

The Mystery of the Sealed Garret

By A. M. Burrage

Punctually at ten o'clock—for the new policeman was not yet to be trusted—Billy Chignell went through his nightly ritual of crying 'Time, gentlemen!' in tones ranged between brisk joviality and reluctant severity. When he had ushered the last customer out into the night he put up the heavy bar and walked upstairs into the smoke-room.

He had four 'guests' sleeping under his roof that night, which, considering that the time of the year was early spring, was something approaching a record. Few visitors came to St. Fay, save in the summer, and most of those preferred the charms of the great new hotel, with its 'desirable situation' on the headland near the golf course. Most of the men who came to spend a night at the Schooner Inn were commercial travellers, and two or three in the course of a week was about the average number. Now chance had brought three all at once, and besides these there was Mr Dimsdale, who had been there a fortnight. Mr Dimsdale was a leisured, cultured, and extremely pleasant person in the late thirties, who cherished a delusion that there were trout in the upper reaches of the St. Fay river, and spent his days trying to catch them.

Billy Chignell, good sociable soul, liked nothing better than a glass and a chat in the smoke-room after hours with anybody who might be staying in the house.

He entered unobtrusively and sat himself on a chair near the door, for the four were engaged upon a discussion which had already waxed hot. Dimsdale, vaguely suspected by Billy Chignell of being a scholar and authority on most things, sat on a horsehair chair with an elbow resting on the table. His lips were set in a faint smile, which the landlord interpreted as a sign of suppressed amusement. Walters, a serious little man, who was something of a mystic and compelled by hard fate to vend frivolous articles beloved by womenfolk, sat simmering in a mild rage. Beside him, but a little to the rear, sat Dorley, the representative of a firm of wholesale haberdashers, smirking openly. He loved to see Walters under the lash of another's tongue, but lacked the wits himself to administer the lash. Chudd, who travelled for a firm of brush manufacturers, sat in the largest armchair and laid down the law with all the vigour of a man who relies upon noise and persistence in an argument rather than upon his own reasoning powers.

'It makes me sick,' he was saying—'right down sick, it does. How ever children, let alone grown men and women, can believe such fiddle-faddle beats me. Everybody who believes in spiritualism ought to be in a lunatic asylum, and those who go about trying to kid other people ought to get two years' hard for it. That's what I say, and I don't care who hears me say it. Ghosts—spirits—bah!'

He was a big man was Mr Chudd, with a very red face and neck. For the rest he was a blatant self-opinionated person, with hardly sufficient bovine intelligence to be aware that he was a bully.

The situation was perfectly clear to Billy Chignell before he had been ten seconds in the room. Little Walters, in the hope of starting some quiet and amicable discussion, had remarked how much talk of spiritualism one heard nowadays, and ventured his opinion that 'there might be something in it.' This had brought Chudd down upon him like a hundredweight of bricks, and he had proceeded to dispose of the denizens of the spirit world, using heavy sarcasm alternately with his table-thumping methods of reasoning. Dorley, with nods and half-words of encouragement, had egged him on, and Walters was having very much the worse of it, because

Chudd, having much the louder voice, would not allow him to speak. Dimsdale was sitting quiet and saying nothing.

Billy Chignell disliked Chudd, who was noisy and would not brook the opinion which did not exactly coincide with his own. He did not think highly of Chudd's intelligence. For one thing, Chudd did not come from London—only from Bristol—and he was therefore not entitled to speak with the voice of authority.

Billy Chignell was a little disappointed to find that Chudd held the same views as himself. Not being a lawyer, he was unable to argue successfully against his own beliefs. He was, however, tolerant on the subject. If people wanted to believe in ghosts and such-like—well, they were welcome. One of his rooms was supposed to be haunted, and the stories which had reached his ears were strange and disturbing. He was inclined, lazily, to suppose that there must be some quite simple and natural explanation. He did not believe in ghosts, but he doubted his own courage, and so he had taken the line of least resistance and shut up the room. It was hardly ever needed.

'I've only just come in,' he remarked, 'but I'll lay Mr Chudd's been weighing in with some mighty heavy arguments against ghosts and spirits. I don't suppose any'll dare show themselves now.'

The delicate shaft of sarcasm glanced off the thick skin of the bagman. Dimsdale, the angler, however, took advantage of the pause to enter into the discussion.

'Mr Chudd,' he said, 'hasn't favoured us with any arguments. We have heard him bang the table and shout and behave offensively, but no gems of reason have fallen from his lips. He has said Rubbish, and Bosh, and Nonsense, all of which are emphatic as an opinion, but unconvincing as an argument.'

Billy Chignell grinned delightedly, thankful that Chudd had found an antagonist who could take his measurements. Little Walters laughed and plucked up the courage to say:

'Yes, saying Rubbish and Bosh don't prove anything, Mr Chudd.' Chudd's face flamed redder than ever. He was the natural enemy of men of Dimsdale's type. He conceived his intelligence to be the greater, but he had not what he called 'the gift of the gab.'

'Proof!' he cried. 'It don't want proof. If you said that two and two made five instead of four, it 'ud be rot, but nobody could prove it was rot, except by their own common-sense.'

'Oh, I see—that's the difficulty.' Dimsdale's voice was as smooth as milk. 'You are going by your own commonsense. But surely you don't expect other men to rely on your reasoning as an infallible guide. For instance, one of our leading scientists, one of the cleverest men in the land, is a confirmed believer in the things your intelligence puts to scorn. You may be a cleverer man, but I never heard of you before I met you, and if I had to pin my faith to one or the other of you I could not pin it to you.'

His speech ended in a mild uproar. Little Walters was bouncing about on his chair. Dorley, who observed that a greater man than Chudd was in the field, shamelessly changed sides and joined in the laughter. Chudd struggled to make his voice heard above the din, but for once in a way it was he who was shouted down.

'Yes,' he cried, as soon as he could make himself heard, 'and that man's as mad as a hatter.'

'Because he disagrees with you?'

'No, because he—he—everybody knows he's mad.'

Dimsdale shook his head slowly and regretfully.

'No,' he said, 'you have talked for a long time and been very rude, but nothing in the shape of legitimate argument has crossed your lips. Everybody does not believe—much less know—that

that distinguished gentleman is mad. I am sure he is not. He may be a self-deceiver, but that again requires proof. You don't believe in a spirit-world partly because you think it beneath your dignity as a sober, hard-headed man of business to inquire into anything that sounds to you so childish. You don't want to believe in such things.'

'And half the people who do believe only believe because they want to. All the people who say they've seen ghosts, or talked with the dead, are liars—those that aren't mad.'

Dimsdale smiled.

'Yes,' he said, 'I'm afraid the worst enemy to the spiritualist is the liar. There are a lot of people going about who say they've seen ghosts, when they don't even imagine they have. They believe in such things and they want to convince other people. It may happen though that certain pig-headed people have had strange experiences which they won't talk about because they don't want to believe. Seeing isn't believing to a pig-headed man.'

Chudd sat upright and leaned a little forward.

'Do you believe in ghosts?' he challenged.

Nailed down by a direct question, Dimsdale smiled and shook his head.

'No—'

'Well, then, there you are.'

'Not at all. I don't disbelieve either. As a cautious man I take the middle course. I'm not anxious to be convinced. There's a room in this house that's supposed to be haunted, but I haven't plagued Mr Chignell to let me sleep in it.'

'A haunted room? In this house?'

Dorley and Walters repeated the words, and all eyes were turned upon the landlord.

'No there aren't,' he muttered. 'Aren't no such things.' 'Of course there ain't!' Chudd cried. 'Which room is it, boss?' 'Not the one where the murder happened?' Dorley inquired. 'It's shut up now,' said Chignell. 'I don't believe in ghosts, but there are folks who do, and I've got my living to make.'

'Did anybody see anything there?' Dimsdale asked.

'I dunno—there was complaints.'

'Complaints? What of?'

'Oh, all sorts of things. All imagination, I dare say. But there was complaints, so I shut it up. I can't afford to have people complaining in my house.'

'What's this about a murder?' Walters inquired eagerly. 'I didn't know there'd been one here.'

'It was some years back, just before I took the house,' Billy Chignell explained. 'A skipper it was. He'd just come ashore and he took a bed here for the night. It seems he'd had trouble with some of his crew—lascars and black men and such-like. Anyhow, he was found dead in bed in the morning—strangled! They never caught the man.'

'He must have been in this house the whole time,' Dorley exclaimed.

'No; they reckoned he'd managed to hide himself in the Black Horse, opposite, and crawled across from one window to the other. With the streets narrow, like they are here, and the upper storeys nearly meeting overhead, anybody could do it. The skipper had locked his door overnight, and it was found locked in the morning.'

'P'r'aps Mr Chudd 'ud like to spend the night there,' said Walters, grinning.

'I wouldn't mind.'

'No,' said Chignell. 'I don't want any complaints.'

'I sha'n't make any complaints.'

‘I think Mr Chudd should certainly sleep there if he wishes,’ Dims-dale put in. ‘I wouldn’t myself, because I don’t disbelieve in ghosts.’

‘Afraid!’ said Chudd.

‘Not necessarily. I don’t go about in search of danger and discomfort, that is all. But you, as you definitely disbelieve, have nothing to fear.’

He looked sharply at Billy Chignell, who was preparing to utter a protest.

‘I hate suggesting that our worthy host should be put to any trouble,’ he continued, ‘but it would be a matter of only a few minutes to have bedding put in that room. And if Mr Chudd is really anxious—’

‘I am,’ said Chudd, and he meant it.

The man was honest enough. He was quite convinced that he had nothing worse than a damp bed to fear. Give him a dry bed and he would be all right.

Billy Chignell hesitated. He had had complaints about the room, but he did not believe that it was haunted. He could not see of what advantage it would be to give Chudd the opportunity of crowing like a gamecock over the breakfast-table and pouring fresh scorn on the credulity of weaker mortals. However, it was obvious that Dimsdale wished it. Dimsdale was watching him now, anxiously, appealingly. He found it hard to deny Dimsdale anything.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘you can sleep there if you want, Mr Chudd. Only you won’t forget I did warn you that people have made complaints about that room.’

The room of evil repute assigned to Chudd proved to be a cheerless and damp-smelling garret. It was in the old part of the house, which means that portion which had escaped the hands of a previous owner with a passion for renovation and reconstruction. The floor was on a slant and the ceiling hung absurdly low—so low that a tall man had to remember to bend his head as he passed under the long beam on his way to the dressing-table.

The one window faced another window in the house opposite, and the two were so near together that, by leaning well out, one could easily touch the outer sill of this opposite window. The thoroughfare below was so narrow that an automobile could hardly squeeze through, and the upper storeys of both houses projected, after the picturesque fashion of mediaeval architecture.

Chudd held this to account for the air of depression—something more than that of mere desuetude—which seemed present in the room. It had never had, from year’s end to year’s end, one glimpse of the sun. The house opposite shut it out as completely as if no window were there at all. No wonder nervous and imaginative people had suffered in such a room.

He whistled as he undressed in order to convince himself that he was no nervous mouse of a man. But he did not whistle long, because the atmosphere of the room seemed unresponsive. This feeling he found difficult to analyse. It was a little as if he had made questionable jokes in a company which declined to be amused and eyed him coldly. There was no company present in this case, but he seemed to have aroused some chilly and baleful consciousness.

‘It’s like singing comic songs in a vault,’ he reflected, a little while after he had ceased whistling. ‘A chap doesn’t want to believe in ghosts to get the horrors in this room. If the sunlight could only get in—’

To do him justice, he was perfectly unafraid. He was barely conscious of the slight weakening of his nerves—a mere nothing. He put down that, such as it was, to the brief story of the murder. Ugh! Easy to imagine a murder happening there. His mind, slightly more alert and imaginative than usual, conjured up an ugly picture of the sleeping captain, lying on the very bed which he

was about to enter, and some ugly shape, which had come out of the night, bending over him and crushing his throat with hooked, claw-like-fingers.

Before getting into bed he closed the lattice window, although ordinarily he was a great believer in the virtues of fresh air. He told himself that the room was already cold enough, and that the draught between the chimney and the door was sufficient to keep the room healthy. At the back of his mind he could not help remembering that it was through that same open window that the assassin had crept to strangle a man lying where he was going to lie.

The room was very dark when he had blown out the candle. The house opposite which shut out the sun by day, shut out all but a fitful glimmer of the dim moonlight. He looked long and intently, but could not see the window clearly, only a faint dimness which grew slowly beyond the posts at the foot of the bed.

'If anybody tries any tricks with me,' he thought savagely, clenching a great fist beneath the bedclothes, 'I'll smash 'em!'

It somehow comforted him to remind himself of his strength and manhood, although he would have denied that he stood in need of comfort. Three or four long minutes he lay, trying to define the shape of the window; then he turned over and lay on his side and tried to compose himself to sleep.

But that night sleep, which was usually so responsive to his wooing, played the jade with him and mocked him from a distance. He turned from side to side, restless and out of temper, and continued to toss and turn until—

Quite how it began he did not know. Perhaps it was no more than a creaking board which began that unreasonable nervousness which seemed to grow in him as quickly as the mango tree of the Indian juggler. Somewhere in the room a board did creak. There was nothing unusual in that, of course, and a hundred causes might have been assigned to it. Chudd, however, could not think of one. Lying there in the dark it did not seem right to him that a board should creak unless somebody trod on it. No, no; he wasn't afraid, only—only what made it creak?

He turned over in bed, and the board creaked again, as if in response to his movement. The breath he drew tingled and felt cold in his nostrils. His eyes were closed, and he had to summon resolution before he could open them. Perhaps the captain had heard that board creak—

His open eyes encountered nothing but the empty darkness and he breathed relief. Deciding that he must force himself somehow to go to sleep, he turned over once more. The board creaked again. This time he felt his heart beating, and one ear, pressed against the pillow, heard the loud, quick drumming of an artery. Damn that creaking board! If that wasn't enough to give a man the horrors, what was? It was as if there were somebody in the room—somebody who turned to look at him every time he moved on the bed. An unpleasant thought, that! To himself he fiercely denied that he was nervous, but he did not move, although he wanted to turn over again. Also, it was entirely his own affair if he chose to breathe more gently; it did not mean that he was afraid of attracting the attention of anything that might be taking cover in the darkness. Besides, there was nothing there.

He lay still until the posture tortured him; then he turned again. This time the board did not crack, but its not doing so, perversely enough, increased his discomfort. It seemed to prove that it was not his movement on the bed causing a slight pressure on the boards which had made the sound. He drew a long breath, and the board creaked again then, as if the sound of breathing had attracted unwelcome attention.

Chudd became conscious of feeling slightly damp. In the stillness he fancied he could hear something—something more than the blood singing in his veins. It sounded like a chorus of

voices singing—a very long way off, low, but terribly distinct. All imagination he knew, but— He clenched his hands. He could not now disguise from himself the fact that he, Alfred Chudd, was nerve-ridden and afraid, and for no reason that the Alfred Chudd of normal times would accept for a reason. The breath came from his lips in a thin trickle of vapour, as if he released it grudgingly.

He lay and sweated, feebly battling against the invading waves of horror, and too engrossed in staving off a nightmare panic to curse himself for owning the weakness, which he had despised in other men. It was not merely the creaking of a board which had brought him to these straits, but because he was conscious—although not through the medium of any sense that he could name—of the presence of some horror, a vague, nameless beastliness for which there was no description in any human language.

Heavens! What was that! His heart bounded within him like a live thing, and every nerve in his body made for him a separate agony. That was no piece of imagination—that noise, that movement at the far end of the room. While his pulses still raced, he realised the meaning of the sound. The window had opened and was swinging in the night breeze that moaned along the narrow streets.

The window had opened! Yes, and when he had shut it before getting into bed he tried its firmness and been satisfied. It had taken pounds of pressure to shift it, but it had shifted. A strong draught invaded the room and breathing over his pillowed head cooled the sweat in his hair. The window had opened as—O God of pity!—as it had opened that night the captain No, no, he wouldn't, he daren't think about that.

The seconds lagged and became periods of eternity. He knew that his normal self would have risen and closed the window, but he dared not move. The least movement—even of a hand or limb beneath the bedclothes—seemed to attack the resentful gaze of countless unseen eyes out there in the darkness. If he got out of bed, surely they would all come clamouring around him.

In the midst of all the stealthy restlessness that seemed to be going on in the room, his hearing—or some other sense—made him aware of some other sound or movement that was definite and purposeful. Someone—something—was creeping towards him from the direction of the open window, slinking, huddled and crouched, along the carpet. Chudd was now wet through with sweat. He felt his hair stiffen and rise.

'This is nightmare,' he told himself; but in nightmare one cannot move, and Chudd was able, only he dared not.

But the climax was yet to come, and it came along moments later when something cold touched his cheeks and deftly and gently felt its way down to his windpipe. His tortured brain knew it to be a clammy hand with long bony fingers. They fastened on to his throat and broke the spell which had kept him lying still as a felled log. With his ecstasy of terror came the fighting courage of the cornered rat.

He uttered a harsh, gurgling cry as the fingers tightened on his windpipe in an agonising grip. As he writhed beneath it the strength of ten came to his aid. He lunged out, grunting with the effort, great smashing blows which struck the empty air. He tore the hands from his throat, and, with a snarling scream, struck again and again. Half rising, he lashed out like a madman, and toppled off the bed on to the floor in a huddle of bedclothes. His head struck the handle of the door as he picked himself up, and a moment later he had flung it open and half tripped, half staggered across the landing, trailing blankets and sheets behind him.

There was a horsehair sofa in the coffee-room; there was also an oil lamp which might be lit. He made his way there, and remained with a light burning until dawn was in the sky.

Alfred Chudd's appearance was such as to attract attention when, rather late, he made his appearance at the breakfast table. He looked pale and hollow-eyed and worse tempered than usual, and he kept his chin well down over his collar. Billy Chignell was in the room as he entered, the landlord having just brought in a fresh supply of bread-and-butter for the three already seated.

'Good morning, Mr Chudd,' he said, turning half round. 'I hope you slept all right.'

Chudd grunted an affirmative.

'No complaints about the room, I hope?'

Chudd, although not looking directly at them, was aware of four pairs of challenging eyes focused upon his face. He hesitated only for a moment. Now that the sun was shining into the coffee-room it was possible to conceive himself to have been the victim of a nightmare. Besides, the humiliation of telling his story was something not to be borne.

'No complaints,' he grunted.

'What?' exclaimed Dorley. 'You haven't seen the ghost?'

'Ghost be hanged!' exclaimed Chudd, in quite his old manner. 'If I'd been a madman or a liar I might have seen fifty. But I knew nothing would happen in that room, and nothing did happen. Pity I'm moving on to Bodmin today, or I'd sleep in it again and welcome.'

It did him good to talk in that vein, and as he continued the breakfast-table shook beneath his fist, and the room became highly uncomfortable for Mr Walters.

Dimsdale, who had been the first to come down to breakfast, was the first to leave the table. He went downstairs and into the outhouse at the back where he kept his rod ready jointed and his creel and tackle. Some march browns needed tying, and he came out into the light to thread the 'points'. Billy Chignell, emerging from the back door to shake a mat, saw him, dropped the mat, and made towards him. He was doing his best to grin and look severe at the same time, and his round, jolly face was oddly distorted in the effort.

'Doesn't it beat cock-fighting?' he asked, in a hoarse whisper. 'There's that there Chudd, he won't eat his words and he looks nearer dead than alive. He's had an awful night, and he won't say a word. If he doesn't believe in ghosts now—'

'I rather gathered from his shouting,' said Dimsdale, wetting the end of a point and holding a little brown fly up to the light, 'that he was still rather more than sceptical.'

The landlord's voice became a thought more serious. There was a note of respectful rebuke in the tone of it.

'Oh, Mr Dimsdale,' he said, 'it's been a rare lark. But you shouldn't have done it.'

'Done what? Dash it, my sight's getting very bad, or I'm very clumsy this morning.'

'Come, now, Mr Dimsdale, sir, it must have been you. Dorley and Walters wouldn't have dared. It beats me how you knew what the others complained of, for I know I didn't tell you. But I could tell what had happened to Chudd, although he did keep his chin well down. I could see the marks on his throat—bruises—all black and blue.'

Dimsdale lowered the fly and stared at Billy Chignell.

'Are you suggesting,' he asked, half laughing, 'that I went to that fellow's room last night and nearly throttled him?'

'I don't suppose you meant to nearly throttle him. But he won't forget it in a hurry.'

Dimsdale gazed at him in blank amazement.

'Well,' he said, 'I swear I never went near his room.'

Billy Chignell stared harder than ever.

‘And I swear I didn’t,’ he said, ‘and I’ll take my solemn dying oath that Walters and Dorley didn’t.’

They continued to stare at one another. The sunlight was very bright and warm and seemed to deny what was in their minds.

‘The others,’ said Billy Chignell, sinking his voice, ‘all complained of the same thing. Somebody came in the night and tried to choke ’em, so they said. I didn’t believe it, and I’m not going to say that I believe it now.’

‘Nor am I,’ said Dimsdale, and added, after a pause: ‘Well, what are you going to do about it?’

‘Do about it? I’m a plain man and I don’t believe in ghosts or haunted rooms, and I don’t want to. But I’ve got my living to get, and I can’t afford to have people making complaints in my house, so I’m going to shut that room up again right away, and people can go down on their knees before I let them sleep in it again. As a plain man who doesn’t pretend to understand some things—and doesn’t want to—don’t you think I’m right?’

‘As another plain man,’ Dimsdale answered. ‘I’m rather inclined to think you are.’