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The Flint Knife



*One of its hands grasped
Harry's hair, bending
his head back. . . .*

*Too late he learned what ghastly thing
lurked within that secret garden!*

By E. F. BENSON

WE were philosophizing about gardens, Harry Pershore and I, as we sat one warm, serene June evening on the lawn outside his house, and the text of our observations was the scene in which we talked. The Pershore house, at which I had arrived that afternoon, was set in the very center of a little country-town: its Georgian front looked out on to the main street, but at the back was this unsuspected acre of green lawn and flower beds, surrounded on all sides by high walls of mellow brick, over which peered the roofs and chimneys of the neighboring houses. To me, weary of the heat and roar of London, it was indescribably delightful to sit, cool and at ease, in this green place, which to the inward sense seemed soaked in some peculiar tranquillity.

Just as old houses have their "atmosphere" which has been distilled from the thoughts and the personalities of those who have inhabited them, so this garden seemed to me to have absorbed into the very soul of it the leisure of the generations whose retreat it had been. It was, I said, as if the spirit of that leisure had soaked into the darkling garden where we sat. . . .

Harry was not encouraging about these mild sentimentalities.

"Very pretty indeed," he said, "but for myself I find your theory too fanciful."

"Have it your own way," I retorted. "But I refuse to give up my theory that the inhabitants of houses create a special atmosphere in them. Walls and floors get soaked with them, and why not lawns and flower-beds?"

He rose from his seat and came to me. "I don't believe a word of it," he said. "How can wood and stone receive qualities other than their own? But your remarks, though erroneous, are *à propos*, for we shall have an opportunity of testing their truth. There'll be a new atmosphere let into this garden to-morrow, and we shall see if it has any disturbing effect. Come across the lawn with me, and I'll show you what I mean to do."

THE lawn lay on a gentle slope, and to the west, where it declined down the side of a hill, there ran one of those tall brick walls which gave the garden so delightful a privacy. Harry set a ladder against this, and bade me mount it and look over.

"You won't be peering into the privacy of any neighbor of mine," he said, so up I went and leaned my elbows on the top of the wall.

I found myself looking down into a small square plot, some eighty feet across, of wild uncultivated ground. It was thickly overgrown with weeds and wild flowers and rank seeding grasses, and though it lay on the slope of the hill, it instantly struck one that it must once have been levelled, for it was perfectly flat. All around its four sides ran high brick walls as tall as that over which I was now looking, with never a doorway or means of access in any of them: the square was completely sealed on every side. It had been grilled, of course, all day in the blaze of the sun, with not a breeze to stir the enclosed atmosphere, and now it was like leaning over a furnace, so heated was the air that met my face. Though the place lay naked to the sky, this warmth was not like that of the open; there was some indefinable taint about it, as of a room long shut up.

"But what is it?" I asked as I descended again. "Why is it entirely closed?"

"Rather an odd affair," he said. "Only last week I was grubbing about in a box of old papers which I ought long ago to have sorted out, and I came across a diary of my mother's, written in faded ink and treating of faded topics. It began more than fifty years ago, soon after my birth. I did little more than glance at it, for it seemed to be occupied with the mere trivial chronicle of the days; how she walked one day, and hunted on another, and so forth.

"There were records of the arrival of visitors who came to stay with her and my father, and of their departure; and then I came across an entry which puzzled and interested me. She spoke of the building of a

wall in the garden here, something to this effect: 'I am sure it was only wise to have had it done,' she wrote 'and though it looks rather unsightly at present, it will soon get covered with creepers.'

"That struck me as odd: I couldn't understand to what wall she referred."

We had strolled back to the house as he spoke, and had entered his sitting-room. A shabby calf-bound volume lay on the table, and he pointed to it.

"There's the book," he said. "You might like to look at it, as it is most atmospheric. But I must finish my story: By one of those odd coincidences which mean nothing, on the very day on which I found and glanced at that diary, there was one of those summer gales which detached a big shoot of a climbing rose from the wall over which you have just been looking. My gardener had already gone home when I noticed it, and so I got a ladder and secured it again.

"Naturally," he went on, "one doesn't climb up walls and peer into one's neighbor's garden and I had always supposed that the garden of the next house to mine lay behind that section. But since I was already at the top of the wall, I looked over, and there saw what you have just seen—a little square overgrown plot with high walls and no access whatever to it from any side. At that, what I had read in my mother's diary about the building of a wall occurred to me, and later I found in the same box in which I had found the book, an old plan of this house and garden. This made it quite clear that the square plot had once been part of the garden, for there was no indication on the plan of the wall that now separates it.

SO next I called in my builder to examine that section of the wall. He told me that it was certainly much later than the rest and had probably been built fifty or sixty years ago, for he found at either end of it the straight perpendicular line where it joined the older walls. The date therefore is correct, and no doubt that is the wall mentioned in my mother's diary. Finally I consulted my good friend, the Town Surveyor, and he agreed that the square plot is quite certainly part of my estate."

"So you're going to throw it in again?" I asked. "Is that the new influence you spoke of as entering your garden?"

"Yes, that's it," he said, "though I shan't demolish the wall altogether, but only cut an arched doorway through it. I shall make a little secret garden of the place; it is abso-

lutely sheltered, tall walls on every side, and it must be a wonderful sun trap. I shall have a little grass lawn in the middle of it, and a path of crazy pavement running round that, and deep flower beds against the walls. It will be a perfect gem of a place, and the builder is to begin cutting the doorway to-morrow."

I TOOK up to bed that night the diary of Harry's mother, and feeling disinclined for sleep I read in it for a considerable time. A very pleasant impression emerged of this lady who, in the early days of the seventies, had found life so absorbingly filled with small interests.

She was just eighteen when Harry, her only child was born, and his remarkable precocity soon became an almost daily entry. But then I began to pick out certain scattered sentences which somehow seemed to be connected with each other: "A lovely morning, but something rather uncomfortable about the garden" . . . "Baby cried dreadfully in the garden this morning, but he was as good as gold when Nannie took him out in his perambulator into the street". . . . "I sat on the square little lawn in the sun, but wasn't very happy. The flies were horrible. They buzzed continually round me, and yet I couldn't see them". . . . "Something drove me in from the garden this evening, such an odd feeling, as if there was something looking at me from the little square lawn, and yet there was nobody there. Dick says it is all nonsense, but it isn't quite. . . ."

Then after some interval was recorded the building of the wall, and following that came the entry which Harry had told me of, saying that she was sure it was wise. After that there was no more mention of the new wall, or of trouble in the garden. By this time I was drowsy with the deciphering of those faded lines, and I put out my light and went to sleep.

Now dreams are, of course, only a nonsensical medley of impressions lately received, or of those which in some stirring of

the subconscious mind break like bubbles on the surface of the sleeping senses, so it was no wonder that I had vague and disquieting adventures in the garden, after I had fallen asleep. I seemed to be out there alone in some cloudy twilight; the wall over which I had peered that evening was gone, and in the center of the small lawn that lay beyond was standing a tall upright figure toward which my steps were drawn.

In this veiled dimness I could not make out whether it was a man or some columnar block of stone. But the terror that began to stir in me was mingled with a great curiosity, and very stealthily I advanced toward it. It stood absolutely still, and, whether stone or flesh and blood, it seemed to be waiting.

There was the sound of innumerable flies buzzing in the air close about me, and suddenly a cloud of them descended on me, settling on my eyes and ears and nostrils — foul to the smell and loathsomely unclean to the touch. The horror of them overpowered my caution, and in a frenzy I beat them off, still keeping my eye on that silent figure.

But my movements disclosed its nature: it was no stone column that stood there, for it slowly raised an arm, and made passes and beckonings to me.

A stricture of impotence was closing in on me, but the panic of sheer nightmare broke in on my dreams, and suddenly I was sitting up in bed, panting and wet with terror. The room was peaceful and silent; the open window looking out on the garden let in an oblong of moonlight, and there by my bedside was the closed volume which no doubt had induced this unease.

NEXT day the work of cutting a door in the garden wall began, and by the afternoon we could squeeze in through the slit of aperture and examine more closely the aspect of the new plot. Thick grew the crop of weeds and grasses over it, but underneath the northerly and easterly walls there was mingled with the wild growth many degenerated descendants of cultivated plants,

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showing that at one time (even as the diary had indicated) there had been flower beds there. But otherwise the wild growth was rank and triumphant, and a deep digging over of the soil would be necessary before the plot could be reclaimed.

Sun trap indeed it was: the place was a stew of heat, and though on the outer lawn close by it had been pleasant enough to sit out in the unshaded blaze of the day, thanks to the steady north-easterly breeze, here no faintest stir of moving air freshened the sultriness. Coming from that ventilated warmth outside, there was something deadly and oppressive about this hot torpor; the air was stagnant as the heart of some jungle, and there hung about it a faint odor of decay like that which broods in deep woodlands. I thought, too, that I heard the murmur of large flies, but that perhaps was an imagination born of the pages which I had read last night, and which had already worked themselves up into a most vivid and unpleasant dream.

I HAD not mentioned that to Harry, nor, in returning the diary to him, had I alluded to those curious entries I had found there. I had my own reason for this, for it was clear that his mother had felt there was something queer and uncanny about the spot where we now stood, and I did not want any suggestion of that from outside to enter Harry's mind.

Evidently there was nothing further from his thoughts at present, for he was charmed with this derelict little plot.

"Marvelously sheltered," he said. "No east wind can get near it; it will pass right over it. One could grow anything here. And so perfectly private; not a roof or a chimney looks over the walls—nothing but sky. I love a secret place like this! I shall have a door fitted with a bolt inside, and no one can disturb me. As for the rest, it is all in my head, ready to be realized. Beds, deep flower beds where the old ones have been, a square of grass, and a round bed in the center. I can see it; it will turn out precisely as I want it."

Next morning, while the bricklayers were finishing the doorway, Harry got in a couple of men in addition to his gardener, and all day barrowfuls of weeds and grasses were carted away for burning. The position of the flower beds was staked out, and that of the path, but all had to be deeply dug in order to get rid of the burrowing roots of the old vegetation, before the crazy pavement

and the turfs of the lawn could be laid down. That afternoon as I lazed in the hot sun, Harry came out from his labors, hot and grimed, and beckoned to me.

"Come here!" he called, "We've hit upon an odd thing, and I don't know what it is. Bring your archeological knowledge to bear."

It was indeed rather an odd thing: a square column of black granite, some four feet high and about eighteen inches across. In shape it somewhat resembled one of those altars which are not uncommonly seen in collections of Roman remains. But this was certainly not Roman; it was of far ruder workmanship, and looked far more like some Druidical piece. Then suddenly I remembered having seen, in some Museum of early British remains, something exactly like it: it was described as an altar of sacrifice from an ancient British temple. Indeed there could be no reasonable doubt that this stone was of the same nature.

Harry was delighted with this find.

"Just what I want for the center of my flower bed in the middle of the lawn," he said. "I've got the place marked; let's haul it into position at once. I'll have a sundial on the top of it, I think."

I was strolling that evening in the garden waiting for Harry to come out. The sun had just set behind a bank of stormy red clouds in the west, and as I came opposite the yet doorless archway into the new plot, it looked exactly as if it was lit by some illumination of its own. The tall black altar now in place glowed like a lump of red-hot iron, and as I stood there in the doorway, wondering at this lurid brightness, I felt something brush by me, just touching my shoulder and left side in its passage.

THIS was startling, but there was nothing visible, and immediately I heard—this time without any doubt whatever—the sonorous hum of many flies. That certainly came from the new garden, and yet in the air there was no sign of them.

And simultaneously with both these invisible impressions, there came to me a sudden shrinking and shuddering of the spirit, as if I were in the presence of some evil and malignant power. That came and went: it lasted no longer than the soft touch of the invisible thing that had pushed by me in the doorway, or that drove of hovering flies.

Then Harry appeared, coming out of the house and calling me to our usual diversion

of piquet which we both enjoyed playing.

The laying of the lawn and the replanting of the old beds went on with great expedition: strips of turf from the downland were plastered onto the fresh-turned soil and rolled and watered, while against the walls for autumnal flowering Harry planted sunflowers, dahlias and Michaelmas daisies, and in the bed around the black column a company of well-grown young salvias.

A couple of days sufficed for this, and one evening we strolled down there in the dusk, marveling at how well the turf was taking, and how vigorous and upstanding were the young plants. . . .

There were heavy showers that night; blinks of lightning glared through my panes; distant thunder reverberated, and later, in the hot hours of the darkness, I had to get up to close the window, for the rain was spattering on the carpet within. Having shut it, I stood there for a few moments looking out on the shrouded dimness and listening to the hiss of the thick shower on the shrubs outside. And then I saw something that curiously disquieted me.

The door into the new garden had been fitted that day, but it had been left open. The archway was thus visible from my windows, and now it stood out in the darkness as if there was light within. Then a very vivid flash zig-zagged across the sky, and I saw that in the doorway there was standing a black-draped figure.

It seemed hardly credible that a human being had got into the garden: why should a cloaked and living man be standing out there in the storm? If he was a burglar why should he be waiting out there, for the house had long been wrapped in quiet? And yet, supposing that in the morning it was found that someone had broken into the house, I should cut a very foolish figure if, having seen him before any damage was done, I went tranquilly back to bed again without investigation.

But I know that I did not really believe this was a man at all. What then was to be done? I decided that I would not wake Harry until I had carried my investigations

a little further by myself, and I started to go downstairs. But as I passed Harry's door, I saw a chink of light underneath it, then a loose board creaked under my foot, and next moment he came out.

"WHAT is it?" he said. "Did you see it too? Someone coming across the lawn from the new garden? Look here: I'll go out by the back door into the garden and you go through the dining-room. Then he'll be between us. Take a poker or a big stick with you."

I waited till he had time to get around to the back, and then, pulling aside the curtain in the dining-room, I unlocked the door that led into the garden. The rain had ceased and now through the thunder-laden canopy over-head there shone the faint light of a cloud-beleaguered moon. There in the center of the lawn stood the figure I had seen in the archway, and on the moment I heard the click of the lock of the back-door.

Was it after all only a living man who now stood within ten yards of me? Had he heard the unlocking of the two doors? At any rate he moved—and that swiftly—across the lawn toward the archway where I had first seen him. Then I heard Harry's voice:

"Quick; we've got him now!" he cried, and while he took the path, I ran across the lawn toward the doorway through which the figure had disappeared. There was light enough to see, when we got there, that it stood in the center of the garden; it was as if the altar was one with it. Then a near and vivid flash of lightning burst from the pall overhead, and showed every corner of the high-walled plot. It was absolutely empty, but the stillness was now broken by the buzzing of innumerable flies. Then the rain began, first a few large hot drops; then the sluices of heaven were opened, and before we could regain

the house we were drenched.

Of all the men I have ever known, Harry Pershore has the profoundest disbelief in 'the unseen and the aware', and in the few minutes of talk before we turned in again, and at breakfast next morning he was still absolutely convinced that what we had both



seen was real and material, not ghostly.

"It must have been a man," he said, "because there's nothing else for it to be; and after all, the walls are not unscaleable for an active fellow. Certainly we both thought we saw him in the center of the garden. But the light was dim and confusing, and I haven't the slightest doubt that we were both staring at the altar while he was shinning it up the wall. Come down and look."

We went out. The garden was still dripping with the rain of the night, but the vigorous salvias planted yesterday in the bed around the altar were scorched, as if a flame had passed over them. Withered, too, though not so sorely burned, was the new-laid grass, and the sunflowers and Michaelmas daisies were drooping and yellow of leaf. It was as if some tropic day, instead of a warm night with copious showers of rain, had passed over them; or rather as if from the altar had emanated some withering ray, completely scorching all that lay nearest to it. But all this only stiffened Harry into an angry stubbornness when I asked him what explanation he offered.

"GOOD LORD, I can't tell you," he said, "but you've got to find the connection between a man who popped over the wall and my poor withered plants. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll bring out a ground-sheet and a rug and sleep here tonight, and we'll see if anyone comes round with a warming-pan again. No, don't be alarmed; I'm not going to ask you to keep me company. That would spoil it all, for you might somehow infect me with your nonsense. I prefer a revolver. You think there's something occult and frightful at work. So let's have it: bring it out. What's your explanation?"

"I can't explain it any more than you," I said. "But I believe there is something here in this garden, some power connected, I imagine, with that altar you found. Your mother also believed there was something queer, and had the place walled-up. You've opened it again, and set the thing free, and I expect it's vastly intensified by your having disinterred that which lay buried."

He laughed.

"I see," he said. "An instance of your theory that material objects can absorb and give out force they have derived from living folk—"

"Or years ago, from the dead," said I.

He laughed again.

"I really think we won't talk about it," he said. "I can't argue about such monstrous

nonsense. It isn't worth that much to me."

During the day I made several efforts to dissuade him from his scheme, but it was perfectly fruitless. Indeed I began myself to wonder whether I was not the prey of ridiculous imaginings; whether my mind was not reverting to the bygone beliefs and superstitions of primitive man.

A lump of stone like that altar was just a lump of stone. How could it possess properties and powers such as those which I was disposed to attribute to it? Certainly that figure which we had both seen was difficult of rational explanation; so, too, was that withering and scorching flame that had passed over the garden. But it was a flight of conjecture, wholly unsupported, to suppose that a rough-hewn block of granite had any connection with them.

My fears and forebodings receded and dwindled till they lay far back in my mind, cloaked with the darkness that common sense spread round them, and became no more than a tiny spark smouldering there. And so it came about that when, about eleven that night, Harry went forth from the house with his pillows and blanket and ground-sheet, revolver in hand, to spend the night on the new-laid lawn, I soon went up to bed.

The door from the dining-room into the garden Harry had left unlocked, for again the night was thickly over-clouded, threatening rain, and he laughingly said that though he would gaily face the fires of the powers of darkness, a downpour of common rain would certainly rout him and send him running for shelter. Throwing open my window, I leaned out into the night, and in the stillness heard Harry shut and bolt the door into the little garden.

I WENT to sleep at once, and from dreamlessness awoke suddenly to a consciousness of terror and imminent peril. Without waiting to put on a coat or slippers I ran downstairs and across the lawn toward the door in the wall.

I stopped outside it, listening and wondering why I had rushed out like that, for all was perfectly still. Then, while I stood there, I heard a voice—not Harry's—from within. I could not distinguish any words at all, and the tones of it were level, as if it were chanting some prayer, and as I listened I saw above the wall a dim red glow gradually brightening.

All of this happened in a moment, and with some swift onrush of panic I called aloud to Harry, and wrestled with the handle

of the door. But he had bolted it from within. Once more I rattled at it and shouted—and still only that chanting voice answered. Then, exerting my full strength and weight, I hurled myself against the door: it creaked, the bolt snapped and it gave way, falling inward. There met me a buffet of hot air tainted with some rank smell, and round me was the roar of hosts of flies.

Harry, stripped to the waist, was kneeling in front of the altar. By his side stood a figure robed in black; one of its hands grasped his hair, bending his head back, the other, stretched out, brandished aloft some implement. Before the stroke fell, I found my voice.

"By the power of God Almighty!" I yelled, and in the air I traced the sign of the Cross.

I HEARD the chink of something falling on the altar; the red light faded into the dusk of earliest dawn, and Harry and I were alone. He swayed and fell sideways on the grass, and without more ado I picked him up and carried him out past the shattered door

and through the archway, not knowing yet if he was alive or dead. But he breathed still, he sighed and stirred like one coming out of deep trance, and then he saw me.

"You!" he said. "But what's been happening? Why am I here? I went to sleep, and I dreamed something terrible. A priest, a sacrifice. . . . What was it?"

I never told him what had happened beyond that I had felt uneasy about him, had come out and called him, and getting no answer had burst in the door and found him lying on the grass. He knew no more than that; but for some reason he took a dislike to the altar which had pleased him so much. Somewhere in the dim recesses of his subconsciousness, I imagine, he connected it with the very terrible "dream" which he could only vaguely recall, and he said he would have it buried again: it was an ugly thing. As we looked at it next morning, talking of this, he took up from it something that lay on the top of it.

"How on earth did that get here?" he said. "It's one of those early flint knives, isn't it?"

