

Weird Tales

July
1954

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Off the Map

BY REX DOLPHIN



EXCUSE my shivers, but it's good to sit down over a cigarette and recover my wits, and talk to someone who can perhaps persuade me that it never happened.

I often knock around about the countryside, looking out unusual and picturesque places, and one of my pleasures in an old English town is to haunt the second-hand bookshops in search of local lore.

See this? Yes, it's an old map—seventeenth century to be exact—and I found it in a musty old shop in a part of the country I'd better not mention. No, this has nothing to do with buried treasure, though to be truthful

it does concern some golden guineas; guineas that no one will touch. Give you the chance? Maybe, but there's something you should know first.

Here on the map are three villages. Let's call them Burgholme, Wychburne and Ervington. Burgholme and Ervington you can still find on modern maps; you'll look in vain for Wychburne. Where has it gone, you ask? That's the whole point.

As you see, Wychburne lay between the other two villages, but today's large-scale map will show you nothing but wild and waste land, moor, hill and bog. Intrigued by this, I searched en-



Old maps showed three villages; new maps only two



cyclopedias and guide-books old and new, but not a word about Wychburne. There seemed to be a conspiracy of silence wrapped about the place, and I began to wonder if it had ever existed except in the old map-maker's imagination; or, due to the primitive cartographic methods of that day, it had been placed many miles from its true site and now bore a different name.

That disastrous curiosity made me take a train to the nearest town and hike six miles to Burgholme. This place was little more than a hamlet, with no church, chapel or pub. The weather that late summer afternoon was Novemberish, damp with a swirling mist, and the sun giving up his efforts in disgust.

AFTER the long walk the sudden ending of exercise made me chilly, and the need for refreshment was evident. I searched the dismal village for the usual battered and ill-written "TEAS" sign without which no English village however small is complete. There wasn't one in Burgholme.

So it would have to be a cottage. They all looked equally unfriendly. I picked one, and knocked at the door.

It was opened by a thin-faced middle-aged woman, who said: "Well?"

A ragged staring little girl appeared beside her, and in the background, a brawny farm-laborer.

"Excuse me, but can you provide me with a tea?" I said politely.

She didn't answer. Instead, the man came nearer, and said, in a pointedly unfriendly manner:

"What are you doing in Burgholme, anyway, mister? Nobody ever comes here."

Since I never dress in conventional hiker's kit, perhaps the question was understandable.

"Just hiking," I replied. "And I've got hungry and thirsty."

"Ha!" said the man. And they all looked at me as if I were a being from another world.

"I'll pay you well."

That turned the trick. "All right. Come in."

"Thanks."

It was a silent meal. All attempts at conversation failed. As I ate they sat and watched every movement of my face and hands; and though to be fair, the food was good and plentiful, it was the most uncomfortable meal I've ever had.

At the end I made one more attempt.

"What is the quickest way to Ervington?"

The inevitable answer: "Why d'you want to go to Ervington, Mister?"

"I'm just walking for pleasure

—seeing the countryside. Can't you understand that?"

"No." But he gave me the route to Ervington all the same. It was a roundabout way and entailed going backward to get forward.

"Can't I get there across country, then?" I asked.

"Not if you don't want to get lost."

"Surely, there must be some sort of a footpath?" I asked. And then came what I had been leading up to: "After all, long ago there used to be a village—probably in ruins now—between here and Ervington."

A look, queer, as of suppressed horror, came to the faces of the man and woman.

"a place called Wychburne."

The woman went dead white. The man made the Sign of the Cross and said in an unnatural voice:

"There are some places it don't do to talk about, mister. Better go."

"What's the matter with Wychburne?" I persisted.

The man got up, stood between me and his family.

"Go," he said, and almost pushed me through the doorway.

As I walked away I saw their terrified faces watching me from behind the curtain.

The air seemed to get grayer and colder as I passed the

last few huddled cottages that marked the end of the village—the end that according to the old map led past the entrance to the Wychburne road. There was a sound now, that of shuffling and of sticks tapping on the pebbled road.

It came towards me. It came out of the swirling mist, a bent old man making wearily for home. He must have been eighty, to judge by his folded and lined face and deepset rheumy eyes which he turned questingly in my direction. His tattered black coat hung loosely on his body.

I stopped. So did his shuffling.

"Should there be," I said loudly, for I imagined he would certainly be deaf, "be a road leading to Wychburne somewhere along here?"

Dead silence for a few seconds, the silence of utter shock.

Then he dropped his sticks and ran—yes, this old man ran—towards the village. Hoppity-hop, like a crippled crow, his coat flapping about him.

My first feeling was to laugh, both at the idea and the spectacle. Then I checked myself. What, other than intense fear, could have given those withered legs, wings? What was there about the mere name of Wychburne that inspired terror?

I shrugged my shoulders to myself, and persuaded myself that country superstitions—what-

ever they were in this case—were sheer nonsense. Well clear of the village now, I seemed to be in a deserted land. Getting out my maps, I checked my position. Yes, just around here, perhaps fifty yards along on the left, should be the road or track to Wychburne.

Then the mist closed about me like a blanket dropped over my head. This is where, if I hadn't been dead stupid or hungry with curiosity, I should have turned back to the comparative civilization of Burgholme. Instead, I searched around and found what seemed to be a rough track. I got out my compass, set a course, and went into the fog.

WHAT I had struck I don't know, but I stumbled over rocks, tore my trousers in thorn bushes, sank up to my ankles in squelch, tripped over what the folk in those parts call pot-holes, and fell flat on my face more than once. And all these hazards were invisible. Sweat poured off me from sheer pig-headedness and exhaustion.

How long this lasted I could not judge, but just as I said to myself, "Stop it, you fool, you're all in!" I seemed to come to the end of the difficulties and found beneath my feet a level although still stony track. All my strength flowed back.

Then, from far ahead in the

mist, came the thin flowing notes of a fiddle, playing some kind of an old country jig. And, faintly, the ebb and flow of voices raised in revelry, as if Merrie England were here again.

The road led steeply down into the valley, but still nothing could be seen. The sounds of merriment got nearer and nearer, and finally I felt,—"I'm here!"

Very gradually, the mist cleared, and there it was—Wychburne! A compact little village, nestling under the surrounding steep cliff-like hills, almost as if a giant had scooped out a spoonful of the earth's surface and dropped the village neatly into the cavity. The houses were grouped around a neat village green on which the fiddlers were playing and a merry crowd dancing. Girls and men, all dressed in the colorful clothes of Restoration days.

There wasn't a thing modern in the place, from the rose-covered timber and white cottages to the horse-wagons "parked" in the inn-yard. What could there be about this place to inspire terror? Wychburne was charming!

But what was its secret? Was it a "lost village"—a place that was unknown to outsiders; that had resisted the inroads of modern progress, had become cut off and was so completely self-contained as to be capable of

carrying on an independent existence? It was inaccessible enough, and its approaches certainly didn't invite visitors, let alone motor traffic. Surveyors, map makers, census takers, county planners—how could all these have overlooked its existence? Yet the fact remained that it didn't exist in present-day records!

The mist—perhaps that explained it. If Wychburne was permanently hidden from view both from land and air, all these things were conceivable.

I MOVED towards the inn-yard, stood looking at the scene, now close-up, and a strange feeling of timelessness and of not being myself came over me. Everything now was larger than life, over-intimate, and as I threaded among the people I saw their faces close to mine, felt the push of their bodies, and the air was full of their rich voices and laughter and snatches of song and music. There was, too, an indefinable odor—a thing one notices only among people of a different race.

Suddenly a face turned towards me, and eyes looked straight into mine. It was a heavy, countryman's face, but full of dignity and independence, and the wide-brimmed tall feathered hat added to its stature.

"What do ye here, stranger?" the man asked, in accents I'd never heard before.

"Travelling," I answered. "What goes on here, a carnival?"

"And whence come ye, stranger?"

"From London."

"From London!" he echoed, and there was a gasp in his voice. Then he shouted to the crowd, "The stranger comes from London!"

The crowd took up the words in a kind of prolonged echo: "From London! From London!"

The words hummed around for some seconds, then the music stopped. The laughter stopped. The voices stopped.

From a window above the inn a low wailing shriek started, gathering strength and building up to a horrible scream that ended abruptly in a choking sob. I looked, and saw that it had been uttered by a girl whose beautiful face now expressed final hopelessness.

A hundred faces seemed to turn in my direction, seemingly all accusing me of some awful crime. And indeed there was a feeling of guilt on me, but guilt of just what I didn't know, although I felt I should have knowledge.

The people now seemed to peel away from me, until I was left isolated on the green. The man who had spoken to me had

vanished; now he suddenly reappeared, at the head of a small group of purposeful-looking men.

They all bore long staves, and the foremost—my man—lunged at me with his, catching me a painful blow under the heart.

"What means this?" I gasped in anger. Fear was to come later.

"Begone, bringer of evil!" he roared.

THEN they all set about me with the staves, not one man coming near enough to touch me with his hands. Argument was futile. I turned and ran—ran while I still had brains in my head and whole bones in my legs.

Crash, crash, they hit me with their sticks as they pursued. I stumbled over rocks and tree-roots as I made the rough ascent out of the village in the opposite direction to that from which I had entered. I fell, was beaten all over, rose, ran, fell again—a deadly, killing repetition. In the middle of all this the mist closed about me again. And still those fiends hounded me. I must have run miles.

I fell for the last time. I was finished. I tried to rise. It was useless. A savage flurry of blows rained on my head. Then—blackout.

When I regained my senses I was lying flat, face down

on the hard rock, soaked to the skin with mist and bruised all over. A few inches from my eyes, lying on the stony ground, was what I took at first to be a much-weathered halfpenny. I reached out for it painfully—I suppose it's a human instinct to pick up a coin however valueless—scraped it and rubbed it clean on my tattered sleeve.

I sat up sharply, my distress forgotten. It was a Charles II golden guinea! And there was another, and another! Five altogether I found, and the remnants of metal buckles, which seemed to argue a whole leather bagful of coins. The others were no doubt scattered around or buried. I told myself I would come back here later and search properly. Meantime my exhaustion had returned, and I had to get to shelter if I wasn't to die of exposure.

There was some sort of a track here, and I followed it as best I could. Presently, still with thick mist hiding everything, I felt my feet touch tarmac, and I pushed on, miles it seemed, till a glimmer ahead showed another village. This, I knew, must be Ervington, last of the three villages on the map.

A hanging sign, unreadable in the mist, appeared ahead, and below it the welcome warmth of lights; and soon I heard the friendly undertone of casual inn-

conversation. I walked in, feeling like a second-hand scarecrow that the crows have defeated.

The conversation stopped. The few customers, all seated, stared at me. The landlord, a shrewd-looking, puckered-faced short man, stopped polishing a glass. His look was enough question.

"Wychburne," I muttered. "What is Wychburne? Can anyone tell me? I've just got back. . . ."

The drinkers all stood up, as if drilled, edged their way round me one by one, and dashed out into the road. I gazed after them. When I looked back to the bar, the landlord had laid a double-barrelled shotgun meaningly across it, the snouts in my direction.

"Stay," he rasped. "Don't move an inch nearer my bar."

"Look," I said desperately. "I'm sick of these riddles. Everything that's happened since I arrived in these parts has been inexplicable. Do *you* know the answer?"

HE TWISTED a grin. "I'm no oracle, mister. But though I'm not as dumb as the local population, being a bit of a travelled man and partly educated, I still respect their superstitions. Let's see . . . somehow you heard of Wychburne? You tried to find it? You're a Londoner? You found Wych-

burne and they drove you out, nearly killing you in the process?"

I answered each question with a nod.

"Yes," he mused, "I suppose it was bound to happen one day." "You've not quite finished," I pointed out.

"How, mister?"

I fished in my pocket. "Where I fell I found the remains of a leather bag, and these." I held up the gold pieces.

"My God, that as well? *So it isn't just a legend!*" The last words were muttered almost to himself.

He was scared.

"Yes—and now the explanation, man!" I pressed. "What is Wychburne?"

"There's no such place," he said. He lifted the bar-flap, picked up the gun, and grunted: "Go through that door and out into the backyard, quick!"

In no condition to argue with a shotgun, I obeyed.

"How can you say there's no such place?" I demanded. "After what I've just been through? And what's the meaning of this pantomime?"

"There was such a place. Not now. Get undressed."

"What?"

"Get undressed. Jump into that old butt. Don't argue, man. It's the best I can do for you. Good. Stay there a minute."

HE WENT across the cobbled yard to the back door; returned quickly carrying a can of liquid. He found a long stick, pushed my clothes, still containing the guineas, well away from me as I stood shivering in the empty barrel, and poured the fluid over them. It was kerosene, from the oily stench. A match, a sheet of smoky flame, and my clothes were ashes.

What was he going to do to *me*? So far I had believed him—he was by far the most rational being I'd met since arriving in the neighborhood—but now, was I dealing with a maniac?

Back into the house he went, coming out this time with a large jug, and a long hose which was still attached to something inside the house. He pointed the hose at me. Something sprayed out.

It was nothing more than water, but almost unbearably hot. "Soap coming over!" he called. "Catch!"

Then he poured the contents of the jug over me into the butt. A very powerful disinfectant, by the smell.

"Now wash!" he ordered. "As thoroughly as you can."

"All right," I spluttered. "You seem to know what you're doing, though it still beats me. Now you tell me all about Wychburne."

"Nearly three hundred years

ago," he said slowly, "a traveller set out from London on a horse, carrying all his gold in a leather bag. He was escaping from something, and looking for an isolated country, hide-out where he could stay till the trouble was over.

"Yes, he found Wychburne. He stayed at the inn there. The first to die was the innkeeper's daughter. They knew he was the cause. They chased him out of the village and beat him to death with the staves. The gold stayed with him. Nobody would touch it.

"In less than a week there wasn't a life left in Wychburne. The men of Ervington and Burg-holme pitched oil, straw, and everything inflammable they could find, into Wychburne from the steep hills around it, and set fire to the whole village. Then they rolled boulders into it, and filled up the little valley with rocks and earth till not a sign of the village remained. That's the story, and it's known to every soul in the two villages—and until today by nobody else."

"But what happened to me?" I cried, shivering.

"That's anybody's guess, mister."

"And what—?" I began, but he'd vanished into the house again.

This time he came back with a rough outfit of clothes, shoes,

an old towel, half a bottle of brandy and some sandwiches.

"When you're dressed, get yourself to a doctor, and don't use any transport. You might be all right, but there's no telling."

"You mean I'm to walk?" I gasped.

"Sorry, mister. Yes."

"No chance of staying the night?"

"Ugh. Not likely. You see, these things happened in 1665—the year of the Great Plague."

Don't go, my friend. .
Don't look at me like that . . .
for God's sake.