of course we tried to save them, but nothing much could be done without endangering our own lives. Besides, the dogs were determined to die. They were firmly under Thor's spell and he was punishing me by destroying the pack, even though it meant his own death.'

Garner moved uncomfortably in his chair and decided the old boy was well on the way to the nut-house. 'But you can't be certain of that, sir. How do you know that the dogs weren't following the fox's scent and sort of ran into the swamp in their enthusiasm?'

The colonel glared at the young man, his face purple with rage – and perhaps fear. 'Because . . . because there was no fox anywhere near and the dogs let the swamp pull them under without a struggle or a whimper. Thor was the last to go under and his eyes glared their hate and I'll never, never forget them until the day I die. For you see,' the harsh voice sank to a thrilling whisper, 'he wanted me to ride in there, to be sucked down, and was bloody mad when I didn't fall into his trap.'

Garner stared at Colonel Mandersby with speechless astonishment and had difficulty in suppressing a nervous giggle, even though he recognized that this was the kind of thing which made excellent copy. Doubtlessly over the years the old man's fading memory had embellished a straightforward incident into something more dramatic. Whoever had heard of a dog committing suicide, let alone setting traps for its owner? He said derisively:

'Oh, come off it, sir! You've got to admit that's far-fetched.'

The colonel nodded slowly and gave the impression he had reached an irrevocable decision.

'Far-fetched, eh! Well listen to me, young man. From that day onward a curse lay on this house. Nothing has gone right for me. Investments failed, so-called friends let me down. The woman I intended to marry disappeared, together with my best friend. Today I'm all but ruined.'

'Bad luck, sir, but you can't blame all that on a dead dog.'

'Indeed, if that were all, I might be inclined to agree with you. But when you were listening to idle stories, did anyone mention the pack that comes up from Dingle Wood Swamp after dark? Eh? Explain why no one will stay in this house, save Anderson and myself?'

Garner switched the tape-recorder off and replaced it in his pocket. A spot of drama was one thing, pure senile lunacy quite another. He got up.

'You can be quite certain, sir, if I had been told any such story, I would have dismissed it as superstitious nonsense. Packs of ghost hounds went out with Mrs Radcliffe.'

Colonel Mandersby did not reply, but rose and walked slowly over to the window, where he stood, a tall, pathetic figure, outlined against the dying light. His voice was that of a man who had wandered into some mist-shrouded hell.

'I hear them outside, howling, scratching at closed doors, trying to find some way to get in. One night they'll succeed and it will be Thor who will extinguish whatever little spark of life that still remains and force my soul to ride across the black heath and return to Dingle Wood Swamp at sunrise. Then I'll be Master of Hounds again.'

Garner stole quietly from the room and for some reason broke into a run when he reached the hall.

Colonel Mandersby retired early that night. He sat up in bed for some little while and tried to read a book, but soon found that concentration was an impossibility and put it to one side. He had been tricked into revealing a dark secret that should have been for ever locked in his brain, and by a young whippersnapper who was as obvious as he was brash. But it was interesting to know that people had not forgotten Thor and the pack, even after all this time. Now when the story was splashed over the local rag, they'd have something else to talk about; the mad colonel who believed a ghost pack came up from the swamp each night, to say nothing of a vicious leader who hungered for his immortal soul.

Later, his brain a cauldron of thoughts, he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

He woke suddenly, the air in the room cold on his face, aware that the familiar sounds had disturbed him and there was no way they could be dismissed as echoes from a half-forgotten dream.

The sighing of wind through tall grass, the chuckle of water sliding round black rocks; both merging into a soft pattering against the window. He twisted his head round and saw that snowflakes were drifting against the dirty glass.

Pat . . . pat . . . pat . . . invisible paws disturbed the gravel-strewn drive, then paused. A terrible, anticipatory silence . . . 'Oh, God have mercy, I've been a sinful man and did not mean to do . . . what I did. Let no man know . . . ' A sound sprang into violent life, growing in intensity, spiralling upwards in ever increasing circles, until the brain screamed in mortal agony. This time it seemed as if there was a fresh urgency underlining that hideous howling, baying chorus; and surely Anderson must be awake, hastening to share the nightly fear.

Abruptly the sound ceased.

For a while the old man could only hear the roaring wind and the furious beating of his own heart, that bore a remarkable resemblance to the pounding paws, and a tiny spark of hope illuminated the darkness of his despair. Maybe . . . maybe . . . the brain was . . . Then another sound that might have been caused by the crash of smashed glass, the bursting open of a locked door, shattered the silence and sent terror rocketing up to unprecedented heights.

At last the great fear was coming to fruition; they were in the house, padding up the stairs, growling, jostling for position, but following the terrible leader, whose hate was undiminished after twenty years. Mandersby ignored the thudding of his heart, the tight pain across his chest and stared at the slowly opening door with dilated eyes. He could almost see two amber specks of light advancing towards the bed.

Suddenly there was a weight that gradually moved up his legs, and the vague outline of a gaunt head with gaping jaws that actually appeared to smile. Then a tongue – cold as death – upon his cheek . . .

Rain had fallen the night before, because Garner had to step round ice-crazed puddles that had formed in the pot-holed drive. He stood in the porch and hammered on the front door. Receiving no response, he tried to peer in through the windows, but the rooms beyond seemed to be hidden under layers of shadow that had accumulated over the years like the dust that remained unswept in the dark corners of Dover House.

He walked round the house to the conservatory where shattered glass from one broken pane crunched under his feet. The door was open, so he entered, gave a cursory glance at a lone cane chair and eventually came to the kitchen.

Anderson in a few brief days had aged ten years. His white, shrunken face was that of a man in his late seventies, while the wrinkled hands shook as he struggled to rise.

'What do you want, Mr . . . ?'

'Paul Garner. Don't you remember me? I was here last week.'

Anderson sank back in his chair and shook his head reproachfully.

'It's manners to knock, Mr Garner. No right to come barging in here without so much as by your leave.'

'I did, but no one answered, so I came round the back. Sorry if I startled you.'

'Well – what do you want?'

Garner, without waiting for an invitation, seated himself on an adjacent kitchen chair and tried to assume an air of unconcern. Damned if the servant wasn't madder than the master. 'Well, I've completed the article and brought it along for the colonel to vet. Is he in?'

Anderson looked at him mournfully and his lips trembled as he said: 'Colonel Mandersby is dead, sir. He had a heart attack and I found him dead in his bed.'

'Good God! I'm sorry – if I'd known . . .'

'There was no one at the funeral except myself – and the executors of the will. He left everything to me of course – he had nobody else – but I'd rather he was back than live in this great barn by myself.'

Garner shivered and cast a quick glance round the untidy kitchen.

'God, you can't stay here all by yourself! Sell it and move into town.'

The old man shook his grey head wearily.

'Not after all these years. Here I stay until I die – which will be soon. It won't be right or proper for the colonel to ride alone out there with only those damn dogs for company. I heard them last night, howling, baying – and

the Master calling out . . .'

Garner rose abruptly and began a hasty retreat towards the door, while muttering some incoherent words of condolence. But Anderson did not appear to either see or hear him, but sat in his chair, talking . . . talking . . .

'That bloody Thor. Never gave the master any peace . . . leading the pack here every night, trying to get in . . . and me sleeping like the dead until the colonel sent out that scream . . . and the glass was broke . . . and they must have got in . . . they must . . . how else could there have been a great paw mark on the sheet . . .?'

\*

As he walked back down the drive, Garner was not so much fearful, as troubled. He felt like a man who had picked up a book and flicked through its pages, reading a line of dialogue here, a paragraph there, but never getting the gist of the entire story. Somewhere in the unread pages there could have been some hidden tragedy.

He reached a narrow road and began the long walk to the nearest bus stop; with a bit of luck he could be home before nightfall. Suddenly he stopped by a stile that marked a well-trodden path that wandered across frost-silvered fields to the distant woods.

Faintly – as though from far away – came the sound of wind rushing through tall grass and a voice shouting: 'Ware hound! 'Ware hole!'

Garner smiled and shook his head, thinking that perhaps the voice sounded familiar.

## THE DEAD MAN OF VARLEY GRANGE

*Anonymous*

'Hallo, Jack! Where are you off to? Going down to the governor's place for Christmas?'

Jack Darent, who was in my old regiment, stood drawing on his doeskin gloves upon the 23rd of December the year before last. He was equipped in a long ulster and top hat, and a hansom, already loaded with a gun-case and port-manteau, stood awaiting him. He had a tall, strong figure, a fair, fresh-looking face, and the merriest blue eyes in the world. He held a cigarette between his lips, and late as was the season of the year there was a flower in his button-hole. When did I ever see handsome Jack Darent and he did not look well dressed and well fed and jaunty? As I ran up the steps of the Club he turned round and laughed merrily.

'My dear fellow, do I look the sort of man to be victimized at a family Christmas meeting? Do you know the kind of business they have at home? Three maiden aunts and a bachelor uncle, my eldest brother and his insipid wife, and all my sister's six noisy children at dinner. Church twice a day, and snapdragon between the services! No, thank you! I have a great affection for my old parents, but you don't catch me going in for that sort of national festival!'

'You irreverent ruffian!' I replied, laughing. 'Ah, if you were a married man . . .'

'Ah, if I were a married man!' replied Captain Darent with something that was almost a sigh, and then lowering his voice, he said hurriedly, 'How is Miss Lester, Fred?'

'My sister is quite well, thank you,' I answered with becoming gravity; and it was not without a spice of malice that I added, 'She has been going to a great many balls and enjoying herself very much.'

Captain Darent looked profoundly miserable.

'I don't see how a poor fellow in a marching regiment, a younger son too, with nothing in the future to look to,

is ever to marry nowadays,' he said almost savagely; 'when girls, too, are used to so much luxury and extravagance that they can't live without it. Matrimony is at a deadlock in this century, Fred, chiefly owing to the price of butcher's meat and bonnets. In fifty years' time it will become extinct and the country be depopulated. But I must be off, old man, or I shall miss my train.'

'You have never told me where you are going to, Jack.'

'Oh, I am going to stay with old Henderson, in Westernshire; he has taken a furnished house, with some first-rate pheasant shooting, for a year. There are seven of us going – all bachelors, and all kindred spirits. We shall shoot all day and smoke half the night. Think what you have lost, old fellow, by becoming a Benedick!'

'In Westernshire, is it?' I inquired. 'Whereabouts is this place, and what is the name of it? For I am a Westernshire man by birth myself, and I know every place in the county.'

'Oh, it's a tumbledown sort of old house, I believe,' answered Jack carelessly. 'Gables and twisted chimneys outside, and uncomfortable spindle-legged furniture inside – you know the sort of thing; but the shooting is capital, Henderson says, and we must put up with our quarters. He has taken his French cook down, and plenty of liquor, so I've no doubt we shan't starve.'

'Well, but what is the name of it?' I persisted, with a growing interest in the subject.

'Let me see,' referring to a letter he pulled out of his pocket. 'Oh, here it is – Varley Grange.'

'Varley Grange!' I repeated, aghast. 'Why, it has not been inhabited for years.'

'I believe not,' answered Jack unconcernedly. 'The shooting has been let separately; but Henderson took a fancy to the house too and thought it would do for him, furniture and all, just as it is. My dear Fred, what are you looking so solemnly at me for?'

'Jack, let me entreat of you not to go to this place,' I said, laying my hands on his arm.

'Not go! Why, Lester, you must be mad! Why on earth shouldn't I go there?'

'There are stories – uncomfortable things said of that



house.' I had not the moral courage to say, 'It is haunted,' and I felt myself how weak and childish was my attempt to deter him from his intended visit; only - I knew all about Varley Grange.

I think handsome Jack Darent thought privately that I was slightly out of my senses, for I am sure I looked unaccountably upset and dismayed by the mention of the name of the house that Mr Henderson had taken.

'I dare say it's cold and draughty and infested with rats and mice,' he said laughingly; 'and I have no doubt the creature-comforts will not be equal to Queen's Gate; but I stand pledged to go now, and I must be off this very minute, so have no time, old fellow, to inquire into the meaning of your sensational warning. Goodbye, and . . . and remember me to the ladies.'

He ran down the steps and jumped into the hansom.

'Write to me if you have time!' I cried out after him; but I don't think he heard me in the rattle of the departing cab. He nodded and smiled at me and was swiftly whirled out of sight.

As for me, I walked slowly back to my comfortable house in Queen's Gate. There was my wife presiding at the little five o'clock tea-table, our two fat, pink and white little children tumbling about upon the hearthrug amongst dolls and bricks, and two utterly spoilt and over-fed pugs; and my sister Bella - who, between ourselves, was the prettiest as well as dearest girl in all London - sitting on the floor in her handsome brown, velvet gown, resigning herself gracefully to be trampled upon by the dogs, and to have her hair pulled by the babies.

'Why, Fred, you look as if you had heard bad news,' said my wife, looking up anxiously as I entered.

'I don't know that I have heard of anything very bad; I have just seen Jack Darent off for Christmas,' I said, turning instinctively towards my sister. He was a poor man and a younger son, and of course a very bad match for the beautiful Miss Lester; but for all that I had an inkling that Bella was not quite indifferent to her brother's friend.

'Oh!' says that hypocrite. 'Shall I give you a cup of tea, Fred!'

It is wonderful how women can control their faces and pretend not to care a straw when they hear the name of their lover mentioned. I think Bella overdid it, she looked so supremely indifferent.

'Where on earth do you suppose he is going to stay, Bella?'

'Who? Oh, Captain Darent! How should I possibly know where he is going? Archie, pet, please don't poke the doll's head quite down Ponto's throat; I know he will bite it off if you do.'

This last observation was addressed to my son and heir.

'Well, I think you will be surprised when you hear: he is going to Westernshire, to stay at Varley Grange.'

'What!' No doubt about her interest in the subject now! Miss Lester turned as white as her collar and sprang to her feet impetuously, scattering dogs, babies and toys in all directions away from her skirts as she rose.

'You cannot mean it, Fred! Varley Grange, why, it has not been inhabited for ten years; and the last time—Oh, do you remember those poor people who took it? What a terrible story it has!' She shuddered.

'Well, it is taken now,' I said, 'by a man I know, called Henderson—a bachelor; he has asked down a party of men for a week's shooting, and Jack Darent is one of them.'

'For Heaven's sake prevent him from going!' cried Bella, clasping her hands.

'My dear, he is gone!'

'Oh, then write to him—telegraph—tell him to come back!' she urged breathlessly.

'I am afraid it is no use,' I said gravely. 'He would not come back; he would not believe me; he would think I was mad.'

'Did you tell him anything?' she asked faintly.

'No, I had not time. I did say a word or two, but he began to laugh.'

'Yes, that is how it always is!' she said distractedly. 'People laugh and pooh-pooh the whole thing, and then they go there and see for themselves, and it is too late!'

She was so thoroughly upset that she left the room. My wife turned to me in astonishment; not being a Westernshire woman, she was not well up in the traditions of that

venerable county.

'What on earth does it all mean, Fred?' she asked me in amazement. 'What is the matter with Bella, and why is she so distressed that Captain Darent is going to stay at that particular house?'

'It is said to be haunted, and . . .'

'You don't mean to say you believe in such rubbish, Fred?' interrupted my wife sternly, with a side-glance of apprehension at our first-born, who, needless to say, stood by, all eyes and ears, drinking in every word of the conversation of his elders.

'I never know what I believe or what I don't believe,' I answered gravely. 'All I can say is that there are very singular traditions about that house, and that a great many credible witnesses have seen a very strange thing there, and that a great many disasters have happened to the persons who have seen it.'

'What has been seen, Fred? Pray tell me the story! Wait, I think I will send the children away.'

My wife rang the bell for the nurse, and as soon as the little ones had been taken from the room she turned to me again.

'I don't believe in ghosts or any such rubbish one bit, but I should like to hear your story.'

'The story is vague enough,' I answered.

'In the old days Varley Grange belonged to the ancient family of Varley, now completely extinct. There was, some hundred years ago, a daughter, famed for her beauty and her fascination. She wanted to marry a poor, penniless squire, who loved her devotedly. Her brother, Dennis Varley, the new owner of Varley Grange, refused his consent and shut his sister up in the nunnery that used to stand outside his park gates – there are a few ruins of it left still. The poor nun broke her vows and ran away in the night with her lover. But her brother pursued her and brought her back with him. The lover escaped, but the lord of Varley murdered his sister under his own roof, swearing that no scion of his race should live to disgrace and dishonour his ancient name.

'Ever since that day Dennis Varley's spirit cannot rest in its grave – he wanders about the old house at night

time, and those who have seen him are numberless. Now and then the pale, shadowy form of a nun flits across the old hall, or along the gloomy passages, and when both strange shapes are seen thus together misfortune and illness, and even death, is sure to pursue the luckless man who has seen them, with remorseless cruelty.'

'I wonder you believe in such rubbish,' says my wife at the conclusion of my tale.

I shrug my shoulders and answer nothing, for who are so obstinate as those who persist in disbelieving everything that they cannot understand?

It was little more than a week later that, walking by myself along Pall Mall one afternoon, I suddenly came upon Jack Darent walking towards me.

'Hallo, Jack! Back again? Why, man, how odd you look!'

There was a change in the man that I was instantly aware of. His frank, careless face looked clouded and anxious, and the merry smile was missing from his handsome countenance.

'Come into the Club, Fred,' he said, taking me by the arm. 'I have something to say to you.'

He drew me into a corner of the Club smoking-room.

'You were quite right. I wish to Heaven I had never gone to that house.'

'You mean - have you seen anything?' I inquired eagerly.

'I have seen *everything*,' he answered with a shudder. 'They say one dies within a year -'

'My dear fellow, don't be so upset about it,' I interrupted; I was quite distressed to see how thoroughly the man had altered.

'Let me tell you about it, Fred.'

He drew his chair close to mine and told me his story, pretty nearly in the following words:

'You remember the day I went down you had kept me talking at the Club door; I had a race to catch the train; however, I just did it. I found the other fellows all waiting for me. There was Charlie Wells, the two Harfords, old Colonel Riddell, who is such a crack shot, two fellows in

the Guards, both pretty fair, a man called Thompson, a barrister, Henderson and myself – eight of us in all. We had a remarkably lively journey down, as you may imagine, and reached Varley Grange in the highest possible spirits. We all slept like tops that night.

'The next day we were out from eleven till dusk among the coverts, and a better day's shooting I never enjoyed in the whole course of my life, the birds literally swarmed. We bagged a hundred and thirty brace. We were all pretty well tired when we got home, and did full justice to a very good dinner and first-class Perrier-Jouet. After dinner we adjourned to the hall to smoke. This hall is quite the feature of the house. It is large and bright, panelled half-way up with sombre old oak, and vaulted with heavy carved oaken rafters. At the farther end runs a gallery, into which opened the door of my bedroom, and shut off from the rest of the passages by a swing door at either end.

'Well, all we fellows sat up there smoking and drinking brandy and soda, and jawing, you know – as men always do when they are together – about sport of all kinds, hunting and shooting and salmon-fishing; and I assure you not one of us had a thought in our heads beyond relating some wonderful incident of a long shot or big fence by which we could each cap the last speaker's experiences. We were just, I recollect, listening to a long story of the old Colonel's, about his experiences among bisons in Cache-mire, when suddenly one of us – I can't remember who it was – gave a sort of shout and started to his feet, pointing up to the gallery behind us. We all turned round, and there – I give you my word of honour, Lester – stood a man leaning over the rail of the gallery, staring down upon us.

'We all saw him. Every one of us. Eight of us, remember. He stood there full ten seconds, looking down with horrible glittering eyes at us. He had a long tawny beard, and his hands, that were crossed together before him, were nothing but skin and bone. But it was his face that was so unspeakably dreadful. It was livid – the face of a dead man!'

'How was he dressed?'

'I could not see; he wore some kind of a black cloak

over his shoulders, I think, but the lower part of his figure was hidden behind the railings. Well, we all stood perfectly speechless for, as I said, about ten seconds; and then the figure moved, backing slowly into the door of the room behind him, which stood open. It was the door of my bedroom! As soon as he had disappeared our senses seemed to return to us. There was a general rush for the staircase, and, as you may imagine, there was not a corner of the house that was left unsearched; my bedroom especially was ransacked in every part of it. But all in vain; there was not the slightest trace to be found of any living being. You may suppose that not one of us slept that night. We lighted every candle and lamp we could lay hands upon and sat up till daylight, but nothing more was seen.

The next morning, at breakfast, Henderson, who seemed very much annoyed by the whole thing, begged us not to speak of it any more. He said that he had been told, before he had taken the house, that it was supposed to be haunted; but, not being a believer in such childish follies, he had paid but little attention to the rumour. He did not, however, want it talked about, because of the servants, who would be so easily frightened. He was quite certain, he said, that the figure we had seen last night must be somebody dressed up to practise a trick upon us, and he recommended us all to bring our guns down loaded after dinner, but meanwhile to forget the startling apparition as far as we could.

We, of course, readily agreed to do as he wished, although I do not think that one of us imagined for a moment that any amount of dressing-up would be able to simulate the awful countenance that we had all of us seen too plainly. It would have taken a Hare or an Arthur Cecil, with all the theatrical appliances known only to those two talented actors, to have 'made-up' the face, that was literally that of a corpse. Such a person could not be amongst us—actually in the house—without our knowledge.

We had another good day's shooting, and by degrees the fresh air and exercise and the excitement of the sport obliterated the impression of what we had seen in some measure from the minds of most of us. That evening we all appeared in the hall after dinner with our loaded guns

beside us; but, although we sat up till the small hours and looked frequently up at the gallery at the end of the hall, nothing at all disturbed us that night.

Two nights thus went by and nothing further was seen of the gentleman with the tawny beard. What with the good company, the good cheer and the pheasants, we had pretty well forgotten all about him.

'We were sitting as usual upon the third night, with our pipes and our cigars; a pleasant glow from the bright wood fire in the great chimney lighted up the old hall, and shed a genial warmth about us; when suddenly it seemed to me as if there came a breath of cold, chill air behind me, such as one feels when going down into some damp, cold vault or cellar.

'A strong shiver shook me from head to foot. Before even I saw it I knew that it was there.

'It leant over the railing of the gallery and looked down at us all just as it had done before. There was no change in the attitude, no alteration in the fixed, malignant glare in those stony, lifeless eyes; no movement in the white and bloodless features. Below, amongst the eight of us gathered there, there arose a panic of terror. Eight strong, healthy, well-educated nineteenth-century Englishmen, and yet I am not ashamed to say that we were paralysed with fear. Then one, more quickly recovering his senses than the rest, caught at his gun, that leant against the wide chimney-corner, and fired.

'The hall was filled with smoke, but as it cleared away every one of us could see the figure of our supernatural visitant slowly backing, as he had done on the previous occasion, into the chamber behind him, with something like a sardonic smile of scornful derision upon his horrible, death-like face.

'The next morning it is a singular and remarkable fact that four out of the eight of us received by the morning post – so they stated – letters of importance which called them up to town by the very first train! One man's mother was ill, another had to consult his lawyer, whilst pressing engagements, to which they could assign no definite name, called away the other two.

'There were left in the house that day but four of us –

Wells, Bob Harford, our host, and myself. A sort of dogged determination not to be worsted by a scare of this kind kept us still there. The morning light brought a return of common sense and natural courage to us. We could manage to laugh over last night's terrors whilst discussing our bacon and kidneys and hot coffee over the late breakfast in the pleasant morning-room, with the sunshine streaming cheerily in through the diamond-paned windows.

"It must be a delusion of our brains," said one.

"Our host's champagne," suggested another.

"A well-organized hoax," opined a third.

"I will tell you what we will do," said our host. "Now that those other fellows have all gone – and I suppose we don't any of us believe much in those elaborate family reasons which have so unaccountably summoned them away – we four will sit up regularly night after night and watch for this thing, whatever it may be. I do not believe in ghosts. However, this morning I have taken the trouble to go out before breakfast to see the Rector of the parish, an old gentleman who is well up in all the traditions of the neighbourhood, and I have learnt from him the whole of the supposed story of our friend of the tawny beard, which, if you will, I will relate to you."

Henderson then proceeded to tell us the tradition concerning the Dennis Varley who murdered his sister, the nun – a story which I will not repeat to you, Lester, as I see you know it already.

The clergyman had furthermore told him that the figure of the murdered nun was also sometimes seen in the same gallery, but that this was a very rare occurrence. When both the murderer and his victim are seen together, terrible misfortunes are sure to assail the unfortunate living man who sees them; and if the nun's face is revealed, death within the year is the doom of the ill-fated person who has seen it.

"Of course," concluded our host, "I consider all these stories to be absolutely childish. At the same time I cannot help thinking that some human agency – probably a gang of thieves or housebreakers – is at work, and that we shall probably be able to unearth an organized system of villainy by which the rogues, presuming on the credulity of the



persons who have inhabited the place, have been able to plant themselves securely among some secret passages and hidden rooms in the house, and have carried on their depredations undiscovered and unsuspected. Now, will all of you help me to unravel this mystery?"

"We all promised readily to do so. It is astonishing how brave we felt at eleven o'clock in the morning; what an amount of pluck and courage each man professed himself to be endued with; how lightly we jested about the "old boy with the beard," and what jokes we cracked about the murdered nun!

"She would show her face oftener if she was good-looking. No fear of her looking at Bob Harford, he was too ugly. It was Jack Darent who was the showman of the party; she'd be sure to make straight for him if she could, he was always run after by the women," and so on, till we were all laughing loudly and heartily over our own witticisms. That was eleven o'clock in the morning.

'At eleven o'clock at night we could have given a very different report of ourselves.

'At eleven o'clock at night each man took up his appointed post in solemn and somewhat depressed silence.

'The plan of our campaign had been carefully organized by our host. Each man was posted separately with about thirty yards between them, so that no optical delusion, such as an effect of firelight upon the oak panelling, nor any reflection from the circular mirror over the chimney-piece, should be able to deceive more than one of us. Our host fixed himself in the very centre of the hall, facing the gallery at the end; Wells took up his position half-way up the short, straight flight of steps; Harford was at the top of the stairs upon the gallery itself; I was opposite to him at the further end. In this manner, whenever the figure—ghost or burglar—should appear, it must necessarily be between two of us, and be seen from both the right and the left side. We were prepared to believe that one amongst us might be deceived by his senses or by his imagination, but it was clear that two persons could not see the same object from a different point of view and be simultaneously deluded by any effect of light or any optical hallucination.

'Each man was provided with a loaded revolver, a brandy and soda and a sufficient stock of pipes or cigars to last him through the night. We took up our positions at eleven o'clock exactly, and waited.'

'At first we were all four very silent and, as I have said before, slightly depressed; but as the hour wore away and nothing was seen or heard we began to talk to each other. Talking, however, was rather a difficulty. To begin with, we had to shout—at least we in the gallery had to shout to Henderson, down in the hall; and though Harford and Wells could converse quite comfortably, I, not being able to see the latter at all from my end of the gallery, had to pass my remarks to him second-hand through Harford, who amused himself in mis-stating every intelligent remark that I entrusted him with; added to which natural impediments to the "flow of the soul", the elements thought fit to create such a hullabaloo without that conversation was rendered still further a work of difficulty.

'I never remember such a night in all my life. The rain came down in torrents; the wind howled and shrieked wildly amongst the tall chimneys and the bare elm trees without. Every now and then there was a lull, and then, again and again, a long sobbing moan came swirling round and round the house, for all the world like the cry of a human being in agony. It was a night to make one shudder, and thank Heaven for a roof over one's head.

'We all sat on at our separate posts hour after hour, listening to the wind and talking at intervals; but as the time wore on insensibly we became less and less talkative, and a sort of depression crept over us.

'At last we relapsed into a profound silence; then suddenly there came upon us all that chill blast of air, like a breath from a charnel-house, that we had experienced before, and almost simultaneously a hoarse cry broke from Henderson in the body of the hall below, and from Wells half-way up the stairs. Harford and I sprang to our feet, and we too saw it.

'The dead man was slowly coming up the stairs. He passed silently up with a sort of still, gliding motion, within a few inches of poor Wells, who shrank back, white with terror, against the wall. Henderson rushed wildly up

the staircase in pursuit, whilst Harford and I, up on the gallery, fell instinctively back at his approach.

'He passed between us.

'We saw the glitter of his sightless eyes – the shrivelled skin upon his withered face – the mouth that fell away, like the mouth of a corpse, beneath his tawny beard. We felt the cold death-like blast that came with him, and the sickening horror of his terrible presence. Ah! can I ever forget it?'

With a strong shudder Jack Darent buried his face in his hands, and seemed too much overcome for some minutes to be able to proceed.

'My dear fellow, are you sure?' I said in an awe-struck whisper.

He lifted his head.

'Forgive me, Lester; the whole business has shaken my nerves so thoroughly that I have not yet been able to get over it. But I have not yet told you the worst.'

'Good Heavens – is there worse?' I ejaculated.

He nodded.

'No sooner,' he continued, 'had this awful creature passed us than Harford clutched at my arm and pointed to the farther end of the gallery.

'"Look!" he cried hoarsely, "the nun!"'

'There, coming towards us from the opposite direction, was the veiled figure of a nun.

'There were the long, flowing black and white garments – the gleam of the crucifix at her neck – the jangle of her rosary-beads from her waist; but her face was hidden.

'A sort of desperation seized me. With a violent effort over myself, I went towards this fresh apparition.

'*"It must be a hoax,"* I said to myself, and there was a half-formed intention in my mind of wrenching aside the flowing draperies and of seeing for myself who and what it was. I strode towards the figure – I stood – within half a yard of it. The nun raised her head slowly – and, Lester – *I saw her face!*

There was a moment's silence.

'What was it like, Jack?' I asked him presently.

He shook his head.

'That I can never tell to any living creature.'

'Was it so horrible?'

He nodded assent, shuddering.

'And what happened next?'

'I believe I fainted. At all events I remembered nothing further. They made me go to the vicarage the next day. I was so knocked over by it all – I was quite ill. I could not have stayed in the house. I stopped there all yesterday, and I got up to town this morning. I wish to Heaven I had taken your advice, old man, and had never gone to the horrible house.'

'I wish you had, Jack,' I answered fervently.

'Do you know that I shall die within the year?' he asked me presently.

I tried to pooh-pooh it.

'My dear fellow, don't take the thing so seriously as all that. Whatever may be the meaning of these horrible apparitions, there can be nothing but an old wives' fable in *that* saying. Why on earth should you die – you of all people, a great strong fellow with a constitution of iron? You don't look much like dying!'

'For all that I shall die. I cannot tell you why I am so certain – but I know that it will be so,' he answered in a low voice. 'And some terrible misfortune will happen to Harford – the other two never saw her – it is he and I who are doomed.'

A year has passed away. Last summer fashionable society rang for a week or more with the tale of poor Bob Harford's misfortune. The girl whom he was engaged to, and to whom he was devotedly attached – young, beautiful and wealthy – ran away on the eve of her wedding-day with a drinking, swindling villain who had been turned out of ever so many clubs and tabooed for ages by every respectable man in town, and who had nothing but a handsome face and a fascinating manner to recommend him, and who by dint of these had succeeded in gaining a complete ascendancy over the fickle heart of poor Bob's lovely fiancée. As to Harford, he sold out and went off to the backwoods of Canada, and has never been heard of since.

And what of Jack Darent? Poor, handsome Jack, with his tall figure and his bright, happy face, and the merry

blue eyes that had wiled Bella Lester's heart away! Alas! far away in Southern Africa, poor Jack Darent lies in an unknown grave – slain by a Zulu assegai on the fatal plain of Isandula!

And Bella goes about clad in sable garments, heavy-eyed and stricken with sore grief. A widow in heart, if not in name.

## CHRISTMAS ENTERTAINMENT

*Daphne Froome*

Professor Conway, the well-known scientist, opened the door of his study, which, with its leather armchairs, green velvet cushions, and its parchment-shaded lamp in one corner, was his favourite room in the house.

There was almost half an hour to spare before the children were due to arrive for the Christmas party, just time to make a note of an idea which had been running through his mind all day. The Professor hated writing, particularly when he was working under the influence of some sudden inspiration. He hated the expression of his thoughts to be delayed even by the time it took to form the letters with a pen, so now, padding rather heavily across the shabbily carpeted floor, he bent and lifted the black plastic cover of his tape-recorder, set the reel spinning, and dictated his idea at considerable length into the microphone. Having used the tape to the end, he removed it, numbered it and filed it away in the appropriate cabinet with all the others. Then he stood gazing complacently round at the walls, crowded on every side with shelves and cupboards, each crammed with data concerning every conceivable kind of psychical phenomenon, from vampires, via poltergeists, down to the mere unresolved echo in an empty, modern flatlet.

For years he had spent his spare time happily ghost-hunting. His hobby had given him an excellent excuse to travel to places all over the world, and to meet all kinds of people, different from and far more interesting than the academics who were normally his associates. What was more, as not one of the apparently mysterious incidents reported to him had withstood a properly organized scientific scrutiny, he had convinced himself absolutely that ghosts did not exist. Now he was ready to begin writing the book that would dispel for ever the mists of superstition and probably make him a substantial sum in royalties as well.

Plugging in the electric typewriter he sat down at his desk and tapped out the title page :

## THE FINAL DISAPPEARANCE

by

*Harold E. Conway*

There was no time for any more now. What a nuisance this party was proving to be! Mrs Barker, the wife of his closest colleague, had established some years ago the tradition of holding a Christmas party for the children of the College staff. This year, however, she had taken it into her head to go away and foist the whole thing on to him. He had not liked, either, the acid way she had remarked that for once he could give up his solitary, self-centred existence and put his large house to good use.

He went thoughtfully over to the window and stood looking up at the darkening sky. It had been raining, and the recently lighted antique lamps, in keeping with the architecture of the small square in which the house was situated, shone peacefully as inverted mirror images in the limpid water of the puddles. Suddenly the reflections were disturbed by a crowd of small boys as they came splashing along.

His guests were beginning to arrive.

Mrs Megan Dent, the Professor's cleaner and cook, a tall, smart, energetic young woman, lifted a tray of hot mince pies from the oven and began to arrange them on a large dish, chattering all the while to her husband, Tim, who, blowing up the last of the balloons, was for once unable to stem her flow of words.

'There's the first child arriving now. Oh I do hope the party will go all right, everyone's bound to blame me if it doesn't! I must say it's not at all like it was last Christmas in Mrs Barker's house when everywhere was bright and seasonal-looking. The Professor would only let me put up a few bits of holly – not that any amount of decoration would make this place look cheerful. Then again, instead of you dressed up nicely as Father Christmas, doling out presents (and what generous presents they were!), there's

to be a demonstration of some queer optical illusion in his old lecture room that's full of cobwebs and cold as charity because it's been out of use for years!

Mr Dent, deciding the balloon had reached a satisfactory size, stopped blowing, tied it securely with string and said, 'Actually the Professor's going to conjure up a ghost. It's an old trick but I don't expect the kids will have seen it before. I reckon they'll love it; it's far more exciting than Father Christmas.'

'You only say that because you've spent every evening this week helping him to get it ready.'

'You'll see later on. I bet it will give you the creeps!'

After tea Mr and Mrs Dent escorted the children, still consuming the remains of the cakes and sweets, into the small lecture theatre for the entertainment.

Professor Conway, twitching slightly, was beckoning Mr Dent. 'I think we ought to check everything's all right before we begin.'

Mr Dent pursued him on to the stage and disappeared behind the curtain. His wife, after hesitating for a moment, followed curiously behind.

'How's it done?' she asked.

'Quite simply really,' the Professor answered in a patronizing tone. 'You just have this large sheet of plate glass' – he gave the glass a loud resounding tap – 'and by setting it up at an angle of forty-five degrees to your audience the light rays are reflected in such a way that it looks as if the spectators are seeing a transparent ghost behind the glass instead of an illuminated dummy placed out of sight at the side of the stage.'

Mrs Dent glanced at the dummy. 'It's very cleverly constructed. Who made it?'

'The Professor,' Tim Dent replied, then added more quietly, 'being a bachelor he's a dab hand with a needle and thread!'

'They mustn't realize the glass is there, of course,' the Professor continued. 'I hope you like the way your husband has camouflaged the edges with his paintings of witches and dragons.'

'You get a better idea of them from a distance of course,'



Mr Dent put in rather diffidently.

The Professor coughed impatiently at the interruption. 'The illusion is very convincing. When it was first demonstrated by one Professor Pepper in the nineteenth century, people came flocking to see it. Plays with his ghosts in were all the rage. They were better staged, of course, than ours will be, with real actors playing the ghosts, but the principle was the same.'

Glancing at the dummy once more, Meg noticed that the Professor had neglected to fasten one of the shoes. As she was a neat, tidy person, the sight of the trailing lace worried her. She walked across, bent down, and knotted it in a secure double bow.

Standing up, she clutched at one of the arms to steady herself. It felt soft, almost human to the touch. As she moved, the grotesquely featured head rolled forward towards her.

'Hey, be careful!' shouted Tim. 'What are you trying to do, wreck the show? You'd better be getting back to your seat. The Professor will be waiting to make his introductory speech.'

'Before I came to live in this house,' the Professor began, 'it was occupied by a man named Sir Arthur Stanbrook. Now, there is no doubt that Sir Arthur was a very clever scientist—he was an expert in electronics, like me. We often helped each other with our work; in fact, we soon became friends. We shared the same hobby, too. We were both fascinated by anything supernatural. I've always found it an absorbing subject—investigating ghostly happenings and proving that they don't exist. But Sir Arthur spent his time going round saying they did. Can you imagine someone as intelligent as that considering it possible that ghosts exist?'

The Professor paused for effect, then went on.

'I thought it was dreadful that so clever a man should believe in such superstitious nonsense, so I challenged him to produce for me one of his ghosts. Of course he was unable to do so, and I am afraid we quarrelled violently.'

It is now over twenty years since Sir Arthur died, but when I decided to conjure up an apparition for your entertainment today I couldn't resist the temptation to make it like Sir Arthur. Later on I will try to explain how the trick is done, and perhaps one or two of you might be prepared to come up on to the stage and be turned into temporary spectres yourselves. Now, if someone will kindly put out the lights. . . .'

During the rather apprehensive whispering and shuffling that followed, Tim Dent switched on the arc lamps and then, drawing back the curtains, revealed the ghostly image. After about a minute he switched the lamps off, then on, so that the apparition disappeared and reappeared again. Then he walked round behind the sheet of glass and stood in the circle of chalk he had carefully positioned so that the body of the ghost seemed to be superimposed on to his own. A nice touch this, Tim thought. The children had suddenly become very quiet, he noticed. Perhaps they were beginning to get bored. He sauntered over to the edge of the stage and stood there, rather self-consciously, bowing.

His wife sat watching him quite proudly. She had seated herself at the back of the room, as far away as possible from the illusion on the stage. She was glad to see the image flicker and become blurred—perhaps the demonstration would go wrong and they could all spend the rest of the time playing games and singing a few songs. But the spectre gradually began to appear again; only now the general shape had taken on more realistic contours, the mitten-like hands possessed fingers, and the mask-like face was transformed into something distinctly human. She opened her mouth to shout a warning to Tim, but for once the power of speech utterly deserted her and she could only gasp, fishlike.

Professor Conway had descended from the stage and was walking between the rows of children, studying their obviously delighted reaction with smug satisfaction. Then he turned to survey the shadowy reflection he had created. It was certainly very realistic, but there was something odd about it when seen from this angle, he thought, a

distortion that gave the impression that the sagging limbs were straightened and the lolling head had reared upright above shoulders suddenly squared. Then, as Tina extinguished the arc lamps, the spectre vanished and there was a roar of appreciative applause from the audience.

The Professor turned to Meg, huddled pale and mute in her chair. 'What a success! Look at them now, all pestering Tim to let them take a turn at being a ghost! - I say, are you all right?'

'I feel rather faint,' Meg whispered. 'I think I'll go outside for a bit.'

Professor Conway smiled condescendingly down at her. 'Good heavens, Megan, it was only a trick!'

He elbowed his way back up on to the stage, among the crowd of excited children, and shifted the dummy in order that they could stand, one by one, in its place. Controlling so many energetic youngsters was certainly absorbing work, but he still found time to worry about the strangeness of that final image. He found it impossible to concentrate on the problem with all these children enjoying themselves so enthusiastically around him. It was extraordinary how long it took them to get tired. The party seemed to continue for an almost interminable time, but when it had eventually dragged to a close he turned to Tim and said, 'Really, the ghost looked most peculiar the last time you showed it. Could we see it again, do you think? Your wife seemed quite upset by it, too.'

'You don't mean you were scared, Meg?' Tim laughed.

'You just sit here with me, Mrs Dent, and we'll soon solve all this with a simple, scientific explanation,' the Professor added.

'I'd rather not - there's all the clearing up to be done.'

'Oh do stop fussing, we can clear up tomorrow - it's Saturday.' Tim sounded impatient as he rather wearily began to demonstrate the spectral effect yet again. 'I can't see anything wrong,' he called. 'Everything seems to be working perfectly to me.'

'I agree. Your wife and I were mistaken, of course.' Professor Conway beamed at Meg. 'Let me give you a drink before you go - you've certainly earned it.'

He rose, and ushering them into his study, he happily dispensed generous quantities of whisky to them both.

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The house seemed very silent after Megan and Tim's departure. It was just the contrast, the Professor decided, after the pandemonium of the afternoon. Thank goodness it was over. The cost of the food had been quite excessive, not to mention all the extra electricity they had used. Megan was certainly not the most economical of housekeepers; there were electric fires and lights still burning in all the downstairs rooms. Wandering round switching them off, he came to the lecture room, where the image was still distinctly visible on the screen.

He stood just inside the door, surveying it gloatingly. It really had amused the children – they would not think very highly of Mrs Barker's parties after this! The effect really was extraordinarily good. The arc lamps seemed to be giving a far more powerful image than he had anticipated, too, and from here they almost produced the odd impression that the spectre was lit by some inward source of its own. It also looked disconcertingly like Sir Arthur. He thought he saw the momentary gleam of white teeth as the mouth opened and closed again . . . The Professor blinked, then fixed the apparition with a coldly questioning scientific stare. He wished he hadn't given the thing eyes – even from this distance they seemed to be glowering back at him. And now the tall figure, swaying slightly, appearing to become more solid every moment, moved with slow deliberation out of the circle of chalk, straight through the glass, down from the stage and along the aisle between the rows of chairs. Professor Conway suddenly realized that he could even hear the man's heavy gold watch chain clinking with a small rhythmic jingle. Still illuminated in the darkness by an eerie glow, its bald head gleaming, its loosely knotted tie flapping, the ghost turned and inclined its head, in a supercilious fashion, towards him, before disappearing into the corridor.

Professor Conway hesitated only momentarily before giving chase. He caught a vague glimpse of it making

its way across the darkened hall before it disappeared from sight. Glancing into each of the rooms as he passed, he reached and flung open the front door, and stood surveying the scene outside. The rain clouds had given way to a clear sky and the moon irradiated the area with almost daylight brightness. The cutting wind had cleared the square of people; it was quite deserted.

Very thoughtfully he went back into the house. The whole thing must be a hoax perpetrated by Tim, he decided. This was the only possible explanation. And Meg, of course, had pretended to feel faint at the appearance of the ghost during the party, just to add to the effect. Tim had probably by now crept into the house by the back door and they were no doubt waiting together in the lecture room to plague him with further stupid, infantile pranks. Well, they would not be given the opportunity to fool him a second time. He went into his study, and, filling a large glass with the remainder of the whisky from the decanter, he stamped upstairs with it into his bedroom.

Stumbling into the kitchen the following morning, Professor Conway set the left-over coffee from the day before re-heating on the stove, then turned to address Tim.

'I did not think much of your idea of a walking ghost,' he stated acidly.

Tim looked confused. 'Walking ghost? What walking ghost?'

The Professor brooded wearily over the pungent liquid full of grounds in the saucepan. 'You didn't return then, after the party?'

Meg looked at the Professor sharply. 'Hardly! We'd had quite a long enough day of it, as it was.'

'Well, someone played a ridiculous prank on me.' The Professor's red-rimmed brown eyes glared blearily into Meg's wide grey ones. 'Those loose slates rattling on the roof disturbed me, too. It was a very stormy night. I hope you haven't forgotten that I've asked you once or twice to climb up and deal with them, Mr Dent.'

Tim, with the air of a man fighting to retain the final vestiges of his patience, washed the last of the mugs,

handed it to his wife to dry, squeezed the suds from the dishmop, pulled the plug out of the sink and waited while the water bubbled slowly down the drain before replying, 'You sometimes seem to forget, Professor, that I do have my own work to do, and if there's anything to be dealt with today it had better be the vacuum cleaner. It blew up when my wife plugged it in this morning—why, she might very easily have been killed!'

The Professor, haughtily ignoring Tim completely, turned out the gas beneath the saucepan and stepped across to the refrigerator for milk. As he opened the door a small stream of water dribbled out and spread into a pool on the floor. 'Why, look at this! The thing's defrosted. Everything's swimming in water.' He looked up. 'The blasted plug's in pieces!'

'Those children!' Tim laughed weakly. 'Little demons! They must have done it. Last year at Mrs Barker's we had hunt the thimble and it took us days to sweep up the horsehair stuffing they'd torn out of the chaise-longue.'

'Nonsense, it was perfectly all right when I went to bed.'

'Then perhaps you and Tim really did conjure up a ghost,' Meg cried. 'Perhaps it was that you saw walking. Perhaps it did for the vacuum cleaner, too. Who knows what it might not get up to next?'

The Professor swore loudly. 'Of course there isn't a ghost! If that dummy is giving you hysterics I'll go and burn the thing now, right away!'

Rushing from the kitchen, Professor Conway arrived, breathless, in the lecture room.

The apparition that once more stared down from the sheet of plate glass seemed to be standing watching him, the face creased in the frown of malignant concentration which the late Sir Arthur Stanbrook always wore when wrestling with some particularly taxing problem. The figure was already beginning to move.

'I'll soon put paid to you!' the Professor shouted. 'I'll turn the lamps off!'

Running forward he mounted the steps on to the stage and hurled himself towards the switch.

Tim and Meg reached the doorway just in time to see a

brilliant flash reflected in the glass, as the body of the Professor slumped on to the stage.

The ghost of Sir Arthur Stanbrook had disappeared, and, perfectly distinct behind the glass, that of Professor Conway had taken its place.

## JOHN CHARRINGTON'S WEDDING

*E. Nesbit*

No one ever thought that May Forster would marry John Charrington; but he thought differently, and things which John Charrington intended had a queer way of coming to pass. He asked her to marry him before he went up to Oxford. She laughed and refused him. He asked her again next time he came home. Again she laughed, tossed her dainty blonde head, and again refused. A third time he asked her; she said it was becoming a confirmed bad habit, and laughed at him more than ever.

John was not the only man who wanted to marry her: she was the belle of our village *coterie*, and we were all in love with her more or less; it was a sort of fashion, like heliotrope ties or Inverness capes. Therefore we were as much annoyed as surprised when John Charrington walked into our little local Club—we held it in a loft over the saddler's, I remember—and invited us all to his wedding.

'Your wedding?'

'You don't mean it?'

'Who's the happy fair? When's it to be?'

John Charrington filled his pipe and lighted it before he replied. Then he said:

'I'm sorry to deprive you fellows of your only joke—but Miss Forster and I are to be married in September.'

'You don't mean it?'

'He's got the mitten again, and it's turned his head.'

'No,' I said, rising, 'I see it's true. Lend me a pistol someone—or a first-class fare to the other end of Nowhere. Charrington has bewitched the only pretty girl in our twenty-mile radius. Was it mesmerism, or a love-potion, Jack?'

'Neither, sir, but a gift you'll never have—perseverance—and the best luck a man ever had in this world.'

There was something in his voice that silenced me, and all chaff of the other fellows failed to draw him further.

The queer thing about it was that when we congratu-



lated Miss Forster, she blushed and smiled and dimpled, for all the world as though she were in love with him, and had been in love with him all the time. Upon my word, I think she had. Women are strange creatures.

We were all asked to the wedding. In Brixham everyone who was anybody knew everybody else who was anyone. My sisters were, I truly believe, more interested in the *trousseau* than the bride herself, and I was to be best man. The coming marriage was much canvassed at afternoon tea-tables, and at our little Club over the saddler's, and the question was always asked: 'Does she care for him?'

I used to ask that question myself in the early days of their engagement, but after a certain evening in August I never asked it again. I was coming home from the Club through the churchyard. Our church is on a thyme-grown hill, and the turf about it is so thick and soft that one's footsteps are noiseless.

I made no sound as I vaulted the low lichened wall, and threaded my way between the tombstones. It was at the same instant that I heard John Charrington's voice, and saw Her. May was sitting on a low flat gravestone, her face turned towards the full splendour of the western sun. Its expression ended, at once and for ever, any question of love for him; it was transfigured to a beauty I should not have believed possible, even to that beautiful little face.

John lay at her feet, and it was his voice that broke the stillness of the golden August evening.

'My dear, my dear, I believe I should come back from the dead if you wanted me!'

I coughed at once to indicate my presence, and passed on into the shadow fully enlightened.

The wedding was to be early in September. Two days before I had to run up to town on business. The train was late, of course, for we are on the South-Eastern, and as I stood grumbling with my watch in my hand, whom should I see but John Charrington and May Forster. They were walking up and down the unfrequented end of the platform, arm in arm, looking into each other's eyes, careless of the sympathetic interest of the porters.

Of course I knew better than to hesitate a moment

before burying myself in the booking-office, and it was not till the train drew up at the platform, that I obtrusively passed the pair with my Gladstone, and took the corner in a first-class smoking-carriage. I did this with as good an air of not seeing them as I could assume. I pride myself on my discretion, but if John were travelling alone I wanted his company. I had it.

'Hullo, old man,' came his cheery voice as he swung his bag into my carriage; 'here's luck; I was expecting a dull journey!'

'Where are you off to?' I asked, discretion still bidding me turn my eyes away, though I saw, without looking, that hers were red-rimmed.

'To old Branbridge's,' he answered, shutting the door and leaning out for a last word with his sweetheart.

'Oh, I wish you wouldn't go, John,' she was saying in a low, earnest voice. 'I feel certain something will happen.'

'Do you think I should let anything happen to keep me, and the day after tomorrow our wedding day?'

'Don't go,' she answered, with a pleading intensity which would have sent my Gladstone on to the platform and me after it. But she wasn't speaking to me. John Charrington was made differently; he rarely changed his opinions, never his resolutions.

He only stroked the little ungloved hands that lay on the carriage door.

'I must, May. The old boy's been awfully good to me, and now he's dying I must go and see him, but I shall come home in time for -' the rest of the parting was lost in a whisper and in the rattling lurch of the starting train.

'You're sure to come?' she spoke as the train moved.

'Nothing shall keep me,' he answered; and we steamed out. After he had seen the last of the little figure on the platform he leaned back in his corner and kept silence for a minute.

When he spoke it was to explain to me that his godfather, whose heir he was, lay dying at Peasmarsh Place, some fifty miles away, and had sent for John, and John had felt bound to go.

'I shall surely be back tomorrow,' he said, 'or, if not, the day after, in heaps of time. Thank Heaven, one hasn't to

get up in the middle of the night to get married nowadays!’

‘And suppose Mr Branbridge dies?’

‘Alive or dead I mean to be married on Thursday!’ John answered, lighting a cigar and unfolding *The Times*.

At Peasmarsh station we said goodbye, and he got out, and I saw him ride off; I went on to London, where I stayed the night.

When I got home the next afternoon, a very wet one, by the way, my sister greeted me with:

‘Where’s Mr Charrington?’

‘Goodness knows,’ I answered testily. Every man, since Cain, has resented that kind of question.

‘I thought you might have heard from him,’ she went on, ‘as you’re to give him away tomorrow.’

‘Isn’t he back?’ I asked, for I had confidently expected to find him at home.

‘No, Geoffrey,’ – my sister Fanny always had a way of jumping to conclusions, especially such conclusions as were least favourable to her fellow-creatures – ‘he has not returned, and, what is more, you may depend upon it he won’t. You mark my words, there’ll be no wedding tomorrow.’

My sister Fanny has a power of annoying me which no other human being possesses.

‘You mark my words,’ I retorted with asperity, ‘you had better give up making such a thundering idiot of yourself. There’ll be more wedding tomorrow than ever you’ll take the first part in.’ A prophecy which, by the way, came true.

But though I could snarl confidently to my sister, I did not feel so comfortable when late that night, I, standing on the doorstep of John’s house, heard that he had not returned. I went home gloomily through the rain. Next morning brought a brilliant blue sky, gold sun, and all such softness of air and beauty of cloud as go to make up a perfect day. I woke with a vague feeling of having gone to bed anxious, and of being rather averse to facing that anxiety in the light of full wakefulness.

But with my shaving-water came a note from John which relieved my mind and sent me up to the Forsters’

with a light heart.

May was in the garden. I saw her blue gown through the hollyhocks as the lodge gates swung to behind me. So I did not go up to the house, but turned aside down the tufted path.

'He's written to you too,' she said, without preliminary greeting, when I reached her side.

'Yes, I'm to meet him at the station at three, and come straight on to the church.'

Her face looked pale, but there was a brightness in her eyes, and a tender quiver about the mouth that spoke of renewed happiness.

'Mr Branbridge begged him so to stay another night that he had not the heart to refuse,' she went on. 'He is so kind, but I wish he hadn't stayed.'

I was at the station at half past two. I felt rather annoyed with John. It seemed a sort of slight to the beautiful girl who loved him, that he should come as it were out of breath, and with the dust of travel upon him, to take her hand, which some of us would have given the best years of our lives to take.

But when the three o'clock train glided in, and glided out again having brought no passengers to our little station, I was more than annoyed. There was no other train for thirty-five minutes; I calculated that, with much hurry, we might just get to the church in time for the ceremony; but, oh, what a fool to miss that first train! What other man could have done it?

That thirty-five minutes seemed a year, as I wandered round the station reading the advertisements and the timetables, and the company's bye-laws, and getting more and more angry with John Charrington. This confidence in his own power of getting everything he wanted the minute he wanted it was leading him too far. I hate waiting. Everyone does, but I believe I hate it more than anyone else. The three-thirty-five was late, of course.

I ground my pipe between my teeth and stamped with impatience as I watched the signals. Click. The signal went down. Five minutes later I flung myself into the carriage that I had brought for John.

'Drive to the church!' I said, as someone shut the door.

'Mr Charrington hasn't come by this train.'

Anxiety now replaced anger. What had become of the man? Could he have been taken suddenly ill? I had never known him have a day's illness in his life. And even so he might have telegraphed. Some awful accident must have happened to him. The thought that he had played her false never – no, not for a moment – entered my head. Yes, something terrible had happened to him, and on me lay the task of telling his bride. I almost wished the carriage would upset and break my head so that someone else might tell her, not I, who – but that's nothing to do with this story.

It was five minutes to four as we drew up at the churchyard gate. A double row of eager onlookers lined the path from lychgate to porch. I sprang from the carriage and passed up between them. Our gardener had a good front place near the door. I stopped.

'Are they waiting still, Byles?' I asked, simply to gain time, for of course I knew they were by the waiting crowd's attentive attitude.

'Waiting, sir? No, no, sir; why, it must be over by now.'

'Over! Then Mr Charrington's come?'

'To the minute, sir; must have missed you somehow, and, I say, sir,' lowering his voice, 'I never see Mr John the least bit so afore, but my opinion is he's been drinking pretty free. His clothes was all dusty and his face like a sheet. I tell you I didn't like the looks of him at all, and the folks inside are saying all sorts of things. You'll see, something's gone very wrong with Mr John, and he's tried liquor. He looked like a ghost, and in he went with his eyes straight before him, with never a look or a word for none of us: him that was always such a gentleman!'

I had never heard Byles make so long a speech. The crowd in the churchyard were talking in whispers and getting ready rice and slippers to throw at the bride and bridegroom. The ringers were ready with their hands on the ropes to ring out the merry peal as the bride and bridegroom should come out.

A murmur from the church announced them; out they came. Byles was right. John Charrington did not look himself. There was dust on his coat, his hair was disarranged. He seemed to have been in some row, for there

was a black mark above his eyebrow. He was deathly pale. But his pallor was not greater than that of the bride, who might have been carved in ivory – dress, veil, orange blossoms, face and all.

As they passed out the ringers stooped – there were six of them – and then, on the ears expecting the gay wedding peal, came the slow tolling of the passing bell.

A thrill of horror at so foolish a jest from the ringers passed through us all. But the ringers themselves dropped the ropes and fled like rabbits out into the sunlight. The bride shuddered, and grey shadows came about her mouth, but the bridegroom led her on down the path where the people stood with the handfuls of rice; but the handfuls were never thrown, and the wedding-bells never rang. In vain the ringers were urged to remedy their mistake: they protested with many whispered expletives that they would see themselves further first.

In a hush like the hush in the chamber of death the bridal pair passed into their carriage and its door slammed behind them.

Then the tongues were loosed. A babel of anger, wonder, conjecture from the guests and the spectators.

'If I'd seen his condition, sir,' said old Forster to me as we drove off, 'I would have stretched him on the floor of the church, sir, by Heaven I would, before I'd have let him marry my daughter!'

Then he put his head out of the window.

'Drive like hell,' he cried to the coachman; 'don't spare the horses.'

He was obeyed. We passed the bride's carriage. I forbore to look at it, and old Forster turned his head away and swore. We reached home before it.

We stood in the hall doorway, in the blazing afternoon sun, and in about half a minute we heard wheels crunching the gravel. When the carriage stopped in front of the steps old Forster and I ran down.

'Great Heaven, the carriage is empty! And yet –'

I had the door open in a minute, and this is what I saw –

No sign of John Charrington; and of May, his wife, only a huddled heap of white satin lying half on the floor of the carriage and half on the seat.

'I drove straight here, sir,' said the coachman, as the bride's father lifted her out; 'and I'll swear no one got out of the carriage.'

We carried her into the house in her bridal dress and drew back her veil. I saw her face. Shall I ever forget it? White, white and drawn with agony and horror, bearing such a look of terror as I have never seen since except in dreams. And her hair, her radiant blonde hair, I tell you it was white like snow.

As we stood, her father and I, half mad with the horror and mystery of it, a boy came up the avenue – a telegraph boy. They brought the orange envelope to me. I tore it open.

*'Mr Charrington was thrown from the dogcart on his way to the station at half past one. Killed on the spot!'*

And he was married to May Forster in our parish church at *half past three*, in presence of half the parish.

*'I shall be married, dead or alive!'*

What had passed in that carriage on the homeward drive? No one knows – no one will ever know. Oh, May! oh, my dear!

Before a week was over they laid her beside her husband in our little churchyard on the thyme-covered hill – the churchyard where they had kept their love-trysts.

Thus was accomplished John Charrington's wedding.

## THE PRIMROSE CONNECTION

*Margaret Chilvers-Cooper*

'At last, the haunting is over.' The remark in Melissa Hayden's soft voice rose with a stumbling inflection, more like a question than a conviction. Standing by the casement windows, her eyes were on the garden where their daughter, Tricia, knelt motionless beside the primroses which encircled the pink dogwood tree.

Nathan put down his paper and smiled at his wife. Her hair had darkened to a shade somewhere between blonde and brown; otherwise, she looked like Tricia exactly, or Tricia like her, both of them valentines given to a man who did not know how to make a great amount of money, who was not handsome, but whose shoulders were sturdy and brown eyes warm and loving. 'Melly,' he said, 'the Daceys are gone, aren't they?'

Reluctantly, she turned away from her watch over the little girl. 'Yes, they're gone, but it is too soon to know, to be really sure,' her voice faltered –

Nathan's smile broadened. 'Gone, bag and baggage.' He paused significantly. 'Everything.'

Tricia had heard Patty call earlier, but had not dared to mention her return and had had to stay at the table until she finished her sweet, a trifle, which felt dry to her tongue and hard to swallow. She had not wanted to leave her parents. The place where they were was a nice place. It shone in their eyes as her father leaned over to pat her mother's hand, and when her mother smiled. The kitchen of the cottage was nice, too. It smelled of the sole which her father had caught in the waters of Vineyard Sound, and the bread which her mother had baked. Its song came from the copper kettle which whistled a safe, soft tune, a counterpoint to Patty's insistent call. She had not really cared to go, but she could not refuse Patty. They had done everything together.

Patty had returned just last night to stand beside the giant elm which, in addition to the boxwood hedge,



separated the Hayden garden from the De Cordova-Dacey estate. As if she were weeding, Tricia leaned forward over the primroses which her mother had selected for her and Patty to plant because they were easy to culture. They bowed to none of the many varieties of primroses which bordered the trees and shady areas in a spectrum of colour from clear white through yellows, pinks, and scarlets, into shadows of purple, where, like wild violets, they had crept through the hedge and planted themselves in the garden beyond. After a while, she saw Patty, following the primrose path through the opening, her fair hair flooded with that other light unrelated to the fierce brilliance of the sun which had begun its rapid roll down the horizon's edge. A pair of orioles flew over her head to pause on a bough beside an orange, cut into baskets, to hang a sweet lure. Moving deliberately, she got to her feet. From the distance, Patty looked like another self, a film in double exposure, but the illusion faded as she moved across the grassy centre of the garden to where Patty leaned against the elm directly under the marks her father had made last year to measure their height. Patty's eyes became grey, while her own were blue, and her nose and mouth were different too. It was only her long fair hair, and the shape of their faces, like a heart, that were the same. And, of course, they shared Patricia, the same name.

'Listen,' Patty said, as she had so often in the past when she had wanted to explain something. 'Listen! This is important. I have to tell you something. It's about Mummy and Daddy.' Her gaze shifted to the orioles for an instant, but returned to Tricia. 'They are going to go now. They have to go.'

Tricia was confused. What had Patty come back to say that for? Everyone knew that the van had arrived at eight o'clock in the morning to move out all the furnishings from the house next door, and the windows, stripped of their curtains, were like eyes without lashes staring as Mrs Davey, the last of the De Cordovas, had driven away with Mr Dacey in the silver Bentley.

But, as if the information were of the greatest importance, Patty was insistent.

'They have to go,' she said clearly.

In exact measure with her mother's voice calling her name, Tricia protested. 'They have gone.'

But Patty had disappeared through the opening in the hedge, her voice drifting back with its repeated message, 'They have to go,' and something else. 'You don't have to.'

If she hurried, Tricia thought she might be able to find her again. In order to reassure her mother, who was now standing on the back porch, one nervous hand holding back her hair, while the other rested on her enormous abdomen, where a new baby waited almost ready to be born and join Tricia, she called, 'I'll take Wimpie for a walk.'

Her mother nodded, and to her whistle the white miniature poodle bounded out of the house to join her. Pausing for an instant, she measured herself against the scratches on the tree. She had now reached the mark which had been Patty's last year, but Patty had not grown. It was as if while she, Tricia, had progressed a year, Patty had moved back in time. Taking a firm grip on Wimpie's leash, she led him through the opening in the hedge into the De Cordova-Dacey property. Once within its green walls, Wimpie followed a familiar course, pulling her along until she released him to run ahead in puppy-like abandon through the gardens and out on to the road beyond. When they approached the putty-coloured Toyota parked on Pin Oak Lane, they had walked almost three-quarters of a mile without even a glimpse of Patty.

The occupants of the car, the Daceys, were crowded. Charlotte's head almost reached the roof, and she moved cautiously in order to meet her husband's eyes, putty-grey, like the clever paint job which camouflaged the Toyota making it no more noticeable on the dark turnings of the lane, than the scrubby pines which repeated themselves in their march from one end of Cape Cod to the other until, in their monotony, they were no longer visible.

Tibault said, 'It's kidnapping. You can't get away from it.'

'Tib,' she answered, because no one would have thought

to call such an inconsequential little man Tibault, 'Tib, you don't listen. Kidnappers are criminals. They kidnap for ransom. With us, Tricia will live in the lap of luxury, something the Haydens can never provide.' Charlotte stuck out her jaw, heavy and out of proportion to her face. 'Anyway, it's justice.'

Tibault was simplistic. 'Two wrongs don't make a right. The accident was not the fellow's fault. It was Patty's. She jumped the horse over the hedge without a thought that there might be a car on the lane. There seldom is.'

Lightly moving branches of the oak tree above them cast slips of shadows on the windshield, a distraction at which they both stared until he added, 'That time there was.'

Charlotte groaned. 'I can't bear it. Why do you keep on defending him?'

'Because it wasn't his fault.' He looked at her sharply. 'Patty was my child, too, a fact you seem to forget. Tricia is not Patty. Patty is dead.' He tried to move his shrivelled leg from her big hand which gripped his arthritic knee heedlessly and caused his voice to sound high like a muffled sob. 'We'll get caught, Charly. Mark my words, sooner or later, we'll get caught.'

Releasing her grip, she glanced at her watch. 'She's late for her walk with the dog.' For the dozenth time, she peered into the dusk which was settling over the road until she spotted the little figure with the dog running on ahead. Her voice rose in triumph. 'They're here!'

'Get in, Patricia,' Mrs Dacey said.

Melissa's eyes were on the battery-run clock which hung on the kitchen wall. Tricia had been gone only ten minutes, but she had glanced at the clock six or seven times. Finally, she asked. 'Is the clock right?'

Nathan went to her and kissed the top of her head. 'We can't put chains on Tricia,' he said gently. 'Remember, we did decide - we did say - the haunting is over.' Tilting her face towards him, he kissed her lips, but her twisting hands did not relax.

'I can't say why, but I'm still afraid. It's a feeling.' She glanced at the clock again. 'She's been gone fifteen minutes. She always comes home in fifteen minutes.'

He smiled reassuringly. 'Fourteen. That gives me a moment to think. Yes, it's decided. It will be best if I walk. If I take the car, she'll get the idea that we don't trust her.'

'She cuts through the Dacey land and out on to Elm Road.'

'Don't worry. I know the way.' Stopping casually, he opened the lid of the cookie jar and sniffed. 'I'm a growing boy,' he said. 'I need sweets for energy.'

At last, she smiled. 'Just one - to grow on.'

Walking leisurely through the garden, Nathan waited until he was out of her sight before he quickened his pace to a steady jog which took him rapidly through the Dacey land and out on to Elm Road. When he saw in the distance a small, grey car pull out of Pin Oak Lane, he stretched his long legs out into a run and shouted, 'Wait! Wait!' but the occupants were too far away to hear, and moving jerkily, it disappeared from sight.

In this car, which had never been one of the three in the Daceys' garage, this shabby car, Mrs Dacey appeared different, as if she were on a masquerade with her hair covered with a grey wig and a scarf pulled up over her face. Mr Dacey looked the same, that is, if anyone ever noticed such a small, grey-looking man.

'I thought you had gone,' Tricia cried.

'We came back for our new car,' Mrs Dacey said. 'Do you like it?'

Tricia supposed that this was a joke, and she smiled to be polite; but she did not think much of it. The car was dusty, and smelled of oil and stale popcorn and the upholstery was torn. It was the very last car you would expect to meet the Daceys in. But they had acted strangely since that terrible day when Mrs Dacey had insisted that Tricia ride in the funeral procession beside them, although she had wanted to get out when she could no longer see her own parents, and Mrs Dacey had spoken quite sharply.

As Mrs Dacey put the car in gear and they began to pick up speed, Tricia thought of her mother standing in the doorway with that worried expression.

'I have to ask my mother if I can stay out after dark,' she said.

Like a great dragonfly, her remark hovered in the air between the front of the car and the back, as the words, tenuous and more of a question than a demand, remained unanswered.

Finally, Mrs Dacey said, 'I told your mother that we would take you for a ride.' With her right hand, she fumbled around on the seat and passed Tricia a box. 'Here, have a piece of candy. I made them for you.'

Unlike the picky mints that are served after dinner, these were like miniature loaves of bread with delicious fillings of orange, liquorice, and lime. Tricia popped one of the orange into her mouth first, then liquorice, and last, the one with the green filling, which she decided was not lime, but something she did not recognize. She offered one of these to Wimpie, but the dog growled and turned away. After a while, she felt very sleepy, and rather strange, as the Daceys' voices drifted back more and more softly like a radio tuned so low you could not be sure whether they were talking or whether she was dreaming.

'We can still turn back,' Tibault said. 'You're going to miss your home. You've always lived there.'

'Yes,' Charlotte agreed. 'It is a wrench. I suppose we could buy it back.'

'And the Haydens will be grief-stricken.'

'Yes. It's unfortunate.'

'She reminds us - she looks like Patty,' his voice grew stronger. 'But she is not. Nothing can bring back Patty.'

Charlotte's voice, which had been sweet as a melody played on a violin, changed to the brass of a trumpet. 'Oh, yes it can! What you don't know is, what I have found out. She sees Patty, so if we have her, we have them both!'

After a very long time, Tricia dreamt Mrs Dacey said, 'There will be pictures of her with the dog. We'll have to get rid of the dog.'

A clock with an illuminated dial on a bureau with a glass top read seventeen minutes of three. It seemed part of a continuing dream in which she had travelled many miles, a dream which had begun when she had taken Wimpie for a walk. Her hands moved slowly as she felt around in the bed for him, but he was not there. After a

while, she noticed the night light and tiptoed to the open door of a bathroom and looked in. A pair of stockings hung over the shower rod and white anonymous towels were scattered about. Switching on the ceiling light, she moved in further. The girl in the mirror over the sink was wearing a pink nightgown and her hair was short. Leaning forward, she ran her hand through it. It was a poor cut, hanging unevenly as if done hastily and with a bang covering the widow's peak from which her hair had been combed back. It did not look as if it belonged on her, but to a person whose head felt as if it were floating, it did very well. Upon examination, the figures in the large bed on the other side of the room became the Daceys. Mr Dacey was snoring in soft cadence. Mrs Dacey groaned and moved from her right to her left side. By sticking her head around the drape, which was drawn across the window wall, Tricia could see a parking lot, and a neon sign, garish against a black sky in which thunder rumbled far away and without threat, like Wimpie's growls. Where was Wimpie? He must be around somewhere. Leaving the door to the hall open a crack, so that she could get back inside, she followed silent corridors to a desk. A man's head rested on it.

'Please,' she said. 'Please. Have you seen a small, white poodle?'

He lifted his head, the iris of his eyes strange, as if focused on his dreams.

'A dog was run over in the parking lot,' he yawned. 'A woman ran over a dog last night.'

'Not - not a white poodle?'

The question suspended like the dragonfly. She remembered it now, how she had thought of it in the car when she had asked something and no one had answered.

The desk clerk nodded. The strange eyes softened a little. 'Sorry.'

'I don't believe that Wimpie's dead,' Tricia said. Her eyes found the phone on the desk. 'May I use your phone? I want to talk to my mother and father.'

The eyes became angry. Angry and hostile. 'Your mother and father are in room seven. Go back to your room. I don't like cheeky kids.' He stood up, his eyes riveting into

her back as she walked awkwardly down the corridor to room seven, where the Daceys slept. The dragonfly returned once more with its message of questions, unanswered questions, which hung like ribbons in the sky. Her parents had only allowed her to go away once before with Patty and the Daceys, and they had told her to brush her hair, clean her teeth, and always be polite. Things like that. And they had given her a big hug. There was a phone booth out in the hall. If only she had some money, she could call her mother. Very cautiously, she opened the bedroom door. Mrs Dacey's left arm was flung out, the fingers touching her handbag which rested on the night table. It was a handsome bag, with a gold clasp and in it was always plenty of money. If she could just take out enough to phone, her father would pay it back. On legs which did not respond any better than her head, she tiptoed over to the night table and stood staring at it and the hand which touched it. The fingers had rings on them, diamond rings, a lady's rings. They did not belong in this funny motel or in the funny, old car. With awkward hands which perspired and trembled, Tricia tried to slide the bag away from them, but the fingers came aware and the bag slipped, as if it had a will of its own, and fell to the floor.

Mrs Dacey sat up in bed. 'What are you doing?'

'I was looking - I was looking for a mint.'

'Oh. On the bureau.' She picked up the bag and put it under her pillow. 'Go back to sleep.'

There were three suitcases on the luggage rack. After a while, it came to Tricia that the red one, the one on top, must be Patty's. When Mrs Dacey's breathing became deep and rhythmic, she opened it, her fingers exploring the pockets of the dresses and the sweaters. On the very bottom was Patty's red coat. In the pocket of it, she found a quarter. Shivering for fear she would drop it, for fear that they would awaken, she moved slowly, step by step, until she reached the door and out into the corridor to the phone booth. With cotton fingers, she placed the coin in the slot.

'I wish to make a long-distance call. I have to reverse the charges.'

'What city? Whom are you calling?'

Over the thunder which had come closer with its continual rumble, Tricia made her voice loud and firm. 'Mr and Mrs Nathan Hayden, Falmouth, Massachusetts.'

Her father's voice, faint and far away, said, 'Hello.'

'Daddy, Daddy,' she burst in, 'Wimpie's gone. They say he's dead. I want to come home.'

'Who is it?' her father asked. 'Who is it? Please. Is it about my daughter? Please speak. Please.'

'What number are you calling from?' the operator asked.

'What do you think you're doing?' Mrs Dacey's hand wrenched away the receiver and replaced it on the hook.

The night clerk was standing in the corridor beside her. 'She was out here before.' His eyes had their revenge. 'You spoiled my sleep,' they said.

Charlotte shook Tibault, her voice hissing its message over the voice of the storm which hurled hail mixed with rain against the windows and batted it on the roof. 'She tried to get away.'

Tibault struggled to arouse himself. 'And the dawn came up like thunder,' he murmured.

'Yes. It's a storm.' She shook him again, bringing back pain so that he became alert. 'Wake up! I caught her phoning her father. The night clerk summoned me. She tried to get him to make the call before.'

'So he'll remember her. And you. And the dog.' He leaned over and turned on the lamp to the lowest of its three powers. 'It isn't too late to let her go. Her word won't count for much, and tomorrow we'll be on the plane. Otherwise, we're bound to get caught.'

'I couldn't bear that.'

He seized his advantage. 'Charly, look at the facts. Patty's dead, but there are lots of children who need a home. You're as strong as an ox; you could raise a hundred.'

Tiptoeing over to the other bed, she stared down at Tricia. 'I don't want other people's children. I want my own child back. Tricia looks like Patty. She sees Patty.'



She talks to Patty.' She paused, before continuing more slowly, emphasizing each word. 'She is going to *be* Patty.'

Light streaked through the mustard and gold print curtains where they did not quite join, casting a pyramid across Tricia's right eye. The pyramid of light convinced her that what she saw now was real. Last night had been real. Her father had said please. He had said that he wanted to know. Mrs Dacey had taken the quarter and had waited a long time to go back to sleep, but she was asleep now. If she went out of the room, the clerk would be asleep also. Soundlessly, she opened the door. Beyond the parking lot was a garden and she walked to it. Perhaps there would be someone about who would listen to her. It wasn't a big garden, but like the one at home, it was filled with primroses to her delight, with many pinks and scarlets, the colours that Patty liked. She was thinking of her when she saw her coming down the path.

'Patty! Patty! I want to go home. I don't like it here.'

Patty shrugged. 'I told you. You don't have to go. You have only to open the door.'

When a man in a gardener's uniform walked towards them, Patty faded, like a dewdrop, shimmering for an instant and then evaporating into the air.

Tricia picked a single flower and held it out in her hand. 'I'd like this,' she said, 'because we have a primrose garden at home. My mother knows everything about primroses. She bought them for me and Patty to plant. I guess we have most every colour. Patty liked the pinks and reds. I suppose my dog, Wimpie, will go with Patty now. She's dead.'

'Was that your dog?' The gardener's eyes were brown and filled with sympathy.

A flicker of hope stirred in Tricia's heart. 'Would you do me a favour?'

'If I can.'

'Would you phone my mother and reverse the charges? My mother and father don't know where I am. You see, I was walking along the road with Wimpie, and the Daceys came along and took me for a ride. I want to go home to Falmouth. That's on Cape Cod. Mrs Dacey

doesn't know much about primroses,' she added, as she spotted her out of the corner of her eye galloping, just galloping towards them.

Charlotte's eyes swept the garden. 'Ah, the polyanthus primrose, so easy to raise, and the denticulata. Their earliness makes them a must, don't you think? And the auriculas. So interesting to know that the Emperor Maximilian collected them in the sixteenth century, wasn't it?'

And, so it went from the common cowslip to the Asiatic strains from mountain meadows or forest edges of China or Tibet; Mrs Dacey recited as if reading from a book. From a book! While the Haydens' had worked, Mrs Dacey had acquired her knowledge another way. Tricia's heart slid into her shoes. The gardener would not help her now. Mrs Dacey had made sure of that.

'Our little girl is a story-teller,' Charlotte said, as she wrapped determined fingers around Tricia's arm and dragged her towards the car.

'I'm Tricia Hayden,' she shouted back. 'My father is Nathan Hayden, at Falmouth, Cape Cod,' but the gardener had turned his back.

As they rolled along the mountain road, the funny, little car moved faster and faster, taking Tricia farther and farther away with each mile from her life in Falmouth and making it more in the nature of a dream, and this continuing journey with the Daceys the reality. But even though no one believed her, she knew which was real. It was something that happened to a child. Her arm hurt where Mrs Dacey had gripped it and her eyes were dry where there should have been tears.

Mr Dacey was asleep. There was no one to tell Mrs Dacey that she was driving too fast, the old car shuddering off to the shoulder of the road, weaving this way and that as she pressed her foot on the gas pedal. The candies that made everything soft with sleep were on the seat beside Tricia. If she popped one in her mouth, it would help fill her stomach which was empty, fill it with sweet dreams instead of orange juice, toast, and an egg, which her mother and father would be eating right now at home in Falmouth.

Mrs Dacey was humming, her voice as strange as the

high whining protest of the tyres as they jounced and skidded on the narrow mountain road. From the back seat, Tricia could see the speedometer climbing, but Mrs Dacey did not see it as she sang. Tricia stuck the candy in her mouth, the candy that made dreams like smoke drifting. She was sucking on it, its sweet taste cloying to her tongue, when the air filled with the smell of burning rubber. Tugging the wheel this way and that, Mrs Dacey's hands left wet marks on it as the car careened like a crazy top to the edge of a deep ravine and suspended there like the dragonfly, in time, spread out. Time in which a flight of Canada geese honked their messages as they formed a skein across the sky, and a frog croaked, croaked, croaked his guttural cry from a pond below. Time for a turtle to begin a slow move down a steep trail where skis were meant to sing. Time to see Patty climbing up it, her hand beckoning. All were going somewhere. The Daceys were going, too. They had to go, Patty had said, but she did not. She had only to open the door. The primrose in her hand wavered, but she did not wish to let go of it, and with it in her fingers, she was clumsy, fumbling with the handle too late to release the catch before the car began its tumbling down, down, down in a series of flashes, until it disappeared in one huge flame, and they all stepped out of it to join Patty and Wimpie in that other light. Mr and Mrs Dacey, and Tricia. All of them together.

## THE SAVING OF A SOUL

*Sir Richard Burton*

At the castle of Weixelstein in Germany, strange noises were heard during the night for several years towards the end of the seventeenth century. But the origin of these same noises was a subject of vain research and speculation. After a time, a new serving-maid named Ankha Wnikh-laukha was taken on at the castle. On hearing these mysterious sounds she decided they were caused by a ghost and made up her mind to address this ghost.

It fell out like this. On 15th January 1648, a noise arose at night in the servant-wench's room, as though someone were walking about clad in iron armour and clanking chains. The women being sorely frightened, some stable-hands were brought to sleep in the room. They were struck upon the head by an unknown hand, and one was like to die of terror.

The following evening, while the lights were still burning, a rapping was heard at the door of the room. But when they went to see what caused it, nothing was found. Presently those inside put out the lamps, and lay down to rest. Thereupon began a loud clatter; two serving-wenches, Marinkha and Mitza, were seized by the hair, but they could not make out anyone near them.

The whole account is strictly 'spiritualistic'. Ankha is the chosen medium, and nothing is done till she appears on the scene. The ghost will hardly answer the officious and garrulous steward; and has apparently scant respect for the reverend men who were called in. One of the latter somewhat justified the ghost's disdain by telling a decided fib. The steps by which the apparition changes from hot to cold, from weariness to energy, from dark to white robes, and from loud noises to mild, are decidedly artistic.

On 17th January nothing happened.

On the 18th, the servant-wenches being in great fear, five others joined them. One, Hansche Juritschkno Suppan, put out the light when all had lain down, locked the door,

and endeavoured to sleep. Thereupon arose a dreadful noise. After it had ended, Ankha, by the advice of those present, thus bespake the ghost:

'All good spirits, praise the Lord,'—such being the recognized formula throughout Germany for addressing apparitions.

The ghost answered: 'I also; so help me God, and Our Blessed Lady, and the holy Saint Anthony of Padua!'

Ankha resumed: 'What wantest thou, O good spirit?'

The ghost replied: 'I require thirty Masses.' It added: 'This castle was once mine,'—and it disappeared.

On 19th January the ghost was present, but nothing untoward occurred.

On the evening of the 20th, the servant-wenches being still affrighted, the steward, one Antoni Glanitsschinigg, and the man Hansche before-mentioned, with six other persons, were in the chamber. When all lay down to rest, the steward locked the door and put out the lamp. The ghost at once came and violently dragged a chair backwards. Whereupon quoth Antoni: 'I confess that I am a great sinner; nevertheless, I dare address thee, and ask thee, in God's name, what more dost thou want?'

To this question no answer was vouchsafed by the ghost, although the steward repeated it a second time and a third time. He then rose up and advanced towards the apparition, which was seen standing near the window, thinking to discover whether it was a true ghost, or some person playing a trick. It vanished, however, before he could lay hand upon it. The steward went out with one of the servant-wenches to fetch a light; and, whilst doing so, he heard the ghost speaking in the room he had left. When the lamp was brought, nothing was found. Then all those present knelt down and prayed. After their devotions, the light was extinguished, and the ghost reappeared, crying out, with weeping and wailing:

'Ankha! Ankha! Ankha! help me.'

The wench answered: 'How can I help thee, O good spirit?' Whereupon the ghost rejoined:

'With thirty Masses, which must be said at the altar of Saint Anthony, in the church of Jagnenz,'—which church is in the parish of Schaffenberg.

Jagnenz is a church in the valley of the Sapotka, a small stream which falls into the Save River, about half a mile west of Weixelstein. Schaffenberg is the hereditary castle of the well-known count of that name, while Wrunikh is another little church, remarkably pretty, near Weixelstein. Apparently the ghost served to 'run' Jagnenz against all its rivals.

Hearing those words from the ghost, the steward again inquired:

'O thou good spirit, would it not be better to get the Masses said more quickly by dividing them, part at Jagnenz, the other at the altar of Saint Anthony in Wrunikh?'

Whereto the ghost made an answer: 'No! Ankha! Ankha! Only at Jagnenz, and not at Wrunikh!' The steward continued: 'As this ghost refuseth to answer me, do thou, Ankha, ask it what and why it suffers.'

Then Ankha addressed it: 'My good spirit! Tell me wherefore thou dost suffer?' It replied: 'For that I unrighteously used sixty florins; so I, a poor widow body, must endure this penalty.'

Ankha further said: 'Who shall pay for these thirty Masses?'

The ghost rejoined: 'The noble master of the castle,' and continued: 'Ankha! Ankha! I am so weary, and dead-beat, and martyred, that I can hardly speak.'

Then cried the steward: 'My good spirit! When the thirty Masses shall have been said, come back and give us a sign that they have helped thee.' The ghost rejoined: 'Ankha, to thee I will give a sign upon thy head.'

Ankha replied: 'God have mercy upon me, that must endure such fright and pain!' But the ghost thus comforted her: 'Fear not, Ankha. The sign which I will show to thee shall not be visible upon thy head, nor shall it be painful.' It added: 'Ankha! Ankha! I pray thee, when thou enterest into any house, tell the inmates that one unjust farthing eats up twenty honest farthings.'

Then the ghost began to scratch the wench's cap, and she, in her terror, took to praying for help. The ghost comforted her, bade her feel no fear nor anxiety, took leave, and was seen no more that night.

Late on 21st January the ghost reappeared, and made a terrible noise with a chair in presence of the lord of the castle, Sigmund Wilhelm Freiherr, Baron von Zetschekher, and of two priests, Georg Schlebnikh and Lorenz Tsichitsch. Several others, men and women, were present, and nothing took place till the candles were put out. Whereupon the said Schlebnikh began to exorcize the apparition, beginning with the usual formula :

'All good spirits, praise the Lord.'

'I also,' replied the ghost.

It would not, however, answer any questions put to it by the priestly man, but began to speak with Ankha, saying : 'Ankha, help me !'

Ankha rejoined : 'My dear good spirit, all that lies in my power will I do for thee. Only tell me, my spirit, if the two Masses already said have in any way lessened thy pain.'

'Yea, verily,' answered the ghost.

'How many more Masses must thou still have?' Ankha continued.

'Thirty, less two,' was the response.

'My good spirit,' asked Ankha, 'tell me thy family name.'

'My name is Gallenbergerinn,' quoth the ghost.

The wench further asked for a sign of salvation when all the thirty Masses should have been said. The ghost promised to do so, and disappeared.

On the night of 22nd January, when the lights were put out, the ghost reappeared, passing through the locked door. This was in presence of Wollf Engelbrecht, Baron Gallen, of the lord of the castle, and of three priests, namely, Georg Schiffrer, curate of Laakgh, Georg Schlebnikh, and Lorenz. There were again several others. This time the ghost did not make a frightful noise as before, the reason being that eight Masses had been said. So at least it appeared from its address.

'Ankha, Ankha, I thank thee; I shall soon be released,' it said.

'O my good spirit,' the wench answered; 'dost thou feel any comfort after the eight Masses?'

'Yea, verily, my Ankha,' the apparition replied – and

when asked how many more were required, answered: 'Two and twenty.'

As it had declared its family name, it was now prayed to disclose its Christian name, in order that the latter might be introduced into the Masses by the four reverends.

'My name is Mary Elisabeth Gallenbergerinn,' it said.

Further it was asked whether, being a Gallenberg, the thirty Masses should be paid for by the Lord of Gallenberg or by Zetschekher of Weixelstein.

'Zetschekher,' it ejaculated, without giving the baron's title, and added: 'A thousand, thousand, and a thousand thanks to thee, dear Ankha.'

'O my good spirit,' said Ankha, 'tell me what wrong didst thou with the sixty florins, that we may make restitution.'

The ghost replied: 'Ankha, this must I tell thee in secret,' upon which the wench begged that the matter might be disclosed in public, so that men would believe it, but the ghost answered: 'No, Ankha; in private.'

It then took leave and disappeared, promising to come back for three more evenings.

On 23rd January, the lord of the castle, with three priests, prayed at the altar of Saint Anthony of Jagnenz, and five more Masses were said. They all lodged that night with Georg Schlebnikh of Altenhoff, not far from the church. When the lamps were put out, Ankha was sitting on a chest, between two of the priests. Then, after rapping thrice, the ghost entered and pulled the hair of one of these reverends. He stood up from the chest, whereupon the ghost struck Ankha so violent a box on the ear that it sounded like a sharp hand-clap and could be heard all over the dwelling-place.

Lights were brought, and revealed the print of a left hand burnt in the coif on the right side of the wench's head. She was not hurt, but the cap remained heated for some time. Nothing else occurred that night.

On the evening of 24th January, after prayers by the priests, and the lamp being extinguished, the ghost rapped once and came in. As the wench again sat on the same chest between the priests, the curate of Laagh felt his hair tugged, and he rose up.



At the same time Ankha exclaimed: 'Who is touching me so coldly?'

The priest, who was sitting near, said: 'Be not afraid, it is I.'

But this was not true. He wished to dispel her fright.

On 25th January when all the required Masses had been said at the altar of Saint Anthony of Jagnenz, the Lord of Weixelstein and the priests engaged in the ceremony returned to pass the night at the castle, and to receive the thanksgiving of the Saved Soul. While they were supping, the housemaid, carrying the children's food, was crossing the hall to the dining-room, when the ghost seized her arm.

She started back, and saw behind her the form of a woman robed in white. As the family were retiring to rest, the lord of the castle ordered two of his dependants, Christop Wollf and Mathew Wreschek, to pass the night with the serving-wench in the haunted room.

As the lamps were put out, the ghost entered and rapped loudly on the table, saying: 'Ankha, now I am saved, and I am going to heaven.' The wench rejoined: 'O blessed soul, pray to heaven for me, for the noble master, the noble mistress, and all the noble family, and for all those who helped thee to attain thine eternal salvation,' whereto the ghost responded: 'Amen, amen, amen.' It then went towards Ankha, and privily told her the promised secret of her sin, strictly forbidding her to divulge it.

Finally, it should be noted that before all these happenings, Ankha had been to confession and partaken of holy communion.

All this was translated from the folios of the 'Honour of the Duchy of Carniola', written by Johann Weichard, Baron Walvasor, Lord of Wazemberg, and printed at Laibach in M.DC.LXXXIX.

## NO LIVING MAN SO TALL . . .

*Rosemary Timperley*

Alan had been drunk when it happened, or it never *would* have happened. Yet that's a foolish way to think, for everything happens inevitably because of what went before. Our destiny is marked out from the moment we drew our first breath, and possibly even before that.

So—it happened because he was drunk. Why was he drunk? Because he was out of work and the humiliation bit deep. He had no wife or close friend to turn to, so he turned to alcohol for solace. Once he'd paid his rent, nearly all his money went on drink. He cut down on food, of course. He was a sick man without being fully aware of it. Starved and poisoned physically, anguished and mortified mentally. Lonely as hell.

One Saturday night he took a bus to an area outside the one where he lived, which was shabby and squalid. He went to a 'nice' place by the river, posh houses and prosperous people. Expensive cars lining the kerbs. The kingdom of the well-heeled. Alan, the down-at-heel, should not have gone there. But he hadn't always been like this. When he entered the riverside pub, he felt as if he were stepping back into a past life. Then that feeling had quickly worn off. He was out of place here, and therefore he sat drinking all the more to take the edge off his misery.

If he hadn't got into conversation with that man with the black beard, it wouldn't have happened. Though it was hardly a conversation. Blackbeard did all the talking. In his loud and over-cultured voice, he was sounding off about 'no-good layabouts, sponging off the state'.

'They're on to a good thing, these so-called unemployed,' he announced. 'The draw their free money at the expense of us, the tax-payers. And don't you tell me that they couldn't work if they really wanted to. Anyone can. When I was young, if men didn't work, they didn't eat.'

There were no hand-outs then. They're spoiled and lazy. They drift about enjoying themselves while we honest citizens are working our guts out. Don't you agree?' he'd challenged Alan.

'Very few want to be unemployed,' Alan had said. 'They're the exception, not the rule. The newspapers make a lot of them, but they're a minority group. And I should know.'

'You don't mean to say you're one of them!'

'I'm out of work, yes. It happened through no fault of my own. The firm went bust. I was doing a skilled job. But I'm over forty and -'

'Excuses, excuses!' said the other. 'You sit there drinking, enjoying yourself, and indirectly it's my money that's paying for your alcoholic excesses. Have you no pride?'

Alan said nothing. He had a lot of pride.

The other man went on: 'I don't know what this country's coming to, supporting drones and wastrels, all of them cushioned by the Welfare State. Welfare for whom? For the no-goods!' On and on he went, so smug, so sure of himself.

Listening, Alan felt at first only a dull despair. And then, suddenly, hate rose up in him. A wild, irrepressible hate - like boiling lava thrusting its way through the earth's crust - an act of nature - unstoppable. People are at the mercy of the forces of nature. Alan was at the mercy of this burning hatred which came from within himself yet did not seem entirely to belong to himself. And he'd had a skinful too.

There was something zestful about the anger he felt, and the alcohol built on that zest, for drink heightens whatever emotion is there already - for a while, that is. For as long as it lasts.

'Time, ladies and gents, please!'

Time, thought Alan. Yes, it's time something was done about this arrogant bastard.

He and Blackbeard left the pub together, the latter still pontificating about scroungers and the like. He was enjoying telling Alan just what he thought of 'him and his kind'. For he didn't often *meet* the unemployed. Only

read about their feckless ways.

Outside it was dark, and there was the towpath and the river. Alan and Blackbeard turned right. The other customers, by some divine or diabolical chance, turned left. Alan waited until they were out of sight and earshot of other people – waited until the only sounds were the lapping of the water and the voice of his companion. The night river had a gentle beauty. The evil voice was spoiling it. Alan's hate was still burning. The man was still in full speech when, without a word, Alan pushed him into the water.

There was a splash, some gurgles, and Alan walked on alone as if nothing had happened. The act of violence – the first in all his life – had cleared his head. But even now that he felt sober again, he did not regret what he had done. With satisfaction, he imagined his victim crawling out of the river, plastered with dirty mud, fine clothes ruined, confident voice no more than gasps and grunts. Serve him bloody right! thought Alan. How dared he preach to me like that when he knows nothing of the anguish which my own futility gives me? He deserved a wetting!

He'd been walking for ten minutes when the doubts came: How deep was the river at that point? Had there been anything on the bank for a man to grab hold of – a protruding branch, a solid stone – anything? Would there be underwater weeds to entangle a man's feet? Oh, rubbish, of course Blackbeard would have scrambled out all right. It wasn't as if he'd been pushed off a liner in the middle of the ocean. He'd probably have gone back to the pub, banged on the door, explained what had happened, and the landlord would be providing him with towels and a change of clothes. Then no doubt Blackbeard would be telephoning the police and describing the 'layabout scoundrel who'd made this dastardly attack on him'. So the sooner I get to the bus and home again, the better, thought Alan . . .

But the doubts would not go away.

His footsteps slowed. He stopped. Then he turned and ran back – ran as fast as he could – as if another man's

life depended on it. Perhaps it did! Oh, God!

Because of the darkness, and his former drunkenness, he couldn't find the exact spot where he'd pushed Blackbeard in. At the time, it had all been a blur and a daze. A madness of hate.

He wandered up and down, looking and calling: 'Hello? You there?' No reply. Silence.

Oh, the chap must have got out and walked back the other way. Of course he did! Of course!

But Alan was shaking with fear. Half-starved as he was, and suffering the after-effects of all that drink, he was freezing cold too. It was as if the boiling hatred had turned inside out, leaving him encased in ice.

He turned back the way he'd come. He walked quickly, trying to get warm. Yet he was sweating too. Drowning under the armpits. Drowning. No! Blackbeard had *not* drowned! Sheer neurotic imagination to think he had!

At last the path which led away from the river to the bright streets. He was glad to see it, glad to reach pavements and people. Plenty of people, just out of the pubs or the pictures. Coffee bars still open. Queues at the bus stops.

He joined the queue for the bus to take him home. Some home! That dingy little pad. All he could afford. Murder! The word flashed into his head. No! he screamed silently back at it.

The bus came. The queue moved. When he reached a seat, he half-collapsed into it and lit a cigarette. Yes, he smoked too. Drink and smoke, the unheavenly twins which yet give a sad man a few moments of seeming heaven. Sometimes. Not tonight. My God, not tonight! What a terrible night! Murder!

He was looking out of the window. The bus was still stationary as people were getting on. He was looking without seeing really. Then he *did* see. And what he saw sent a surge of relief flowing through him. An injection of wonder and peace. For a man was walking past the bus. Alan watched his head and shoulders bobbing up and down as he went along. He looked pretty rotten – a gash down his cheek – hair and beard caked with mud – but it was Blackbeard all right. And anyone who could walk along

a street like that, not even wavering, *was* all right.

And then—realization struck him. He remembered where he was. Cigarette in hand, he was sitting on the top deck. And no living man could possibly be as tall as that—no living man so tall. . . .

## THE HOUSE BY THE HEADLAND

### 'Sapper'

'You'll no get there, zurr. There'll be a rare storm this night. Best bide here, and be going tomorrow morning after 'tis over.'

The warning of my late host, weather-wise through years of experience, rang through my brain as I reached the top of the headland, and, too late, I cursed myself for not having heeded his words. With a gasp I flung my pack down on the ground, and loosened my collar. Seven miles behind me lay the comfortable inn where I had lunched; eight miles in front the one where I proposed to dine. And midway between them was I, dripping with perspiration and panting for breath.

Not a breath of air was stirring; not a sound broke the death-like stillness, save the sullen, lazy beat of the sea against the rocks below. Across the horizon, as far as the eye could see, stretched a mighty bank of black cloud, which was spreading slowly and relentlessly over the whole heaven. Already its edge was almost overhead, and as I felt the first big drop of rain on my forehead, I cursed myself freely once again. If only I had listened to mine host: if only I was still in his comfortable oak-beamed coffee-room, drinking his most excellent ale . . . I felt convinced he was the type of man who would treat such trifles as regulation hours with the contempt they deserved. And, even as I tasted in imagination the bite of the grandest of all drinks on my parched tongue, and looked through the glass bottom of the tankard at the sanded floor, the second great drop of rain splashed on my face.

For a moment or two I wavered. Should I go back that seven miles, and confess myself a fool, or should I go on the further eight and hope that the next cellar would be as good as the last? In either case I was bound to get drenched to the skin, and at length I made up my mind. I would not turn back for any storm, and the matter of the quality of the ale must remain in the lap

of the gods. And at that moment, like a solid wall of water, the rain came.

I have travelled into most corners of the world, in the course of forty years' wandering; I have been through the monsoon going south to Singapore from Japan, I have been caught on the edge of a water-spout in the South Sea Islands; but I have never known anything like the rain which came down that June evening on the south-west coast of England. In half a minute every garment I wore was soaked; the hills and the sea were blotted out, and I stumbled forward blindly, unable to see more than a yard in front of me. Then, almost as abruptly as it had started, the rain ceased. I could feel the water squelching in my boots, and trickling down my back, as I kept steadily descending into the valley beyond the headland.

There was nothing for it now but to go through with it. I couldn't get any wetter than I was; so that, when I suddenly rounded a little knoll and saw in front a low-lying, rambling house, the idea of sheltering there did not at once occur to me. I glanced at it casually in the semi-darkness, and was trudging past the gate, my mind busy with other things, when a voice close behind me made me stop with a sudden start. A man was speaking, and a second before I could have sworn I was alone.

'A bad night, sir,' he remarked, in a curiously deep voice, 'and it will be worse soon. The thunder and lightning is nearly over. Will you not come in and shelter? I can supply you with a change of clothes if you are wet?'

'You are very good, sir,' I answered slowly, peering at the tall, gaunt figure beside me. 'But I think I will be getting on, thank you all the same.'

'As you like,' he answered indifferently, and even as he spoke a vivid flash of lightning quivered and died in the thick blackness of the sky, and almost instantaneously a deafening crash of thunder seemed to come from just over our heads. 'As you like,' he repeated, 'but I shall be glad of your company if you cared to stay the night.'

It was a kind offer, though in a way the least one would expect in similar circumstances, and I hesitated. Undoubtedly there was little pleasure to be anticipated in an eight-mile tramp under such conditions, and yet there was some-



thing—something indefinable, incoherent—which said to me insistently: 'Go on; don't stop. Go on.'

I shook myself in annoyance, and my wet clothes clung to me clammily. Was I, at my time of life, nervous, because a man had spoken to me unexpectedly?

'I think if I may,' I said, 'I will change my mind and avail myself of your kind offer. It is no evening for walking for pleasure.'

Without a word he led the way into the house, and I followed. Even in the poor light I could see that the garden was badly kept, and that the path leading to the front door was covered with weeds. Bushes, wet with the rain, hung in front of our faces, dripping dismally on to the ground; and green moss filled the cracks of the two steps leading up to the door, giving the impression almost of a mosaic.

Inside the hall was in darkness, and I waited while he opened the door into one of the rooms. I heard him fumbling for a match, and at that moment another blinding flash lit up the house as if it had been day. I had a fleeting vision of the stairs—a short, broad flight—with a window at the top; of two doors, one apparently leading to the servants' quarters, the other opposite the one my host had already opened. But most vivid of all in that quick photograph was the condition of the hall itself. Three or four feet above my head a lamp hung from the ceiling, and from it, in every direction, there seemed to be spiders' webs coated with dust and filth. They stretched to every picture; they stretched to the top of all the doors. One long festoon was almost brushing against my face, and for a moment a wave of unreasoning panic filled me.

Almost did I turn and run, so powerful was it; then, with an effort, I pulled myself together. For a grown man to become nervous of a spider's web is rather too much of a good thing, and after all it was none of my business. In all probability the man was a recluse, who was absorbed in more important matters than the cleanliness of his house. Though how he could stand the smell—dank and rotten—defeated me. It came to my nostrils as I stood there, waiting for him to strike a match, and the scent of my own wet Harris tweed failed to conceal it. It was the

smell of an unlived-in house, grown damp and mildewed with years of neglect, and once again I shuddered. Confound the fellow! Would he never get the lamp lit? I didn't mind his spiders' webs and the general filth of his hall, provided I could get some dry clothes on.

'Come in.' I looked up to see him standing in the door. 'I regret that there seems to be no oil in the lamp, but there are candles on the mantelpiece, should you care to light them.'

Somewhat surprised I stepped into the room, and then his next remark made me halt in amazement.

'When my wife comes down, I must ask her about the oil. Strange of her to have forgotten.'

Wife! What manner of woman could this be who allowed her house to get into such a condition of dirt and neglect? And were there no servants? However, again, it was none of my business, and I felt in my pockets for matches. Luckily they were in a watertight box, and with a laugh I struck one and lit the candles.

'It's so infernally dark,' I remarked, 'that the stranger within the gates requires a little light, to get his bearings.'

In some curiosity I glanced at my host's face in the flickering light. As yet I had had no opportunity of observing him properly, but now as unostentatiously as possible I commenced to study it. Cadaverous almost to the point of emaciation, he had a ragged, bristly moustache, while his hair, plentifully flecked with grey, was brushed untidily back from his forehead. But dominating everything were his eyes, which glowed and smouldered from under his bushy eyebrows, till they seemed to burn into me.

More and more I found myself regretting the fact that I had accepted his offer. His whole manner was so strange that for the first time doubts as to his sanity began to creep into my mind. And to be alone with a madman in a deserted house, miles from any other habitation, with a terrific thunderstorm raging, was not a prospect which appealed to me greatly. Then I remembered his reference to his wife, and felt more reassured . . .

'You and your wife must find it lonely here,' I hazarded, when the silence had lasted some time.

'Why should my wife feel the loneliness?' he answered,

harshly. 'She has me – her husband . . . What more does a woman require?'

'Oh! Nothing, nothing,' I replied hastily, deeming discretion the better part of veracity. 'Wonderful air; beautiful view. I wonder if I could have a dry coat as you so kindly suggested?'

I took off my own wet one as I spoke, and threw it over the back of a chair. Then, receiving no answer to my request, I looked at my host. His back was half towards me, and he was staring into the hall outside. He stood quite motionless, and as apparently he had failed to hear me, I was on the point of repeating my remark when he turned and spoke to me again.

'A pleasant surprise for my wife, sir, don't you think? She was not expecting me home until tomorrow morning.'

'Very,' I assented . . .

'Eight miles I have walked, in order to prevent her being alone. That should answer your remark about her feeling the loneliness.'

He peered at me fixedly, and I again assented.

'Most considerate of you,' I murmured, 'most considerate.'

But the man only chuckled by way of answer, and, swinging round, continued to stare into the gloomy, filthy hall.

Outside the storm was increasing in fury. Flash followed flash with such rapidity that the whole sky westwards formed into a dancing sheet of flame, while the roll of the thunder seemed like the continuous roar of a bombardment with heavy guns. But I was aware of it only subconsciously; my attention was concentrated on the gaunt man standing so motionless in the centre of the room.

So occupied was I with him that I never heard his wife's approach until suddenly, looking up, I saw that by the door there stood a woman – a woman who paid no attention to me, but only stared fearfully at her husband, with a look of dreadful terror in her eyes. She was young, far younger than the man – and pretty in a homely, country-fied way. And as she stared at the gaunt, cadaverous husband she seemed to be trying to speak, while ceaselessly she twisted a wisp of a pocket handkerchief in her hands.

'I didn't expect you home so soon, Rupert,' she stammered at length. 'Have you had a good day?'

'Excellent,' he answered, and his eyes seemed to glow more fiendishly than ever. 'And now I have come home to my little wife, and her loving welcome.'

She laughed a forced, unnatural laugh, and came a few steps into the room.

'There is no oil in the lamp, my dear,' he continued, suavely. 'Have you been too busy to remember to fill it?'

'I will go and get some,' she said, quickly turning towards the door. But the man's hand shot out and caught her arm, and at his touch she shrank away, cowering.

'I think not,' he cried, harshly. 'We will sit in the darkness, my dear, and – wait.'

'How mysterious you are, Rupert!' She forced herself to speak lightly. 'What are we going to wait for?'

But the man only laughed – a low, mocking chuckle – and pulled the girl nearer to him.

'Aren't you going to kiss me, Mary? It's such a long time since you kissed me – a whole twelve hours.'

The girl's free hand clenched tight, but she made no other protest as her husband took her in his arms and kissed her. Only it seemed to me that her whole body was strained and rigid, as if to brace herself to meet a caress she loathed . . . In fact the whole situation was becoming distinctly embarrassing. The man seemed to have completely forgotten my existence, and the girl so far had not even looked at me. Undoubtedly a peculiar couple, and a peculiar house. Those cobwebs: I couldn't get them out of my mind.

'Hadh't I better go and fill the lamp now?' she asked after a time. 'Those candles give a very poor light, don't they?'

'Quite enough for my purpose, my dear wife,' replied the man. 'Come and sit down and talk to me.'

With his hand still holding her arm he drew her to a sofa, and side by side they sat down. I noticed that all the time he was watching her covertly out of the corner of his eye, while she stared straight in front of her as if she was waiting for something to happen . . . And at that moment a door banged, upstairs.

'What's that?' The girl half rose, but the man pulled her back.

'The wind, my dear,' he chuckled. 'What else could it be? The house is empty save for us.'

'Hadn't I better go up and see that all the windows are shut?' she said, nervously. 'This storm makes me feel frightened.'

'That's why I hurried back to you, my love. I couldn't bear to think of you spending tonight alone.' Again he chuckled horribly, and peered at the girl beside him. 'I said to myself, "She doesn't expect me back till tomorrow morning. I will surprise my darling wife, and go back home tonight." Wasn't it kind of me, Mary?'

'Of course it was, Rupert,' she stammered. 'Very kind of you. I think I'll just go up and put on a jersey. I'm feeling a little cold.'

She tried to rise, but her husband still held her; and then suddenly there came on her face such a look of pitiable terror that involuntarily I took a step forward. She was staring at the door, and her lips were parted as if to cry out, when the man covered her mouth with his free hand and dragged her brutally to her feet.

'Alone, my wife—all alone,' he snarled. 'My dutiful, loving wife all alone. What a good thing I returned to keep her company!'

For a moment or two she struggled feebly; then he half carried, half forced her close by me to a position behind the open door. I could have touched them as they passed; but I seemed powerless to move. Instinctively I knew what was going to happen; but I could do nothing save stand and stare at the door, while the girl, half fainting, crouched against the wall, and her husband stood over her motionless and terrible. And thus we waited, while the candles guttered in their sockets, listening to the footsteps which were coming down the stairs . . .

Twice I strove to call out; twice the sound died away in my throat. I felt as one does in some awful nightmare, when a man cries aloud and no sound comes, or runs his fastest and yet does not move. In it, I was yet not of it; it was as if I was the spectator of some inexorable tragedy with no power to intervene.

The steps came nearer. They were crossing the hall now – the cobwebby hall – and the next moment I saw a young man standing in the open door.

‘Mary, where are you, my darling?’ He came into the room and glanced around. And, as he stood there, one hand in his pocket, smiling cheerily, the man behind the door put out his arm and gripped him by the shoulder. In an instant the smile vanished and the youngster spun round, his face set and hard.

‘Here is your darling, John Trelawnay,’ said the husband quietly. ‘What do you want with her?’

‘Ah!’ The youngster’s breath came a little faster, as he stared at the older man. ‘You’ve come back unexpectedly, have you? It’s the sort of damned dirty trick you would play.’

I smiled involuntarily: this was carrying the war into the enemy’s camp with a vengeance.

‘What are you doing in this house alone with my wife, John Trelawnay?’ Into the quiet voice had crept a note of menace, and, as I glanced at the speaker and noticed the close clenching and unclenching of his powerful hands, I realized that there was going to be trouble. The old, old story again, but, rightly or wrongly, with every sympathy of mine on the side of the sinners.

‘Your wife by a trick only, Rupert Carlingham,’ returned the other hotly. ‘You know she’s never loved you; you know she has always loved me.’

‘Nevertheless – my wife. But I ask you again, what are you doing in this house while I am away?’

‘Did you expect us to stand outside in the storm?’ muttered the other.

For a moment the elder man’s eyes blazed, and I thought he was going to strike the youngster. Then, with an effort, he controlled himself, and his voice was ominously quiet as he spoke again.

‘You lie, John Trelawnay.’ His brooding eyes never left the other’s face. ‘It was no storm that drove you here today; no thunder that made you call my wife your darling. You came because you knew I was away; because you thought – you and your mistress – that I should not return till tomorrow.’

For a while he was silent, while the girl still crouched against the wall staring at him fearfully, and the youngster, realizing the hopelessness of further denial, faced him with folded arms. In silence I watched them from the shadow beyond the fireplace, wondering what I ought to do. There is no place for any outsider in such a situation, much less a complete stranger; and had I consulted my own inclinations I would have left the house there and then and chanced the storm still raging outside. I got as far as putting on my coat again, and making a movement towards the door, when the girl looked at me with such an agony of entreaty in her eyes that I paused. Perhaps it was better that I should stop; perhaps if things got to a head, and the men started fighting, I might be of some use.

And at that moment Rupert Carlingham threw back his head and laughed. It echoed and re-echoed through the room, peal after peal of maniacal laughter, while the girl covered her face with her hands and shrank away, and the youngster, for all his pluck, retreated a few steps. The man was mad, there was no doubt about it: and the laughter of a madman is perhaps the most awful thing a human being may hear.

Quickly I stepped forward; it seemed to me that if I was to do anything at all the time had now come.

'I think, Mr Carlingham,' I said, firmly, 'that a little quiet discussion would be of advantage to everyone.'

He ceased laughing, and stared at me in silence. Then his eyes left my face and fixed themselves again on the youngster. It was useless; he was blind to everything except his own insensate rage. And, before I could realize his intention, he sprang.

'You'd like me to divorce her, wouldn't you?' he snarled, as his hand sought John Trelawnay's throat. 'So that you could marry her. . . . But I'm not going to - no. I know a better thing than divorce.'

The words were choked on his lips by the youngster's fist, which crashed again and again into his face; but the man seemed insensible to pain. They swayed backwards and forwards, while the lightning, growing fainter and fainter in the distance, quivered through the room from time to time, and the two candles supplied the rest of the

illumination. Never for an instant did the madman relax his grip on the youngster's throat: never for an instant did the boy cease his sledgehammer blows on the other's face. But he was tiring, it was obvious; no normal flesh and blood could stand the frenzied strength against him. And, suddenly, it struck me that murder was being done, in front of my eyes.

With a shout I started forward – somehow they must be separated. And then I stopped motionless again: the girl had slipped past me with her face set and hard. With a strength for which I would not have given her credit she seized both her husband's legs about the knees, and lifted his feet off the ground, so that his only support was the grip of his left hand on the youngster's throat and the girl's arms about his knees. He threw her backwards and forwards as if she had been a child, but still she clung on, and then, in an instant, it was all over. His free right hand had been forgotten. . . .

I saw the boy sway nearer in his weakness, and the sudden flash of a knife. There was a little choking gurgle, and they all crashed down together, with the youngster underneath. And when the madman rose the boy lay still, with the shaft of the knife sticking out from his coat above his heart.

It was then that Rupert Carlingham laughed again, while his wife, mad with grief, knelt beside the dead boy, pillow-ing his head on her lap. For what seemed an eternity I stood watching, unable to move or speak; then the murderer bent down and swung his wife over his shoulder. And, before I realized what he was going to do, he had left the room, and I saw him passing the window outside.

The sight galvanized me into action; there was just a possibility I might avert a double tragedy. With a loud shout I dashed out of the front door, and down the ill-kept drive; but when I got to the open ground he seemed to have covered an incredible distance, considering his burden. I could see him shambling over the turf, up the side of the valley which led to the headland where the rain had caught me, and, as fast as I could, I followed him, shouting as I ran. But it was no use – gain on him I could not. Steadily, with apparent ease, he carried the girl up the hill,



taking no more notice of my cries than he had of my presence earlier in the evening. And, with the water squelching from my boots, I ran after him—no longer wasting my breath on shouting, but saving it all in my frenzied endeavour to catch him before it was too late. For once again I knew what was going to happen, even as I had known when I heard the footsteps coming down the stairs.

I was still fifty yards from him when he reached the top of the cliff; and for a while he paused there silhouetted against the angry sky. He seemed to be staring out to sea, and the light from the flaming red sunset, under the black of the storm, shone on his great, gaunt figure, bathing it in a wonderful splendour. The next moment he was gone. . . . I heard him give one loud cry; then he sprang into space with the girl still clasped in his arms.

And when I reached the spot and peered over, only the low booming of the sullen Atlantic three hundred feet below came to my ears. . . . That, and the mocking shrieks of a thousand gulls. Of the madman and his wife there was no sign.

At last I got up and started to walk away mechanically. I felt that somehow I was to blame for the tragedy, that I should have done something, taken a hand in that grim fight. And yet I knew that if I was called upon to witness it again, I should act in the same way. I should feel as powerless to move as I had felt in that ill-omened house, with the candles guttering on the mantelpiece, and the lightning flashing through the dirty window. Even now I seemed to be moving in a dream, and after a while I stopped and made a determined effort to pull myself together.

'You will go back,' I said out loud, 'to that house. And you will make sure that that boy is dead. You are a grown man, and not an hysterical woman. You will go back.'

And as if in answer a seagull screamed discordantly above my head. Not for five thousand pounds would I have gone back to that house alone, and when I argued with myself and said, 'You are a fool, and a coward,' the gull shrieked mockingly again.

'What is there to be afraid of?' I cried. 'A dead body: and you have seen many hundreds.'

It was as I asked the question out loud that I came to a road and sat down beside it. It was little more than a track, but it seemed to speak of other human beings, and I wanted human companionship at that moment – wanted it more than I had ever wanted anything in my life. At any other time I would have resented sharing with strangers the glorious beauty of the moors as they stretched back to a rugged tor a mile or two away, with their wonderful colouring of violet and black, and the scent of the wet earth rising all around. But now. . . .

With a shudder I rose, conscious for the first time that I was feeling chilled. I must get somewhere – talk to someone; and, as if in answer to my thoughts, a car came suddenly in sight, bumping over the track.

There was an elderly man inside, and two girls, and he pulled up at once on seeing me.

'By Jove!' he cried, cheerily, 'you're very wet. Can I give you a lift anywhere?'

'It is very good of you,' I said. 'I want to get to the police as quickly as possible.'

'The police?' He stared at me surprised. 'What's wrong?'

'There's been a most ghastly tragedy,' I said. 'A man has been murdered and the murderer has jumped over that headland, with his wife in his arms. The murderer's name was Rupert Carlingham.'

I was prepared for my announcement startling them; I was not prepared for the extraordinary effect it produced. With a shriek of terror the two girls clung together, and the man's ruddy face went white.

'What name did you say?' he said at length, in a shaking voice.

'Rupert Carlingham,' I answered, curtly. 'And the boy he murdered was called John Trelawnay. Incidentally I want to get a doctor to look at the youngster. It's possible the knife might have just missed his heart.'

'Oh, Daddy, drive on, drive on quick!' implored the girls, and I glanced at them in slight surprise. After all, a murder is a very terrible thing, but it struck me they were becoming hysterical over it.

'It was just such an evening,' said the man, slowly; 'just such a storm as we've had this afternoon, that it happened.'

'That what happened?' I cried a trifle irritably; but he made no answer, and only stared at me curiously.

'Do you know these parts, sir?' he said at length.

'It's the first time I've ever been here,' I answered. 'I'm on a walking tour.'

'Ah! A walking tour. Well, I'm a doctor myself, and unless you get your clothes changed pretty quickly, I predict that your walking tour will come to an abrupt conclusion—even if it's only a temporary one. Now, put on this coat, and we'll get off to a good inn.'

But, anxious as I was to fall in with his suggestion myself, I felt that that was more than I could do.

'It's very good of you, doctor,' I said; 'but, seeing that you are a medical man, I really must ask you to come and look at this youngster first. I'd never forgive myself if by any chance he wasn't dead. As a matter of fact, I've seen death too often not to recognize it, and the boy was stabbed clean through the heart right in front of my eyes — but . . .'

I broke off, as one of the girls leaned forward and whispered to her father. But he only shook his head, and stared at me curiously.

'Did you make no effort to stop the murder?' he asked at length.

It was the question I had been dreading, the question I knew must come sooner or later. But, now that I was actually confronted with it, I had no answer ready. I could only shake my head and stammer out confusedly:

'It seems incredible for a man of my age and experience to confess it, doctor — but I didn't. I couldn't . . . I was just going to try and separate them, when the girl rushed in . . . and . . .'

'What did she do?' It was one of the daughters who fired the question at me so suddenly that I looked at her in amazement. 'What did Mary do?'

'She got her husband by the knees,' I said, 'and hung on like a bulldog. But he'd got a grip on the boy's throat and then — suddenly — it was all over. They came crashing

down as he stabbed young Trelawnay.' Once again the girls clung together shuddering, and I turned to the doctor. 'I wish you'd come, doctor: it's only just a step. I can show you the house.'

'I know the house, sir, very well,' he answered, gravely. Then he put his arms on the steering-wheel and for a long time sat motionless staring into the gathering dusk, while I fidgeted restlessly, and the girls whispered together. What on earth was the man waiting for? I wondered: after all, it wasn't a very big thing to ask of a doctor. . . . At last he got down from the car and stood beside me on the grass.

'You've never been here before, sir?' he asked again, looking at me fixedly.

'Never,' I answered, a shade brusquely. 'And I'm not altogether bursting with a desire to return.'

'Strange,' he muttered. 'Very, very strange. I will come with you.'

For a moment he spoke to his daughters as if to reassure them; then, together, we walked over the springy turf towards the house by the headland. He seemed in no mood for conversation, and my own mind was far too busy with the tragedy for idle talk.

But he asked me one question when we were about fifty yards from the house.

'Rupert Carlingham carried his wife up to the headland, you say?'

'Slung over his shoulder,' I answered, 'and then . . .'

But the doctor had stopped short, and was staring at the house, while, once again, every vestige of colour had left his face.

'My God!' he muttered, 'there's a light in the room. . . . A light, man; don't you see it?'

'I left the candles burning,' I said, impatiently. 'Really, doctor, I suppose murder doesn't often come your way, but . . .'

I walked on quickly and he followed. Really the fuss was getting on my nerves, already distinctly ragged. The front door was open as I had left it, and I paused for a moment in the cobwebby hall. Then, pulling myself together, I stepped into the room where the body lay, to halt

and stare open-mouthed at the floor. . . .

The candles still flickered on the mantelpiece; the furniture was as I had left it; but of the body of John Trelawney there was not a trace. It had vanished utterly and completely.

'I don't understand, doctor,' I muttered foolishly. 'I left the body lying there.'

The doctor stood at the door beside me, and suddenly I realized that his eyes were fixed on me.

'I know,' he said, and his voice was grave and solemn. 'With the head near that chair.'

'Why, how do you know?' I cried, amazed. 'Have you taken the body away?'

But he answered my question by another.

'Do you notice anything strange in this room, sir?' he asked. 'On the floor?'

'Only a lot of dust,' I remarked.

'Precisely,' he said. 'And one would expect footprints in dust. I see yours going to the mantelpiece; I see no others.'

I clutched his arm, as his meaning came to me.

'My God!' I whispered. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean,' he said, 'that Rupert Carlingham murdered John Trelawney, and then killed himself and his wife, five years ago . . . during just such another storm as we have had this evening.'

## DRURY LANE GHOST

*W. Macqueen-Pope*

Most people disbelieve in ghosts. Yet, strangely enough, the more they express their disbelief the greater interest they show in ghost stories and the greater reluctance they display at being left alone in places where a ghost walks.

I don't believe in ghosts myself, yet I am a habitual ghost see-er. Let me qualify that statement. I don't believe in the ghost who is regarded as the disembodied spirit of someone long dead, doomed to walk this earth for some reason or other. But I do believe – and seeing is believing in my case – that apparitions can be, and are, seen by certain people and under certain conditions. We will come to that later. I might mention, to avoid further argument, that I am a teetotaller and am not a Spiritualist, although I find no fault with the Spiritualist case.

If there are no ghosts, if they are never seen except in the imagination, why this age-old belief in them? Science scoffs at them. Yet Science will, one day, and before very long, provide the satisfactory explanation of their presence and probably the means whereby everyone will be able, if they so desire, to have a look at them. Meanwhile, I can do it for myself. So can many others.

Now, on the face of it, a theatre might seem an unlikely place for a haunt. The popular idea runs to graveyards, deserted moated granges, ancient castles, deep dungeons and the like. That is the disembodied spirit school of thought. As a matter of fact, a graveyard is a most unlikely place, for ghosts haunt the spots with which they were most intimately connected and, more important still, where in nine cases out of ten they met with a sudden and violent end.

In order to see them, the 'waves' must be right, the atmospheric conditions must be attuned. For seeing a ghost is much akin to tuning in on the radio – if you have not got the right wave-length you won't get the programme.

Now a theatre, to most people, is a centre of human

activity, of crowds, of lights and music, laughter and applause – the sort of place that a self-respecting ghost would shun. Yet there are no less than four accredited ghosts in London theatres, all well authenticated and of years' standing.

There are other ghost stories in the playhouses, but these are the Big Four, who are permanencies – the others have only been seen once or twice.

So far from being a bad place for a haunt, a theatre is a very good one. Life moves swiftly there and often violently for theatre folk. The atmosphere is charged with emotion and deep feeling – despair, excitement, triumph and disaster. These set up the right waves to make the ghosts visible. Sokolova, the world-famous ballerina, once said to me, 'Haven't you ever felt, when crossing the stage of an empty theatre after a big first night, that the building itself was tired and worn out – that it, like you, is almost exhausted by the stress and the excitement of what has happened?' Sokolova is quite right. She had put into words what so many of us have experienced. It is just that generation of electricity – for want of a better word – which creates and makes visible the ghosts of the theatres. The atmospherics are right.

The haunted theatres of London are Drury Lane, the Haymarket, the St James's and the Royalty. Take them in order of seniority – the Ghost of Drury Lane coming first, as indeed he should. Perhaps I shall deal with the others at another time.

Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, is the oldest playhouse in the world still used as such. And its ghost is the senior theatre ghost. He is not as old as the theatre, but I am sure he is over two centuries old all the same. He is a double mystery. There he is, undoubtedly, but who he is, or who he was, that nobody knows. He is anonymous, he is the ghost of a forgotten man – he is the ghost of a forgotten and undiscovered crime. Save in his ghostly form he has no history at all. He was not an actor, dramatist, or a manager, for, if so, he could be located. He is, I believe, the victim of a murder which was never discovered at the time and the perpetrators of which got off scot-free. Let me tell you the story.

Just over a century ago repair work was in progress at Drury Lane Theatre. The workmen were busy inside the theatre building on the thick, sturdy main wall on the Russell Street side. To their astonishment they came across a section of the wall, on the present upper circle level, which rang hollow where it should have been solid. They called the foreman. He either consulted with a higher authority or gave instructions himself, for they broke through that wall – and found themselves in a small room which had been bricked up. The room was not empty. It contained an old worm-eaten table and a broken chair. It contained something else – a complete skeleton with a dagger in its ribs. Someone had been killed – murdered – and had been bricked up in that small room and left for centuries. There were, about the bones, some fragments of mouldering cloth with a corded edge, which crumbled at the touch.

There was an inquest and an open verdict. The bones were buried in the small graveyard at the corner of Drury Lane and Russell Street. It is now a children's playground, but it was the graveyard Dickens mentioned in *Bleak House* where Lady Deadlock's lover lay and on the steps of which she herself died.

To this day nobody knows who was the man murdered and immured in the theatre. Nor does anyone know when it occurred. I have my own theory. I would place that murder at any time between 1690 and 1710, when the wily and reprehensible Christopher Rich controlled the theatre. I do not for one moment suggest he did the deed. He was too artful to indulge in violence – he knew a trick worth two of that. But during his reign we have it on record that builders were always in the theatre extending, altering, tinkering with the structure, for Rich was always trying to find room for more seats. I believe that some time during that period a young man of property came up from the country to see life and found – Death. He would naturally frequent the playhouses – there were only two, Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields. He would, like the other gay sparks, go and walk about on the stage. Doubtless he fell for one of the girls – doubtless he aroused jealousy. And a lover or a husband had him quietly re-



moved, and for a small consideration—life was cheap then—got him neatly bricked up and—that was that! People often vanished without trace in those good old days. They still do. That is what I think happened.

The portion of the wall in which he was found survived the rebuilding of 1794 and the fire of 1809. It was, it is, part of the second theatre which Christopher Wren built so strongly and well. It has been cut about since, but I can show you exactly where that room was. But neither I nor anyone else knows the identity of the man whose tomb it was for so many long years. It is, however, not from the site of that room that our ghost appears. He comes through a wall very near to it, where once there was a 'pass' door—that is, a door leading back-stage. There used to be one on every tier at Drury Lane up to very recently, and there was so, certainly, when our ghost was a living man. I say he comes through the wall, but nobody has actually seen him emerge through it. Suddenly he is there, on the very threshold of the room where the skeleton lay. He walks along a short corridor, he enters the upper circle—in his day it would have corresponded with the second box circle—he walks right round the back of it, and enters a room now used as a bar on the other side of the theatre, passing through the wall there, and through again what was an old pass door, the outline of which can still be seen although long since bricked up. There are witnesses to this, so it is fairly safe to assume that he comes through the corresponding door on the other side in the first place.

Now, although he comes back-stage and returns to that part of the theatre, he has never once been glimpsed the other side of the proscenium arch. Watch has been kept there, but never a sign of him seen. But on his own walk, in the auditorium itself, he is constantly seen.

That, more than anything else, proves him to have been a member of the public and not an actor—for you cannot keep an actor off the stage in life and the urge would certainly remain in a ghost. This ghost is never seen away from his usual walk, never in any other part of the theatre—and he always walks the same way—in the same direction, from the left-hand side of the theatre to the right. He

is a remarkable mystery, he has many odd traits missing in other apparitions, but he is constant to his selected route and never varies it.

The oddest thing about him is his disregard for usual ghostly custom. This spectre has not the fears which racked Hamlet's father, neither is he bound by the same rules. It matters not one whit to him that the glow-worm begins 'to pale his uneffectual fire' at the approach of matins. For this ghost walks by day. Every recorded appearance of his has been between nine o'clock in the morning and six o'clock at night. He has never been seen after that time. I was Chief Warden of Drury Lane Theatre during the war, and was about the place (of which by long association I know every cranny) at all hours of the night. During those by no means silent watches neither I, nor my fire guards, caught sight of him. But during the regular hours, he has been seen scores – no, hundreds – of times.

So, if you are a playgoer who likes to include a bit of ghost-seeing as well, it is no use looking for him when you go to Drury Lane at night. But if you attend a *matinée* – that is a different matter.

He is also unlike Hamlet's father, in as much as he addresses nobody and shows not the slightest desire so to do. He has no dislike of human beings, nor does he avoid them, unless they approach him deliberately and with the idea of speaking to him. Then he just is not there. The reason is, of course, that by shifting your position you have got out of focus. He is doubtless still there but you have lost the wave-length. As to why he should be invisible at night I have very little idea, except that every radio fan knows that it is easier to get distant stations under certain atmospheric conditions than others. It may be the same with him. He may require something which the night atmosphere cannot supply.

But if you are interested and you happen to be in Drury Lane Theatre, and in or near its upper circle during the hours between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m., you have a very good chance.

If you are lucky – or unlucky, according to your feelings in the matter – what you will see is a man of just over middle height, clothed entirely in grey, wearing a long

riding cloak of the early eighteenth-century type. His hair is either powdered or he wears a wig, it is difficult to tell; beneath that cloak, which is wrapped round him, are riding-boots, and you can see the end of a sword scabbard, too. His hat is three-cornered, and here again is something curious. Sometimes it is on his head, sometimes it is carried under his arm. Personally I have always seen him wearing it, but there are reports of his being uncovered for which I cannot vouch myself. His features are clean-cut, he has a rather square face with a strong chin and a well-marked mouth—if one was asked whom he resembled, the nearest to his looks would be the late Sir George Alexander—but he is not the apparition of that actor-knight. Although Alexander appeared at the Lane, nothing ever occurred whilst he was there to make him haunt it—and besides, there are records of our ghost's appearance for nearly two hundred years. He appears to be a young man and a well-bred man. He does not hurry. He walks in a calm and leisurely fashion along his pitch, taking no notice of anyone.

I have said he does not shun human company. For all I know he is unaware of it. But certain it is that he has been seen by members of an audience whilst a *matinée* performance was actually in progress. Not once but many a time. During the run of Ivor Novello's *Careless Rapture* in 1936 a lady in the audience, during the interval, asked an attendant if this was the sort of play in which the actors came in front and mixed with the audience. The girl, somewhat surprised, replied that it was not. 'I asked,' said the lady, 'because a man in fancy dress with a three-cornered hat passed by me just now.' I was fetched and spoke to the playgoer. Her description was an exact description of our ghost. The lady had no idea we had one.

At a *matinée* of the last pantomime staged at Drury Lane, Christmas 1938-9, a woman was taken with a fainting fit, of course in the upper circle. First-aid was administered, but she did not feel well, and asked if she could have the services of the nurse. She was asked what nurse, and she replied, 'One in a grey cloak, of which I caught sight shortly before I fainted.' There was a search, but no nurse in a grey cloak was in any part of the theatre. She had

seen the ghost, probably he had just passed by, and it was his back view she had caught sight of. But she did not faint on that account, for she knew nothing at all about the Drury Lane ghost.

One morning, just after nine o'clock, a cleaner (as theatre charwomen are always called) went into the upper circle. It was her first day in the theatre. She saw a man in curious dress strolling along the gangway at the back. The curtain was down, and so far as she knew, no rehearsal was on. Yet this man appeared to be in stage costume. She thought she had better question him. She bent to put down her pail and her brushes, and when she straightened up again he had gone. She hurried along the way he had taken – and she saw him for a second against the wall of the refreshment-room on the right-hand side. Then again he had gone. To come out again he must have passed her – he had not done so. She went down to report. In due course I was informed. I questioned the woman. Her description was just the same as all the others. And she had no knowledge that Drury Lane had a ghost. There are countless other instances, but let these serve.

When Drury Lane was bombed during the war, scoffers at once suggested that the ghost would be seen no more, and that he had been blown up. True, the bomb passed right through the middle of his walk. But it made no difference to him – why should it? He took not the slightest notice. He walks as he has walked for so many years. But he does not seem to be very regular in his appearances. Sometimes there are long gaps of time between recorded appearances, sometimes he is seen often in a short space of time. There is no record of his ever being seen twice in one day – or even in one week. Nor is he only visible to one person at a time. Crowds of people have seen him at once. During the photo call of *The Dancing Years*, when the stage was crowded with the company having photographs taken, he went across the back of the upper circle and was visible to many of them.

He has an irritating knack of not turning up when he is most wanted. A deputation from the Psychical Research Society came along one afternoon with some journalists, and we sat for over two hours, waiting and hoping. Not a

sign of him did we see. Yet two days later I saw him clearly and well. And whilst that particular pantomime was running – it was just before Christmas that they came – Fay Compton saw him too. She is also a ghost see-er.

There was another time when I would have paid a handsome sum of money to any theatrical charity – or any society for the maintenance of poor and needy ghosts – had he put in an appearance. But he did not oblige. On Friday, November 28th, 1939, Their Majesties the King and Queen came to inspect the work of ENSA, which had made Drury Lane the headquarters for troops entertainment. It was my privilege to guide the King and Queen round the building, show them all there was to see and to tell them something of its long history – after all, it is Theatre Royal, the Monarch's own playhouse, and we who work there can, by virtue of the Royal Charter of Charles II, call ourselves His Majesty's Servants. I told them of the ghost and they were greatly interested. They stood with me for several minutes on the stage gazing at the upper circle as I pointed out its walk. The King expressed the wish that it would turn up, which the Queen echoed. But that ghostly servant of Their Majesties missed his great opportunity. Yet during the next month we saw him three times.

Frequently I show parties of visitors round the historic theatre. The ghost walk and the ghost story is always the most popular part of the tour. Some laugh, some sneer, some are eager to see him, others are obviously scared. There is nothing to be frightened about. No weird or terrifying phenomena accompany him. There is no wailing, no screaming, no clanking of chains, no howling of dogs, not even a dank and chilly atmosphere surrounds him. One just sees that calm and rather dignified figure quietly proceeding on his usual promenade. 'What does he look like?' they ask. 'Is he transparent – can you see through him – is he clear to the eye?' He is, extremely so, although a little misty. The effect is as if you were watching a scene on the stage which was being enacted behind what we call a 'gauze'. The gauze is transparent because of the lights behind it, so you can see the figures come and go quite distinctly as you might see a man a little distance away

through a light summer mist. That is the effect as nearly as I can put it into words. I have seen him many scores of times. He is an old friend. I used to try to approach right up to him, but he always vanished when I did so. But if you stay fourteen, fifteen, or twenty feet away, you can keep him in full view. I have been about twelve feet from him, when I have seen him pass through that old bricked-up pass door. I have never been able to pass by him. I have gone to meet him face to face, but at the usual distance he has vanished. But I have been enabled, as have others, to see his features and I know him well.

When those parties of visitors have seen the wall from which he enters the theatre, have gazed on the site of the murdered man's room, I always take them over the ghost walk, pausing now and then to give him a chance of turning up. So far he has never done so, but I never lose hope.

It always amuses me to notice that those who have giggled and laughed, who have expressed their complete disbelief when I have been telling them the story, always press on pretty quickly, with many glances round, until we have left the part of the building he uses.

Twice, quite unwittingly, he has given us a good laugh. On the occasion when the Psychical Research people came to inspect him, I stayed on in the upper circle after they had gone, together with a girl journalist who had been sent down on the story by her paper – a daily illustrated one – and who had evidently been told to come back with a first-hand account of the ghost. With me, she sat and waited. All of a sudden, on the far side of the theatre, a figure became visible against a very dimly lit glass door. The girl saw it, shrieked and clutched my arm. I got up at once and went towards the figure, which walked very slowly towards me. That young journalist held on to me tight, breathing heavily and torn between fear and the hope of a first-class story. But, alas, it was not the ghost, but one of the Researchers who had lost her way in our rabbit-warren of a theatre and was searching for the way out.

On another occasion, during the war, and at about eleven at night, I was taking a party of fire guards round Drury

Lane, to get them accustomed to the many twists and turns, the odd staircases, the ways in and out and the nearest water supply to their posts. It was a very necessary part of their training. We were on the grand circle level, and I took advantage of a rest to tell them the story of the ghost. It was new to them. From the grand circle, on each side, a wide staircase ascends to the upper circle. I was just reaching the end of my story when there was a cry of 'My God, look!' There, entering from a corridor at the top of the upper circle stairs and coming very slowly towards us was—a figure in grey. Several of the men turned tail and bolted. Bombs they could face, but spectres were not in their line. Others—and to their credit, the majority—stood fast with me. I waited events. It was out of order—the time was wrong and the figure was coming the wrong way. Still, one never knew—even a ghost might alter his habits owing to war . . . and the figure in grey came nearer and nearer. Then—it spoke. 'I say,' it said, 'can I get out this way, or must I go down to the stage door?' The spell was broken. It was a pianist in a grey flannel suit who had been rehearsing in the upper circle bar. . . .

Now I have set down here exactly what happens. I don't expect to be believed by the majority of people. That does not worry me in the slightest. I know what I know. I think my theory of our ghost is correct. He is not the remnant of a famous actor, he is not Betterton, Hart, Mohun, Garrick, Cibber, Wilks, Macklin or even Edmund Kean. He is what is left of that young man who was murdered and bricked up in that wall—the victim of an undiscovered crime. It is my theory also that when what we call the spirit leaves the fleshly body by some act of violence or by some equally sudden means, some imprint is left on what for the want of a better name we call the ether.

I could have written this story in another way. I could have decked it out with eerie atmosphere, with strange sounds, and grim, half-lit details. But I chose to tell it as it actually is, as it actually happens. In daylight, in a building often full of people, as if for a ghost to walk was one of the most ordinary things of the world. That, to my mind, is the strangest and most convincing thing about it, the

matter-of-fact, everyday manner in which it occurs. That is the fact – as I have seen it scores of times. The theory is my own explanation of the sight and of its origin. You may believe or disbelieve, as you choose. But I would remind you that most of the great faiths of humanity are a compound of facts and of theory as well.

We at Drury Lane are fond of our ghost. We count him one of ourselves. We have an affection for him – indeed, we have considerable pride in him. Drury Lane is no ordinary theatre and its ghost is no ordinary apparition.

One more thing about him, which also endears him to us. His appearance usually betokens good luck. Seldom, if ever, do we see him when we have a failure, either just before its production or during its run. On the other hand, his appearance before a first night of a new show (yes, he was seen three days before *Oklahoma* was staged) is an almost sure token of success. He seems to know the good from the bad.

Which starts another theory – perhaps that ghost – that murdered man – was a critic. . . .



## THE NIGHT WALKERS

*Sydney J. Bounds*

'You're drinking too much again.'

Roger Bateson glanced across the table as his wife's furious whisper echoed around the canal-side pub. She had pushed back her plate with the remains of lunch, fat trimmed off cold meat and a tired leaf of lettuce. Her mouth was turned down at the corners.

He looked back at the large-scale map spread out on the table, his finger still on the junction where two cuts met. He had been working out time and distance to their next mooring, when he spotted the branch and the name of the lock a few miles along it: Deadmen's Lock.

'Look at this, Jan.'

'I'm not interested.'

'Then you'd better get interested, because this is where we're going.'

He swallowed the rest of his pint and rose abruptly, tall and willowy and black-haired, dressed in faded jeans and a check shirt. He carried the map across to a corner where two local men sat sucking on pipes over empty glasses.

'Can I get you a refill?' Roger's brilliant smile switched on like the charm of a con-man.

'With pleasure, sir. Us has never been known to turn down free beer.'

'We're on a holiday cruise—I suppose that's obvious?' Roger displayed his map of the waterways and pointed out the junction, a few miles north of the Swan inn. 'I'd like to know if this branch is navigable.'

'Aye, we know un . . . your health, sir, and my advice is, stick to the main line. That branch ain't nice and that's fact. The lock's dangerous, been a few drowned there, 's how it got its name.'

''Tis true what Harry says.' The second oldster wiped his moustache. 'But there's more to it. Local folk avoid Deadmen's Lock, and with reason. Only visitors use that

stretch of cut, and they don't happen back to tell any tales.'

'Rumours, Tom -'

'Aye, and the Night Walkers be only rumour? I'll wager you a quid you don't fancy walking along the towing path after dark. You know same as everyone in these parts 'tis a cruel haunting, a plague spot best avoided.'

Roger stared at them. 'Ghosts, you mean? You're serious?'

'Ghosts? In a manner o' speaking. I don't say they mean harm, but it must get powerful lonely down there. And the Night Walkers, well, they like company.'

'So it's best to give that branch a miss, sir. If you'll take my advice.'

'Time, gen'lemen, please!'

Jan rose promptly and started towards the door. 'Are you coming, Roger?'

He finished his beer, folded the map and followed her out into late summer sunlight. He walked just a trifle unsteadily across the jetty where Sister Rose was tied up. But now the idea of cruising the branch was fixed, like an immovable object, in his mind.

As Jan, blonde and dumpy, stepped aboard their hire cruiser, she turned to give him a hard look.

'If I know you, we're going all the same, No matter that it's dangerous. You won't consider my feelings - either keep straight on, or turn back?'

'You're dead right, I won't,' Roger agreed. 'Sounds like a lot of old cod to me. But if other people avoid this cut, good - we'll have it all to ourselves. That's the whole point of a holiday on the canals, to get away from the rat-race and enjoy a quiet life in the backwaters.'

Jan laughed harshly. 'The quiet life, yeah, stuck in a cramped cabin cooking on a paraffin stove, slogging away at rusted-up locks. I'm fed up with it.'

Roger ignored her; she reminded him of a needle stuck in a groove. Her idea of a holiday was a first-class hotel on the sea front with waiters to fetch and carry. It had been his idea to spend a fortnight on the canals and he didn't back down to anybody, least of all his wife.

He started the engine and slipped the mooring ropes

and eased *Sister Rose* out into the middle of the canal. She cruised along at a steady three miles an hour, leaving the Swan behind. Ahead was an empty horizon where blue sky met silver water; on each side, beyond thick green hedges, open countryside.

Jan changed into a bikini and sun-bathed on the cabin roof.

It could have been a marvellous holiday last year, Roger thought; but in their second year of marriage, the glamour had worn thin. They seemed to spend more time rowing than anything else.

And it was hard work at times, winding sluice paddles and pushing heavy wooden beams to work lock gates.

He reached the junction marked on his map and nosed the cruiser into it. There was a screen of low branches and overgrown hedge, but he forced a way through; the foliage sprang back, isolating them from the rest of the world.

The only sound was the noise of their engine. Roger was just a bit apprehensive; this cut was narrow, the banks high and green, and patches of weed floated on the surface.

Presently the boat slowed as the engine took up the strain. He leaned over the side to use the boat hook.

'Give me a hand, Jan.'

'You can do it yourself - it was your idea to come up here, so get on with it.'

Her voice was shrill. How had he ever imagined she had a soft country burr? It grated like a buzz-saw and he shouted back:

'Bitch!'

He reversed, then poked away with the boat hook, clearing the propeller.

The boat moved forward again. The trees grew in close and dense foliage cut off any view beyond. They chugged along, the engine protesting; and again he had to stop to get rid of the weed.

Roger glanced from his map to the sinking sun. Dead-men's Lock wasn't far now. He'd reach it before dark, and that was far enough for one day. An old disused lock wouldn't be easy to work; he'd leave that till morning. Maybe Jan would be in a better mood then.

*Sister Rose* plodded on until, ahead, the ancient timbers

of the lock reared out of the canal.

Roger slowed the boat and took her in close to the tow-path, searching for a mooring. Not that he expected much traffic; he hadn't seen another boat since he left the main line. It was a lonely spot, quiet, with no sign of life anywhere.

Jan sat up suddenly. 'Please, Roger, let's go on. I don't like it here.'

'That's too bad. You wouldn't help with the boat, and I'm dead tired.'

'It's always what you want.'

'I'm mooring. You get supper ready.'

She stamped into the cabin and he heard her banging things about as he tied up.

Strangely, the tow-path looked as though it were still in use. It was wide and clear where it ran along the bank, from the lock and past the boat. A damp mist was forming over the canal, turning the evening air chill. A breeze moved the gathering mist in eddies, first hiding, then revealing the gaunt framework of lock gates and balance beams.

He went into the cabin. Jan had changed into slacks and sweater, and there was cold tinned meat and bread and butter and tomatoes on the fold-out table between their bunks.

'We only had a cold lunch,' he grumbled.

'If you want something hot, cook it yourself!'

Roger scowled and reached for a can of beer. He pulled off the tab.

'Drinking again? Your breath stinks enough already.'

'Ah, shut up.'

They ate in silence, darkness coming down like a shroud, and Roger lit an oil lamp. Water dripped monotonously somewhere, and a rope creaked as the boat shifted fractionally.

He glowered at his wife. A year ago she'd been a dolly-bird, now . . . well, there wasn't anyone else available.

'How about it tonight?'

She sniffed. 'That's all you think about. Suppose you do the washing-up for once?'

She left the table and went out on deck. Roger pushed

back his chair and followed.

The night was dark and moonless. A few stars shone through banks of cloud and a chill wind blew across dark water, rippling its surface and stirring the mist. Deadmen's Lock had an eerie appearance by starlight, sagging timbers shrouded in greenish weed; a steady drip-drip of water leaked from the sluices and an unpleasant smell, like rotting vegetation, came on the breeze.

On impulse, he voiced his thoughts. 'Remember what the locals told us? A haunted place, where the drowned walk.'

Wind moaned through the trees and Jan shivered. 'It sounds like the dead wailing,' she whispered, and came into his arms for comfort.

'It's only the wind,' Roger said, refusing to admit his own unease.

He stared at the mist hanging over the lock. Muffled splashing sounds came from there. Rats? he wondered. Jan was warm and scented in his arms. 'Let's go inside.'

'Okay, Rog.'

He knew by her tone of voice that it was going to be all right, and smiled in the night, remembering their courting; how she'd been willing after a horror film.

Then the mist parted, like a stage curtain, and the stars shone on indistinct shapes, vaguely man-like, with just a hint of transparency.

Jan gave a choking sob and Roger's arms tightened about her.

'It's nothing,' he muttered. 'A trick of the light.'

His brain refused to accept what his eyes recorded. This could not possibly be happening, yet his scalp lifted.

Grotesque figures, bloated and pallid, heaved themselves up from the water in the lock chamber. The drowned climbed laboriously on to the tow-path, trailing weeds like green slime.

Starlight shone on and through the Night Walkers as, in seeming slow motion, they drifted towards the *Sister Rose*.

A wave of paralysing cold struck. The wind roared, battering at their ears, and Jan's mouth opened in a silent scream.

Clothed in mist, the Night Walkers moved along the embankment, water-logged flesh swollen and pulpy. They

squelched as they came, dripping water. Dead eyes stared avidly.

Roger suddenly remembered: *they like company* . . . and pushed Jan from him. He stumbled across the deck and fumbled at the mooring ropes with hands that shook. He couldn't loosen the knots and his teeth rattled in his head. Oh God, he prayed, let us get away, please let us get away . . .

The Night Walkers reached the boat and clambered aboard. Jan shrank back as one of the leprous shapes reached out to embrace her. She tried to jump to the opposite bank, but the gap was too wide; she vanished into the pound with a splash, crying out in her distress.

Roger gave up on the ropes; his hands were useless. One of the corpse-shapes stalked him. He flung up an arm that apparently went through the figure, and his arm felt as numb as if he'd stuck it in a refrigerator.

He jumped after his wife, into the canal.

'Jan!'

He glimpsed a head, hair spread out and floating on the surface, then she went under again as he stroked towards her.

Something curled around his ankle, dragging him back, pulling him under. He spluttered as water filled his mouth and nostrils. It's only weeds, he told himself, don't panic; but it felt like a hand gripping him, pulling him down, down . . .

He choked, lungs filling, and couldn't break free of the relentless hold. He struggled to reach the surface in his last moments of consciousness. Weeds like hands or hands like weeds, they wouldn't let go. Despair came, and darkness, and the roar in his ears gradually faded . . .

Sister Rose rocked gently at her mooring. The mist lifted and the stars shone on the still and silent water of Dead-men's Lock. After a decent interval, Roger and Jan, too, joined the Night Walkers.

## THE BUSINESS OF MADAME JAHN

Vincent O'Sullivan

How we all stared, how frightened we all were, how we passed opinions, on that morning when Gustave Herbout was found swinging by the neck from the ceiling of his bedroom! The whole *Faubourg*, even the ancient folk who had not felt a street under them for years, turned out and stood gaping at the house with amazement and loud conjecture. For why should Gustave Herbout, of all men, take to the rope? Only last week he had inherited all the money of his aunt, Madame Jahn, together with her house and the shop with the five assistants, and life looked fair enough for him. No; clearly it was not wise of Gustave to hang himself!

Besides, his aunt's death had happened at a time when Gustave was in sore straits for money. To be sure, he had his salary from the bank in which he worked; but what is a mere salary to one who (like Gustave) threw off the clerkly habit when working hours were over to assume the dress and lounge of the accustomed *boulevardier*: while he would relate to obsequious friends vague but satisfactory stories of a Russian Prince who was his uncle, and of an extremely rich English lady to whose death he looked forward with hope. Alas! with a clerk's salary one cannot make much of a figure in Paris. It took all of that, and more, to maintain the renown he had gained among his acquaintances of having to his own a certain little lady with yellow hair who danced divinely. So he was forced to depend on the presents which Madame Jahn gave him from time to time; and for those presents he had to pay his aunt a most sedulous and irksome attention. At times, when he was almost sick from his craving for the *boulevard*, the *café*, the theatre, he would have to repair as the day grew to an end, to our *Faubourg*, and the house behind the shop, where he would sit to an old-fashioned supper with his aunt, and listen with a sort of dull impatience while she asked him when he had last been at Confession, and told

him long dreary stories of his dead father and mother. Punctually at nine o'clock the deaf servant, who was the only person besides Madame Jahn that lived in the house, would let in the fat old priest, who came for his game of dominoes, and betake herself to bed. Then the dominoes would begin, and with them the old man's prattle which Gustave knew so well: about his daily work, about the uselessness of all things here on earth, and the happiness and glory of the Kingdom of Heaven; and, of course, our *boulevardier* noticed, with the usual cheap sneer of the modern, that whilst the priest talked of the Kingdom of Heaven he yet showed the greatest anxiety if he had symptoms of a cold, or any other petty malady. However, Gustave would sit there with a hypocrite's grin and inwardly raging, till the clock chimed eleven. At that hour Madame Jahn would rise, and, if she was pleased with her nephew, would go over to her writing-desk and give him, with a rather pretty air of concealment from the priest, perhaps fifty or a hundred francs. Whereupon Gustave would bid her a manifestly affectionate good night! and depart in the company of the priest. As soon as he could get rid of the priest, he would hasten to his favourite *cafés*, to discover that all the people worth seeing had long since grown tired of waiting and had departed on their own affairs. The money, indeed, was a kind of consolation; but then there were nights when he did not get a *sou*. Ah! they amuse themselves in Paris, but not in this way – this is not amusing.

One cannot live a proper life upon a salary and an occasional gift of fifty or a hundred francs. And it is not entertaining to tell men that your uncle, the Prince at Moscow, is in a sorry case, and even now lies a-dying, or that the rich English lady is in the grip of a vile consumption and is momentarily expected to succumb, if these men only shove up their shoulders, wink at one another, and continue to present their bills. Further, the little *Mademoiselle* with yellow hair had lately shown signs of a very pretty temper, because her usual flowers and *bon-bons* were not apparent. So, since things were come to this dismal pass, Gustave fell to attending the race-meetings at Chantilly. During the first week Gustave won largely, for that



is sometimes the way with ignorant men: during that week, too, the little Mademoiselle was charming, for she had her *bouquets* and boxes of *bon-bons*. But the next week Gustave lost heavily, for that is also very often the way with ignorant men: and he was thrown into the blackest despair, when one night at a place where he used to sup, Mademoiselle took the arm of a great fellow whom he much suspected to be a German, and tossed him a scornful nod as she went off.

On the evening after this happened, he was standing between five and six o'clock, in the *Place de la Madeleine*, blowing on his fingers and trying to plan his next move, when he heard his name called by a familiar voice, and turned to face his aunt's adviser, the priest.

'Ah, Gustave, my friend, I have just been to see a colleague of mine here!' cried the old man, pointing to the great church. 'And are you going to your good aunt tonight?' he added, with a look at Gustave's neat dress.

Gustave was in a flame that the priest should have detected him in his gay clothes, for he always made a point of appearing at Madame Jahn's clad staidly in black; but he answered pleasantly enough:

'No, my Father, I'm afraid I can't tonight. You see I'm a little behind with my office work, and I have to stay at home and catch up.'

'Well, well!' said the priest, with half a sigh, 'I suppose young men will always be the same. I myself can only be with her till nine o'clock tonight because I must see a sick parishioner. But let me give you one bit of advice, my friend,' he went on, taking hold of a button on Gustave's coat: 'Don't neglect your aunt; for, mark my words, one day everything of Madame Jahn's will be yours!' And the omnibus he was waiting for happening to swing by at that moment, he departed without another word.

Gustave strolled along the *Boulevard des Capucines* in a study. Yes; it was certain that the house, and the shop with the five assistants, would one day be his; for the priest knew all his aunt's affairs. But how soon would they be his? Madame Jahn was now hardly sixty; her mother had lived to be ninety; when she was ninety he would be— And meanwhile, what about the numerous bills; what

(above all!) about the little lady with yellow hair? He paused and struck his heel on the pavement with such force, that two men passing nudged one another and smiled. Then he made certain purchases, and set about wasting his time till nine o'clock.

It is curious to consider, that although when he started out at nine o'clock, Gustave was perfectly clear as to what he meant to do, yet he was chiefly troubled by the fear that the priest had told his aunt about his fine clothes. But when he had passed through the deserted *Faubourg*, and had come to the house behind the shop, he found his aunt only very pleased to see him, and a little surprised. So he sat with her, and listened to her gentle, homely stories, and told lies about himself and his manner of life, till the clock struck eleven. Then he rose, and Madame Jahn rose too and went to her writing-desk and opened a small drawer.

'You have been very kind to a lonely old woman tonight, my Gustave,' said Madame Jahn, smiling.

'How sweet of you to say that, dearest aunt!' replied Gustave. He went over and passed his arm caressingly across her shoulders, and stabbed her in the heart.

For a full five minutes after the murder he stood still; as men often do in a great crisis when they know that any movement means decisive action. Then he started, laid hold of his hat, and made for the door. But there the stinging knowledge of his crime came to him for the first time; and he turned back into the room. Madame Jahn's bedroom candle was on a table: he lit it, and passed through a door which led from the house into the shop. Crouching below the counters covered with white sheets, lest a streak of light on the windows might attract the observation of some passenger, he proceeded to a side entrance to the shop, unbarred and unlocked the door and put the key in his pocket. Then, in the same crouching way, he returned to the room, and started to ransack the small drawer. The notes he scattered about the floor; but two small bags of coin went into his coat. Then he took the candle and dropped some wax on the face and hands and dress of the corpse; he spilt wax, too, over the carpet, and then he broke the candle and ground it

under his foot. He even tore with long nervous fingers at the dead woman's bodice until her breasts lay exposed; and plucked out a handful of her hair and threw it on the floor to stick to the wax. When all these things had been accomplished he went to the house door and listened. The *Faubourg* is always very quiet about twelve o'clock, and a single footstep falls on the night with a great sound. He could not hear the least noise; so he darted out and ran lightly until he came to a turning. There he fell into a sauntering walk, lit a cigarette, and, hailing a passing *fiacre*, directed the man to drive to the *Pont Saint-Michel*. At the bridge he alighted, and noting that he was not eyed, he threw the key of the shop into the river. Then assuming the swagger and assurance of a half-drunken man, he marched up the *Boulevard* and entered the *Café d'Harcourt*.

The place was filled with the usual crowd of men and women of the *Quartier Latin*. Gustave looked round, and observing a young student with a flushed face who was talking eagerly about the rights of man, he sat down by him. It was his part to act quickly: so before the student had quite finished a sentence for his ear, the murderer gave him the lie. The student, however, was not so ready for a fight as Gustave had supposed; and when he began to argue again, Gustave seized a glass full of brandy and water and threw the stuff in his face. Then indeed there was a row, till the *gendarmes* interfered, and haled Gustave to the station. At the police-station, he bitterly lamented his misdeed, which he attributed to an extra glass of absinthe, and he begged the authorities to carry word of his plight to his good aunt, Madame Jahn, in our *Faubourg*. So to the house behind the shop they went, and there they found her – sitting with her breasts hanging out, her poor head clotted with blood, and a knife in her heart.

The next morning, Gustave was set free. A man and a woman, two of the five assistants in the shop, had been charged with the murder. The woman had been severely reprimanded by Madame Jahn on the day before, and the man was known to be the girl's paramour. It was the duty of the man to close at night all the entrances into the shop, save the main entrance, which was closed by

Madame Jahn and her deaf servant; and the police had formed a theory (worked out with the amazing zeal and skill which cause the Paris police so often to overreach themselves!) that the man had failed to bolt one of the side doors, and had, by his subtlety, got possession of the key whereby he and his accomplice re-entered the place about midnight. Working on this theory, the police had woven a web round the two unfortunates with threads of steel; and there was little doubt that both of them would stretch their necks under the guillotine, with full consent of Press and public. At least, this was Gustave's opinion; and Gustave's opinion now went for a great deal in the *Faubourg*. Of course there were a few who murmured that it was a good thing poor Madame Jahn had not lived to see her nephew arrested for a drunken brawler; but with full remembrance of who owned the house and shop we were most of us inclined to say, after the priest: That if the brave Gustave had been with his aunt, the shocking affair could never have occurred. And, indeed what had we more inspiring than the inconsolable grief he showed? Why! on the day of the funeral, when he heard the earth clatter down on the coffin-lid in *Père Lachaise*, he even swooned to the ground, and had to be carried out in the midst of the mourners. 'Oh, yes,' (quoth the gossips), 'Gustave Herbout loved his aunt passing well!'

On the night after the funeral, Gustave was sitting alone before the fire in Madame Jahn's room, smoking and making his plans. He thought, that when all this wretched mock grief and pretence of decorum was over, he would again visit the *cafés* which he greatly savoured, and the little Mademoiselle with yellow hair would once more smile on him delicious smiles with a gleaming regard. Thus he was thinking when the clock on the mantelpiece tinkled eleven; and at that moment a very singular thing happened. The door was suddenly opened: a girl came in, and walked straight over to the writing-desk, pulled out the small drawer, and then sat staring at the man by the fire. She was distinctly beautiful; although there was a certain old-fashionedness in her peculiar silken dress, and the manner of wearing her hair. Not once did it occur to Gustave, as he gazed in terror, that he was gazing on a

mortal woman: the doors were too well bolted to allow anyone from outside to enter, and besides, there was a strange baffling familiarity in the face and mien of the intruder. It might have been an hour as he sat there; and then, the silence becoming too horrible, by a supreme effort of his wonderful courage he rushed out of the room and upstairs to get his hat. There in his murdered aunt's bedroom, — there, smiling at him from the wall — was a vivid presentment of the dread vision that sat below: a portrait of Madame Jahn as a girl. He fled into the street, and walked, perhaps two miles, before he thought at all. But when he did think, he found that he was drawn against his will back to the house to see if *It* was still there: just as the police here believe a murderer is drawn to the *Morgue* to view the body of his victim. Yes; the girl was there still, with her great reproachless eyes; and throughout that solemn night Gustave, haggard and mute, sat glaring at her. Towards dawn he fell into an uneasy doze; and when he awoke with a scream, he found that the girl was gone.

At noon the next day Gustave, heartened by several glasses of brandy, and cheered by the sunshine in the *Champs-Élysées*, endeavoured to make light of the affair. He would gladly have arranged not to go back to the house: but then people would talk so much, and he could not afford to lose any custom out of the shop. Moreover, the whole matter was only an hallucination — the effect of jaded nerves. He dined well, and went to see a musical comedy; and so contrived, that he did not return to the house until after two o'clock. There was someone waiting for him, sitting at the desk with the small drawer open; not the girl of last night, but a somewhat older woman — and the same reproachless eyes. So great was the fascination of those eyes, that, although he left the house at once with an iron resolution not to go back, he found himself drawn under them again, and he sat through the night as he had sat through the night before, sobbing and stupidly glaring. And all day long he crouched by the fire shuddering; and all the night till eleven o'clock; and then a figure of his aunt came to him again, but always a little older and more withered. And this went on for five days; the

figure that sat with him becoming older and older as the days ran, till on the sixth night he gazed through the hours at his aunt as she was on the night he killed her. On these nights he was used sometimes to start up and make for the street, swearing never to return; but always he would be dragged back to the eyes. The policeman came to know him from those night walks, and people began to notice his bad looks: these could not spring from grief, folk said, and so they thought he was leading a wild life.

On the seventh night there was a delay of about five minutes after the clock had rung eleven, before the door opened. And then – then, merciful God! The body of a woman in grave-clothes came into the room, as if borne by unseen men, and lay in the air across the writing-desk, while the small drawer flew open of its own accord. Yes; there was the shroud and the brown scapular, the prim white cap, the hands folded on the shrunken breast. Grey from slimy horror, Gustave raised himself up, and went over to look for the eyes. When he saw them pressed down with pennies, he reeled back and vomited into the grate. And blind, and sick, and loathing, he stumbled upstairs.

But as he passed by Madame Jahn's bedroom the corpse came out to meet him, with the eyes closed and the pennies pressing them down. Then, at last, reeking and dabbled with sweat, with his tongue lolling out, and the spittle running down his beard, Gustave breathed:

‘Are you alive?’

‘No, no!’ wailed the *thing*, with a burst of awful weeping; ‘I have been dead many days.’

## HERE TODAY . . .

*James Fisher*

Sydney Tanner took an appreciative sip from his gin and tonic, then expressed an opinion.

'To believe in ghosts one must be either infantile, stupid or drunk. All of which suggests an impaired intelligence.'

Richard Howard smiled gently and toyed with his empty glass, while gazing earnestly at the patterned carpet. In contrast to Tanner's robust body and round red face, he was small, pale and insignificant. His narrow face wore a sly, perpetual smirk, giving the observer the impression that he was the possessor of dark and sinister secrets that were a source of constant amusement. A dry chuckle escaped from between his yellow teeth.

'And as you consider yourself to be neither childish, stupid nor drunk . . .'

'I refuse to believe that anyone has ever seen a ghost,' Tanner interrupted, annoyed by the little man's tone of voice that clearly suggested the assumption was not shared. 'Self-deception, illusion, imagination—a wisp of smoke or a veil of mist, takes on whatever shape your ghost-hunter expects to see. And I'll tell you this. There isn't one of your so-called ghosts that can stand up to the cold wind of disbelief.'

The little man transferred his gaze from the carpet to the ceiling.

'I'm rather surprised you took the trouble to answer my advertisement.'

It was Tanner's turn to chuckle.

'The hundred quid. I couldn't resist the opportunity to pick up one hundred tax-free pounds for one night's untroubled sleep. By the way, you do pay cash?'

'Five new twenty-pound notes,' Howard replied. 'Payable five minutes after sunrise. But you do understand the terms of our agreement?'

'Indeed I do. I'm to spend a night in any house that you stipulate and if by daybreak I'm not fully convinced

that it's haunted . . .'

Howard flinched and held up a small and exceedingly white hand.

'Please - I do so hate these hackneyed terms. Subjected to psychic phenomenon.'

Tanner shrugged. 'As you wish. If I'm not fully convinced it's subjected to - what you said - you will pay me one hundred pounds. Great. A piece of cake.'

'I am delighted to hear you say so. A true disbeliever is what I have been looking for. You cannot appreciate the intense satisfaction I derive from that glorious moment when the derogatory sneer is transformed into a whimper. You could call me an intellectual sadist.'

Tanner allowed a slight frown to crease his forehead. It was possible that a little of his self-confidence seeped into the pit of conjecture.

'Let's get one point clear. I don't want any nonsense. I warn you - any sheeted apparitions will be laid by the toe of my shoe.'

Howard's smile flickered like a faulty neon-sign.

'I do assure you there will be no childish tricks. But of course if you have any doubts, do not hesitate to withdraw.'

Tanner hastened to reassure the little man, suddenly alarmed at the prospect of losing the proposed hundred pounds - of which he stood in great need.

'No, I accept your word that all will be above board. So, I'm ready to go - to wherever we're going.'

Howard rose and possibly his smile was a little more derisive.

'Let us get moving by all means. We can use my car.'

The house stood dark and desolate at the end of a long, disused country road; an ugly structure that bore more than a passing resemblance to a small castle, having a turret on each corner. The windows reminded Tanner of black, gleaming eyes that watched the approaching car with malicious intent, and appeared at times to positively glare when a thin veil of cloud was torn from the face of the moon by a never-resting wind. The place looked solid enough, being built of undressed stone that was en-



hanced by a kind of sinister beauty borrowed from the silver moonlight.

But the massive double front doors appeared to have been smashed in, the left-hand one reeled drunkenly on a single hinge.

'It would appear,' Howard remarked suavely as he swung the car round on to the overgrown drive and braked to a halt, 'that there was a spot of violence here at one time or another. But I dare say we can shut the doors somehow if you feel uneasy.'

Tanner did not reply, but climbed out of the car and stared up at the house in which he was to spend the next twelve hours, suddenly aware of an almost imperceptible tremor that ran down his spine. Disbelief in ghosts was one thing—sweating it out in a great barn of a house quite another. Then he saw Howard's sneering smile and anger came to his rescue.

'Who does it belong to?' he asked brusquely.

'You—me—anyone who has the courage to take up residence. I stumbled across it quite by accident. I might so easily have missed it—as have so many before me. Shall we go in?'

He took a small bag and an immense torch from the car and led the way up three stone steps, through the gaping doorway and into the hall beyond. Tanner felt an eerie, unnatural coldness close in on his shrinking body and was quite unable to suppress a shudder. Moonlight streamed in through one high window and revealed a magnificent chandelier that swung gently from a shadow-shrouded ceiling. To the left a wide staircase curved up and round and terminated on to a long gallery or landing that was completely swathed in darkness. Otherwise the hall was bare; a naked expanse of stone floor that seemed to capture every sound—a footstep, a spoken word—and duplicate them in some far-off empty place. On either side was a door. Howard opened the one on the left and performed a little ironic bow.

'Your lodging for the night. There's no reason why you should leave it before daybreak—unless you wish.'

Tanner entered the room and looked around with wide-eyed concern. It was drenched with moonlight. The panel-

led walls, the old furniture, the lop-sided pictures – all appeared to be bleached with cold, silver brilliance, that would not permit the existence of a single shadow. Then, as though to contradict such a fanciful notion, a cloud passed over the moon and its shadow went racing across the walls and ceiling like a formless ghost fleeing from some invisible pursuer.

‘I can’t stand this light,’ Tanner protested. ‘It’s – it’s not natural.’

‘Some property in the glass no doubt,’ Howard murmured. ‘But there are thick curtains. We have but to close them.’ He tugged at a cord and red velvet curtains glided out from narrow alcoves, clattered their way along dingy brass rails, then met with a decisive snap. Instantly total darkness pounced down upon the room and Tanner choked back an involuntary cry as Howard’s mocking voice shattered the silence.

‘My torch! It will be annoying if it doesn’t work. Ah, a little shake does wonders.’

A fierce beam of light carved a bright tunnel through the darkness and swung round until it illuminated Tanner’s face. The little man chuckled.

‘Why, you are quite pale with excitement. Who would have thought that such a firm disbeliever could so enter into the spirit of our little venture.’

‘Get the light off my face,’ Tanner snarled. ‘And don’t think that you’re going to frighten me with words. I’m not easily scared.’

‘My dear fellow, anyone can see you have nerves of steel. Now, where’s my little black bag? Ah, here at my very feet. Candles are the answer. A few strategically placed will create that nostalgic, long-ago atmosphere that lonely souls find so comforting.’

He lit six white candles and cemented them in their own wax on the sideboard, mantelpiece and what appeared to be a Georgian wine cabinet. Tanner found that the soft, flickering light was far from comforting, for now an entire army of shadows assumed grotesque shapes and began a never-ending dance across the walls; a kind of bobbing and writhing that was most disconcerting. Howard produced a vacuum flask and a plastic box from his bag

and deposited them on a low table.

'Coffee and sandwiches. Can't have your glorious disbelief undermined by lack of nourishment. I think that's all. I am going to drive the car some way back along the road and make myself comfortable on the back seat. Should you feel – how shall I put it? – feel the need for my company, don't hesitate to join me.'

'You'd like that, wouldn't you?' Tanner said quietly. 'Save yourself a hundred pounds and for ever more be able to boast that a spook – a patch of coloured air scared me out of my wits.'

The little man shook his head in mock reproach. 'My dear fellow, the purpose of the exercise is not to frighten you, but prove to at least one genuine disbeliever, that psychic phenomena are an undoubted fact. And my hundred pounds is quite safe. I know with an unshakeable certainty that by sunrise tomorrow morning, you will either have given up or be entirely convinced.'

Tanner shook his head violently.

'Neither. The chances are I'll fall asleep.'

The little man performed another ironic bow and it took all of Tanner's self-control not to hit the pale, mocking face.

'Then it only remains for me to wish you pleasant dreams and sweet repose.'

He went out and closed the door softly behind him. Presently Tanner heard the sound of the car engine and the crunch of gravel as it moved slowly down the drive. Then the silence rushed in and with it the knowledge that he was alone.

For the first three hours sleep was an impossibility. Tanner created a passable bed out of two armchairs, but every time he closed his eyes there came the distinct feeling that something had materialized and was watching him. Finally he got up and began to explore the room; he opened the wine cabinet which was unfortunately empty, then with faint interest examined the pictures. He knew nothing about art and cared even less, but the three gilt-framed landscapes appeared to be very old and were

perhaps valuable. He found time to marvel that they hadn't been long ago stolen, particularly with the front doors smashed in and the house so isolated.

But the massive picture over the mantelpiece did light a tiny flame of interest and he studied it for some little while, dimly aware that, although it was probably a brilliant work of art, there was some defect – something that had been omitted.

The subject matter was commonplace. A man on horseback facing a pack of hounds. A fine, handsome fellow with a dark, almost beautiful face, dressed in a black tunic and white buckskin trousers. The horse was worthy of its rider. A great coal-black stallion with head thrown back and one foreleg raised; it seemed to be on the point of erupting into awful, destructive action. The hounds were huddled together, each head raised, upper lips curled back, eyes bright with either rage or fear.

It was, Tanner decided, a study of light and shadow. In the background wild moorland was tinted by the rays of the setting sun, while in the foreground the hounds and the horse cast elongated black shadows. In fact the dogs appeared to have either emerged from a slab of darkness or were trying to retreat into it. But when Tanner again re-directed his attention to the handsome horseman, he suddenly realized the omission that marred an otherwise perfect portrait.

The horse's shadow lacked a rider.

'Ran out of black paint,' Tanner muttered and actually giggled. Then he screwed up his eyes and read the inscription that had been etched into a metal plate that was fixed on the bottom of the frame.

#### SELF-PORTRAIT OF SIR CHARLES BENTLEY, BART.

An artistic baronet. Surely a rare specimen of the breed? And what is more, one who had spoilt his masterpiece by the lack of a half-pennyworth of black paint. Tanner scratched his head, yawned and retreated to his makeshift bed. There he made himself as comfortable as two chairs permitted and stared at the incompleted pic-

ture with surprising fortitude. From this distance the fellow's eyes appeared to be watching him, which was of course utter nonsense.

'I wonder,' Tanner spoke aloud and now rejoiced in his complete lack of fear, 'if you're supposed to be the ghost? Eh?'

His voice sounded confident, alert - tinged with an undertone of mockery. Tanner took one more daring step.

'If you are a ghost - manifest.'

For the space of three heart-beats he held his breath; even jerked his head from side to side in an effort to see as much of the room at one time as possible. Then he gradually relaxed. Sir Charles did not come down from his picture; no apparition glided across the floor. The room looked neither more nor less sinister than it had before the impudent challenge.

Tanner felt vaguely disappointed.

He lay perfectly still, strangely at peace in this awesome place, giving vent to an occasional dry chuckle when he remembered that Howard was seated in his car, waiting for a reformed disbeliever to put in an appearance.

Presently sleep crept upon him unawares and for a while he was lost in the pit of oblivion.

Tanner was awakened by the continuous blast of a car horn.

He sat up abruptly, every sense alert, fearfully aware that the room was again in total darkness, the candles having long since burnt themselves out. He swung his legs off the chair and began to stumble in the direction of the window, alive only to the need for a glimmer of light - no matter how meagre it might be.

He bumped into the low table, lurched forward with hands outstretched, then released his breath in a vast sigh of relief when his fingers felt the sleek smoothness of the velvet curtains. He jerked them aside and for a while could scarcely believe that which greeted his incredulous gaze. The rising sun was painting the eastern sky pale gold and permitted him to see the car with Howard standing beside it.

Slowly realization flooded his numb brain. His vigil was

over. He had spent the night in a so-called haunted house, had not surrendered to the dictates of imagination, had most certainly neither seen nor heard anything that could even be loosely described as psychic phenomena. Now all he had to do was go out and collect his hundred pounds.

He did not bother to analyse the faint feeling of surprise.

It was of course irritating to find that Howard had not discarded his sneering smile and seemed to be in no way put out by the prospect of acknowledging complete defeat. Tanner lost no time in proclaiming his delight.

'So your hundred pounds was safe, eh? Couldn't lose! Not a sight or smell of a spook. So - what about handing over the folding green stuff?'

For a moment it did seem as if Howard was going to laugh, but he finally contented himself with a peculiarly grotesque grin and shook his head.

'Not so fast, my dear fellow. Our agreement was for daybreak and the sun has yet to rise over the horizon.'

Tanner exploded into a bellow of rage.

'For God's sake, man, come off it. In a couple of minutes it will be broad daylight. So don't split hairs. Are you going to honour our agreement or not?'

This time Howard did laugh: a nasty little evil chuckle.

'So much can happen in two minutes. I must ask you to bear with me for just a while longer. Now, look at the house.'

Tanner turned and looked back at the grim structure and decided it seemed more uninviting in the half-light, than it had when viewed by vivid moonlight. He growled:

'I'm looking. So what?'

'Let me tell you a little of its history,' Howard said in a conversational tone of voice. 'It was once the property of the Bentley family and had a fairly mundane existence until it fell into the hands of the tenth baronet. Sir Charles Bentley. He - to use the parlance of his day - dabbled in the black arts, which included doing certain unpleasant things to those female members of the local peasantry who were so misguided as to wander abroad

after sunset. Legend has it that he rode the moors on a gigantic black horse, accompanied by a pack of hounds that were possessed by the souls of his erstwhile victims. But that's as maybe. But I do know that all the local small fry so far forgot the respect due to the lord of the manor, that they came up here one moonlit night and drove a sharp stake through his aristocratic heart. They buried his remains in the cellar.'

Tanner exclaimed: 'Bloody hell!' and cast an anxious glance at the eastern sky. The sun was just peeping over the horizon.

'Then set fire to the house,' Howard added.

'Set fire . . . ! They didn't do a very good job.'

The perpetual smile froze into a grin.

'On the contrary. They burnt it to the ground.'

Tanner stared at the little man with bulging eyes and gaping mouth; a tiny worm of hideous truth was beginning to eat into the frail wall of his sanity.

'You see,' the sneering voice went on, 'the purpose of staking Sir Charles down, was to stop him walking – and it most certainly worked. No one has ever seen the shade of Charles Bentley. But due to the immense psychic power he generated during his lifetime, he had to manifest somehow. So, once a year, he materializes as his former house.'

Tanner was just able to repeat the one word: 'House!'

'Yes. You, my dear fellow, have not only seen a ghost – you spent the night in one.'

At that moment the first rays of the newly risen sun struck the grey walls and Sydney Tanner was hurled from the ranks of the non-believers. The house began to slowly disappear. Stone became transparent, rooms complete with furniture were for a brief while seen through a veil of translucent mist, then the entire structure vanished. All that remained was an expanse of bare ground, on which lay a vacuum flask, a plastic box and six blobs of candle grease.

'So you see,' Howard remarked with terrifying calmness, 'my hundred pounds was never in jeopardy. My dear fellow, you don't look well.'

Tanner was still staring at the site where Bentley

Grange had once stood, trying so hard to force words from his contorting throat; clothe terror with vocal expression. He only partially succeeded. He sent out one long-drawn-out scream. Howard creased his face into what can only be described as a diabolical grimace.

'Another one lost whatever sanity he ever had. Remove the prop of doubt and their silly little souls collapse.'

He got into his car, started the engine, then drove out of the one-time drive and soon disappeared round a bend in the road. Left alone Tanner lurched slowly forward until he stood on the rectangular patch of naked ground, where he looked around with an air of pathetic confusion. Presently his voice rose up and shouted his conversion to the steel-blue sky.

'I believe . . . I believe . . . I be . . . li . . . e . . . v . . . e . . .'



## WHITE CHRISTMAS

*David E. Rose*

Little Louisa was drifting gently in that beautiful twilight between dreams and the living world. Snug in her little bed, as she was waking she was half-remembering, half-dreaming about Christmas. It had been such a long night. As her eyes flickered open she knew it was not yet dawn. Her room was in complete darkness. A little earlier she had heard a low mumbling voice and then gentle bumping but had slipped back into sleep. There was silence now; it was utterly peaceful. She wondered if snow had fallen to make it a white Christmas as everyone had promised. She wondered too if Father Christmas had remembered her present, but was too cosy and warm to get up just then. She just wanted to rest and dream again about the tree and those gaily-wrapped presents beneath. She had not wanted to be ill only a few days before Christmas, to miss the snow and the laughter and happiness in the house and so had wished and wished not to be ill.

As the warm evening lights of the houses in the village were extinguished, the gardens of shivering shrubs and gaunt, looming trees had grown darker and colder and sadder. Snow had fallen. On Christmas Eve it had been sifted generously along the leafless country lanes, between hedgerows and across fields and lay thick, almost with the promise of marzipan beneath. The frozen lights glowed ice blue under the stars. Farmhouses and cottages with roofs twinkling under their dusting of frost were like tiny cake decorations. Snow sparkled on little islands of frozen earth in the village churchyard. Wreaths of hardy greens, decorated with bright red berries and sprays of little flowers, lay silently in the graveyard in this soft blue light, softening the starkness of its Peter Pan-like quality.

Louisa's house had been silent, almost in mourning, on Christmas Eve. Its Christmas tree stood to the ceiling,

eloquent yet muted. It was draped with silver tinsel, bedecked with miniature flags. The paper hearts had sweets in them still. Beneath it were the tantalizingly-wrapped presents about which Louisa had felt as only a child can, a supreme joy in the frustration, the anticipation of opening them. Streamers and brightly coloured paper chains were pinned across the room hanging limp and ignored. The bunches of balloons were lifeless. Only in sunlight and resonating with the laughter of a child would their colour burst forth fresh and vibrant. Louisa had had such fun helping her father put them up before she was ill. His face had been red and his cheeks puffed as he had blown them almost to bursting. She had giggled and laughed as her mother had tied them into bunches trying all the while to inspire them into singing some carols.

Sleepily, Louisa turned to the window to see if there was a hint of light. It was warm, almost stuffy in her room. She felt so much better but still wanted to lie a little while longer. She had dreamt of so many things and remembered all their Christmases when she was a baby. There had been dreams she hadn't understood about a place so real it was as if she had actually visited it. She had been called by distant voices and found herself flying, an exotic multi-coloured bird flying lazily in brilliant sunlight over tropical jungle. She had tried to call out but had not had the will because everything had been so peaceful, so beautiful. In another dream she had been a fairy-tale princess with flowers in her hair, and strange gentle people in white had slowly, gracefully bowed to her, holding out their arms smiling. These hadn't been frightening dreams, but she had always returned to the memory of Christmas and the snow. Even though he always remembered, she had still wished and wished that Father Christmas would not forget her present. She was happy now and no longer felt tired. She had caught an infection, they said. But it hadn't hurt. It had made her feel so heavy, so sleepy. But she remembered her mummy crying and she had been too tired and too heavy to move and comfort her. There had also been strange, frightening voices in their house, but these had been horrible dreams

that were now over.

Her attention turned again to the dull thuds. Her father must be getting up. He was always so cheerful in the morning and always bumped about. And Christmas morning was special. It was traditional that he got up first to prepare breakfast. Soon he would call her and she would go down and collect all the presents, including those that Father Christmas had left, and take them into her parents' bedroom so they could unwrap them together. There was more thumping. It was surely time to get up. She reached for the curtains . . .

Pale orange sunlight filtering through skeletal trees spread itself thinly across the snow-covered churchyard. Christmas was over. It had been one of grief and tears and of memories. Two men were perspiring in the chill morning wind. The slush and footprints made by the little gathering of stunned, silent people who had now gone, were freezing hard. One of the grave-diggers paused to wipe his brow and then with a dull thudding noise that hardly disturbed the tranquillity, continued stamping the frosty soil over little Louisa's coffin that had that morning been laid in its final resting place.

## ONLY CHILD

*Frances Stephens*

You could see the house from a long way off. It stood on a sweep of moorland, grey stone etched against empty sky. Outcrops of rock dotted the hillside like jagged teeth.

The Jaguar drove slowly along the drive, past the lake, and stopped.

A man climbed awkwardly out of the driving-seat, puffing a little, for he was heavily built and the car was low. Leaving the woman and child to fend for themselves, he began hauling suitcases out of the boot in a rough and impatient fashion.

The woman alighted, stretching her slender legs, her main concern for the creases in her dress. The child, a boy of seven, stood close to her and gazed round uncertainly.

His gentian-blue eyes ranged unhappily over the bleak surrounding country with its rough grass and bracken, broken only by drystone walls and a few stunted trees bent by the wind.

'Piers!'

The woman's voice was peremptory and the boy started, blinking nervously at his mother.

'Stop day-dreaming. What's the matter with you now?'

'Nothing's the matter with me. N . . . nothing.'

'Well then?'

'It's so . . . so . . .'

'What?' Her impatience pricked his skin like hot needles.

'So lonely.' He shivered. 'There'll be no one to play with.'

'Oh, for God's sake.'

She flung away from him and climbed the shallow steps to the door.

'Help your father,' she called over her shoulder.

'He's not my father,' said Piers darkly. Only he kept the words inside his head. 'He is not my father. He is not. Not. Not.'

A woman wearing a print overall was beaming from the doorway.

'Mrs Abrahams. And Mr Abrahams.' She managed to convey both welcome and deference. This must be the woman from the village who was going to come in each day. Piers had heard them talking in the car.

Like every other conversation, it had not included him. His mother was Mrs Max Abrahams. But *his* name was not Abrahams. It never would be.

Max Abrahams acknowledged the woman's greeting with a nod, and put a suitcase down in the hall. He brought out a handkerchief, mopping his fleshy face. His lips had a bluish tinge.

The boy's mother was half-way up the wide staircase following the woman from the village, when her husband shouted to her.

'Sylvy! I want a quiet evening. No disturbances.'

He always called her Sylvy. Piers hated it. And this he recognized as their private code. This was how Max Abrahams told his wife to keep her son out of the way.

A sharp rush of tears stung the boy's eyes. The gloomy shadows of the dark hall with its high wooden panels made him anxious and uneasy. His lips trembled.

Moments later, the village woman reappeared, clasped his hand, and led him to the kitchen where egg sandwiches and a glass of milk were waiting. She informed him that her name was Mrs McInnes, and in the soothing wash of her conversation which flowed like tepid bath water, Piers began to feel better. He was anxious that this kindly soul should not depart, leaving him to his own devices in a strange house.

'Will we be staying here long, Mrs McInnes?' he asked, for no one had told him.

'Bless the boy; so polite. The house is let for the shooting, so I expect it'll be August and September.'

Piers nodded gravely, striving to hide his dismay as he contemplated a long procession of interminable days.

'I'll have no one to play with.'

He tried valiantly, but he could not control his agitation. Tears cascaded down his face.

'You're tired.' Motherly arms gathered him in. 'You'll

feel better tomorrow.'

He lay in a big bed upstairs, listening to the silence of the house all around him. Thoughts of his real father crowded into his mind. The lean face, the restless body, always on the move. The man who had gone, leaving a bewildering void. He's dead, his mother had told him bitterly. Better get used to the idea. Nothing will bring him back. He's gone for ever.

It had been dark for a long time when she came into the bedroom. She laughed softly, and gave his hand a quiet squeeze. Piers knew the glasses and bottles had been out downstairs. Her voice was different then.

A week later, the three of them were sitting at lunch when the child plucked up courage and made his request.

'I want to play with the boy in the attic.'

Max Abrahams continued to read his newspaper. It was his habit to ignore the presence of Piers whenever possible. Sylvy frowned.

'What nonsense is this?'

'P-please. I want to play with the boy in the attic.'

'There is no boy,' said Sylvy sharply.

'There is, there is. Sometimes he bowls a hoop or plays with a ball. Sometimes he just runs about.'

The boy stared pleadingly at his mother, his face white and strained, for he could feel the opportunity slipping away from him.

His mind formed the prayer that in this one thing she would listen. Please. *Please*.

Her mouth had become a thin, disapproving line.

'I've warned you before about these stories. You're old enough to know better.'

Irritably, Max Abrahams thrust the newspaper aside.

'Let him play in the attic if he wants to—keep him out of the way. What harm could he do?'

Piers slipped down from his chair, and ran upstairs to the first floor, along the wide corridor with its faded, rose-coloured carpet, then up a narrower, creaking flight of wooden steps with a door at the top. On the outside was a large, iron bolt. Panting, he reached for it.

He stepped into an upper chamber that gave an impression of never having been finished. This vast expanse

of wood-lined attic ran the length of the house. Windows at floor level peeped blearily out at the countryside. Dust and dead moths drifted over the sun-cracked sills.

Days melted away whilst the adults followed their own occupations. There were cars on the driveway, bands of men striding off on to the moors, noisy parties that went on far into the night.

A lull followed, a temporary interlude whilst Max Abrahams went off on a short business trip. In his absence, a change came over the boy's mother. The bright, brittle look she habitually wore now disappeared.

Piers, passing the door of her room, saw her standing by the open window, gazing over the moors. She was singing. It stirred something in him. It was a sound he seldom heard.

He went in, a thing he would never have done when the man was around. There was a dull ache inside him, yearning to talk to her, yearning for things the way they used to be when his father had been there.

She smiled.

'What shall we do? Shall we picnic by the lake?'

He hesitated.

'Don't you want to go?' Her voice sharpened. It had always been like this. Her patience soon wore thin.

'Yes . . . oh yes, I . . .'

'Then run down and tell Mrs McInnes.'

Piers trotted alongside her, secretly hoping she would soon lose interest, but perversely she preferred to dawdle, and it was evening when they returned. The warmth had gone. In the light of the dying sun, the house cast a long shadow.

Piers was dragging his feet with weariness. His eyelids drooped. When Max Abrahams was present, his mother dismissed her son perfunctorily at the end of the day, but tonight she accompanied him upstairs.

The boy lay fighting sleep, longing for it yet filled with apprehension. His ears sang with compulsive, nervous listening.

It was as his mother was leaving that he caught the drumming of footsteps from the attic. Not an indeterminate faraway echo, but the sound of a clumsy body moving

back and forth in restless frustration.

Piers saw his mother stiffen. His skin stretched taut on his cheekbones, but his strongest fear was that the pounding of his heart would reach her across the dimness of the room.

'These old houses,' she said fretfully. 'This place is playing on my nerves.'

Downstairs, he heard her turn up the volume on the television set.

When Max Abrahams returned, his eyes fastened immediately on Piers. They were hard and critical.

'You look peaky. That's because you're shut away inside too much. You need exercise.'

The boy shrank inside himself, for he recognized the threat in the words.

'Swimming,' said Max Abrahams with relish. 'Every day, until you master it.'

'Oh, please . . .'

Piers groped for words that eluded him. His limbs were struggling to keep composure so as not to disgrace himself in front of this hateful man. Before his eyes was a shifting sea of red. The voice swam back from a long way off.

'Run upstairs and get ready.'

'I don't want to swim.'

'Rubbish. Go and get ready.'

The boy's legs were heavy, his heart full of foreboding. When he returned, wearing his trunks and carrying a towel, Max Abrahams set off in the direction of the lake. A rotting jetty ran out from a boathouse. Briskly, Abrahams trod along the green-slimed boards. Yards below, water licked hungrily around the black wooden posts. A thin wind stirred the weeds along the shore.

Abrahams rubbed his hands together, for the air was chilly.

'Let's be having you.' He was tiring already of this latest enterprise.

'I can't.' Words choked the boy.

'Rubbish. Don't want them calling you yellow when you go away to school.'

Control broke.



'I hate you. I hate you.'

With a sudden movement of his heavy body, Max manoeuvred Piers into a position within inches of the edge. The boy's body broke the air, then hit the water, sending up a streaming curtain of angry spume.

In a moment, his head appeared. Gasping and spluttering, his face was frantic with terror. His thin arms and legs moved frantically as he floundered in the direction of the shore.

It was starting to rain. Abrahams turned and strode away. Piers, his teeth chattering, dragged himself through mud and slime.

Later, when he had dried himself and pulled on his clothes, he stole towards the kitchen and the comforting presence of Mrs McInnes. Passing through the hall, he heard their voices. His mother's, soothing, cajoling.

'You shouldn't hurry like that.'

The harsh, heavy breathing of Max Abrahams.

'Insolent puppy. Standing there, shouting in my face.'

'Don't upset yourself. You know what the doctor said.'

Piers' narrow nostrils quivered and his mind registered a certain sharp odour. He sat down to milk and a warm shortbread biscuit.

But the respite was temporary. The next day brought the same nightmare. Abrahams came looking for him, already peevish and impatient.

'What's the idea, keeping me waiting? I told you to be ready.'

Piers faced him desperately. Even now, perhaps he might escape.

'I . . . I don't feel very well.'

'We'll see about that.'

A hand grasped Piers on his shoulder. As the fingers wormed into his flesh, noisy sobs burst from him. He hadn't meant to give the obnoxious man the satisfaction of making him weep.

Half-way down the drive, dragging his feet along the gravel, he turned his reddened eyes to look back at the house, seeking the comfort of a certain attic window. The pale glimmer of a face he knew.

'What are you staring at?'

Abrahams jerked him roughly. The boy clamped his lips in a mutinous line. Nothing, *nothing* the man could do to him would make him tell anything further. Even if he roasted him over a slow fire.

Scowling, Abrahams followed his gaze. For the fraction of a second, uncertainty flickered on the heavily-jowled features. Then he thrust Piers forward.

'Enough of this nonsense. You've been pandered to long enough.'

Piers recognized a finality in this edict which chilled him almost as much as the cold muddy water of the lake. He knew it was useless looking to his mother for intervention as she deferred to Abrahams in everything.

It was as though he had become sharply aware of a new danger. He wanted to be left alone to play with Tommy. The price of such freedom was submission.

On following days, he endured the hated swimming sessions, biting down his fear, because he must wait until he was presented with his opportunity.

He knew now what he must do, and if it worked, how he would laugh about it when he talked it over with Tommy. They would laugh about it together. Safe from grown-ups and the curious ideas they had. Grown-ups who lived their lives, but shut you out. Trying to make you into something different from what you were born to be.

Piers waited for a week. Sensing his mother's restlessness, the boy kept out of her way. Soon she would disappear on one of her shopping sprees and stay overnight in town; compensation for what she considered the boredom of country life. He would be left alone with Abrahams. He must lie low and draw as little attention to himself as possible.

He was playing in the attic when he heard a heavy footfall on the creaking wooden stairs. There was a furtiveness in the sound. As though someone wished to catch him unawares.

Piers crouched against the wall. Pale sun sent pallid beams shot with dust-motes into the murky chamber.

Hoop tracks scored their pattern on the grimy floorboards with blurred, shuffling footprints trailing off to the end of the room.

In the electric tension, his eyes slowly moved away from the dim shapes of rotting furniture and came round with sick fascination to where Abrahams stood in the doorway. No, whispered Piers to himself. No. No. Over and over again.

The man was panting as his glance raked the outlines of mouldering furniture and came back, incredulously, to an eyeless rocking-horse, paint yellowed and cracked, grotesque nostrils flaring as it moved gently on its wooden frame.

In the musty warmth of the attic, the man's face had a pinched look. Piers went towards him.

'I'm coming downstairs now,' he said in a docile voice.

Piers heard the rise and fall of adult voices as he lay in bed. The next day, Abrahams drove his wife to the station. That night he sat drinking alone.

Piers listened until he heard the ponderous footfall. He let minutes pass, then he slipped out of bed. In the master bedroom, Abrahams sat in his quilted dressing-gown. His face looked paunchy and grey.

Piers stared at him from the doorway. His eyes registered the red-veined nose, the coarse eyebrows, the sagging jowls. On a bedside table stood a glass of water and a small canister bearing a dispenser's label.

'What do you want?'

'I came to tell you what my mother really thinks about you.'

Man and boy eyed each other. The boy was quite composed.

'She loathes you,' said Piers contemptuously. 'She only married you for money. She told me that beforehand. She said you were so rich, it didn't matter that you made her flesh crawl.'

Max Abrahams stood up. His breath rasped in his throat.

'She told me not to worry that you were fat and ugly. And that you were a snob. Pretending to do all sorts of

things you couldn't really do. She hates you. We both do.'

A blackish red was beginning to suffuse the man's face.

'Why, you little monster. This time you've gone too far.'

Suddenly, his shoulders jerked forward, as though in intense pain. As his glance turned in the direction of the metal canister on the bedside table, Piers sprang forward.

His fingers closed round the canister of amo-nitrate ampoules. Abrahams lunged at him, stumbled on a chair, and fell.

Piers lay in bed, listening. Much, much later he stole back to the master bedroom. An ungainly shape lay on the floor. All was quiet.

It was Mrs McInnes who woke him, tearful and overwhelmingly full of concern. People came and went, cars arrived and departed, the telephone rang. Piers sat passively in the kitchen and when his mother arrived, she kissed him swiftly, drank coffee, and smoked cigarette after cigarette.

It was only when the suitcases were packed and carried into the hall that Piers became agitated.

'Where are we going?'

A look passed between Mrs Abrahams and Mrs McInnes.

'We can't stop here,' his mother said. 'Not now.'

'Why not? He's dead, isn't he?'

'Come along. The car's waiting.'

'I won't go! I won't!'

Piers planted his feet firmly, his whole body mutinous.

'Please let me stay here and play with Tommy.'

'Tommy?' echoed Mrs McInnes. 'What an odd coincidence.'

'Who is Tommy?' asked the wife of the late Max Abrahams.

'They say the man who built this house in the last century had an idiot son called Tommy. His only child. The father locked the boy away in the attic. They tell how he used to hammer on the door, and scream to be let out. Unfortunately ...'

'What?'

'The boy was cunning. He had immense strength. He pushed his father through one of the attic windows on to the terrace below.'

Piers lay down on the floor, his body knotted with misery.

'Let me stay,' he moaned. 'Let me stay.'

Between them, the two women picked up the rigid boy and carried him out to the car.

## THE BEARER OF THE MESSAGE

*Fritz Hopman*

During the winter of 1869, I entrusted my medical work for a while to two of my friends, and left Paris in order to attend the International Congress of Medicine at Moscow. The first sessions of the Congress were extremely interesting.

Famous men of the day exposed new theories and discussed new methods which have been quite forgotten since, and I entered, with the ardent enthusiasm of youth, into the discussions that followed these discourses.

On the third day of the Congress, a young Swedish professor had been talking of the treatment of epilepsy by 'mesmerism', as psychic medicine was called in those days. During the course of these interesting and stimulating debates I heard telepathy and the significance of dreams discussed by eminent men whom I could not but respect. Hitherto, I had considered such phenomena as inventions of the superstitious, but as I was on the way back to my hotel, I realized that the materialism of my young days had had a rude blow, and that it was time I revised my outlook on life.

That evening, the Governor of Moscow gave a dinner in honour of the delegates; it was an assembly of the most brilliant diplomatists and officers, of renowned scholars and beautiful women.

I was sitting next to a Dorpat surgeon, who knew French very well, and I was absolutely in my element. I was still at the age when all hero-worship had not been stifled, and I lived in the timid admiration that a young man must have experienced later, when he saw for the first time Pasteur, Lister, Metchnikoff or Virchow. To my romantic mind these great men seemed like stars in the firmament, totally superior beings.

Moreover, I was conscious that for the time being at least, even I was on an equal footing with the great men who were present.

Someone touched my arm gently. I was surprised to see a woman, whom I did not know, speaking to me in Russian. She was an intriguing creature, pale, supple and slight. The pallor of her face was remarkable, and lines of care marked it. Amid an assembly of such brilliant men and women she introduced an element of sadness and anxiety. It was as though a window had been opened, through which an icy wind blew, driving snow into the room.

As I did not understand Russian, I appealed to the surgeon, to whom I had been talking, for an explanation. He told me that the woman had heard that my treatment of affections of the heart was excellent, and that she wanted me to attend a relative of hers who was dangerously ill.

Impelled by a cavalier spirit, I answered that I was ready to accompany her. It would mean missing the gala dinner, but that was one of the chief reasons that induced me to accept, for self-sacrifice is one of the foremost needs of youth. Moreover, my pride was flattered because I was chosen out of all that galaxy of great men. However, I asked no questions but took my hat and overcoat and set off.

I remember, as though it all happened yesterday, the sight I saw when I went towards the door of the palace with the woman who had spoken to me. At that moment, a girl in a white mantle came up the steps to the palace. The light, coming through the open doors, fell on her face. I can see all that now, but it is like a photograph yellow with age, like a relic of the past that survives only in an old man's memory.

We passed the row of vehicles, and we were fortunate in finding a troika—the ordinary vehicle used in the streets of Moscow, and drawn by three horses. While the woman was talking to the driver, I observed him by the light of a lantern. He had red cheeks, and rough, furrowed skin, a thick beard and an insignificant nose, as all Russians have.

We took our places in the troika, and passed through some streets that were brightened by lights from big shops. After that we came to great, deserted open spaces, where the outline of equestrian statues could be discerned.

In places the white domes of Russian churches stood out in startling contrast against the dark sky, giving a strange, weird effect. We met no one but a squadron of soldiers with guns and a poacher. After passing through the dim suburbs we reached the country, leaving behind us the light and noise of the old city.

But before long I became a prey to doubts and distrust, and I regretted the light and warmth of the palace I had so thoughtlessly left. I cursed my own credulity. The silence and monotony of the journey made me sink into a drowsy sleep. I felt detached sometimes as though I were alone in the sledge, sometimes as though I were old, very old.

I began to dread an attack of wolves, and I wished I had brought a revolver with me. I did not know what to think of my adventure, for in a country infested with secret societies anything might happen. Was I walking into some trap? Was I not suspected of Nihilism? Was I going to be robbed? But why not choose someone rich? I invented endless theories, and rejected them all.

I was almost asleep when we reached a little village, where lights were still burning in the windows of some of the houses.

The horses were foaming and panting when they stopped outside a kind of inn. The door opened, and I saw, through a cloud of tobacco smoke, the dark form of a man in a tunic and high boots. We got out of the sledge, and I was glad to stretch my stiff legs. The driver was in conversation with the innkeeper, but the woman led me farther on in the darkness.

I had decided to defend myself to the best of my power if I were attacked. There was perfect silence all around us; as we made our way through the snow, we did not speak a word. I was greatly distressed, and my mind was full of the talk about the occult, to which I had listened during the afternoon. I thought of the stories my nurse had told me, when she was putting me to bed; of spectres haunting newly opened graves, and I saw in my mind's eye, tombs, coffins, black-covered lanterns lit on grey days, and all the fantastic visions that have profaned the idea of death and made it hideous and terrifying.



Finally we reached the garden wall of a dark-looking country house. I rang, footsteps approached. I turned round thinking that the woman was going to speak. To my great horror and amazement, I found that she had disappeared. I was alone. I could not understand how she could have vanished so quickly and so silently, but I had not time to indulge in speculations, for the door opened, and I saw a girl standing before me.

I explained to her in French the purpose of my visit. She answered hesitatingly that I must have made a mistake, since all the members of the family were in good health. She asked me to go in and speak to her father, who spoke and understood French better than she did. I was in utter despair, but I followed her to a kind of study, where an old man was sitting in an arm-chair, beside an earthenware stove.

There was no need of a specialist to tell that he was suffering from some form of heart disease. His face was a bluish-purple, and his nose was red like a drunkard's. He held a cigarette in his hand, and it quivered each time his heart beat.

I greeted him, and explained again the reason of my visit. The old man looked at me over his spectacles and frowned. Evidently he didn't believe a single word of what I said, and he wanted to know my real intentions. To appease him and to explain my disturbing his peaceful dwelling at such an hour, I told him all the details of my adventure. He listened with eager attention to my story, and when I had finished, he said:

'I don't know what to think of it. In any case, you are wrong. There is no one ill here. But now you have taken so much trouble for nothing, I should like you to stay a while. You can't return to Moscow tonight. You will have to stay at the inn. I should be glad to offer you hospitality, but we do not receive visitors, and we have not many comforts to offer.'

He passed me a box of cigarettes and the daughter made me some tea with lemon and rum. Meanwhile, I constructed a theory, more or less unconsciously. I decided that the woman realized that the old man was suffering from heart disease, although he himself did not. She saw

that the advice of a doctor was indispensable, and she had found a very cunning ruse to send him a doctor without being compromised herself.

I asked the old man if he was well. He smiled and said:

'I'm sixty-one years old, and I have never been laid up in bed. Of course, weakness comes with old age. I'm not as strong as I was, and I have asthma a little, but apart from that I am very well. No, doctor, you can take it from me, there's not a rouble to be earned here.'

The conversation turned on the Congress and on life in Paris, about which he had read much. His daughter, a slight, shy girl, gazed at me with her deep, dark eyes, but took no part in the conversation. The father's conversation was witty and gay, and this surprised me in a hermit.

Probably my conversation brightened him, for he talked of his student days, of his youthful follies, and of the time when he was a young lawyer. For an hour he recalled his forgotten youth and talked of the good old times. Suddenly the lamp flickered as though it were about to go out.

Candles were brought, but the charm was broken, and I felt like a young husband who suddenly sees an ill omen. The clock was striking twelve when I took my leave. The old man asked me to call the next day, and naturally I promised to do so. The daughter came with me to the door, and said:

'I'm so glad you have come, doctor, even though it was by error. Papa has not been so gay for many years. You must come back tomorrow. I wish we had a few more visitors. It would do him good.'

I had a kind of presentiment that I should find my silent companion on the road, but I saw no one. Lights were still burning in the inn, and when I entered the innkeeper was reading the newspaper to some men, who looked like peasants, wearing Russian tunics. They had long hair and long beards, sombre faces, and they all sat in the same position, with their chins in their hands.

The atmosphere of the inn was stifling and a cloud of tobacco smoke was rising slowly towards the ceiling. I made the innkeeper understand that I wanted a room for

the night by gesticulating, and he took me to a room where there was a huge bed.

There were some pictures of saints of the Greek Church hanging on the whitewashed wall. The innkeeper brought candles and lit a big wood fire. I did not want to sleep, so I lit a cigar and sat in an armchair to think over the happenings of the evening.

I had just thrown the end of my cigar away when I heard footsteps on the stairs. I was terrified, for I was afraid it was a trap and that I was going to be robbed. But it was the innkeeper and the daughter of the old man with whom I had spent the evening. The girl seemed greatly excited, but she did not lose control of herself.

'How fortunate that you are here, doctor,' she said, 'Poor father had scarcely got into bed when he had a terrible attack. Perhaps he's had too much excitement to-night. I'm sorry to trouble you, but would you mind coming with me? Perhaps you could do something for him.'

The room into which she took me was lofty and uninviting; there was a sharp smell of eau de Cologne and of ammonia in the air. A lamp was burning on a table where there were the usual things one sees in a bedroom – hairbrush, razor, clock and a big tiepin with a cameo.

The last flame was dying out on the hearth. The curtains of the bed were drawn aside and an old servant was praying at the bedside, while another was sitting on a chair, weeping.

I listened for the old man's heartbeats, but there was not the slightest breath. Death had done its work, and the limbs were already growing stiff. I broke the news to the girl as gently as possible, but she had already understood, and mastered herself with a truly feminine energy.

While I was washing my hands and thinking of the adventures of the day, I noticed a framed oil painting. It was painted in 1830 style, and it showed a young woman with low-cut dress and flattened hair. Without the least doubt I recognized in her the mysterious companion who had sought me out in the hall of the palace at Moscow. My surprise was so great that I could not restrain a cry.

'Who is that?' I asked, pointing to the portrait. 'It

is the woman who brought me here.'

The girl looked at me fixedly. Her upper lip was twisted in an expression of incredulity, but seeing me look uneasy, she, too, grew pale.

'It's my mother,' she said. 'She died when I was born, twenty years ago.'

## THE HERB GARDEN

*Meg Buxton*

Mrs Petherick didn't believe in God, not as such. In fact, having no imagination, she didn't believe in anything she couldn't see.

She was as well aware as the next person that everyone needs something to believe in, and that it was convenient to give that something a name, be it Buddha, Tao, Mithras or whatever, but religion seemed to cause so much unhappiness, to be so doom- and gloom-ridden when surely it should be a joyful thing.

She certainly could not subscribe to the idea of an old man with a white beard, sometimes benign, sometimes brutal, sitting somewhere up in the sky, on which her generation had been brought up.

No. As she pottered about in her large, rambling garden, she knew what *she* believed in; the unfailing yearly procession of miracles, the beauty that surrounded her, the peace and tranquillity that came from working close to the soil. She was deeply grateful, not only for so much so unstintingly given, but also for the eyes to see, the ears to hear and the fingers to touch the glories that were hers.

When her small, green-gloved hands were lifted to an arching spray of rambler rose, the impulse behind the movement was as much one of worship as an attempt to divest the opening buds of impudent greenfly; when on her knees before the pansies at the border's edge, her kneeling was as much an act of reverence as a comfortable position in which to pinch off dead heads to prolong their flowering.

Although she deplored the short poem by Dorothy Gurney, called 'God's Garden', thinking it mawkish, she agreed wholeheartedly with its last lines:

'One is nearer God's heart (whoever one might consider him to be, she added) in a garden Than anywhere else on earth.'

She supposed that if her sort of religion had to have a

name she might be called a Nature Worshipper, but that conjured up a picture of earnest, thick-socked-and-booted people hiking about the countryside, wild-flower book in hand, which was not her style at all: or a Sun Worshipper, perhaps? She chuckled to herself as she pulled up an intrusive wisp of couch-grass; that had a new connotation nowadays, one of nudist camps and naked sun-bathing, and the thought of her stout, exuberant little figure exposed to the public gaze amused her greatly.

There had been a sect once, she remembered, called Pantheists, Great Blue Domers. 'God in everything' had been their creed. Now that *might* have been something she could have subscribed to, but no doubt, if it still existed, it had become as hemmed about by dogma and rules and repulations as all the other organized religions, and as devoid of joy.

Despite her lack of religion Mrs Petherick had quite liked going to church on Sundays once. She was devoted to the small grey fifteenth-century building, enjoyed a good rousing hymn tune and was glad of the excuse to get out of her gardening trousers and to put on a dress and wear a pretty hat once a week, but that was before the new vicar came.

The Reverend Jeremy Ballantyne had been the incumbent of Langarth for six weeks now, having replaced dear Canon Cowling when the old man had sadly breathed his last after half a lifetime of ministering to the little community.

Jeremy was an aesthete, a tall, painfully thin young man with a haggard face and great, haunted eyes. Not for him the old tweed jacket and grey flannels of Canon Cowling; he wore his cassock all the time, the tasselled girdle and the large silver cross he wore on a chain round his neck swinging wildly as he strode about in his sandals.

He owned a vast and ancient Rolls-Royce in which he drove to the outlying parts of his parish. It stood high off the ground on spoked wheels, its brass radiator flanked by headlamps mounted on stalks like enormous anxious eyes, and was exceedingly difficult to manoeuvre, so he made shorter journeys on an equally antique lady's bicycle, clanking along the narrow lanes, his cassock flapping and

more than once getting caught in the back wheel, despite the stringent skirtguard, and precipitating him into the hedge.

The services in the little grey church had changed dramatically, becoming so high, Mrs Petherick thought, as to be practically out of sight, and she personally was totally lost. Besides this the incense brought on her asthma, so she stopped going across the field behind her house and over the stile into the churchyard on Sunday mornings, putting in an extra hour among her precious flowers instead and letting the mellow pealing of the bells fill her with the peace which passeth all understanding rather than wrestling with the earnest outpourings of Jeremy Ballantyne as he leant perilously over the edge of the pulpit, his burning eyes greatly embarrassing the villagers in the front pews.

Since she had withdrawn from church it was with some surprise that Mrs Petherick, on answering the telephone one evening, heard Jeremy Ballantyne's urgent young voice addressing her.

'Ah! Dear lady!' he said, 'I wonder if I might ask a great favour of you?'

'Of course,' Mrs Petherick replied, intrigued as to what it might be. 'Ask away, by all means.'

'Well,' the young man continued, 'there's a parish meeting this evening and I wondered if you would be kind enough to allow me to leave my car in your courtyard. She's so large and has such a bad lock that I can't get her into the parking space by the parish hall, in fact there is literally nowhere else I can leave her.'

'Of course you may leave her here,' Mrs Petherick said readily, 'I shall be charmed to accommodate such a handsome vehicle. But what is the matter with your bicycle?'

'Nothing is the matter with it,' the young man assured her, 'Unless you could call its uncertain temperament an affliction. No, it is I who am partially out of commission. The bicycle hurled me from it in a fit of pique this morning and I appear to have damaged a knee, which quite precludes my riding it tonight. However, many thanks indeed for saying I may leave the car in your courtyard. I look

forward to seeing you.'

Mrs Petherick was standing in the courtyard when the great black Rolls-Royce turned awkwardly in at the wide entrance, the earnest young cleric sitting bolt upright and wrenching the large steering-wheel to manoeuvre the ancient vehicle between the granite gateposts.

The scent of the Albertine roses festooning the crumbling walls mingled with that of stocks and tobacco flowers which were opening as the day cooled towards evening. Fantailed pigeons fluttered down to alight on the roof of the small culverhouse which stood across the lawn.

Jeremy Ballantyne descended from the tall car with some difficulty.

'My goodness, you *have* damaged yourself, haven't you?' Mrs Petherick said solicitously as he limped towards her. 'You really must take more care.'

She was a kindly little woman, a great gatherer-up of stray cats and dogs, several of which basked in her affections and were to be found ambling round the garden or draped over the good old furniture in her comfortable house, and she looked at the young man before her very much as she might have looked at one of these.

'You're far too thin, Mr Ballantyne,' she observed severely, 'I'm sure you don't bother to cook properly for yourself. I know what it's like when you live alone, but it really won't do. You'll make yourself ill if you don't eat.'

The young clergyman laughed.

'You sound just like my dear mother,' he said. 'She was always on at me to eat more, but really I do very well on bread and cheese with the odd slice of cold ham. "Man doth not live by bread alone", you know.'

He looked round him at the flowers, the grey stone house, the tabby cat that pressed against his legs, all washed with golden evening sunlight.

'How perfectly lovely it is here!' he cried. 'So peaceful! So beautiful! And how nice it is to see a medieval pigeon house used for its original purpose,' he pointed to the small round building on the roof of which the white birds were alighting. 'This used to be monastic property, didn't it?'

'Indeed it did,' Mrs Petherick was pleased at his interest.



'It was a hospice for travellers who were benighted on their way to the monastery at Porthminack. The pigeon-house - only we call them culverhouses in Cornwall - was the only building of which enough was left standing to restore, but that,' she pointed to a wall against which hollyhocks grew tall and beautiful in shades of red and pink, 'used to be the dormitory, apparently; where the monks used to sleep, you know,' she added, and the young man nodded, smiling.

'No one seems to know what the other ruins were, but at the far end of the garden behind the apple trees is a bit of wall with carving on it. I think it was probably the chapel. Of course the house itself was built of the material from the ruins after the Reformation.'

'I wanted to be a monk,' the young man said wistfully. 'An Anglican one of course; but my mother wouldn't hear of it, so the ministry was the next best thing.'

'I'm quite sure your mother was right,' Mrs Petherick said firmly. 'I've never seen the sense in young people shutting themselves away from the world like that. Most unnatural. It must turn them in on themselves and make them very odd.'

Jeremy Ballantyne was not listening to her but to something else, his face intent, mouth open.

'I can hear chanting,' he whispered. 'Plain-song!'

Mrs Petherick listened too, and then laughed.

'It's the pigeons,' she said, 'they're all going in to roost and they always coo and bicker for quite a while before settling down to sleep.'

'No, not that!' Jeremy leant against his ancient car, his great eyes wide and wild. 'Vespers, they must be going in to Vespers,' he said, his hands feeling for the large silver cross on his chest and holding it in front of him.

Mrs Petherick looked at him sharply. He really did look extremely ill, and here he was practically having hallucinations in her yard.

'Nonsense,' she said. 'I tell you it's the pigeons, and I'll tell you something else. Before you go to that meeting you're coming indoors with me to have a glass of milk and a large piece of home-made cake, my boy.'

After that first evening Jeremy Ballantyne became one of Mrs Petherick's most frequent visitors. He would turn up at various times of day, in the Rolls at first, and later, when his damaged knee was better, clanking and flapping along on his tall bicycle.

She was delighted at first and would sweep cats and dogs off chairs and settle him down at the kitchen table to make him eat, which he did with the enormous appetite of the young when forced with food, all the more remarkable since they could equally well do with nothing at all; but soon Mrs Petherick was under no misapprehension as to why he came.

He liked her a great deal, she knew, and he enjoyed her good Cornish cooking, wolfing down pasties and saffron cake and great mugs of coffee, but it was after he had eaten and conversed with her that the real reason for his visits became apparent.

He would wander round the garden, scarcely seeing the glorious high-summer tapestry of roses, or the great beds of heavily-scented lilies, scarlet poppies and huge-leaved acanthus hemmed about by pansies and mignonette, but tracing the shape of the ancient buildings that once stood there, marked now only by fragments of crumbling wall, which Mrs Petherick used to great advantage to shelter and support a profusion of plants. Holding his silver cross in front of him he would pace along as though part of a procession.

Mrs Petherick would trot along beside him, taking three steps to one of his, pointing out to him this or that magnificent bloom, but, although he courteously gave her part of his attention, she had only to bend down for a second to snap a dead flower off here or uproot a daring dandelion there, for him to have drifted off without her, his eyes seeming to see that which she could not see.

'Ghosts,' she thought, 'he's taken to seeing ghosts now; and ghosts of wretched monks, I'll be bound!'

Mrs Petherick didn't believe in ghosts any more than she believed in God or approved of monks. Had she not lived here all alone for over fifteen years with never so much as a shiver running up her spine? He really was the oddest young man, this new vicar, and much as she

had come to enjoy his visits, she resolved to put a stop to them for his own sake. Seeing ghostly monks couldn't be good for anyone, let alone anyone as highly strung as Jeremy.

Monks, indeed. She'd give them monks if she ever set eyes on them.

Jeremy Ballantyne was saddened when it finally dawned on him that Mrs Petherick was trying to tell him that his frequent visits were a nuisance. He knew she disapproved of his High Church calling but he had been extremely careful never to talk about religion when he was ensconced in her comfortable house, cats covering his cassock with hairs and dogs sitting on his feet, or when happily following the brethren from brewhouse to malt store, from woodshed to dorter, with her at his side.

He had been sure she liked him, and it had been a comfort to feel her concern for him and for his welfare, so much like that of his mother whose death a year previously had been such a sad loss to him.

But most of all the feeling of being at home, of belonging, that he had had when walking in the garden had been an utter joy. Behind the luxuriant and colourful blooms of which Mrs Petherick was so proud, he was aware of less flamboyant plants, feverfew, bishop's weed, comfrey, lungwort, tormentil and valerian, the descendants of which now sprang from every crevice of the fragmented walls, all in neat rows, all with their health-giving part to play in the life of the monastic community. Apart from being the site of a hospice, as Mrs Petherick had said, he was sure that the garden had also once contained an infirmary, planted about with carefully-tended herbs.

And it was not only of the herbs that he was aware. He had latterly made out the forms, shadowy at first, of cassocked brothers, looking very much like himself, singing at their labours, glorifying their God, as they hoed and weeded, culled and collected the plants. The place was alive with them and he felt entirely at home in their company, looking forward eagerly to the next time he could walk in their footsteps and hear their endless chanting.

This, he decided, he could not do without and, though

less frequently, he continued to find excuses to visit Mrs Petherick; delivering the parish magazine, begging flowers for the church, collecting gifts for charity stalls.

Mrs Petherick was not deceived. She had grown fond of him and treated him as she had done her own two sons before they married and left home, fussing and scolding him about this and that, sending him off with cake and biscuits in the large basket on the handlebars of his bicycle as though seeing a child off to school: but she could not be a party to the nonsense that was going on in her garden. Being closer to whatever gods there might be in a garden was one thing, but seeing ghosts, or whatever it was he was doing, was ridiculous and she became cold and forbidding to him, seeking to alienate him altogether, telling him, when he came, that from now on she would be much too busy to put up with his visits.

So Jeremy became cunning. He took careful note of Mrs Petherick's comings and goings. She was an orderly woman and lived to a pattern, driving her little estate car into the nearby town of Porthminack three mornings a week, going to play bridge with friends in the village on two afternoons, to dinner on alternate Saturday evenings, and always in bed by eleven o'clock at night.

He soon knew her timetable by heart and saw to it that he was in the churchyard in time to watch her drive away on each occasion, after which he would climb the stile, cross the field and enter the hallowed garden by the small, arched gate behind the house.

All summer long he roamed the garden, often accompanied by one or two of the cats and dogs who, knowing him, were glad of his company when their mistress was out and strolled along the mown grass paths with him.

He could see the brethren quite clearly now, could even recognize some of them individually and knew their names; Brother Martin was the infirmarian, Brother James the brewer, Brother Peter in charge of the garden, and it was to Brother Peter that he attached himself.

As he came and went about his appointed tasks Jeremy would join him, watching to see which herbs to pick, when and how, and helping to keep the neat rows free of

weeds, but always careful not to step on, or harm in any way, the marigolds, antirrhinums and sweet williams which grew between them and which he could see but Brother Peter could not.

The young clergyman had a good ear and in no time he had learnt the chants with which the brethren accompanied all their labours. Although, since he was no longer being fed by Mrs Petherick, he was now appallingly thin, his face and arms were brown from the sun and, as he lifted up his voice in the ancient songs of praise, he had never felt so well, so happy, in his life.

His ministry suffered, all the time he should have spent on clerical and parish matters being taken up with his gardening, but his little flock had never taken to him, finding him too intense and quite frightening, and they were relieved when he no longer visited them in their homes and they only had to contend with his burning rhetoric once a week in church.

As the summer progressed Jeremy found the life he lived in the monastery garden more real than that which he lived in the other world. Mrs Petherick saw him only very infrequently when he sometimes passed her gate, and was shocked at his appearance. He was thin to the point of emaciation and his huge eyes were like holes in his weather-beaten face, burning with an unnatural light, she thought.

'Religious mania,' she told herself. 'That's what *he's* got.'

Why must the glorification of his God take him like this, she wondered. Why must it burn him up like a cinder? She worried about him. Should she invite him in again? At least then she would know that he had some good food inside him, but better not. He had this stupid idea about ghosts in the garden and that must be worse for him than not eating properly. No, she thought, innocently unaware, she must not let him into the garden again.

Autumn came and the nights drew in, swathed about with mists and the drifting smoke of bonfires. Jeremy had never set foot in the garden when Mrs Petherick was at home, and he greatly regretted never having sung the night offices with the brethren, but now, with darkness descend-

ing earlier and more blackly as winter approached, he became more daring. He would wait in the churchyard every night until he saw the light go out in her bedroom and then, stealthily and silently, he would enter the garden through the arched gateway from the field and join the brethren, his hands tucked into the wide sleeves of his cassock, head bent, moving from dorter to chapel where, with them, he would listen to the strangely moving and sweetly monotonous chants. He grew more haggard as lack of sleep joined forces with lack of food to undermine his health.

Mrs Petherick had something else to worry about now as well as the condition of her young erstwhile friend. Autumn rains had softened the ground in her garden and during her annual clearing up and trimming back she had come across footprints in the soil of the flowerbeds, large footprints, made by a man.

On returning home from dinner at a friend's house one misty Saturday night she found, on going to bed, that she could not sleep. The heavy rain had made it impossible for her to get into the garden for several days and this always made her restless. Who, she wondered as she tossed and turned, had been walking about in her flower borders? Should she inform the police? Admittedly no damage had been done, not so much as a leaf crushed, but even so it was not pleasant to know that someone was tramping round out there uninvited.

As she pondered, the church clock struck midnight and almost at once a strange sound came from the garden, a strange melodious sound, that of a man—or men?—singing a sweet, solemn, liturgical chant. She leapt out of bed, threw on a dressing-gown and ran downstairs.

Grabbing a spade from the porch she went into the garden, and there by the light of a veiled moon she saw a figure gliding slowly across the misty lawn, and all the while the gentle singing rose and fell plaintively on the still air.

For a second she stood watching. Was there only one figure? No, several in a line and then, as the mist shifted a little and the moon cleared, only one again which

vanished behind a ruined wall.

'Monks!' Mrs Petherick thought. 'That wretched young Jeremy Ballantyne, he's got *me* seeing things now!' and she ran, silent in her slippers, across the grass, carrying the spade like a club and following the melodious singing.

She rounded the corner where the hollyhocks had grown in the shelter of the wall, so tall and so beautiful earlier, now nothing but a cluster of stiff stems thick with seed-pods, and there among them was a hooded figure.

'Monks!' Mrs Petherick shouted out loud. 'I don't believe in ghosts and I don't approve of monks! Get out of my garden! Get out!' and she lay about her with the spade, hearing the brittle hollyhock stems smash and shatter under the blows, and snapping under her feet. But suddenly she stumbled over something and bending down her fingers closed on thick, coarse cloth wrapped round—a body?

She screamed. Of course! She hadn't been seeing things. It was the unknown prowler and she had probably killed him! Dropping the spade she ran indoors to telephone the police.

When the police arrived Mrs Petherick went with them into the garden once more, the beams from their powerful torches cutting swathes through the misty darkness.

In the wreck of broken hollyhock stems something lay, almost completely covered in a long black cloak.

'It is a monk!' Mrs Petherick breathed.

The policemen pulled the cloak back to reveal a thin frail body, the haggard face irradiated with a beatific smile and the skeletal hands clasping a bunch of rosemary.

'No,' said the elder of the two policemen, 'it's the young vicar, and he's dead.'

Mrs Petherick sank to her knees beside the pathetic remains of her former friend.

'Oh, the poor boy!' she sobbed. 'And I killed him!'

The younger policeman lifted her gently to her feet.

'No, you never, madam,' he said, 'He's been dead two-three days by the looks of him. Starved himself most likely. But God alone knows how he came to be in this here garden with his hands full of herbs.'

## THE HANGING TREE

R. Chetwynd-Hayes

*I am awake – walking the haunting path that is terminated by that damned tree and no matter how I try, there's no wandering so much as an inch to either side. The grass on the green is frost-silver in the moonlight, while the tree, which when I last walked still retained a rich covering of brown leaves, now reaches up naked, skeletal branches against the sky.*

*A narrow road is on my right and beyond, the row of terraced houses; tall, stately, not a whit different than in my day – the time when I breathed, ate and did what so pleased me. The one in which I lived has a curtainless, lighted window on the ground floor, and if I sit down on the bench opposite, will myself to feel the wooden bars pressing into my back, then it is possible to enjoy an illusion of sensory life, watch HER – the vessel which could feed me with glorious, life-giving essence – if only she would come out and make contact.*

*Cursed be those who still walk the earth with solid feet; may they be doomed, even as I, to be confined to a narrow strip of grass, invisible to all but a select few, devoid of all emotion, save that of hate, permitted only to sit and stare into a lighted window, like a starving man tormented by a display of succulent food.*

*She's there! Coming to the window, pressing her lovely face against the glass – damn and blast her – why doesn't she come out?*

*'Movita,' Mrs Fortesque spoke from her chair by the roaring fire, 'for heaven's sake come away from that window. There's nothing more disconcerting than to see someone's face flattened against a window-pane late at night.'*

*The girl did not look round, but raised her soft lilting voice.*

*'There's no one out there – much too cold. The moon-*



light gives the green a long-ago look and I wouldn't be surprised if a lady in a long silver dress suddenly appeared. Papa says it was once a tilting yard, back in the days of Henry the Seventh. Perhaps knightly ghosts still go charging up the lists—or whatever it was they did.'

'You're in a nonsensical mood tonight, child. I'm certain those awful men who dressed up in a suit of hardware did quite enough charging about during their lifetimes to go on doing it now they are dead.'

Movita shifted her position and tried to peer round the window frame at the giant oak tree. A sudden gust of wind disturbed the gaunt branches.

'The hanging tree has just groaned.'

Mrs Fortesque shuddered and huddled closer to the fire.

'Don't use that expression. It sends a cold shiver down my spine.'

The girl turned and walked slowly towards the fire, her pale, oval face pensive, enhanced by dark, melancholy eyes. She sank into a chair opposite her mother and watched the orange flames consume a Yule log.

'But everyone calls it the hanging tree. They say a century ago a young man murdered his sweetheart, then went out and hanged himself on that tree.'

'Good heavens, child, stop it. This is not the kind of talk I expect to hear, with Christmas but a few days away. I can't think what's got into you.'

Movita tossed her head and brushed back a strand of auburn hair.

'But isn't Christmastime the period for 'ghosts'? I wonder if the young man lived in this house and maybe murdered his sweetheart in this very room?'

Mrs Fortesque banged a clenched fist down upon the arm of her chair and assumed as near stern an expression as her normally placid features would allow.

'That's quite enough. Such morbid nonsense can only be the result of an unhealthy mind. You will go to bed this instant and pray to God that you don't have horrid dreams.'

'I never dream. But I can't see what's so dreadful about having someone murdered in your house. It's only

another way of dying . . .'

'Not another word. What papa would say if he heard you talking like that, doesn't bear thinking about. Now - upstairs at once.'

'Very well. I'm tired and it's about time I went to bed anyway.' Movita got up and going over to her mother, kissed the smooth cheek. 'Good night, Mama. I'm sorry if I frightened you.'

Mrs Fortesque clasped the young face between her two hands and sighed deeply.

'You're a strange child. So sweet one minute - so contrary the next. Good night, darling.'

She waited until her daughter had left the room, before rising and drawing the curtains. For some reason she was reluctant to look out over the moonlit green.

There was a fire in Movita's bedroom, lit by a maid some two hours before, and this had blunted the chill which haunted the upper rooms during the winter days. The girl put on a thick dressing-gown before drawing a chair to the window and peering out through a six-inch gap in the curtains.

Now she could watch without fear of interruption and allow her thoughts to drift down enthralling lanes of conjecture; weave a web of fantasy and forget for a little while that she was an eighteen-year-old girl, trapped in a late-nineteenth-century, middle-class household.

The green was a silver carpet that stretched out to the row of trees that reared up like giant sentinels on the far side, while over to the left stood the old gatehouse that had once been the entrance to a long-ago-destroyed castle.

Movita swung her gaze slowly round to the right.

The hanging tree stood stark and black under the frost-bright stars, its branches casting shadow replicas on the frozen ground; once in a while it groaned when tormented by the never-resting wind and it was not difficult to imagine a dark figure that swung back and forth, then twisted round to reveal a distorted face.

Had he hung himself in wintertime? Climbed up into

the cold maze of branches, tied the rope round his neck – then jumped? Or had it been on one glorious summer evening, while the tree was still clad in rustling green, with the birds singing a nocturne that mingled with the happy laughter of children playing on the green.

A carriage drawn by two jet-black horses rattled from round a corner then came lumbering along the road. It passed the house, the coachman and footman bulky figures that were muffled in greatcoats and surmounted by funny bowler hats. The coach stopped in front of number 23 and instantly the footman climbed down from his lofty perch and hastened to open the nearside door.

Movita giggled as Mr Davenport heaved his vast body through the narrow doorway, all the while wheezing and berating the unhappy footman, whose feeble efforts to extradite his master were more ludicrous than helpful. Then the big man was stamping his feet on the pavement, paying little heed to Mrs Davenport – in contrast to her spouse, a small, extremely lean lady – who clambered down from the carriage unaided and loudly proclaimed that she was frozen to the bone.

‘Mind you rub the horses down and give ‘em plenty of hot bran,’ he instructed the coachman. ‘Why hasn’t Travers opened the front door? Damn his hide.’

As though in answer to his question a slab of yellow light fell across the pavement, and Mr Davenport and his querulous lady mounted the three steps and disappeared from view. The footman climbed back on to his seat next to the coachman, the horses – which had been pawing the ground with impatience – broke into a quick trot and the carriage rumbled down the road, rounded a bend and became a fast receding blue and gold box of wheels.

Silence returned and Movita added another strand to her web of fantasy.

‘Suppose,’ she whispered, ‘none of this is real, but a reflection of what used to be? Maybe Mama and Papa, fat Mr Davenport, awful thin Mrs Davenport – me – all are ghosts playing out a silly charade in a long dead world. If I closed my eyes just for a second, tilted my head in a certain way, said some strange words – then perhaps I

would wake up in a strange world where no one would have time to dream.'

For one terrible moment Movita thought she heard a growling murmur of distant machinery and the faint sound of shouting voices, but when she again opened her eyes, the green still slept under a gleaming sheet of moonlight, the hanging tree was shaking its head as though in rebuke at such arrant nonsense – and the only person in sight was a young man seated on the bench opposite the front door, who was staring up at her window.

She had a fleeting impression that he was dressed in grey, with a white cravat at his throat, but he was so still, with not so much as a ripple of his fair hair, even though the wind continued to shake the old tree. Then she closed the curtains with a single, impulsive jerk and sat in near darkness, waiting for her thudding heart to regain its normal beat.

After a while she dared to part the curtains again and peer out at the moonlit scene. The bench was empty and nowhere was there the slightest sign of a young man dressed in grey.

A heavy fall of snow laid a thick white carpet over the green on Christmas Eve; made all the roof-tops look as if they had been decorated with cotton wool, and covered the hanging tree with a shimmering dress. But there seemed to be one place where snow either did not settle, or melted as it fell – and that was a long, narrow strip that ran from where the road curved past the house and ended under the tree. An ugly black scar seared across a flawless white surface.

Mr Fortesque said it was much too cold for Movita to go out and she would be far better employed by helping her mother, who had much to do in preparing for the festivities which began that evening. So she spent the day in holding the ladder while Jane the parlourmaid put up paper chains, wrapping presents in holly-patterned paper, then as evening approached, supervising the elaborate laying of the dinner table, ensuring that every knife, fork and spoon was in its correct place and napkins were

folded into neat pyramids.

Then fat, billowing clouds extinguished the pale rays of the dying sun and night stationed its first platoons on snow-clad green and ice-coated pavements; banished house-shadows into dank areas and transformed lighted windows into illuminated frames.

Occasionally Movita peered out into the spectral twilight, but could only make out the lamp-post that was situated over to the far left and cast a flickering circle of yellow light that just managed to reveal one end of the wooden bench. She experienced a faint feeling of disappointment when no grey clad figure materialized to stare at her with disturbing intensity, although such an event would have unlocked the doors of fear.

The guests began to arrive and there was no more time for conjecture, toying with fearful possibilities, for now she had to smile, try not to mind if Mr Davenport retained her hand for longer than was strictly necessary, supply some suitable answer to Mrs Davenport's softly spoken remark: 'You're not looking well, child. Rather peaky, I think.'

Movita sensed the older woman's antagonism that stemmed possibly from an unconscious envy of unspent youth, the yet-to-be-destroyed illusions, but above all, the beauty which she had never possessed. For Mrs Davenport was singularly unblest with physical attraction, being small, round shouldered, lean to the point of emaciation - her sharp featured little face not enhanced by an extraordinary large nose that on occasion was capable of emitting a loud, disapproving snort.

Scarcely had the Davenports been relieved of their outdoor clothes, seated and supplied with liquid refreshment, than Miss Mansfield - a sprightly spinster of some fifty years who was suspected of having unconventional ideas - came tripping over the doorstep, loudly complaining that such weather was not good for her sciatica and she should have stayed at home.

'A glass of hot punch will soon make you feel different.'

'Snow,' Miss Mansfield said while being helped off with her coat, 'should be confined to Christmas cards. It has taken me half an hour to walk from Paradise Close.'

'Fortunately,' Mrs Davenport just succeeded in subduing a snort, 'we live but a few doors away. But had it been otherwise, we would have used the carriage.'

Miss Mansfield's voice sounded not unlike a knife being drawn across ice. 'How terrible for you. Being unable to walk any distance must be an awful liability.'

Mr Davenport exploded into a loud wheezy laugh, then pretended not to see his wife's reproving glare. Later, when they were all seated in large, over-stuffed armchairs, engaged in a hunt for polite conversation, Movita came to a shocking conclusion.

The Davenports disliked each other and Miss Mansfield was capable of murder. There was something about her bright, intelligent grey eyes, the way she watched her two fellow guests, the barely perceptible gesture of impatience when an opinion was uttered with which she disagreed; all combined to suggest that if provoked, given the opportunity, she would eliminate anyone who got in her way.

At the same time there was no reason to suppose the good lady would not walk her respectable, if erratic path to the grave, never suspecting that it might have taken a much more unconventional turning. On the other hand, Mr and Mrs Davenport and Mama and Papa could no more kill anyone than – Movita sought the right simile – walk naked in the snow. They were equipped with safety valves, mental ventilation holes through which the deadly fumes of boredom and hate could escape.

'And what of me?' Movita turned the spotlight of inquiry on to herself. 'I too could never kill anyone – but I might be a murderess. Or a potential suicide.'

*I can see them sitting in that room . . . She is facing me but I'm damned if I can get through, make any kind of impression on that stupid brain . . . a life for a life . . . a soul for a soul . . . must I walk for so long as it takes for the sun to grow cold? She's got the right essence . . . I can feel it . . . I could look on to her quivering white soul . . . if only she would come out . . . stand on the haunting path . . .*

'Movita . . . Movita . . . stop daydreaming. We are about to go in to dinner.'

Mama was standing near the window, looking down at her with angry eyes, while from the sofa Papa was shaking his head in mock reproof. Mr Davenport was smiling, a kind of tolerant, little-girls-must-be-humoured smile, but his eyes were bright with tired lust. It was rather frightening to suddenly catch a glimpse of the real people who lurked behind carefully constructed masks. Then they all filed through the connecting doorway and into the dining-room beyond, where there seemed to be a great deal of unnecessary fuss as to where everyone should be seated, but inevitably Movita found herself next to Mr Davenport, who laid a moist hand on her arm and said:

'We will look after each other, eh, my dear?'

She murmured: 'Yes, I suppose so,' and stared with exaggerated interest at the window, which was now transformed into a clouded mirror that reflected most of the room, including the six figures seated round the table. Heads bobbed up and down, hands raised spoons to gaping mouths, eyes were lost in black caverns – and it was as though she had been permitted to view a macabre feast; the dead dining in a fire-tinted chamber carved from the bedrock of hell.

But the mirror window was marred by the street-lamp which created a bright splodge of light in the right-hand bottom pane and even – when the eyes were adjusted to see beyond the reflection – revealed part of the seat back. A grey figure was standing in a network of shadows cast by the hanging tree – beckoning, a slow bending of the raised forefinger, a silent order to go out, join him under the tree. Then Miss Mansfield's voice shattered the cold band that paralysed her brain and the figure vanished, but still existed as a searing flame of memory.

'Murder is the most complex of human actions. But I am prepared to contend that it is rarely – if ever – a cold blooded affair. And fear is the most prevalent emotion involved.'

Mr Davenport emitted a rumbling laugh and either by accident or intent, nudged Movita in the ribs with his elbow.

'Come, dear lady, are you saying a degenerate villain kills his victim because he's afraid of him? Surely it must be the other way round.'

'Fear is the governing factor in all of our lives and assumes many forms. Fear of poverty, exposure, ridicule, loss of livelihood, wife, husband, health – the list is endless. And anyone could drive a man or woman to murder.'

'I rather think . . .' Mrs Fortesque began a feeble protest, but was quickly interrupted by Mrs Davenport who regarded Miss Mansfield as rather common and therefore a person to be snubbed on every possible occasion.

'A civilized, rational being, with a shred of moral fibre would overcome any one of these misfortunes without resorting to killing a fellow creature.'

Miss Mansfield creased her face into a grim smile.

'What about the soldier on the battlefield?'

'That's a totally irrelevant question. He is defending himself.'

'Yes, because he's afraid of being killed.'

'I cannot imagine how we came to be engaged in such an unseemly conversation,' Mrs Davenport said after a particularly vicious snort. 'It is scarcely a fit subject for Christmas Eve, not to mention the presence of a young person of tender years.'

'Nonsense. What is Christmas but the birthday celebration of a man who was to be murdered in a most gruesome fashion?'

Mrs Davenport gasped and said: 'This is really too much!' and Movita could sense a probing spear of something that had possibly struck the wrong target. He – the man in grey – was trying to contact her brain, but instead had penetrated Miss Mansfield's mental storeroom and, assisted by hot punch and two glasses of the best madeira, was forcing her to make statements she would later regret.

This terrifying assumption should have been dismissed as pure imaginative nonsense, but Movita knew with an unreasoning certainty that it contained at least an element of fact, although later – perhaps tomorrow when the sun shone down on a white world – she might be able to marshal a meagre force of disbelief.

'But I am special – special': the silly phrase became a



dull echo that bounced back and forth across her brain; created a nice superior feeling, sent fear scurrying before a warm glow of self-satisfaction. The knowledge had always been with her, only she had never been able to accept it before. No one else had seen the cringing shadow that sometimes came gliding down the stairs, or heard the faint sobbing that aroused her to instant wakefulness during the small hours.

'I hope the Christmas pudding is not too rich,' Mama was as usual walking a mundane path. 'Cook is inclined to be rather heavy-handed with the suet and one dare not offer a word of advice.'

'Delicious,' Mr Davenport wheezed his approval. 'Fit for the Queen herself.'

'Excellent,' his wife gave the impression that her praise was not without certain reservations. 'I have tasted far worse.'

Miss Mansfield made no comment, but ate her portion in sullen silence as though fearful lest her tongue should again utter outrageous statements. Mr Davenport cast an inquiring glance to his right.

'Why, the little lady has eaten hardly anything at all! Come, my dear, this won't do. At your age I would have been asking for a third helping by now.'

Movita wished he would leave her alone, for now she was the centre of attention, with everyone making mock derogatory sounds that soon merged into fatuous remarks.

'Eating between meals always spoils the appetite,' Papa intoned.

'Perhaps she's in love,' Mrs Davenport suggested with something not far removed from a sneer.

'Or maybe she has something on her mind,' Miss Mansfield abandoned her self-imposed silence and watched the girl with bright, enquiring eyes.

'I would consider that to be most unlikely,' Mama commented dryly, 'but she has been looking off colour all day. Don't you feel well, dear?'

'Yes, Mama. I'm just not hungry, that's all.'

A welcome interruption came in the form of a chorus of childish voices that sent out a rather untuneful rendering of *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* from just beyond

the front door. Papa said heartily: 'Carol singers! We'd better have them in, my dear. A mince pie and a glass of wine for the older ones.'

'I'm surprised that you encourage them,' Mrs Davenport remarked. 'It's nothing more than begging.'

'Not at Christmas time.' He looked back over one shoulder and addressed the maid. 'Jane, let them in. Then ask cook to send up some more of her excellent mince pies.'

'Very well, sir.'

They entered the dining-room, four boys and two girls, but it was the small lad who had yet to celebrate his eighth birthday that claimed Movita's full attention. While the others made appreciative noises when presented with a mince pie and a glass of diluted wine, he stared at her with wide open eyes, then, after a fugitive glance at a tall girl who might have been his sister, edged his way round the table. Movita lowered her head until his mouth was an inch away from her left ear. The whispered words roared across her brain.

'Please, miss, the man on the seat says - he's waiting.'

'Charlie, come here this instant.' The tall girl raised a shrill voice, then blushed unbecomingly. 'Sorry, miss, but I don't know what's come over him. When we were singing he was sitting on that cold seat, pretending to talk to someone. He's usually so good and does what he's told.'

'Filled with Christmas spirit, I dare say,' Mr Davenport wheezed his amusement. 'You seem to have made another conquest, Movita. What was the young scallywag whispering in your ear?'

Movita did not answer, but looked fearfully at the window, which now did no more than faithfully reflect the room and its occupants. Her father's voice broke the spell and restored a semblance of normality.

'Don't tease the girl, Davenport. We don't want a fit of the sulks on Christmas Eve. Now,' he turned a beaming face to the line of carol singers. 'Do you all know *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night*?'

Some said: 'Yes, sir,' others just nodded and in no time at all the familiar words were being shouted, yelled and even sung by voices that made up in enthusiasm what they lacked in harmony. Mrs Davenport grimaced, Miss

Mansfield shook her head, but Movita's parents at least pretended that the performance was quite up to their expectations. Then each child was given a shilling and escorted to the door by Jane, whose disapproving looks suggested that she was of the opinion they should never have been let in. The small boy, just before he was pulled through the doorway by his tall sister, turned and uttered the fatal words with precision. It might have been assumed that he had been instructed by an assiduous parent always to speak up and the devil take the consequences.

'He'll be real angry, miss, if you don't go out.'

After the children had departed a kind of shocked silence hung over the room, like an ominous cloud that is the harbinger of a very violent storm. Then Mrs Fortesque spoke.

'What on earth did he mean? Movita, what have you been up to? Have you been making assignations with some man?'

'I knew she had something on her mind,' Mrs Davenport stated with obvious satisfaction. 'In my experience, still tongue means active mind.'

Papa raised his voice, although he was clearly embarrassed that such a delicate matter had to be discussed in front of guests.

'Are we to understand, Movita, that there is a man outside who is expecting you to join him?'

To tell them the truth was an act of madness, but there was little alternative for silence would be interpreted as a confession of guilt.

'Not a man - I don't know - a ghost I suppose. He walks the green some nights - but not every night. At least I don't think so. I've sort of sensed him ever since I was a child, but only recently has he taken to - well - sort of calling me. I didn't think anyone else could see him, but that little boy must have.'

Her voice trailed off into silence and for a while no one spoke, until Mrs Davenport rose and motioned to her husband to do likewise.

'I think it's about time we went home. Christmas Eve you know, lots to do.'

'So soon!' Mrs Fortesque exclaimed, well aware that an embellished account of Movita's presumed insanity would be in full circulation before the night was out. 'I - we assumed you would stay for the entire evening.'

'Yes, well, now I've just remembered . . . Come, Harold.'

Mr Davenport heaved his vast bulk up from his chair with great reluctance, clearly enthralled by this splash of drama, which was even more intriguing than Miss Mansfield's strange outburst. He oozed apologies, hinted at unexpected guests, a dire crisis that demanded immediate attention, then followed his wife out into the hall, leaving Movita alone with Miss Mansfield. She looked at the girl through narrowed eyes.

'Are you telling the truth? Not just covering up for a bit of nonsense with some boy?'

Movita shook her head, aware that she was very near tears.

'It's all true, but I can't expect anyone to believe me: For a long time I thought everyone knew about him, but was afraid to mention it.'

The woman nodded and cast a quick glance in the direction of the hall, where Mrs Fortesque could be heard still trying to detain her departing guests.

'Have you seen or heard anything else?'

'Sometimes. A shadowy figure on the stairs, the sound of a lady sobbing. But I've never been frightened - up to now.'

The front door slammed and her parents re-entered the room, both angry, possibly frightened, but it was her father who expressed his concern by words.

'Movita, aren't you ashamed of yourself? Making up such a childish and wicked story. What have you got to say?'

'It's all true. It is.'

'Perhaps she should see a doctor,' Mrs Fortesque suggested. 'She must be ill. There can be no other explanation.'

'The girl's psychic,' Miss Mansfield said quietly.

Mr Fortesque exploded into an uncharacteristic fit of rage.

'Nonsense, Miss Mansfield, and I'm surprised that a lady

of your intelligence should encourage the girl in her . . . her madness. She's play-acting, trying to put down a smoke screen for some misdemeanour, if not something far worse.'

'And I maintain,' the lady insisted, 'that she's a sensitive. Gifted with a perception that is fortunately denied to the rest of us. You may not be aware, but this house had a bad reputation long before you came to live in it. There was some talk of a murder committed here way back in the last century. Instead of ranting at the girl, you should be trying to help her.'

Mrs Fortesque gave the impression she might faint if given the least encouragement, while her husband sank into a chair and murmured:

'This is all beyond me. Are you saying my daughter can see spooks?'

'I'm saying she is aware of a phenomenon that cannot be explained in mundane terms. She has an affinity with the past and possibly an unconscious ability to give substance to – for want of a better expression – a personality extension. Something that is trapped in a haunting pattern.'

'Good God, woman, you must be mad!'

'Madness is the sanity shared by the select few. But I have read of similar cases and I know something must be done – and done quickly.'

'What do you suggest? Call in the vicar and get him to conduct an exercise service?'

'Exorcize,' Miss Mansfield corrected. 'But I doubt if you would welcome the kind of publicity such proceedings would attract. My solution is much more simple. Let me take Movita out there and find out what he wants. If nothing happens, we'll know the child is living in a fantasy world and you can take other steps.'

'Very well, I suppose it can do no harm.'

'But it's so cold,' Mrs Fortesque protested. 'She'll catch her death out there.'

'It's only a few steps across the road and she can wrap up warmly.'

Movita shook her head violently while tears ran down her white cheeks. 'I don't want to go. He'll do something awful to my mind. I know it. Please don't make me go.'

Miss Mansfield took one limp hand in hers and spoke with a gentle voice.

'Listen, my dear, and try to understand. He is already in your mind, because you believe in his existence. Do you want to be haunted all your life? The only way to dispel fear is to meet it face to face; look into its eyes and find out why it walks. You need only a spoonful of courage.'

'Something dreadful will happen.'

'It won't. Believe me.'

Parents watched with troubled eyes, the seductress slipped a coat around her shoulders and there seemed little point in further resistance; for was this fate not the reason she had been born? Miss Mansfield opened the door and said: 'Come, my dear, it will soon be over,' and the wind drew her into its icy embrace, while over to the left the hanging tree groaned its perpetual lament. The seat loomed nearer; frozen snow hung like a bleached shroud over the back bars and formed glistening pendants that hung from the outstretched arms. And he was there – a shadow under the tree, a transparent column of mist that disappeared before it could take on a recognizable shape, a voice that spoke in her brain.

*At last you have come out and now I can sip from the overflowing cup and free myself from the haunting path. Before the sun rises again, succulent fruit will dangle from the hanging tree and another earthbound soul will pace this narrow strip of grass, watch those who still eat, live and breathe through lighted windows.*

*Let me for a brief moment become a tiny spark of awareness that coils up in your brain, peers out through your eyes, feels the blood pulsing through your body . . . speaks with your tongue. . . .*

'You see, my dear, there's no one – nothing there. Together we have exorcized him. Two that walk together must prevail.'

Movita's head came slowly round, eyes bright, teeth bared in a grin of ferocious joy, twin rivulets of moisture seeping down over the lax lips. The slender throat con-

torted and presently a harsh, alien voice sent out a stream of tortured words.

'Thank . . . you . . . for . . . bringing . . . me . . . what I . . . most . . . needed.'

Then the girl crumpled like a puppet when the invisible master drops the strings and lay on the ground, her face transformed by a peaceful smile. And Miss Mansfield, after giving vent to one long-drawn-out cry, ran round the seat, across the green and soon became a lurching, wildly gesturing figure that disappeared through the old castle gateway.

Fully dressed, wide awake, Movita lay on her bed and smiled gently in the moonlight. She had been wept over, cosseted, fed with any amount of nourishing liquids, then put to bed. Now had come the time for revelation, to go out fearlessly and face whatever the night had to offer. She got up and walked calmly to the door.

It was necessary to creep down the stairs, for her parents would soon be up and around if they heard the slightest sound and they must not view horror by moonlight; only very special people could do that and not lose their unique sanity. First, a visit to the kitchen where a coil of clothes line was draped over a peg, then back to the hall, there to unbolt the front door, then . . . then out across the narrow road and on to that naked strip of grass.

The hanging tree groaned a mournful welcome, or perhaps an angry protest, for dangling on one of its lower branches was a dark-clad figure that twisted gently from left to right, first presenting a mass of tangled hair, then an awful, contorted face with a purple tongue protruding from between blood-coated lips. Miss Mansfield had not been particularly pretty when alive, dead she was positively hideous.

The wind mischievously lifted her long skirts and revealed thin legs clad in black stockings, a liberty it would never have been permitted to take during the lady's lifetime. Movita uncoiled the clothes line and after pulling the skirts back to their rightful position, bound it tightly round the ankles. Then she stood back and smiled

up at Miss Mansfield's grotesque face.

'I had what he needed to make you hang yourself. But you—you had the killing instinct. You were two of a kind.'

Presently, she went back to bed and slept peacefully for the remainder of the night. Tomorrow promised to be an exciting day.



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# DEVILS OF DARKNESS... VISIONS OF DOOM...

Benighted souls, condemned to hell on  
earth . . . like

## THE MASTER OF HOUNDS

They were padding up the stairs,  
growling, jostling for position.

Mandersby stared at the slowly  
opening door with dilated eyes. He  
could see two amber specks of light  
advancing towards the bed.

Suddenly there was a weight upon his  
legs, and the outline of a gaunt head  
with gaping jaws. Then a tongue – cold  
as death – upon his cheek . . .