

The Horror of Horton House

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Horton House was a mansion that stood on the borders of a wood in Wiltshire. It was about two hundred years old at the time of our story; and the same family had lived in it all the while. Several generations of the Hortons had spent their days in this old home of their family.

It was a quaint rambling place, with passages in unexpected places, and rooms hidden away in odd corners. It was easy to lose oneself; and more than one visitor had wandered about the upper part of the house until almost in despair of finding the way down to breakfast in the morning.

John Horton, the present owner, was fond of the place. He loved it not merely because it was the home of his ancestors, but because it just suited him. He liked a roomy old house of this kind; and when it became his at the death of his father he spent a good deal of money in having it thoroughly restored and put in order. And in the progress of the restorations, several interesting things were brought to light.

A secret passage was found, hidden in the thick wall of the dining-room; and the entrance to it was by means of a panel which slid aside when a knob in the carving was pushed the right way. But the odd thing was that this passage, which was so cleverly hidden, seemed to be of no possible use. It led nowhere! It went for a short distance, and then ended in a blank wall. It was quite dark, for there was no means by which light could enter. John had gone to some expense in having the walls probed in order to discover the secret, if there was one; but it all ended in no result. Still, there was the passage; and the man who had it made must have had some intention.

At the side of the dining-room was another large room, which had formerly been known as the parlour, but now served as a library. It was here that John Horton spent most of his time when in the house. Here too some interesting discoveries had been made. The walls, which had been covered with plaster and paper, were found to be finely panelled with old oak. But the panelling had no sliding door in it and there was nothing hidden behind it. There was, however, one curious thing about it.

Over the fireplace an inscription was found carved deeply in the oak. It ran thus:

“Let Horton live, let Horton die;
Pray God the horror come not nigh.”

What this meant, nobody knew. John Horton had taken great trouble in going through all the old papers belonging to his ancestors, and he had made inquiries in all directions; but without learning anything that could throw light on the strange inscription.

What could the horror be? Evidently it was something that some former owner of the house feared; and it was equally evident that it was in some way connected with the Horton family. Yet there was no family legend that could throw any light on it. No ancestor of his had been under any fear, that he could find out.

The house had not even the reputation of being haunted; which was rather curious, for it was just the sort of place for a good ghost story. It was old; it was lonely; it was rambling; it had plenty of long passages down which a ghost might wander; there were plenty of echoes ready to catch and repeat the sound of sighs and groans and clanking chains; but nothing of that kind had ever been known in the place. No tragedy had ever occurred there, so far as was known; the

family had not a single villain to boast of; there was no curse upon it or any member of it; in fact there was simply nothing at all. The Hortons had been a quiet, respectable, God-fearing set of people; and the very idea of any horror or mystery in connection with them seemed to be utterly absurd.

Still John Horton was by no means satisfied. He insisted that there must be some meaning in the inscription; and he meant to find out what it was. If he had known what it was that he was to find out, and how appalling was the horror that he was seeking, he would certainly have been content to let well alone. But he did not know: and that was what brought about the tragedy.

On the evening when this history begins, he was sitting before the fire in his library. It was a chilly evening towards the end of October; he had been shooting most of the day in some coverts near by; and now after dinner he was sitting with pipe and paper before the fire, occasionally glancing at the news but more often gazing idly into the fire and thinking of nothing in particular.

Then his eye caught the inscription over the fireplace:

“Let Horton live, let Horton die;
Pray God the horror come not nigh.”

Once more he wondered what it could mean; and he felt almost inclined to pray that the horror might come nigh in order that he might find out what it was. And then a strange idea took hold of him. There was something unusual about the inscription. The word “horror” was not as distinct as usual. Some change seemed to be coming over it as he looked at it. The two letters O were not as sharply defined as before. There was a blur in each which puzzled him.

Then he started out of his chair with a cry of alarm. In place of the two letters O were two eyes: and the eyes were not those of any creature known to man. In circles of green glowed two pupils of dull red fire! But it was intelligent fire. The eyes were alive; and their glance spoke of a malignancy that might be feared but could never be measured.

John Horton quailed before that stare of horror. For a moment he let his eyes fall; and when he looked again there was nothing unusual to be seen. The inscription was as before, and the word “horror” was as it had always been. He rubbed his eyes and tried to convince himself that he had fallen asleep and dreamed the whole thing. But he knew that he had not: he had been very wide awake all the time. His pipe had not gone out.

No; he could not put the thing down to a dream; but neither on the other hand was he willing to believe in its reality. Such things do not occur, as every sensible person knows. He could only put it down to sheer imagination or hallucination. But he was not the kind of man to indulge in fancies or to see things that are not there. Nothing of the kind had ever happened to him before. He began to think that he must be unwell in some way, though he never felt better in his life. The best thing would be to go to bed and try to forget all about it.

So he went to bed; and, contrary to his expectations he slept soundly and did not dream about eyes and horrors. In the morning he examined the inscription carefully, to see if it was possible that any shadow cast upon the word “horror” could produce the appearance of eyes in the two letters O; but found nothing of the kind. There was nothing now peculiar in any way about the word.

He got on a chair and sounded the panel thoroughly to see if there was any possibility of a trick being played by anyone. But it proved to be quite solid and all in one piece. And he knew that the wall behind it was sound, for it had been partly rebuilt during the restoration of the house, in order to strengthen the chimney. So he gave up the problem as insolvable, and resolved to think no more about it.

But a week or two later he had to start thinking again. On this occasion he was sitting before the fire rather late in the evening, and once again found himself looking at the inscription and wondering what secret it concealed. The house was very quiet, for he lived alone and had told the butler that no one need wait up for him. He was smoking a final pipe before retiring for the night, when he thought that he heard something in the dining-room, which as we have mentioned was the next room to the library. He listened, and distinctly heard a chuckling sound as if someone was amused. But it was an unpleasant sort of amusement and suggested that the person who chuckled was not a friendly one.

He heard it a second time. Then he rose quietly and went into the next room to see who was there. He found no one: but the sliding panel leading to the hidden passage was open!

For the moment he thought that one of the servants was there; but the passage within proved to be empty. He was a little annoyed, for he now felt convinced that the hidden passage had been shown to some visitor without his knowledge—a thing that he never allowed—and he decided to make inquiry in the morning. But as he closed the panel, he distinctly heard the chuckle again; and this time the sound came from within the passage. So clear was it that he opened the panel and again examined the interior; but the passage was empty.

In the morning he mentioned the matter to the butler, but was assured that the panel was closed when he cleared the room and put out the lights after dinner, and that no one could have entered it afterwards. The thing was a complete mystery; and John Horton did not like mysteries.

He was still more disturbed when the same thing happened a few days later; and this time there was more to think about. He had just closed the panel, thinking at the time that it might be as well to have a lock fixed to it, when he noticed what looked like the marks of a set of very dirty fingers at the side of the panel. This pointed pretty clearly to some meddlesome person with unwashed hands; and he made up his mind to say a few very plain words to the servants about it next day.

But when the morning came he was not quite so sure about this. On looking more closely at the finger-marks he saw that they were not made by an unwashed hand, but by a burning one! The wood was slightly scorched where the fingers had touched it; and another remarkable thing was that the hand seemed to have five fingers in addition to the thumb! There were six marks where there should have been five.

John Horton decided not to mention the affair to the servants. It hardly seemed possible that one of them was in fault; while it was more than possible that they would want to leave if they knew what had occurred. They were good servants and he had no wish to frighten them away.

That same evening he fell asleep in his chair by the fire, after struggling in vain with an uninteresting book; and he dreamed that he again saw the eyes of fire looking at him from the word “horror” over the mantel. He awoke with a start, and became conscious of a slight smell of burning wood. This scared him, for he had a wholesome fear of fire in an old house largely constructed of wood. He rang for the butler, who also noticed the smell of burning. They both went carefully through the house, but could find nothing amiss.

But next day John happened to look at the carved inscription and saw that the word “horror” in it was apparently discoloured. On closer inspection he found that the two letters O were scorched by fire—just like the finger-marks on the panel in the dining-room. The smell of burning was still slightly perceptible when one’s face was close to the wood.

The following week-end an old college friend spent a short holiday with John, and met with an experience which would not be worth recording but for its apparent connection with the mystery

that was perplexing his host. He had a very disturbed night, and told John that he had dreamed the same thing twice in the same night—which is a somewhat unusual occurrence.

He thought himself in the dining-room alone, sitting opposite the entrance to the passage in the wall, which John had shown to him during the day. As he sat there, the panel slid back and he was at once aware of a strong smell of burning. Then he saw a hand appear out of the darkness—and it was on fire! The fingers were long and claw-like; and little blue flames were playing over them. The hand grasped the side of the panel, and he saw that the wood was slightly scorched. It was then that he noticed that the hand seemed to have a finger more than the usual number.

The hand seemed to waver vaguely for a moment in the gloom of the dark entrance to the passage; next it suddenly pointed to a large painting of John Horton on the opposite wall; then it seemed to just go out, as when a candle is blown out; and the panel slid back into its place.

The visitor woke up and noticed that it was still dark. He struck a light and found that it was half-past two o'clock. Then he went to sleep again, and dreamed the same thing once more in all its details. It should be mentioned here that John had not said anything to him about the curious occurrences that had been troubling him of late.

John dismissed the subject with a joke; but it gave him some uneasy minutes when he thought it over afterwards. It was after this occurrence that he commenced keeping a record, to which he gave the ominous title of "The Coming of the Horror"; and it is to this record that we are indebted for the details which developed until they culminated in such appalling terror.

The next occurrence that he has thus left on record took place in the early morning. John Horton had planned some fishing before breakfast; and he rose about four for that purpose. After dressing hastily and snatching a mouthful of food, he took tip his rod and started. But, before he had gone many yards, he happened to look back at the house.

There was a slight mist—one of those mists in the early morning which often indicate heat later on in the day. But as he looked back at the house it seemed to him that it was hidden more than the slight mist would account for. He looked again, and then he saw that it was smoke and not mist that obscured the view. This brought him back at the double, and he found that smoke was rising from the wall of the house. There was no other sign of fire; but the smoke seemed to come through the wall exactly outside the place where the passage was hidden in its thickness. Evidently the place was on fire!

John rushed to the dining-room, but found no sign of fire there. When he opened the panel leading to the concealed passage, he found it empty and quite as usual. But a slight smell of fire could be detected, and the outer wall was warm. All idea of fishing was now abandoned, and he spent the next hour in a thorough examination of the premises. But it was without result: everything was in order; and the wall of the dining-room was soon quite cold.

The whole business was most perplexing. Everything pointed to the fact that something must have been on fire in the passage. He had seen smoke, he had smelt the fire, and he had felt the heat. He could not deny the evidence of three of his senses. But what could have been on fire? That was the problem that he could not answer. He left a wooden bucket of water in the passage as a precaution in case the fire broke out afresh.

For some days after this he was left in peace; and the worry had almost passed out of his mind when he chanced to wonder if the pocket knife that he had missed might have been dropped in the hidden passage when he was there. So he went to see: and he saw what he did not expect. The bucket of water was empty, and it was badly charred by fire!

About this time John Horton was absent from home on a visit to some relatives for three weeks; and it was apparently directly after his return that the next incident happened. He went

into the dining-room on his way to bed, thinking that he had left a book there; and he distinctly heard a chuckle in the hidden passage. He listened and heard it a second time. He was not lacking in pluck, and he at once walked across the room, slid back the panel, and looked in. The passage ran along the side of the room, so that the light from the room only reached that end of it which was immediately behind the panel. The rest of the passage was in complete darkness: and at the farther end he saw two gleaming eyes. They glowed red within circles of green, and were apparently the same that he had seen looking out of the inscription over the fireplace in the library.

John was staggered for the moment. He turned quickly to get a light and clear up the mystery, when his hand was caught in a grip of fire! It only for an instant; but he screamed with the shock and pain of it. Then the burning hand released him; and the gleaming eyes had vanished.

His hand was giving him extreme pain, which was only partly relieved by the remedies that were available in the house. In the morning some ugly blisters remained; and when the doctor saw them he remarked that the burn was a bad one. John did not care to tell how it occurred, but said he had burnt himself when destroying some old letters—an explanation that the doctor clearly did not believe, though he was too discreet to say so.

It was a full fortnight before the hand was well; and during this time nothing unusual seems to have occurred. But John had been thinking things over, and he had come to the conclusion that possibly fire was the “horror” referred to in the inscription. With this idea in mind, he had again gone through the history of the Hortons to see if there was anything to confirm it. He found very little, except that in the early days of the history of the house there had been a fire that damaged some of the downstairs rooms. It was possible enough that the inscription had been carved after this occurrence. But there was nothing to prove it: so the notion did not amount to much, nor did it go far to explain the strange things that had happened.

The next thing noted by him was the odd behaviour of the parlourmaid, who asked to be allowed to leave without giving the usual notice. She had given every satisfaction and had been in the house for several years; so that he tried his best to persuade her to stop. He offered to raise her wages or to do anything else in reason if she would change her mind. But she would not be persuaded to stay; and at last he got the reason out of her. She liked the place well enough, got on well with the other servants, and had been very comfortable; but she could not stand the “goings on.”

John naturally asked what “goings on”; and with some reluctance she told him a strange tale. It was part of her work to sweep and dust the dining-room the first thing in the morning, and she had been frightened several times by hearing what she described as a sort of choking laugh in the hidden passage. She had spoken to the housekeeper about it, and had been well laughed at for her pains. The housekeeper had taken her into the passage and had shown her that it was impossible for anyone to be there when the panel was closed. But the laughter had still been heard.

But what had finally made her give notice was something that had occurred a few days before. She was dusting the room, and had happened to lean back for a moment against the edge of the sliding panel. At once she had smelt burning linen, and had found that the back of her dress was scorched where it had touched the chink at the side of the panel. She had told this to the housekeeper and had been sharply reprov'd for telling untruths when it was quite plain that she had burnt her dress by leaning against the stove. So she had made up her mind to go; and she would like to go without waiting the month, please.

Really this hidden passage was becoming troublesome. The mystery of its origin and purpose had never been discovered. It seemed to have been there ever since the house was built; but no

one had been able to suggest any use for it. It was by far too long for the purposes of a cupboard; and the situation was absurd for a storeroom. Someone had started the idea that it was “priest’s hiding hole” in penal days; but against this was the fact that the Hortons were not an old Catholic family.

In any case, the hidden passage was not merely useless but positively mischievous, and had better be destroyed. So John Horton made up his mind rather reluctantly to have the passage filled up and the wall made solid behind the sliding panel. He wrote a note to a builder to come over during the following week to arrange about the work. But when the builder came, John Horton was not there to meet him.

Only one other note was found in his diary. It appears that during the evening he went to the secret passage for some purpose that he does not mention, and that while he was standing at the entrance looking once more at the scorched finger-prints, the cat strolled into the passage. A moment later it gave a piercing yell, and then came whirling through the air as if flung by an invisible hand. It dashed out of the room and out of the house; and, when it returned an hour later it was noticed that its fur was singed badly.

There the diary ends, and the mystery is left unsolved. When the builder arrived a few days later to attend to the passage, he found the house in confusion. John Horton was missing. He had last been seen by the butler late in the previous evening; but he had not answered when called in the morning. Then it was found that his bed had not been slept in. Possibly he had gone out, but it seemed very unlikely, for none of his hats or caps was missing, and all his boots were in the house.

The servants were greatly puzzled but were hoping that their master would turn up presently. In the meantime the butler said that the builder might just as well save time by looking at the passage that was to be closed. The two men entered together. They were met by a curious smell of burning; and on the floor they found a heap of calcined bones which the doctor at the inquest said were those of a man. The Horror of Horton House had done its worst.