

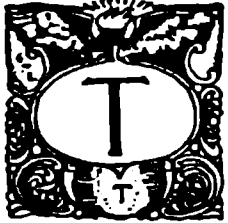
“ ‘He looked closer through the dusk, and saw a pair of boots’ ”

In the Barn

By BURGESS JOHNSON

Illustrations by George Avison

A new kind of ghost-story. If you found yourself in an old barn with a number of pupils who expected a story from you, and you improvise one which turns out to be uncannily as it was described, what then?



THE moment we had entered the barn, I regretted the rash good nature which prompted me to consent to the plans of those vivacious young students. Miss Anstell and Miss Royce and one or two others, often leaders in student mischief, I suspect, were the first to enter, and they amused themselves by hiding in the darkness and greeting the rest of our party as we entered with sundry shrieks and moans such as are commonly attributed to ghosts. My wife and I brought up the rear, carrying the two farm lanterns. She had selected the place after an amused consideration of the question, and I confess I hardly approved her judgment. But she is native to this part of the country, and she had assured us that there were some vague traditions hanging about the building that made it most suitable for our purposes.

It was a musty old place, without even as much tidiness as is usually found in barns, and there was a dank smell about it, as though generations of haymows had decayed there. There were holes in the floor, and in the dusk of early evening it was necessary for us to pick our way with the greatest care. It occurred to me then, in a premonitory sort of way, that if some young woman student sprained her ankle in this absurd environment, I should be most embarrassed to explain it. Apparently it was a hay barn, whose vague dimensions were lost in shadow. Rafters crossed its width about twenty feet above our heads, and here and there a few boards lay across the rafters, furnishing foothold for any one who might wish to

operate the ancient pulley that was doubtless once used for lifting bales. The northern half of the floor was covered with hay to a depth of two or three feet. How long it had actually been there I cannot imagine. It was extremely dusty, and I feared a recurrence of my old enemy, hay-fever; but it was too late to offer objection on such grounds, and my wife and I followed our chattering guides, who disposed themselves here and there on this ancient bed of hay, and insisted that we should find places in the center of their circle.

At my suggestion, the two farm lanterns had been left at a suitable distance, in fact, quite at the other side of the barn, and our only light came from the rapidly falling twilight of outdoors, which found its way through a little window and sundry cracks high in the eaves above the rafters.

There was something about the place, now that we were settled and no longer occupied with adjustments for comfort, that subdued our spirits, and it was with much less hilarity that the young people united in demanding a story. I looked across at my wife, whose face was faintly visible within the circle. I thought that even in the half-light I glimpsed the same expression of amused incredulity which she had worn earlier in the day when I had yielded to the importunities of a deputation of my students for this ghost-story party on the eve of a holiday.

"There is no reason," I thought to myself, repeating the phrases I had used then—"there is no reason why I should not tell a ghost-story. True, I had never done so before, but the literary attain-

ments which have enabled me to perfect my recent treatise upon the 'Disuse of the Comma' are quite equal to impromptu experimentation in the field of psychic phenomena." I was aware that the young people themselves hardly expected serious acquiescence, and that, too, stimulated me. I cleared my throat in a prefatory manner, and silence fell upon the group. A light breeze had risen outside, and the timbers of the barn creaked persistently. From the shadows almost directly overhead there came a faint clanking. It was evidently caused by the rusty pulley-wheel which I had observed there as we entered. An iron hook at the end of an ancient rope still depended from it, and swung in the lightly stirring air several feet above our heads, directly over the center of our circle.

Some curious combination of influences—perhaps the atmosphere of the place, added to the stimulation of the faintly discernible faces around me, and my impulse to prove my own ability in this untried field of narration—gave me a sudden sense of being inspired. I found myself voicing fancies as though they were facts, and readily including imaginary names and data which certainly were not in any way premeditated.

"This barn stands on the old Creed place," I began. "Peter Creed was its last owner, but I suppose that it has always been and always will be known as the Turner barn. A few yards away to the south you will find the crumbling brickwork and gaping hollows of an old foundation, now overgrown with weeds that almost conceal a few charred timbers. That is all that is left of the old Ashley Turner house."

I cleared my throat again, not through any effort to gain time for my thoughts, but to feel for a moment the satisfaction arising from the intent attitude of my audience, particularly my wife, who had leaned forward and was looking at me with an expression of startled surprise.

"Ashley Turner must have had a pretty fine-looking farm here thirty years or so ago," I continued, "when he brought his wife to it. This barn was new then. But he was a ne'er-do-well,

with nothing to be said in his favor, unless you admit his fame as a practical joker. Strange how the ne'er-do-well is often equipped with an extravagant sense of humor! Turner had a considerable retinue among the riffraff boys of the neighborhood, who made this barn a noisy rendezvous and followed his hints in much whimsical mischief. But he committed most of his practical jokes when drunk, and in his sober moments he abused his family and let his wife struggle to keep up the acres, assisted only by a half-competent man of all work. Finally he took to roving. No one knew how he got pocket-money; his wife could not have given him any. Then some one discovered that he was going over to Creed's now and then, and everything was explained."

This concise data of mine was evidently not holding the close attention of my youthful audience. They annoyed me by frequent pranks and whisperings. No one could have been more surprised at my glibness than I myself, except perhaps my wife, whose attitude of strained attention had not relaxed. I resumed my story.

"Peter Creed was a good old-fashioned usurer of the worst type. He went to church regularly one day in the week and gouged his neighbors—any that he could not get into his clutches—on the other six. He must have been lending Turner drinking money, and every one knew what the security must be.

"At last there came a day when the long-suffering wife revolted. Turner had come home extra drunk and in his most maudlin humor. Probably he attempted some drunken prank upon his overtaxed helpmate. Old Ike, the hired man, said that he thought Turner had rigged up some scare for her in the barn and that he had never heard anything so much like straight talking from his mistress, either before or since, and he was working in the woodshed at the time, with the door shut. Shortly after that tirade Ashley Turner disappeared, and no one saw or heard of him or thought about him for a couple of years except when the sight of his tired-looking wife and scrawny children revived the recollection.

"At last, on a certain autumn day, old



"I imagine Mrs. Turner knew what was in store for her when his rusty buggy came in sight around the corner of the barn"

Peter Creed turned up here at the Turner place. I imagine Mrs. Turner knew what was in store for her when his rusty buggy came in sight around the corner of the barn. At any rate, she made no protest, and listened meekly to his curt statement that he held an over-due mortgage, with plenty of back interest owing, and it was time for her to go. She went. Neither she nor any one else doubted Creed's rights in the matter, and, after all, I believe it got a better home for her somewhere in the long run."

I paused here in my narration to draw breath and readjust my leg, which had become cramped. There was a general readjustment and shifting of position, with some levity. It was darker now. The rafters above us were invisible, and the faces about me looked oddly white against the shadowy background. After a moment or two of delay I cleared my throat sharply and continued.

"Old Creed came thus into possession of this place, just as he had come to own a dozen others in the county. He usually

lived on one until he was able to sell it at a good profit over his investment; so he settled down in the Turner house, and kept old Ike, because he worked for little or nothing. But he seemed to have a hard time finding a purchaser.

"It must have been about a year later when an unexpected thing happened. Creed had come out here to the barn to lock up—he always did that himself—when he noticed something unusual about the haymow—this haymow—which stood then about six feet above the barn-door. He looked closer through the dusk, and saw a pair of boots; went nearer, and found that they were fitted to a pair of human legs whose owner was sound asleep in his hay. Creed picked up a short stick and beat on one boot.

"'Get out of here,' he said, 'or I 'll have you locked up.' The sleeper woke in slow fashion, sat up, grinned, and said:

"'Hello, Peter Creed.' It was Ashley Turner, beyond question. Creed stepped back a pace or two and seemed at a loss for words. An object slipped from

Turner's pocket as he moved, slid along the hay, and fell to the barn-floor. It was a half-filled whisky-flask.

"No one knows full details of the conversation that ensued, of course. Such little as I am able to tell you of what was said and done comes through old Ike, who watched from a safe distance outside the barn, ready to act at a moment's notice as best suited his own safety and welfare. Of one thing Ike was certain—Creed lacked his usual browbeating manner. He was apparently struggling to assume an unwonted friendliness. Turner was very drunk, but triumphant, and his satisfaction over what he must have felt was the practical joke of his life seemed to make him friendly.

"'I kept 'em all right,' he said again and again. 'I've got the proof. I was n't working for nothing all these months. I ain't fool enough yet to throw away papers even when I'm drunk.'

"To the watchful Ike's astonishment, Creed evidently tried to persuade him to come into the house for something to eat. Turner slid off the haymow, found his steps too unsteady, laughed foolishly, and suggested that Creed bring some food to him there. 'Guess I've got a right to sleep in the barn or house, whichever I want,' he said, leering into Creed's face. The old usurer stood there for a few minutes eying Turner thoughtfully. Then he actually gave him a shoulder back on to the hay, said something about finding a snack of supper, and started out of the barn. In the doorway he turned, looked back, then walked over to the edge of the mow and groped on the floor until he found the whisky-flask, picked it up, tossed it into Turner's lap, and stumbled out of the barn again."

I was becoming interested in my own story and somewhat pleased with the fluency of it, but my audience annoyed me. There was intermittent whispering, with some laughter, and I inferred that one or another would occasionally stimulate this inattention by tickling a companion with a straw. Miss Anstell, who is so frivolous by nature that I sometimes question her right to a place in my classroom, I even suspected of irritating the back of my own neck in

the same fashion. Naturally, I ignored it.

"Peter Creed," I repeated, "went into the house. Ike hung around the barn, waiting. He was frankly curious. In a few minutes his employer reappeared, carrying a plate heaped with an assortment of scraps. Ike peered and listened then without compunction.

"'It 's the best I've got,' he heard Creed say grudgingly. Turner's tones were now more drunkenly belligerent.

"'It had better be,' he said loudly. 'And I'll take the best bed after to-night.' Evidently he was eating and muttering between mouthfuls. 'You might have brought me another bottle.'

"'I did,' said Creed, to the listening Ike's great astonishment. Turner laughed immoderately.

"A long silence followed. Turner was either eating or drinking. Then he spoke again, more thickly and drowsily.

"'Damn unpleasant that rope. Why don't you haul it up out of my way?'

"'It don't hurt you any,' said Creed.

"'Don't you wish it would?' said Turner, with drunken shrewdness. 'But I don't like it. Haul it away.'

"'I will,' said Creed.

"There was a longer silence, and then there came an intermittent rasping sound. A moment later Creed came suddenly from the barn. Ike fumbled with a large rake, and made as though to hang it on its unaccustomed peg near the barn-door. Creed eyed him sharply. 'Get along to bed,' he ordered, and Ike obeyed.

"That was a Saturday night. On Sunday morning Ike went to the barn later than usual and hesitatingly. Even then he was first to enter. He found the drunkard's body hanging here over the mow, just about where we are sitting, stark and cold. It was a gruesome end to a miserable home-coming."

My audience was quiet enough now. Miss Anstell and one or two others giggled loudly, but it was obviously forced, and found no further echo. The breeze which had sprung up some time before was producing strange creakings and raspings in the old timbers, and the pulley-wheel far above us clanked with a dismal repetitious sound, like the tolling of a cracked bell.



"Crossing this space, he saw the figure of Peter Creed"

I waited a moment, well satisfied with the effect, and then continued.

"The coroner's jury found it suicide, though some shook their heads meaningly. Turner had apparently sobered up enough to stand, and, making a simple loop around his neck by catching the rope through its own hook, had then slid off the mow. The rope which went over the pulley-wheel up there in the roof ran out through a window under the eaves, and was made fast near the barn-door outside, where any one could haul on it. Creed testified the knot was one he had tied many days before. Ike was a timorous old man, with a wholesome fear of his employer, and he supported the testimony and made no reference to

his eavesdropping of the previous evening, though he heard Creed swear before the jury that he did not recognize the tramp he had fed and lodged. There were no papers in Turner's pockets; only a few coins, and a marked pocket-knife that gave the first clue to his identity.

"A few of the neighbors said that it was a fitting end, and that the verdict was a just one. Nevertheless, whisperings began and increased. People avoided Creed and the neighborhood. Rumors grew that the barn was haunted. Passers-by on the road after dark said they heard the old pulley-wheel clanking when no breeze stirred, much as you hear it now. Some claim to have

heard maudlin laughter. Possible purchasers were frightened away, and Creed grew more and more solitary and misanthropic. Old Ike hung on, Heaven knows why, though I suppose Creed paid him some sort of wage.

"Rumors grew. Folks said that neither Ike nor Creed entered this barn after a time, and no hay was put in, though Creed would not have been Creed if he had not sold off the bulk of what he had, ghost or no ghost. I can imagine him slowly forking it out alone, daytimes, and the amount of hay still here proves that even he finally lost courage."

I paused a moment, but though there was much uneasy stirring about, and the dismal clanking directly above us was incessant, no one of my audience spoke. It was wholly dark now, and I think all had drawn closer together.

"About ten years ago people began calling Creed crazy." Here I was forced to interrupt my own story. "I shall have to ask you, Miss Anstell, to stop annoying me. I have been aware for some moments that you are brushing my head with a straw, but I have ignored it for the sake of the others." Out of the darkness came Miss Anstell's voice, protesting earnestly, and I realized from the direction of the sound that in the general readjustment she must have settled down in the very center of our circle, and could not be the one at fault. One of the others was childish enough to simulate a mocking burst of raucous laughter, but I chose to ignore it.

"Very well," said I, graciously; "shall I go on?"

"Go on," echoed a subdued chorus.

"It was the night of the twenty-eighth of May, ten years ago—"

"Not the twenty-eighth," broke in my wife's voice, sharply; "that is to-day's date." There was a note in her voice that I hardly recognized, but it indicated that she was in some way affected by my narration, and I felt a distinct sense of triumph.

"It was the night of May twenty-eighth," I repeated firmly.

"Are you making up this story?" my wife's voice continued, still with the same odd tone.

"I am, my dear, and you are interrupting it."

"But an Ashley Turner and later a Peter Creed owned this place," she persisted almost in a whisper, "and I am sure you never heard of them."

I confess that I might wisely have broken off my story then and called for a light. There had been an hysterical note in my wife's voice, and I was startled at her words, for I had no conscious recollection of either name; yet I felt a resultant exhilaration. Our lanterns had grown strangely dim, though I was certain both had been recently trimmed and filled; and from their far corner of the barn they threw no light whatever into our circle. I faced an utter blackness.

"On that night," said I, "old Ike was wakened by sounds as of some one fumbling to unbar and open the house-door. It was an unwonted hour, and he peered from the window of his little room. By the dim starlight—it was just before dawn—he could see all of the open yard and roadway before the house, with the great barn looming like a black and sinister shadow as its farther barrier. Crossing this space, he saw the figure of Peter Creed, grotesquely stooped and old in the obscuring gloom, moving slowly, almost gropingly, and yet directly, as though impelled, toward the barn's overwhelming shadow. Slowly he unbarred the great door, swung it open, and entered the blacker shadows it concealed. The door closed after him.

"Ike in his secure post of observation did not stir. He could not. Even to his crude imagining there was something utterly horrible in the thought of Creed alone at that hour in just such black darkness as this, with the great timbered chamber haunted at least by its dread memories. He could only wait, tense and fearful of he knew not what. A shriek that pierced the silence relaxed his tension, bringing almost a sense of relief, so definite had been his expectancy. But it was a burst of shrill laughter, ribald, uncanny, undeniable, accompanying the shriek that gave him power of motion. He ran half naked a quarter of a mile to the nearest neighbor's and told his story.

"THEY found Creed hanging, the rope hooked simply around his neck.

It was a silent jury that filed from the barn that morning after viewing the body. 'Suicide,' said they, after Ike, shivering and stammering, had testified, harking back to the untold evidence of that other morning years before. Yes, Creed was dead, with a terrible look on his wizen face, and the dusty old rope ran through its pulley-wheel and was fast to a beam high above.

"'He must of climbed to the beam, made the rope fast, and jumped,' said the foreman, solemnly. 'He must of, he must of,' repeated the man, parrot-like, while the sweat stood out on his forehead, 'because there was n't no other way; but as God is my judge, the knot in the rope and the dust on the beam ain't been disturbed for years.'"

At this dramatic climax there was an audible sigh from my audience. I sat quietly for a time, content to allow the silence and the atmosphere of the place, which actually seemed surcharged with influences not of my creation, to add to the effect my story had caused. There was scarcely a movement in our circle; of that I felt sure. And yet once more, out of the almost tangible darkness above me, something seemed to reach down and brush against my head. A slight motion of air, sufficient to disturb my rather scanty locks, was additional proof that I was the butt of some prank that had just missed its objective. Then, with a fearful suddenness, close to my ear burst a shrill discord of laughter, so uncanny and so unlike the usual sound of student merriment that I started up, half wondering

if I had heard it. Almost immediately after it the heavy darkness was torn again by a shriek so terrible in its intensity as completely to differentiate it from the other cries which followed.

"Bring a light!" cried a voice that I recognized as that of my wife, though strangely distorted by emotion. There was a great confusion. Young women struggled from their places and impeded one another in the darkness; but finally, and it seemed an unbearable delay, some one brought a single lantern.

Its frail light revealed Miss Anstell half upright from her place in the center of our circle, my wife's arms sustaining her weight. Her face, as well as I could see it, seemed darkened and distorted, and when we forced her clutching hands away from her bared throat we could see, even in that light, the marks of an angry, throttling scar entirely encircling it. Just above her head the old pulley-rope swayed menacingly in the faint breeze.

My recollection is even now confused as to the following moments and our stumbling escape from that gruesome spot. Miss Anstell is now at her home, recovering from what her physician calls mental shock. My wife will not speak of it. The questions I would ask her are checked on my lips by the look of utter terror in her eyes. As I have confessed to you, my own philosophy is hard put to it to withstand not so much the community attitude toward what they are pleased to call my taste in practical joking, but to assemble and adjust the facts of my experience.

