

The House That Was Lost

By Tom Gallon

The events I set down here occurred some three years ago, and I write of them now with as much wonderment as I regarded them then. Let me say at the outset that I have puzzled and puzzled over the mystery, and have arrived at no actual solution of it, nor do I know whether any solution will ever be arrived at, or whether, even if such is the case, I shall ever hear of it.

I am a commercial clerk, earning a small salary sufficient to keep my wife and two children and myself in modest comfort. My name is Paul Jenner, and I live at No. —, Drawbridge Crescent, —. Well, never mind the precise locality. I give you these particulars in order that you may understand that I am a very ordinary and commonplace person, not given to romancing. I want you to understand that I am setting down in bald and simple language what actually happened to me on a certain night in January three years ago.

It was on a Saturday night, and I had, as usual, come home on that day from the City early in the afternoon. It had been a black and foggy day, and I remember that the gas had been lighted in the streets and in the office where I worked from early morning. The fog was very bad at the time I returned home, and I congratulated myself on the fact that I had not to go out again that night. I sat with my wife and the two children in our little sitting-room all the evening, with that comfortable feeling that I was my own master until Monday morning, and that I need trouble about nothing outside the house. In due course the children went to bed, and then it was Mary reminded me of a letter that must be written and posted that night. Sufficient is it for me to say that the letter was to an elderly relative of some means who lived in the country, and who had taken great interest in the children. My wife (prudent woman) remembered that the following day was the birthday of this relative, and that she should receive proper greeting by the Sunday morning post in the country town in which she lived.

Frankly, I did not want the bother of it, but Mary always knows best in these matters, and so I wrote my note and sealed it up. Let me add here that I had read nothing exciting during the evening—nothing to stir my imagination in any way.

I stamped the letter and proceeded to the front door. Judge of my astonishment when, on throwing it open, I saw nothing but the grey wall of fog coming up to the very house; even the railings, not ten yards in front of our little house, were blotted out completely, I called softly back into the house to my wife to come and look.

“Don’t lose yourself, Paul,” she said, half laughing. “What a terrible night!”

“I shan’t lose myself” I replied, laughing in turn. “The pillar-box is only at the end of the crescent, if I stick to the railings, I can’t possibly miss it. Don’t wait here,” I added solicitously. “I’ll leave the door ajar, so that I can slip in easily when I come back. I’ve left my keys on my writing desk.”

Mary went in, and I pulled the door close, and then stepped out boldly for the front gate. Imagine me standing there, just outside my own gate, and with my back to the crescent, knowing that I had to go to the left to find the pillar-box which was at the end of the crescent. There are nine houses, and mine is the third, so that I knew I had to pass six more before reaching the pillar-box. I knew also that the gate of each house had an ornamental centre-piece standing up above it, and that I must touch six of those ornamental centre-pieces before I stepped away from the crescent at the end to reach the pillar-box. That I knew would be something of an adventure,

for the fog was the densest I have ever seen; I could only see the faint glow of the lamp in the centre of the crescent above me when I came opposite to the lamp-post; the post itself was invisible.

I counted the six gates, and then stood at the end of the last line of railings. I knew that the pillar-box was exactly opposite me. I took three quick steps, and literally cannoned into it. I was a little proud of my own judgment in getting it so nicely. Then I fumbled for the mouth of it, and dropped in my letter.

All this may sound very commonplace and ordinary, but you shall hear what followed. I am an observant man, and I had noticed always that the mouth of the pillar-box faced directly along the crescent, thus standing at right angles to the road. At the moment that I had my right hand in that mouth, therefore, I argued that if I stood out at the stretch of my arm I must be facing the crescent; I had but to move straight forward again to touch the friendly railings. I was putting that plan into operation, and had let go of the mouth of the pillar-box, when a man, coming hurriedly round the corner, ran straight into me, muttered a gruff apology, and was lost in the fog again in a moment. And in that accidental collision he had spun me round and tossed me aside—and I was lost!

That is literally true. I took a step and found myself slipping off the kerbstone into the road; stumbled back again, and strove to find my way along by sticking to the edge of the pavement. After a minute or two I was so sure of myself that I ventured to cross the pavement, and by great good luck touched in a moment one of those ornamental centre-pieces of one of the gates—or so, at least, it seemed. I went on with renewed confidence until I saw certain bushes which topped the railings of one particular house, and then I knew that the next house must be mine. I pushed open the gate with confidence, stepped quickly up the little path, and reached the door. I was right; the door yielded to my touch, and I went hurriedly in.

I had taken off my hat, and had held it towards the familiar hat-stand before I realized that it was not a familiar hat-stand at all; it was one I did not know. I looked round in some confusion, meaning to make good my escape without being observed, and yet wondering into what house I could have come so near my own, when I stopped stock still, with the hat held in my hand, listening. From a room near at hand I heard the sound of a low, long-drawn moan, as from someone in pain. More than that, it was almost the wail of someone in acute terror.

Now I am a mild and inoffensive man, and I confess that my first instinct was to fly. There was the door within a foot of me; I could open it again noiselessly and slip out, and leave whoever was moaning to his or her own trouble. My next instinct, however, was a braver one; I might be able to help. Putting my hat on, and so leaving my hands free, I moved cautiously towards the sound, which was coming intermittently.

I found that the house was built in exactly the same fashion that mine was; there was the same number of steps leading to a room downstairs, which in my case was used as a playroom for the children. I went down these steps slowly and cautiously, with my flesh creeping a little, I must admit, as that weird moaning went on, and almost inclined to turn back with every step I took. But at last I got into the basement, and came to the door of the room from which the sound proceeded. I was in the very act of recklessly thrusting open the door when another sound broke upon my ears that held me still. The sound of someone singing in a raucous voice.

It was a sea song I remembered to have heard when a boy, and the words of which I have forgotten; it was something about "Blow the man down". The door of the room was open a little way, and through the crack of it I was able to peer in; and there I saw a sight that for a moment

made me doubt my own eyes. I remember that I rubbed my eyes in a stupid way and looked again, and this is what I saw:

The room was in a neglected state, with strips of wallpaper hanging down from the walls and with a blackened ceiling. There was a table in the centre of it, and at that table a man was seated, with a square black bottle and a glass before him, and a candle burning near his left hand. I can see the whole room now as plainly and as clearly as I saw it then. He was a man so villainously ugly that I had a thought that he was not a man at all, but some hideous thing out of a nightmare. He had very long arms— so long that they were stretched across the table, and his hands gripped the opposite edge of it, a great heavy head, crowned with a mass of red hair, was set low between enormously broad shoulders; his eyes, half closed, were high up and close together on either side of a nose that was scarcely a nose at all; the lips were thick and heavy.

But it was not the man that I looked at first, it was at two other figures in the room. These figures were seated on chairs facing the table at which the man was, and the strangeness of them lay in the fact that each was securely bound to the chair on which he and she sat, for it was a man and a woman. The man, who was quite young was not only bound, but gagged securely also; the woman was more lightly tied to her chair by the arms only, and her mouth was free. She was leaning back, with her eyes closed, and it was from her lips that that strange wailing sound was coming, and mingling with the raucous singing of the man at the table. My first impression was that the man at the table was some sort of unclean, bestial judge, and the others his prisoners.

He stopped his singing to pour some liquor from the square bottle into his glass and to drink it off then he resumed his former attitude, with his fingers locked over the edge of the table. And now I noticed that while the woman, who was, by the way, quite young and very pretty, with a fair, dainty prettiness, still kept her eyes closed, the eyes of the bound man never left that dreadful figure seated at the other side of the table.

“Wouldn’t you like to speak, you dog?” said the red-haired man.

“What would you give now to have the use of your limbs—the free wagging of your tongue? What would you say to me; what would you do to me?”

The man who was bound could, of course, answer nothing. I saw his face flush and darken, and I guessed what his thoughts were. For myself I was too fascinated by the scene before me to do anything else than peer through the crack and watch what was going on.

“Lovers—eh?” exclaimed the man at the table. “You thought I was unsuspecting; you thought I knew nothing and suspected nothing—didn’t you? While I was safely out of the way you could meet, the pair of you —day after day, and week after week, and this puppy could steal from me what was mine by right.”

The woman opened her eyes for the first time and spoke. “It isn’t true,” she said, a sob breaking her voice. “It was all innocent Dick and I have done no wrong.”

“You lie!” thundered the man, bringing his fist down upon the table with a blow that might have split it “You’ve always lied—lied from the moment your father gave you to me—from the very hour I married you. You always hated me; I’ve seen you shudder many and many a time at the mere sight of me. Don’t I know it; haven’t I felt you stab me a thousand times more deeply than you could have stabbed me with any weapon? You white devil! I’ve come at last to hate you as much as you hate me.”

The woman turned her head slowly and looked at the younger man; a faint smile crossed her lips. In an instant the red-haired man had leapt to his feet, showing me astonishingly enough that he was a dwarf with the shortest legs surely ever a man had. But the bulk of him was enormous,

and I could guess, with a shudder, at his strength. He caught up the glass, crossed the room, and flung the contents in the face of the man.

“It’s a waste of good liquor—but that’s for the look she gave you. I wish there was some death more horrible than any invented yet that I could deal out to you,” he added, standing with the glass in his hand and glaring at his victim. “The death I mean for you is too easy.”

He walked across to the fireplace in a curious purposeless way, and stirred a great fire that was blazing there. Then from a corner of the room he dragged with ease a great sack that appeared to contain wood and shavings; so much I saw in a rent in the side of it. This he dropped down near the fire, as if in readiness for something, and then went back to his seat, applying himself again to the drink that was on the table. And still I watched, as a man may watch a play, wondering how it will end.

“I got the best of you tonight,” he said presently. “You might have been too much for me if I hadn’t come upon you from behind; but I was ready and waiting. I’ve been watching longer than you think, I had everything mapped out clearly days ago. Tonight sees the end of all things for the pair of you; tomorrow sees me miles away from here. You came in secret, you dog you’ll go in secret.”

“We have done no wrong,” said the woman again. “We loved each other years ago, when we were boy and girl; there was no sin in that.”

“Bah!—I don’t believe a word of it. Don’t I know that in your black heart you’ve compared the two of us every day of your life since first I saw you. His straightness for my crookedness; his sleek, black hair for my red; his prettiness for this face of mine”—he struck his own face relentlessly with one hand as he spoke—“that women shudder at. Don’t I know all that?”

It was the strangest and most pitiful thing that the creature sitting there before his victims suddenly covered his face with his hands and groaned. If ever I had seen a soul in torment, I saw it then, and though I loathed him I could have wept for him. After a moment or two he dropped his hands and seized the bottle, and poured out the last drops into the glass and drank them off; then flung the bottle and glass crashing into the fireplace, as though there was an end to that business. And now, as he got down again from the chair, I saw the eyes of the woman open wide and follow his every movement with a dreadful look of terror in them.

“I’ll kill you both—here in the place where you’ve met—and then I’ll fire the house,” went on the dwarf “I’ve planned it all. Look your last on each other, for tonight you die—and this house shall be your funeral pyre!”

“I swear to you,” panted the woman eagerly, “by all I hold most holy and most dear, that if you’ll let us go, we’ll never see each other again. For pity’s sake!—for the sake of Dick!”

“For the sake of Dick!” sneered the dwarf. “That shows you in your true colours; that shows who you are and what you are. There’s one poor satisfaction left to you; you’ll die together.”

What held me then it would be impossible to say. I can only plead that in the dreadful thing that followed I was as a man who sits at a play, wondering what will happen next, and with never a thought in him of interfering. I think in my anxiety I had pressed open the door a little to get a dearer view, so that I saw every movement of the dwarf For myself, I had forgotten everything—my own home, and my wife, and the babies who slept in their quiet room above. It was as though I had stepped straight into a new world.

I saw the dwarf advance towards the man in the chair, carrying his right hand stiff and straight beside him, gripping something, I could not tell what it was that he held. I saw him come straight at him, and I saw the eyes of the woman in the opposite chair watching him as one fascinated. Then I saw two movements; one with the left hand of the dwarf, when he struck the other man on

the face; then with the right hand, when he raised something that gleamed in the light of the candle and brought it down with a sound that was new and horrible to me on the breast of the other man. And I saw the face of the man change, and start as it were into new life, and then fall as it were into death. And I saw his head drop forward, and his eyes were closed.

Then, above it all, and yet seeming as a sort of dreadful chorus to it all, rang out the scream from the woman in the other chair. I do not think that the dwarf heard it, he had drawn back from what had been the living man, and was staring like one mad upon what he had done. And still piercing the air of the place rang the scream of the woman—not for her lover alone, but for herself.

That sound seemed at last to break in upon the senses of the dwarf and to call him partially to himself. I had watched him to the point where he drew himself together and crouched like a wild beast ready to spring, with that in his hand that dripped red, when, in some fashion, I flung myself round the partially open door and stumbled into the room. I think I must have been a little mad myself; otherwise, frail and commonplace creature that I was, I could not have battled with this madman. I came upon him from behind and gripped him, seizing him by the throat and by the head, and all the while shouting something to him quite unintelligible.

The attack had been so sudden and so unexpected that I had him, in a sense, at my mercy. He could not know who had attacked him; he struggled madly, not alone to get away from me, but also to discover who I was. I struggled to keep his face away from me, gripped him by the neck and by the hair, and fought with him for what I knew then was my own life. And so struggling we stumbled at last horribly against that still figure bound in the chair and brought it over crashing with us to the floor. And then in a sudden I felt the dwarf inert in my hands, and knew that I had conquered.

What I must have looked like in that room, kneeling there, panting and struggling to get my breath, I cannot now tell; the whole business was so like a nightmare. I remember seeing the dwarf lying there—huddled up and very still. I remember that other figure, bound grotesquely in the chair and lying, still bound, upon its side; and I remember, too, the woman, with her arms close fastened behind her, sitting there and sobbing wildly.

The dwarf must have been stunned, he lay there quite still, with the knife that was dreadfully red fallen from his hand, and lying beside him.

When at last I staggered to my knees I saw that the girl was staring at me with a face that seemed to suggest that here, perhaps, was another ruffian come to kill her.

“Who—who are you?” she asked in a frightened whisper.

“A friend—one who stumbled in by accident,” I panted.

“Look at the man that’s tied to the chair,” she whispered hoarsely.

“He can’t be dead.”

I knew that he was, but still I looked, as she bade me. I had no need to look twice; the poor fellow was quite dead. The blow had been strong and sure. On my knees beside him, I looked up and nodded slowly to her, there was no need for words.

She leaned back in her chair again and closed her eyes. “Set me free,” she said in a faint voice.

I could not touch that knife that lay there; in a mechanical, methodical way I took from my waistcoat pocket the decent, respectable little bone-handled penknife I carried always with me. With that I cut her bonds, noting as I did so how cruelly they had cut into the white flesh; and after a moment or two she swung her arms listlessly against her sides and opened her eyes, and then, with an effort raised her hands and pressed them against her temples.

“What will you do?” I asked, looking at her curiously.

“I—I don’t know,” she said; and then, breaking into weeping, sobbed out “Oh—dear God—that it should have come to this! What shall I do—what shall I do?”

“You must get away,” I said, watching the dwarf, who was beginning to stir a little. “If he wakes, you know what will happen.”

“I know—I know,” she said; and got to her feet and began to move towards that bound figure still lying tied to the chair.

But at that I got before her, and with my hands against her shoulders held her back, and pleaded passionately to her that she should go, and leave the dead alone. She listened, with that strange look in her eyes of a child wakened from sleep and not clearly understanding, but she yielded to me, and stumbled under my guidance to the door.

We had reached it, and I had opened it for her to pass out, when suddenly the dwarf twisted over on to his hands and knees, and then raised himself upright. He did not seem to realize for a moment what had happened; then he caught sight of the woman, and, with a snarl, crawled forward and gripped the hilt of the knife. At that she pushed suddenly past me and fled like a hare up the stairs. I heard the swift passage of her footsteps in the little hall of the house—then the slamming of the outer door.

And now I had to look to myself, for I saw in the eyes of the man that he would not let this witness escape if he could catch him. I had managed to get through the door by the time that he had got to his feet, and in a dazed fashion was stumbling towards me, knife in hand. With a sudden swoop he reached the table and blew out the candle, and at the same moment I ran up the stairs, and in the darkness stumbled along the hall and fumbled with the catch of the door. By great good fortune I got the door open, and literally fell out into the fog.

I could not see him as he tore after me; in a faintness I had fallen to my knees, and I heard him, as he raced past me, panting heavily. Then the fog swallowed him up, and I knelt there on the pavement alone, shaking from head to foot.

I had, of course, no means of knowing exactly which house it was in which I had had my adventure; I could only judge roughly that it must be about the middle of the crescent. I started along again, in the right direction, as I hoped, and thought to find my own house; missed the railings, after going what seemed to be an interminable distance, and came up hard against a pillar-box. Scarcely knowing what I did, I set my right hand in the mouth of it, and performed the same manoeuvre I had done before; advanced three paces, and touched railings again. Stumbling along these, I came blindly to a house that I thought might be mine, walked up the path, and pushed open a door that yielded; and there, with the face of my Mary looking at me in alarm and wonderment, I fell in a dead faint at her feet.

It has to be recorded that I never found the house again. I know everyone that lives in Drawbridge Crescent—all highly respectable people, of humdrum lives. Over and over again, in clear weather, I have walked to that pillar-box and have closed my eyes, and have tried to remember what steps I took on that particular night, after a stranger had cannoned into me and twisted me round, but all in vain. Whether in some house in some other road nearby lies the body of a man who was foully murdered on that particular night; or whether in one of the innocent-looking houses of the Crescent itself the crime was committed; or whether, in some strange supernatural fashion, I saw that night a deed committed that had been committed long before, I shall never know. That it is no mere figment of the imagination, and that something really happened that night, is proved by one fact. My wife, in raising me from the floor that night when

I fell at her feet, found my fingers locked close upon something, and, forcing them open, disclosed what it was.

A tuft of red hair!