

# A Dead Man's Bargain

By Clive Pemberton

The conversation in the smoke-room had flowed unflaggingly, as conversation will when a cosmopolitan gathering comes together, and the pipes are drawing well and none is a laggard with the glass. There were a dozen grouped round the blazing log fire—men from all parts and in diverse walks of life. Topic after topic was broached, descanted upon at length or dismissed with a word, and at last the subject of supernatural agency was started.

"I can't and don't believe in what some people call supernatural agencies," said a stout, jovial faced man, drawing briskly at a mammoth briar.

"I remember a man telling me once of a visitation he had from his mother-in-law—deceased ten years—and it nearly killed him—the shock of seeing her again, I suppose," and he laughed ponderously into his glass.

"I don't believe in spirits or such things either," chimed in a matter-of-fact commercial. "You see, I'm one to only believe in what my eyes show me, and spirits that come to worry folk and frighten them out of their wits always—"

"Yet supernatural happenings are on record whether you believe in them or not"

All turned simultaneously to learn from whom the interruption had come. It proceeded from a man who was sitting somewhat apart from the group round the fireplace. At the first glance, all noticed the same strange thing about him. The face was that of a young man, but the hair, which grew somewhat long and dishevelled, was snow-white, and in the eyes there lurked an expression such as is only seen in those having once undergone some shock or never-to-be-forgotten ordeal. There was a moment of silence, then the first speaker addressed the stranger, who, after his quietly-spoken words, had retired into the background again as though embarrassed at having spoken.

"I don't think any of us but are open to conviction," said the commercial, looking invitingly round. He turned to the stranger. "If you have a story to tell, sir, you will not have to complain of inattention. What do you say, gentlemen?"

The affirmative was unanimous, and the stranger slowly drew his chair forward into the circle. Amid a flattering silence he commenced his story.

You ask yourselves why I, young in years, should have the face of a worn old man and hair whiter than Time could ever bleach it? Listen to the true story of my awful and inexplicable experience—an experience that in one short hour changed the colour of my hair from brown to white, and carved lines on my face that nothing will ever erase while memory lasts to haunt me with the recollection of the most fearful ordeal mortal man ever went through and emerged alive to speak of.

At the time of which I speak—some five years ago—I was living in a remote little town in the Midlands, which I will call L—. From my earliest years, the passion of my life had been music, and an annuity of two hundred a year allowed me to follow my natural inclinations without fear of being harassed by financial difficulties. Insignificant and even unimportant though L— was, it yet possessed one object of interest and antiquity—the Parish Church. This was a fine old building erected in the reign of Elizabeth—rich in stained glass and well preserved stone frescoes. But its greatest attraction—to me, at any rate—was the organ—a superb instrument

combining the immortal work of Father Smith with the modern improvements in mechanism by the latter-day builders. The whole instrument had been reconstructed and made perfect by the generosity of a rich patron some two years before, and on the completion of the work a new organist was appointed—a stranger to L— named Reuben Chelston. I suppose it was our equal enthusiasm in the one pursuit that drew us together, for, in a very short time, Reuben Chelston and I were firm and inseparable companions. As an executant on the organ I have never heard his equal; but as time went on and I got to know him better, I found that he was a man possessed of some very extraordinary theories regarding the supernatural, and in the creed of spiritualism he thoroughly believed. At first his extraordinary doctrines—delivered at lightning speed and with a kind of hysterical excitement that invariably seized him when on the subject—astonished me not a little, and would have led many to incline towards the belief that he was mad; but constant and close contact with the man had given me a deeper insight into his temperament than others possessed, and as I never attempted to argue the matter with him or try to convince him to the contrary, no harm was done. There was seldom an evening that I did not spend with him in the empty church, listening while he played as only he could play. In my mind's eye I can see him now, his great shaggy head thrown back, eyes closed in a sort of ecstatic trance, and the most wonderful melodies ravishing the air as his hands swept over the keys.

Strange melodies they were sometimes that his fancy would conceive, and if some of those extemporaneous pieces he played to me could be reproduced, they would, I am convinced, rank with some of the finest compositions the world has ever heard. It was about a year after the beginning of our somewhat curious intimacy that I first noticed the beginning of a strange change in my friend. He had repeatedly told me that he had confided in me as in no other living person, for, indeed, I was his only companion and he seemed to possess no other friends or acquaintances. He was always a man of moods, now grave, now gay, and subject to curious lapses of sullenness when he appeared to be thinking deeply over something known only to himself. It was summer time, and after the usual practice in the church one evening, he returned with me to my rooms. Once or twice I was on the point of asking him what was amiss, for he seemed to be labouring under some excitement that he found difficult to suppress. For a long time after we had finished the meal he sat silent, his eyes fixed vacantly on the wall and his lips moving rapidly as though he were repeating some set formula to himself over and over again. Suddenly he turned to me—his voice wonderfully quiet and well under control.

“Harold,” he said; “I am going away for a while.”

“Going away?” I repeated. “Where to? what for?”

“I am going away from here,” he went on, not appearing to notice my questions, “because I cannot do what I have to do here.”

“What have you to do which cannot be done here?” I asked, curiously. He was silent for a moment, then he seemed to rouse himself, and his voice sounded clear and distinct.

“As you know,” he said, fixing his eyes—the most wonderful eyes ever set in a man's head—on mine, “I have confided things to you that nobody save myself knows of. Have you noticed that I have been away every Wednesday night for the past six weeks?”

“Why—yes,” I replied, quickly, “but I did not like to —”

“Quite so,” he said, lifting his thin white hand; “but I want you to know why I have been away and what took me away. I have been attending séances—spiritualistic séances!”

I was silent as I heard this, and he went on again quickly after a short pause.

“Harold, why cannot you think as I do?” he cried, a note of pettish irritation in his voice. “I tell you that great marvels can be unfolded by those who return for a fleeting space from the other side. Something will be revealed to me tomorrow night, and then—and then—”

My thoughts had been wandering a little when he commenced speaking, but as he said this my attention was arrested in an instant.

“How can anything be revealed to you tomorrow night?” I said, looking closely at him. “You don’t mean that you—that you—?”

I broke off as he leaned swiftly towards me.

“This I do tell you,” he said, in a kind of awed whisper. “Tomorrow night, myself and one medium will await that which I have been told will be given to me. Such a melody as the world has never yet heard the equal of will be given to me, note by note, by —”

“By whom?” I said sharply, as he suddenly checked himself. He sat silent and thoughtful for a moment.

“That I cannot tell you,” he replied, at last “But this I do promise you, Harold. You shall be the first to hear the wonderful melody, be it what it is.” He dropped his voice to a thrilling whisper. “What if it should be so stupendously unearthly as to be unfit for mortal ears?”

The suddenly conceived idea seemed to move him to ungovernable excitement. He rose and paced the floor with eager, nervous strides. For my part I sat silent and thoughtful. The idea was preposterous, even fraught with a vague suggestion of evil that struck a warning note within my prosaic being.

“Chelston,” I said suddenly, looking up at him; “I am going to ask you to do—or rather, *not* to do—something.”

He paused and looked at me with dilated eyes.

“Well?” he said, quickly.

“I want you not to do what you—you have just told me you are going to do!”

He made a quick movement with his hands.

“Why do you ask me such an impossible thing?” he said, half angrily.

“Because I instinctively feel that some evil will come of it,” I rejoined, boldly. “If we were meant to—to—”

“Enough!” he interposed, peremptorily. “What I have told you I *shall* do! Remember, I promise you that you shall be the first to hear it. Nothing shall prevent you hearing it first! Think of me tomorrow night! . . .”

The following day he left L— before anybody was up and about. It was a blistering hot day—the hottest of that summer—and, situated in a cup-like valley as the town was, it was almost insufferable. All that never-to-be-forgotten day, I felt strangely depressed and restless. I could not settle to anything, and though I tried hard to interest myself in a composition I was at work on, I could not shake off the vague foreboding of a nameless disaster that seemed hanging over me. During the afternoon, the barometer fell with that sudden and ominous rush that always heralds an approaching thunder-storm. Tired with doing nothing all day and still over-shadowed by that same feeling of depression, I determined to walk to the church in the cool of the evening and spend an hour at the organ. The air was still humid and oppressive when I started, although the great heat had gone with the hazing of the sun by a bank of black, uprising clouds. I noticed them as I waited outside the verger’s cottage while he fetched the keys.

“It looks as if a storm was brewing, Trench,” I said, pointing to the sullen bank of clouds.

“Ay!” he replied, shading his eyes with his hand—“It dew that, to be sure, an’ it’ll be on us afore we expect it, I reckon. I wouldn’t be too long if I were you, sir. It *will* be rain when it does come down!”

I agreed with him, and having taken the keys, went on to the church. Having let myself in, I locked the door behind me and mounted the gallery steps to the organ loft. The church—even in bright daylight—was always dim and somewhat gloomy, owing to every window being composed of richly coloured stained glass. Now, with the gathering murky gloom without, the interior was almost completely dark, only the white stone pillars and alabaster statues gleaming whitç and indistinct at the far end below. I should here explain that when the instrument had been renovated and enlarged, a water-driven engine had been installed, thereby rendering the services of a bellows man unnecessary. Afterwards, I would have given the world if another had been with me... But I am anticipating. Having lighted the desk lamps and uncovered the keyboards, I pulled down the lever that controlled the engine, and from the vault far below, I heard the dull thud! thud! of the pistons as they drove the air into the bellows. In a few moments I was lost in a world of melody, and as I put fancy after fancy into execution, the minutes slipped on into long after the hour I had intended to stop. Suddenly I lifted my hands from the keys, and closed my eyes as the gilt music support on the desk before me glinted like an electric spark. It was a gleaming flash of lightning that had stealthily darted from the window on my left and had been reflected in the brass rest. With my hands grasping the stops I listened intently. The rain was pattering down on the roof above with harsh force, and yes! faint but unmistakable was the distant mutter and roll of thunder. Quite suddenly—more suddenly than I can describe—I was seized with that strange sensation which everybody has felt at some time when in an empty building—the sensation that I was not *alone* and was being *watched!* I sat perfectly rigid, straining my ears to hear—what? I do not know, but while I would have given anything to have looked behind me, I found myself powerless to move my head or even glance in the slanting mirror that commanded a view of the gallery and well behind and below me. How long I sat thus I do not know, but a second gleam of lightning—far more vivid than the first—recalled me to action. Seizing the handle that controlled the engine, I turned it off, then pulled the knob of the ledge that covered the keyboards. It would not *move!* Something seemed to be holding it back! I tugged and pulled at it but to no purpose, and as my strange nervousness—it was positive fear by this time!—kept momentarily increasing, I at last desisted, for my one desire was to get outside despite the avalanche of rain that was descending on the roof above me. The last breath of wind ebbed out of the empty bellows with a curious ticking sound; then, amid a strange, deathly still lull both within and without, I turned out one of the gas jets. As I did so, a peculiar thing happened. A draught—faint, yet perfectly distinct—swept behind me; but, with an indescribable feeling of terror, I noticed that the flame beside me did not flicker or become actuated by it in the slightest degree. A kind of frantic desire seized me to tear madly down the steps and out into the raging storm, for fragments of Reuben Chelston’s strange conversations recurred to me, and, try as I would, I could not shut them out. With a sudden effort I turned out the remaining gas-jet, and in black darkness groped my way to the door. I had just reached it when I again distinctly felt a slight stirring of the air—just what a draught would be if caused by somebody passing! Down the steps I crept, one by one, the lightning blazing in at the windows with blinding brilliancy and alarming rapidity. To get to the door, I had to walk the whole length of the aisle, and, with my heart wildly beating, I sped up it, twisting my head round mechanically at every yard. I was about two-thirds up, perhaps, when I suddenly stopped. What was that? I strained my ears, my heart-beats bumming in my head. It came again, sending a thrill of horror through me, for clearly

enough I heard the sudden throb of the engine far below and then the sound of the bellows filling. Like the crash of brazen cymbals in my ears it was borne in upon me that I was *not alone!* Somebody had started the engine—somebody was in the building with me. Summoning all my presence of mind, I called out—“Who is there?”

The echo of my voice was drowned in an appalling crash of thunder; but as it died away, I fancied that a wild laugh came from the gallery! And then—and then—How can I describe what followed? I cannot—simply cannot, for my brain reels at the recollection of it. The storm seemed to suddenly subside—the rain ceased to clatter on the roof, and in an unbroken silence, the organ began to sound. If I could command the language and descriptive power of the greatest mind that ever lived, I could not convey the faintest conception of the weird music that flooded the empty building and poured into my shivering ears; but instinctively I knew that it was a dead march—unearthly and of such sombre grandeur as no living brain of man ever conceived. It seemed to tell of phases that are faintly imagined and seen, shadow-like as in a dream, and awe-struck and bewildered I crouched down on the cold stone floor, covering my ears, for I knew such melody was never meant for human ears to hear. How long it lasted I cannot say, but it gradually died away as gently and imperceptibly as a summer breeze, and as it did so, the clock in the tower slowly struck nine. Then action came to me, and springing to my feet, I flew to the door and fumbled with the key. The rain was falling heavily without as I tore open the door, and I felt that strange soft wind I had felt twice before pass me from behind! It passed me—passed me into the night and was gone! . . .

The man with the white hair ceased speaking, and lifting his hand to his forehead, brushed away a gleam of sweat that shone there. He lifted his glass and drank a little.

“A strange thing,” said one, breaking the silence; “but —”

“How I got home I never knew,” he continued, appearing not to notice the interruption; “but the sequel to that strange night’s experience came two hours later. A telegram came for me with the news that Reuben Chelston had died suddenly at half past eight at the conclusion of a spiritualistic séance. And, as the last notes of that terrible dead march died away and I opened the door, the clock in the tower struck nine, and—and I felt that wind pass me! . . .”

There was silence in the room—a silence that remained unbroken.