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A "Creepy" Story Told in a Quaint Way
By Arthur Edwards Chapman

THE INN OF DREAD

"TAKE care, Owcus," I remember I had said to him, "for mine host tells me that the road hath fallen into bad repute of late; though, truth to tell, 'twas never what one might call well-favored!" And I had laughed, and he with me.

The pair of us had but just returned from the campaign on the peninsula, and, I having some business of a private nature to look to in Bristol, it was decided that the major should proceed to Bath and there await me. Knowing, from the conversation of mine host of the "Woolpack" the previous night, the unsettled state of the highway, I had taken the opportunity of placing my friend on his guard ere he commenced the journey.

"Never fear, John," he had replied carelessly. "I am a soldier, remember, and take no count of common footpads!"

"None-the-less 'tis for you to ride warily, for a blow in the dark is easily struck. Besides, you have my lady's diamonds and those, added to what you

yourself carry, form a tempting haul to any knight of the road."

"Never fear," he had said again; "they will not find Howel Owens asleep. . . Farewell till we meet in Bath!"

Mounting, he had waved lightly to me and ridden off, leaving me gazing after him with doubt in my heart, for I liked not the tales I had heard.

And thus it was that on the third day after this, having transacted my business satisfactorily, I found myself struggling blindly against what surely must have been the foulest storm since the creation—or so it seemed to me.

In all truth, 'twas a wretched night. The wind howled and whistled through the naked branches of the trees, which seemed to complain one to the other with great creakings and groanings; the rain drove before it in a beating, soaking deluge, *pit-pit-patting* on the mud of



the road around me; the thunder rolled and growled in the distance, coming gradually nearer and louder till it burst overhead with a reverberating, ear-splitting crash to the accompaniment of blinding flashes of lightning that revealed the whole dreary, sodden landscape.

A truly wild and terrible night, and one that not even a dog would be out in of its own free will. And yet here was

I, Colonel John Wykeham, of His Majesty's —rd Regiment of Foot, plodding on through it all, ankle deep in mud, and, it would appear, miles from even the outskirts of civilization, when by good rights I should have been seated before a blazing fire in the best house in all Bath, soaking the inside with the choice of mine host's cellars rather than soaking outside in this plaguey storm.

Damn the Frenchman! He was responsible. You see, the mare had received a bullet at Badajos, and the wound, breaking out afresh, had been the cause of us landing in this pretty pickle.

However, 'twas no use crying over spilt milk. We must perforce make the best of bad luck and what progress we could against the elements. We might, perchance, discover some lonely farmhouse, or even (cheering thought) some wayside inn that would at least afford shelter for the pair of us.

Now scarce had this thought crossed my mind than in front of me, some distance up the road, my eye caught a tiny twinkling spot which might have been a star, but that there were no others visible. The Shepherds of Bethlehem could not have welcomed the guiding Star more than I welcomed that point of light, and with a word of encouragement to the mare, I pressed forward with renewed hope.

Gradually the beacon became larger and assumed a definite shape—a square latticed window. Then, as the rain beat down with increased fury, and the thunder rolled more and more deafeningly, a flash of lightning, more vivid and more intensely blue than any as yet, pierced the blackness like a knife, giving me a brief glimpse of an old, weather-beaten building, and above the door a signboard that creaked dismally as it swung in the wind.

But it was the inscription that caused an unexplainable, indescribable shiver to run swiftly down my spine, which immediately gave place to a clammy, heated perspiration, and I trembled—I, John Wykeham, who had passed through the greatest battles of the campaign without turning a hair, trembled like a little child with an awful, nameless dread as I beheld the words: "The Bleeding Heart," and, beneath, a crude design of a heart dripping blood.

This I saw for merely a second, and then it vanished, leaving me standing there, a pale phosphorescent glow floating before my eyes, until a cold hand touched mine and took the bridle from me.

With an effort, I pulled myself together, and as my vision slowly became clearer I could distinguish a figure, exceedingly tall and thin, that, when I addressed it, simply shook its head and pointed to its ears and mouth.

Motioning me to follow, this strange guide led the way to what had once been a serviceable stable, but which was now sorely in need of repair. Having seen to it that the mare was provided for, and washed and dressed her wound as well as might be, I returned and entered the doorway of the inn.

"A rough night and a wet, sir, is't not?" said a deep rasping voice at my elbow.

I turned suddenly at the words, thinking to see some big, bluff personage. But what I did see was the direct antithesis of the voice in a small, underized hunchback who stood before me, rubbing his thin hands together and staring at me with a smile half servile, half sardonic upon his lips.

And as I gazed at this creature the same unaccountable feeling of revulsion passed over me as when the lightning revealed that sign of the "Bleeding Heart," for his eyes were green and seemed to look right through me as at the shades of departed souls.

In fact, so strong was this feeling that instinctively I glanced over my shoulder, expecting to see I know not what. But there was naught but impenetrable darkness and the *pit-pit-pat* of rain which brought me back to the present and reminded me that I was wet and hungry, while a huge fire blazed on the open hearth within.

"Dammé, host," said I, "you're right. 'Tis as evil a night as I remember. Quickly: bring out of your best, for I'm famished an' chilled to the very marrow."

"You shall have it, sir," he replied. "'Tis plain fare, truly, for 'tis rarely now that these walls see company, but none-the-less 'tis wholesome, and the contents of my cellars are not to be surpassed."

The green eyes peered through me as he spoke, and then he shuffled slowly from the room, while I, casting off my dripping cloak and discarding my long riding-boots, stretched my body at full length in the big arm-chair and cast about me to see what manner of place I had come to.

The room was nigh as tumbledown as the outside had appeared to be. It was roughly square, but was broken by many corners and recesses into the shadows of which the feeble light of the candles could not penetrate. The single window was minus many of its diamond

panes, and what remained were cracked and broken, admitting fierce gusts of air which caused the candles to gutter noisily. There was about the place a peculiar earthy smell, a mouldering smell indicative of neglect and decay, but which, to my overstrained senses, conveyed the impression of a newly-opened tomb.

Somewhere without, the water dripped from the roof on to some metal article with a hollow, ringing *plom-plom-plom*, so that I was fain to draw my chair nearer to the fire and was right glad when the innkeeper returned, bringing food and drink, plain, as he had said, but wholesome, and I fell to heartily.

Now as I proceeded to satisfy the need of the inner man, what should that knave of a hunchback do but take up from the table, where I had laid them, my sword and pistols.

"Ho, there, rascal!" I bellowed, springing up. "What are you at, think you? Replace them at once, ere I knock that hump from your back!"

"Nay, sir," said he, dropping the things us though they burnt him, "I meant no harm. I was but going to convey them to your chamber as is my custom with what few guests come this way."

"Well, well, 'tis all right; there's no bones broken." I assured him, sinking down again. "But long companionship with danger makes an old campaigner wary of parting with his best friends." And I arranged the weapons carefully at my elbow.

"I did not think at the moment, sir," said the fellow apologetically, "for 'tis rare any traveler stops at this poor place."

I wondered at the man's persistence, for 'twas the third time he had referred to his luck of trade. Why should he be so particular to impress this fact upon me?

"Your business is not so prosperous these days?" I asked him.

"No, sir; yours is the first strange foot that has trod this floor this six days."

I looked at the fellow hardly as he said this, for my eye, wandering round the room, had espied at that instant, on a little shelf to the left of the fire-place, a pistol of peculiar workmanship, the like of which I had seen but once before in the possession of my friend and brother officer, Major Owens. Yet, if it were his, how did it come here? Certainly he had passed along this road three days before on his way to Bath, where I should have met him this very night, but he could not have stayed here, for did not the inn-keeper himself say that

no stranger had set foot in the place for six days?

None-the-less I was not satisfied with this reasoning, and a sudden suspicion flashing across my mind, I got up from the table and stepped over to the shelf.

"You're not minus a sting, host," said I, taking up the weapon and weighing it carefully in my hand.

"No—" was answered slowly, and his green eyes contracted like those of a cat in the strong light till they were little more than slits. "The toy is not mine, but was left accidentally by a traveler some weeks ago. Mine has a louder bark." And he pointed to a large blunderbuss that hung on the wall.

Then I knew that the knave lied, for on the butt of the pistol I had seen the letters "H. O."

Slowly I replaced it on the shelf, carelessly remarking that the man who left it behind was no soldier. But I was thinking rapidly, and, as I thought, the horror of the place returned and the previous suspicion gave place to dreadful certainty. I became convinced that the major had met with foul play, and several little incidents of which I had not taken much note now became full of awful significance. The fact of the inn being open at that late hour now savored of a trap. Then there was the deafness of the tall man. Anything might happen and he would not hear it.

And again, why was the hunchback so desirous of carrying off my weapons? Or why tell a deliberate lie if he were an honest man? Here was a mystery which I determined to get to the bottom of, and heaven help the villain if my fears proved correct! Quickly I decided on a course of action.

"Well, host," said I, "'tis a rare vintage of yours, an' I should sleep well upon it for I'm mightily tired."

Pulling out my purse so that it jangled noisily, I poured some of the contents into my palm and carelessly picked out a couple of crowns. These I flung upon the table, watching the rogue narrowly the while.

He scarce gave a glance at the coins I had given him, but his eyes feasted on the bulky purse and glittered with a greedy light, and, minding the jewels which Owens carried, I could no longer doubt.

"There," said I, "take those for the nonce, an' if I sleep sound you shall have more. Now show me to my chamber an' I will go to bed."

"Thank you, sir, thank you. You do my poor hospitality honor." And again that sardonic smile so full of unfathomable meaning. "This way, sir, this way,"

he continued. "'Tis a soft, clean bed as you will find."

I followed him up a rickety, creaking staircase, terminating in a small landing with a door on either side and a small window facing us. One of these doors he opened.

"There you are, sir," said he. "Now I will leave you and retire myself, for the hour is late. I trust you will sleep well. Never yet have I had a complaint from any who occupied this chamber; indeed, all have slept exceeding sound."

Putting the candle on a small dressing-stand, he looked through me once with his cat's eyes, and I was alone.

Alone! Yes. But sleep? No. Nothing was farther from me, for I was wrestling with this great problem that faced me. I felt perfectly sure that this inn of dread contained the secrets of a tragedy, if not of tragedies, and was determined to search them out. To my mind the place was but a trap for the unwary traveler. Surely there was something horribly, suggestively sinister in those parting words of the hunchback: "Indeed, all have slept exceeding sound."

With a grim smile, I took up my position on a chair behind the door so that if it opened I should be hid from view, and placed my drawn sword across my knees and my pistol ready in my hand. I should not sleep! Here I would wait until all was quiet, and if no one came to disturb me I should have to go and disturb them. First I would search the building for any further evidence of Owens' fate. If nothing was to be discovered then that rascally inn-keeper should explain how he came to be in possession of that pistol.

I know not how long I sat thus, but on a sudden my nerves were set all of a tingle by a great cry as of someone in mortal terror and physical anguish, and yet having in it a note of grim triumph.

For an instant I remained still, my heart beating a rapid tattoo against my ribs and something of my old horror of the place returning. Then, my sword firmly grasped in one hand and pistol in the other, I cautiously opened the door and stepped out on to the landing.

The bright, full moon had risen, and, revealed in its pale ray was the diminutive figure of the hunchback. He was clad only in his night-shirt, and the green eyes were closed, while from his lips issued broken, half-audible sentences.

"... The knife... I must have it... How sticky his blood is... *Ae, he, he!*" came in low, hollow tones, and I strained my ears to catch more.

"Sh... he sleeps... One swift

stroke, and who is the wiser?" And again that horrible chuckle that made my blood run cold.

Once more the sleepwalker's lips moved as his still active brain conjured up some fresh vision of his crime:

"... Silently, quickly and the purse is mine... How quiet he lies... But the knife is sharp, so sharp... *ho, ho, ho!*... See, his eyes are open; he sees... but it is too late... One swift stroke and one only... *Ah—h!*"

I shuddered at the awful significance of his words, and could hardly keep myself from springing upon the self-convinced murderer, for here seemed to be the confirmation of my suspicions. But as I hesitated the sleepwalker spoke again:

"There, 'tis done... He was quiet before, but he is quieter now... *Ae, he!*... The pretty stones... how they sparkle! Why should he have them and me nothing? But... now they are mine—all mine. *Ho, ho!*... 'Tis a fat purse, also... how it jingles... He sleeps sound... where shall his bed be?... Beneath the stair?... The knife... I must have it..."

Slowly the sleepwalker moved, turning his head neither to right nor left. Outside the water dripped with that ringing, metallic sound which I have mentioned. The sleeper must have heard it, for he stopped and appeared to listen.

"How sticky his blood is... hark!... drip, drip, drip... Blood... everywhere is blood... Where is the knife?... I must get it..."

And he glided silently down the creaking, shaking stair.

Gripping my weapons firmly, I followed, swiftly, relentlessly, as a cat follows a mouse. At the bottom he went on his knees and commenced to prize up the floor-boards with his fingers. Three planks did he take up as I watched, and again there assailed my nostrils the mouldy, decaying smell. Filled with deadly fear, I sprang forward and my startled gaze fell upon the body of my poor friend lying between the scantlings, a large knife buried up to the handle in his breast, while the sleepwalker, chuckling hideously, strove to pull it free.

A blind, unreasoning fury swept over me; I became for an instant as a madman. Leaping upon the vile monster I seized him by the throat and drove my sword again and again, wildly, fiercely, into his body so that he fell, without a cry, across the corpse of his victim, his life-blood spurting forth from his black heart and mingling with the dust.

Then, pausing not an instant, I turned and fled from the accursed place and breathed not till it was far behind.