

# The Pebble Prophecy

## *A Hallowe'en Story*

By VALENS LAPSLEY

**I**T HAPPENED on Hallowe'en, the time of year which sanctions a brilliant celebration, and a holiday celebration with us was always an event and a happy one.

We usually entertained at such times, not only for the evening but for the afternoon as well, for as we live outside the city, many of our friends had to come a long distance, and those who had not seen each other for some time counted on a reunion of congenial souls.

There were some, of course, who could not come for the afternoon, but those who did, came early, so immediately after lunch we were awaiting the arrival of those who were to join in a paper chase. This was to be followed, upon our return, by an immense bonfire which we were to build to foretell our futures by the pebble prophecy.

Many of our expected guests had never heard before of the ancient Hallowe'en custom of placing pebbles on the ground and then building a fire over them to learn of life or death. As the legend had it, should a pebble be at all disturbed by the heat or falling embers, death would surely follow within the year for the person who placed that pebble.

Solemn rites and ceremonies were performed by many of the younger ones as they, with mock gravity, placed their pebbles in such positions as they believed perfectly safe from disturbance. We built the bonfire with as much care as if it were to endure instead of being destroyed. Soon the flames were shooting through the leafy branches which were piled on top, and the foliage crisping at their touch flashed into still more brilliant hues and vanished far above in thin air.

As we watched the soaring blaze, our spirits soared also. We laughed, we sang, we crowned one another with autumn leaves. One and all, with buoyant step, danced round the fire, hand in hand, madly gay in the flush of exuberant spirits, until the flames began to burn low and dinner time drew near. Then we betook ourselves, still singing and laughing, into the house.

The afternoon had been dark and gloomy. As we were assembling for dinner, one of the guests suggested that, as the weather was becoming more threatening we should go and look for the pebbles before we dined. This was heartily approved, for, if after dinner it should be too dark to find them, our labor would have been in vain and our futures still be in doubt.

We were very merry as we sallied forth to the scene of our late frolic. Some of the embers were already dead, some glowed dimly red, others gave forth tiny spirals of smoke, and, gleaming here and there, were leaping darts of blue and crimson. It was a pretty sight. Who could guess that beneath it all lay a prophecy of a tragedy?

It was an easy matter to find most of the pebbles. Each knew exactly where he had placed his and went directly there. Shouts and laughter were heard on all sides as various ones on finding and trying to pick up their pebbles, dropped them quickly from scorched fingers.

Their evident relief at finding the pebbles safe amused me. Had they taken this thing seriously? As I listened to them I uncovered the place where I had so carefully planted my pebble—an odd-shaped piece of quartz which I had chosen because it could be more easily identified.

It was not there. I gently stirred the embers and ashes surrounding the spot, becoming more and more excited as I failed to locate it. It was not there!

Where was it? Who could have taken it?

The others joined in my search, but we had to give it up as useless. It was not until my friends began to ask me jokingly for any instructions I might have for the elaborate funeral they would surely give me, that the full meaning came over me with sudden force. My blood grew cold in spite of my would-be disbelief; a sickening shiver ran through my veins even while I told myself it was foolishness to imagine that such a prophecy could be fulfilled.

With youthful thoughtlessness my friends increased their tormenting, going into dreadful and painful details. It seemed to me they would never cease, though they surely could see they were making me suffer. Thought and feeling were so confused within me that if I had tried to give them utterance I could have only screamed. My nerves contracted; my head swam giddily, and I felt that my death warrant had been signed.

Then a cord seemed to snap in my brain. Why should I be frightened? I had never been superstitious before; why should I be now? I held a bachelor of science degree from a leading university and had always scoffed at anything bordering upon superstition, yet I was allowing this trifling custom of an ancient time to bother me. To be upset over such a simple incident was nonsense. I would forget all about it and at once.

It was a relief when we were summoned to dinner; and by throwing myself heart and soul into the merriment, where music, laughter and mirth—real and unreal—were mixed together in one harmonious whole, I soon forgot the prophecy of the pebbles.

**A**FTER dinner our spacious rooms were rapidly filled. Sounds of merry voices and laughter were heard on all sides, and old and young mingled joyously in every old-time Hallowe'en antic and prank of which we had ever heard. I was my normal self again. Never had I been in higher spirits.

Late in the evening some one made the suggestion that we sit in the firelight and tell stories. This was greeted with applause. Everyone was called on in turn to contribute his share of the story telling. Fairy tales and tales of adventure followed one another, but all these were nothing compared to the tales of ghosts and apparitions that succeeded.

There was a wonderful fire in the cavernous old fireplace. The mighty logs, glowing with warmth, were almost hidden by sticks of pine and hickory which were sputtering and crackling with good cheer. The blood-red glare flashed on the faces of those nearest the hearth,

while the countenances of those farther back only now and then received a casual gleam as a curl of flame darted out into the room. The light threw a shimmering luster of a ruddy hue on the dark wainscoting. The stories had a new zest, told in such an atmosphere and in the drowsy or sepulchral tones with which people talk in the firelight.

It was just the night for such tales—the very witching time of night. The wind blew and howled around the corners of the house; everything within breathed of sorcery and enchantment.

A rather oppressive pause followed a blood-curdling tale, and, to break it, I asked my grandmother to tell some of the weird stories connected with a certain Dame Walcott, who used to sit before that very fireplace a long time ago. My grandmother gladly assented. She told these tales exceedingly well for in her younger days they were often repeated in the neighborhood round the winter evening's fire.

The main part of our house is colonial and was built by Dame Walcott's father. A portrait of the old woman, which had been in the house when my great-grandparents took possession of it, had long since been banished to the lumber-room where it still remained.

Dame Walcott was reported to have had the supernatural power of making others perform acts in imitation of her own, and had been one of the first accused of witchcraft in the colonies. Although she was neither tried nor condemned as a witch, that Puritan of Puritans, Endicott himself, had denounced her, and she found the sentiment against her so strong that she was supposed to have preferred death to life.

They had found her body in the lumber-room. Just what had caused her death had always remained a mystery, for those were not the days when an unusual death was widely reported or active inquiry made into it. Murder could not have been committed, for the door and windows were securely fastened on the inside. There was no indication of poisoning, and the only bruises on the body were some dark spots like finger marks on her throat.

It was very late when my grandmother had finished her stories and the guests began at once to make preparations for departure. When the outside door was opened a furious blast of wind rushed in and drove whirling sleet far down the hall. To go any distance in such a storm would be almost impossible, so we urged our friends to remain until morning.

Although our house is large, our guests were many, and our sleeping accommodations were taxed to the utmost. My room had also to be given up, so I gathered some bedding together, intending to pass what remained of the night on a discarded cot in the lumber-room. I was surprised when my mother strenuously objected. She seemed worried and spoke with an agitation not quite unmixed with anger. I laughingly assured her there was nothing to fear, kissed her and bade her "Good-night."

**T**HERE is no electric light in the lumber-room, so I lighted a small oil lamp which we keep for emergencies. When I had set this lamp on a chest in my lonely quarters, I saw before me the dingy old portrait of Dame Walcott gazing down from the canvas with an expression which seemed to mock at me as the fitful light illumined it. The little green eyes seemed to see everything I did and to watch every movement I made.

The physiognomy of the old dame had struck me more than once, just as it would anyone who liked to study human faces best for what they tell of life's experiences. Her eyes had a vague yet answering gaze, and there was a peculiar smile which age made appear like an ugly film hovering about her lips.

The picture fascinated me. The longer I studied it, the more the face seemed to take on an animated expression, as if her soul, long stifled in a cold and narrow prison, was unfolding and developing gradually into full consciousness.

I should have considerable difficulty in expressing the thoughts which passed through my mind during the scrutiny of this portrait, as I sought for a consciousness of unity between the past and the present. Had the old dame really been a witch? Had she really lured people to death? How had she done it? Had she possessed the power of hypnotism?

I stepped back from the portrait. The lamp on the chest managed with diabolical art to cast its shadows so that at a short distance nothing could be seen but what now appeared to me a sinister face. This combined with the storm of the night, the rattle of the loose-fitting windows, and the shadows everywhere, were well prepared to fill me with a strange and creepy sensation.

Never before had I felt so lonely nor so cheerless. A sense of isolation oppressed and weighed me down. I knew that a breath of fresh air would help me throw off my depression and my morbid thoughts. I opened a window. A magnificent storm was raging.

I heard not a sound nor a sigh beside the wind which whistled shrilly through the trees with impatient haste, as though longing to escape from their gaunt and most untempting embraces. There was in it all a poetic element that stirred the very depths of my being and filled me with a sense of music and harmony, driving out for the moment, all thought of fear. I took several invigorating breaths, intending then to close the window and retire as quickly as possible. Yet—in spite of all this inspiration and determination, my dread returned and I felt that something strange and sinister surrounded me.

A strong presentiment came over me without any visible or audible cause. Obeying an impulse, I swung round and looked, and I knew even as I turned, why I did so—there was some intruder present.

The room was large and the pieces of furniture stored there caused much of it to be in black shadow. It would have been a good place for children to play "Hide and Seek." Any one hiding in the room at night would most certainly have escaped detection, and while I was unable to see anything out of the ordinary, I knew and felt that there was a living presence in the room. It was this sense of danger that had made me turn from the window.

I listened intently, rigidly still. I could hear nothing but the raging storm and the pulsing of my blood, yet I clearly felt someone's presence.

I waited, terror-stricken. After a moment, which seemed to contain a dayful of hours so terrible was its length, I heard a faint sound. The light in most of the room was dim and uncertain, and shadows threw their obscurity between, yet I felt sure I saw something opposite me, a darker spot in the darkness.

My straining eyes soon saw the darker shadow take on shape, a figure appearing dim and unsubstantial as if it were molded of darkness and gray light. At that moment a breath of wind came through the open window, causing the light to flicker, throwing dancing shadows all around the room. A shaft of light touched the dark mass, giving it the outline of a human form.

**A** HUNDRED questions seemed to pass through my mind at once. Was I being made the victim of a cruel joke? Could it be a burglar—a creature of actual flesh and blood? Could it be some unearthly visitor, some specter forced back by mystic art from another world?

I tried to speak—to scream—but my parched tongue was glued to the roof of my mouth. I stood there in a frigid trance of speechless terror. I could not utter a sound, though crying for help could not have brought me aid. The door was closed and the howling storm would have drowned my voice.

I had seen this thing that lurked in the shadow. Had it seen me? I pulled myself back nearer the window, trembling with fear, afraid of something I could not recognize, and hoping against hope that it did not know I was there.

Then came the horrible thought. Could it be some victim of Dame Walcott, forced to rise and haunt the place where it had met its untimely end? Some soul that lived in another world or state when our world thought him dead? If he had risen from a sealed tomb, what could he be seeking here?

I tried to pray as my mind flashed back to tales I had heard and read of the spirits of the murdered who were compelled to revisit the scenes of their death until their murders had been avenged, and all the stories of ghosts and goblins that I had heard in the evening now came crowding upon my recollection.

The shadow moved. This, then, was no hallucination, no trick of strained eyesight. I felt that I was in the presence of something that could not only frighten but could actually harm.

I tried to call my bewildered wits to my aid; and, calming the frenzy of my thoughts by a strong effort, I determined to try getting out of the room, and believed that by keeping in the shadow and close to the wall I could make my escape through the door. Scarcely had I taken one step when the shadow turned in my direction. To turn and fly now was too late. All I could do was wait.

Slowly the shadowy form came toward me. As it came into the full glare of the light I saw that it was Dame Walcott with her head bent upon her breast. I recoiled in wide-eyed horror from this terrifying spectacle.

No one can ever know what I suffered as I waited—waited until she should reach me. There flashed across my mind the pebble prophecy. Was I, too, to be a victim of Dame Walcott? Was the prophecy to be a true one? Was it to be fulfilled the very night it was made, carried out by a specter risen from the dead?

Very slowly she raised her head. Very slowly our eyes met. Very slowly, like some jungle panther, she glided toward me until she stood directly in front of me. She pointed at me jeeringly. Her whole face became animated with a sudden glow of fiendish triumph. Her eyes glistened with a malign expression.

I met her gaze fully, absorbing into my innermost soul the mesmeric spell. I imitated everything she did, though vainly striving to prevent it. It had been difficult for others to oppose her; it was impossible for me.

She clasped her hands about her throat. Unable to resist, I imitated her. Tighter and tighter did my hands close. I was unable to loosen them. It seemed as though they were being controlled by some inexplicable power.

She extended her right arm, slowly opening her hand. In it could be plainly seen something which glimmered faintly in the light.

She described a circle in the air with a perfectly even and majestic motion. The light caught the object in her hand and it gleamed like a living coal. As she did this her eyes looked straight into mine, held steadily for a moment, then dropped to the object in her hand.

My gaze followed hers, and I recognized my pebble of quartz which had disappeared from the bonfire.

EVERYTHING gradually became dark about me. I had a convulsion of terror. My tongue was frozen, my teeth clenched. A film settled upon my eyes, a dull faintness overpowered me. Every vestige of strength deserted me, an icy spasm contracted my heart.

Uttering an inarticulate cry, I made a last violent effort to free myself from the spell that held me as I felt the shadow of death creeping over me. Then I sank face downward upon the floor.

I do not know how long I lay in this death-like swoon. Familiar faces were all about me when I was restored to consciousness. I looked around in bewilderment. Where was I? How came I to be there? Suddenly I remembered and swooned again.

When the hot and terrible delirium which followed had burned itself out, my loved ones told me the part they had taken in my Hallowe'en experiences. I had no need to tell them mine. They had heard it all in the ravings of my illness.

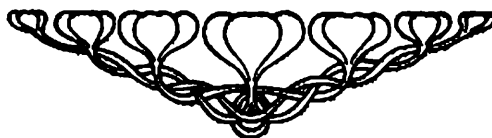
My mother had been both angry and anxious because I had refused to heed her, and was unable to sleep. She wakened my father and insisted that he go with her to do what he could to persuade me to spend the remainder of the night on the sofa in their room.

On reaching the lumber-room, they found the lamp burning, a window open and the cot unslept in, and in searching for me, found me at the base of the portrait, apparently dead, with some ugly black finger marks on my throat. In my stiff, rigidly clasped hands something gleamed white and shining. It was the quartz pebble.

An alarm was sounded. Soon voices and steps were heard in the corridor and the room was ablaze with light. Friends rushed in, rubbing their eyes, still half asleep, questioning each other as to what had happened.

My grandmother appeared on the threshold, full of astonishment at the sudden disturbance. She stopped short, with a wild cry which rang through the whole house: "Dame Walcott! Where is she?"

All looked to where the portrait had stood against the wall. The frame was still there, but the figure within it was gone. Like a cloud melting in thin air, or a ghost vanishing into the nether world, she had mysteriously disappeared.



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