

‘Ill-Steekit’ Ephraim

By H. Pease

‘About the middle of the night
The cocks began to crow:
And at the dead hour o’ the night
The corpse began to thraw.’

Ballad of Young Benjie.

We—that is, the four members of our Oxford reading party—were bathing in a deep pool in many-terraced Tees, and I was seated on a rock’s edge, drying in the September sunshine, and quoting from Clough’s ‘Bothie of Toberna-Vuolich’:

‘How to the element offering their bodies, down shooting the fall,
They mingled themselves with the flood and the force of imperious water,’

when from the central black cauldron immediately below me appeared the face of Sandie—our diver—with a most curiously perturbed expression on his countenance. I had been watching a little cirlet of foam that eddied round on the outskirts of the current, and seemed to wink at me with a hint of hidden and evasive mystery.

Then it vanished, for Sandie’s head had shattered it.

‘Hello, Sandie!’ I cried to him, ‘what’s up? It’s not cramp, is it?’

He climbed out and up to where I sat on the rock above, and shook the water from his hair.

‘Ugh!’ he said in disgust. ‘I’ve just been to the bottom, and there I swear I came across a drowned body; I felt a corpse and touched long hair. I believe it was a woman’s.’ He looked at his hands in disgust, and perceptibly shivered.

‘Nonsense!’ said I. ‘It must have been a drowned cow or sheep, or possibly a pony.’

‘Go down and look, or rather feel for yourself,’ he retorted.

‘How deep down was it?’ I inquired.

‘Twenty feet, perhaps,’ he said, ‘for it’s a deep pool, and I believe the poor thing’s tethered—sunk with a stone tied to her feet.’

‘Surely not,’ I exclaimed, ‘for if it was a case of murder it would be known.’

‘Go down and see for yourself,’ cried Sandie testily. ‘I’ve had enough of it.’ Calling our other two companions I told them of Sandie’s discovery, and we came to the conclusion that it was our duty to try to verify or disprove Sandie’s assertion,

These two dived, but did not get down far enough in the water; it seemed to me as I watched their attempts that the stream carried too swiftly forward, so when my turn came I dived in somewhat higher up, and got as far down as I could in my dive, and kept on striking downwards till I calculated I was close to the spot Sandie had indicated. Treading the water I felt about in the amber swirl for Sandie’s gruesome find, but the circling eddy swept me onward.

Knowing my breath was all but exhausted a final effort, sank a little deeper, striving against the current, and spread my hands abroad. I touched something—surely it was hair! Kicking against the stream I felt again.

Yes, it was hair floating in the current—the hair of a woman. I touched with a shrinking hand a human head, then almost suffocated, I rose to the surface and slowly regained the shore.

‘Well?’ interrogated Sandie, watching me closely.

‘I believe you’re right,’ I said faintly, still short of breath. ‘Yes, I believe it’s some poor woman, for I could just touch the skull, and the hair was long and floating in the current.’

‘Good Lord!’ exclaimed the two others.

‘Can she have got wedged in between two rocks?’

‘I think she’s been thrown in,’ said Sandie gloomily. ‘I felt her body swaying to the stream. Some ruffian’s knocked her on the head, tied a stone to her feet, and flung her in.’

‘No more bathing for me,’ I said, shivering. ‘We’ll just have to dress and go back and report to “the Dean.”’

When we had returned to the inn where we were lodging we reported our discovery to our tutor, ‘the Dean,’ and asked his advice. ‘Granted that you have “viewed the corpse,” as coroners insist, I suppose you should report it to the Inspector of Police,’ said he thoughtfully, ‘but perhaps I might find out first from our landlord if there has been any story about of a woman being missed. Possibly a “village tragedy” may come to light. When we’ve had tea I will have a pipe and a “crack,” as they call it here, with our landlord. Perhaps at supper I may have something to report.’

We were well content to leave it in ‘the Dean’s’ hands, for he was most astute in management of men, and loved to fathom a mystery.

At supper, which was an informal meal, whereat we waited on ourselves, he told us that he had found out nothing in course of his ‘crack’ with the landlord, for the simple reason that he had only been a month in possession, and nothing eventful had occurred in that time.

‘I think,’ suggested ‘the Dean,’ ‘that you divers’ should run down on your bikes tomorrow to the Inspector of Police at Middleton, and tell him privately of your discovery.’

This Sandie and I willingly agreed to, and started off after breakfast down the valley. We found on arrival that the Inspector was away at that county town attending the Assizes, and was not expected back till the end of the week.

We got back just in time to escape a drenching, for a ‘thunder plump’ broke in the heaven above the moors as we ascended the last rise to the inn, which effectually prevented all thought of further investigation of the Black Lynn pool.

The next morning was brilliant after the storm, and naturally suggested an expedition.

‘Let’s go for a walk right across the moors,’ Sandie to me; ‘the other two want to work, but I’ve turned restless.’

I agreed at once, for I was restless also in disappointment of our errand. We ordered sandwiches, obtained leave from ‘the Dean; and prepared to start off at once.

‘Don’t fret if we don’t get back to-night,’ cried Sandie, the ‘second-sighted,’ to our tutor as we departed; ‘we may get lost, Ted may break down under his weight of learning, or one of Saint Cuthbert’s Cross Fell fiends may “lift” him.’

We wanted to get as far as Brough under Stanemoor, and back by the great ‘Nick,’ and then athwart Cross Fell’s desolate moor, but we had not taken the weather into our consideration, nor thought of possible sopping peat-hags on our return journey.

Thus when we had toiled up ‘the Nick’ by a narrow path from Brough to the wild moorland we found our track across the waste very difficult to follow. By six o’clock the clouds had gathered black above us, and another thunderstorm grew imminent.

Suddenly the lightning flared through the serrated gloom, and thunder reverberated over the heather.

The rain descended javelin-like upon us as we struggled through the heavy peat-hags; we lost our bearings and determined to make for any light that we might descry in lonely farm or shepherd's sheil on this forsaken waste. We had almost given up hope when we saw a faint glimmer through the increasing gloom three-quarters of a mile away, perhaps, on our left hand.

We made for our beacon as straightly as we could; then in a dip we lost sight of it, but eventually succeeded in discovering it again, and judged the light to proceed from the window of a small farm, as indeed proved to be case when we had traversed another mile of broken moorland.

After knocking on the door repeatedly, we heard some one moving within. We went up to the window, and asked for shelter from the storm, as we were strangers who had lost our way.

The door slowly opened, and a man bearing a tallow dip in a battered sconce showed himself the entry.

'We've little accommodation here the night,' he said, as he looked at us somewhat suspiciously; 'the goodman has died and lies steekit in his coffin, but ye can come in for shelter if ye have a mind.'

This did not sound very inviting, but any shelter was preferable to a night in a peat-hag; so we accepted his offer, and followed the man within.

It was a strange scene that met our eyes in the little kitchen. On trestles in the middle of the room stood the coffin; in a box-bed to one side of the hearth an old woman in a white mutch or cap sat up against pillows; on the farther side of the hearth sat an untidy, foolish-faced girl who peeled potatoes with an uncanny disconcert.

The old woman, on the contrary, had exceedingly bright eyes, and seemed to note everything with extraordinary interest. 'Wha's there?' she asked, as we bowed in a hesitating manner to our hostess.

Sandie explained who we were and how we had chanced to intrude upon her in such an untimely hour.

'Ay,' she replied, 'the goodman's dead, and is to be lifted the morn, but ye can bide the night; and if ye dinna mind such company,' she pointed contemptuously at the man who had let us in, 'ye can sleep wi' him i' the room above.'

'Whisht, mother, whisht wi' yer talk afore strange gentlemen,' said he, and he seemed to be very uneasy beneath her scorn.

'Why should I whisht?' she said angrily. 'Why hae na ye brocht my daughter Jean to her father's burying?'

The man turned to us eagerly, evidently anxious to divert our attention.

'Be seated, gentlemen,' he said, drawing up chairs to the fire; 'ye'll be ready for something to eat belike. Mary can give ye some and eggs and potatoes for supper whilst ye dry your coats.'

'Ay,' interrupted the old lady, 'ye shall have meat and drink. Nane shall come to a burying at my hoose and no have meat and drink before gang awa. Set oot the bannocks and honey and milk, Mary, for the lads, then mak ready the bacon and eggs.'

Mary with a strange disordered giggle that brought a chill to my bones, looked up at this and half spoke, half sang, aloud to herself by way of reply. 'Meat and drink for Dad's burying. But wherefore not for Jean's? Puir lassie, she was aye kind to me, was Jeannie.'

‘Don’t heed her, gentlemen,’ said the man in a husky voice, ‘she’s a bit daft, poor girl,’ and as he spoke he trod noisily on the stone floor, evidently trying to drown her voice, and forthwith dragged a table that stood in the window what somewhat nearer the hearth.

Mary had now finished with her potatoes, and was cutting rashers of bacon which were soon sizzling delightfully in the pan. Meantime Sandie was talking to our bedridden hostess, whom he had discovered to be of Scottish extraction, and I was conversing with the son-in-law about the danger of being lost on Cross Fell.

There was a lull in the storm at this time, but one could hear the long lances of rain striking on the stone tiles above; it was good to be within doors, and to dry one’s coat by the peat enibers. We insisted on our hostess partaking of supper, which we served up to her in bed; then Sandie and I, the girl and the man, set ourselves down by the table and stretched forth our hands, in the Homeric phrase, ‘to the good things set before us.’

Sandie and I had our backs to the coffin, and had forgotten all about it and the ‘goodman,’ its occupant; Mary and her brother-in-law sat at the corners of the table, and their features were lit up by the flickering peats. The man had shifty, furtive eyes, set rather deep beneath an overhanging forehead, lined cheeks, and a clean-shaven heavy jaw; Mary, with sallow face, light eyes, and disordered hair sat opposite him, evidently apprehensive.

A strange party amid strange surroundings, thought I, for a moment, as I framed an etching of the black coffin, the bright-eyed old woman in the night mutch abed, the daft girl and dour man and two Oxford undergraduates eating heartily amid the flickering light of the dip and peat flames.

But what a splendid moorland supper it was! Bacon and eggs and fried potatoes, bannocks with butter, heather honey and milk.

‘What luck!’ I murmured in Sandie’s ear, ‘to be hopelessly lost, and to find this!’ and I stretched forth my legs at glorious ease. ‘Shifty eyes’ now produced a ‘cutty’ and suggested a smoke, which Sandie and I were thinking was the one thing left to complete our satisfaction. Suddenly and without warning I heard a creak behind my chair, but I took no heed. Then a further creaking and a grinding noise—and I looked round. *I saw the coffin-lid lift upward and a white shroud show below.* Slowly shrouded corpse rose with creaking bones before my staring eyes—rose to a sitting posture, and sat still. The coffin-lid clanged to the ground; then all was still, an awful silence filled the room. A moment more, and a cry of terror rose to the roof, for the man beside me was down on his knees before the corpse in an ecstasy of terror. ‘Never accuse me, Ephraim! Dinnot terrify us that gate, feyther!’ he cried in anguish ‘Poor Jean just happened an accident—fell and was drowned in the river.’ The man’s face held me rigid. Never had I seen mortal fear like this. Suddenly I heard a louder voice beside me, for Sandie—moved by an uncontrollable impulse—shot forth an accusing arm, and cried accusingly, ‘*she lies in the Black Linn pool—her head knocked in—a stone fast to her fret.*’ The man’s face turned to ashes. Awfully he twisted his head about to the voice. He could not remove his eyes from Sandie’s accusing countenance, spittle dropped from his bloodless lips, his eyes were like to pillars. Then he began to shuffle off—still upon his knees—away from Sandie and towards the door—with his face twisted over his shoulder as if it were made of stone.

He shuffled a little faster—still upon his knees—his head still twisted over his shoulder—‘thrawn’ in terror of Sandie and the accusing corpse. He reached the door, groped for the handle, opened it, then shambled to his feet, passed through the outer door, and so into the black night.

I saw the lightning swoop down upon the moorland. I caught a glimpse of a man running as one blinded—his hands above his head to protect himself—vaguely through the inky peat-hags.

Then I turned to look on Sandie who was also gazing into the darkness—his face like the archangel Michael's. I had not yet found my voice, and could not speak for tension, when I heard a foolish titter from the girl beside me who was suddenly overcome with laughter.

'Tee-hee,' she went, *'tee hee! What a funny Tom had on him. Tee hee!'*

I heard a voice from the bed speaking composedly. 'Ay, I aye kenned he'd murdered puir Jeannie. Whaur wast ye fund my puir lassie?' she asked Sandie.

As Sandie replied to her I looked at the fearful figure of the shrouded corpse that sat upright facing the doorway, whence his son-in-law had fled and wondered if there could be any spark of life left within. As I looked the composed voice spoke again, 'Dinna be fleyed! Puir Ephraim's been *ill-steekit*. It's twa-three days since the doctor certifiedst him; noo his muscles hae stiffened and raxed him up. Ye mun lay him doon again, Maisters, for I'll no can sleep wi' him glowering that gate.'

The speaker in the night mutch was the only one of us who seemed unaffected by the extraordinary events we had just witnessed. Her eyes gleamed a trifle more brightly than before. That was the only difference.

I looked at Sandie in dismay at the task assigned to us, but he had risen, and now beckoned me to the coffin side. Handling the poor corpse as reverently as we could we found it very difficult to re-confine it to its resting-place, for the muscles had turned so stiff and rigid that we had to exert force, and seek heavy stones from outside to keep the lid shut down securely.

This done, and the door fastened against the return of the fugitive, at the old woman's command, though I felt sure in my own mind that the man would never come back again of his own accord, Sandie and I took the battered sconce and dying wick and went up to the bedroom above.

We sat upon the bed, smoked another pipe and conversed about the Soul-stirring incidents we had just been witnesses of.

'Do you remember,' asked Sandie, 'the mediæval legend of the dead man's wounds bleeding afresh in the presence of his murderer? I believe that the spirit of the dead man down below us must have been moved by the presence of his daughter's murderer.'

'To think of our having come across in such a mysterious and fortuitous way the poor daughter—Jean!' I said, occupied by another aspect of these extraordinary occurrences.

As we smoked and talked thus our dip went out, which was an intimation that we had better try to sleep.

We slept but fitfully, and rose early to help prepare our breakfast. Scarcely had we finished our repast when a neighbour arrived with a cart and horse wherewith he had promised to 'lift' the corpse and convey it over the rough track down the valley to the spot where the hearse from Middleton was to meet it.

We found a rope and bound the coffin-lid lightly down, and having given our promise to our hostess to recover, if we could, the body of her daughter Jean and give it proper burial, we bade her good-bye for the present and set off to the inn where the 'Dean' would be anxiously expecting us.

We related our experiences to the 'Dean,' we got the Inspector to come up, but failed entirely to discover the body in the Linn. For my part I thought the thunderstorm might be accountable for the disappearance, but Sandie had his own opinion on this matter. As to the criminal, some say he escaped the country, but I firmly believe he perished in a peat-hag, and to this day haunts the bleak spaces of Cross Fell.