

The Lord Warden's Tomb

By H. Pease

My companion had surprised me by a sudden change of demeanour, for which I could not account, and I was watching him out of the tail of my eye from behind a pillar in the nave of the church which we were exploring. We had just been viewing the recumbent figure of a famous Lord Warden of the western English march, that lay on a raised tomb in the north transept, and after I had blazoned the coat of arms and admired the dignity of the carving, I passed on into the nave, but my companion had not followed me.

I noted that he was extraordinarily interested in this figure of Lord Wharton, and I watched him, as I have said, with attention.

Then, driven seemingly by sudden impulse, he lifted his right hand and dealt the stone figure a swift buffet with his fist. At once he glanced round hurriedly—ashamed, evidently, of his action—and rejoined me in the nave without comment trusting, doubtless, that I had not observed him.

I was infinitely astonished, for Maxwell, my companion on our bicycling and walking tour, was a quiet, somewhat dour but devout Scot, a history scholar of Balliol College, and usually most reticent of emotion. I talked of Border ballads and Lord Wardens of the marches, and endeavoured to draw him on the subject, but he made no response.

Then I sang softly—

*'As I went down the water side
None but my foe to be my guide.'*

Hereat his eyes flashed, and he responded with extended fist:

*'I lighted down, my sword did draw—
I hackit him in pieces sma'.'*

Then turning swiftly upon me he said sternly:

'You mustn't quote the Border Ballads to me; I have them in my blood.'

He looked so strange that at once I changed the conversation and suggested that we should ascend Wild Boar's Fell that afternoon, and return for supper at the inn where we proposed stopping the night.

He assented, and we had a fine climb and a glorious view over the West Borderland; we could see Skiddaw and Helvellyn to the northwest, and even thought we saw Criffel looming in the haze beyond Solway; to the east the great hills beside Crossfell lifted their great rampire and gave a sense of security to the green vale below.

Reinvigorated by our walk we returned in good heart to the inn.

After supper I thought a pipe and Stevenson's essay on 'A Walking Tour' were appropriate to my mood, but Maxwell said he was for a stroll in the moonlight, and went out.

As he had not returned by eleven I grew a little anxious, also a trifle annoyed at the thought that perhaps I ought to put on my boots again and go in search of him.

At 11.15 I determined to sally forth, but when I was on the street and could see nobody about I was perplexed as to where to look him.

I turned to the church, and without definite aim went through the gate and walked around the church through the numerous headstones.

By the side of the north transept, wherein was the Wharton recumbent figure, I noticed a new-made grave, and casually looking over it saw a dark figure lying therein. The grave was half in the shadow of the church, half lit by the moon, so that I could not see very distinctly, but as I bent over it I thought I recognised—with a sudden start of horror—the knickerbockers of my friend Maxwell.

I looked about in hope of seeing some one, but all was silent; not a sound stirred in the village.

I must make certain, I felt, for I could not leave the man there, whoever it might be, so gingerly enough I let myself down into the further end of the grave, and, taking a step forward, bent over the body.

Yes, it was Maxwell; he was lying in a huddled lump with his head bent forward on his breast. I felt for his pulse, and found it beating regularly. Thank heaven, he was not dead! He must have fallen in by misadventure in the darkness before the moon rose, I conjectured.

I determined to run back to the inn for the ‘boots,’ since with another man’s help I could lift my friend out and carry him back, and get the doctor to attend him.

‘Boots’ was just going to bed, and while he was searching for a rope and a lantern I ran for the doctor, and thence back to the graveyard.

‘Boots’ was there awaiting me, and between us we raised Maxwell’s limp body and then carried him slowly to the inn.

As far as we could see he had sustained a severe concussion, but I noticed he had a big bruise on his forehead as well as a swelling on the back of his head. We had laid him on the sofa in the parlour, and had just completed our investigation when the doctor arrived. I shook hands and explained how I had found my friend in the open grave by the north transept so unexpectedly.

‘He hadn’t had—well, let us say, too much supper?’ asked the physician, after he had felt the pulse and examined the limbs to see if anything was broken.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘We had supper together; he had a lemon squash and a cup of coffee only to drink.’

‘He’s been in for a fight then,’ said the doctor. ‘Got one on the brow, then falling into the grave has bruised the back of the head. He’s suffering from concussion, but nothing more, so far as I can see. Was he a quarrelsome fellow?’ he inquired. ‘Strange place in any event to come to blows in—and with whom? For we’re a peaceable folk here save perhaps at the annual horse fair when gipsies and others congregate in numbers, and whisky bottles are everywhere.’

I assured him that Maxwell was a quiet Oxford scholar, and incapable of brawling.

The doctor drew a bottle of strong smelling salts from his pocket and applied them to Maxwell’s nostrils.

‘He’s coming round,’ he said; ‘we’ll just give him some sal volatile, and then to bed and a long rest. In a day or two he should be all right again.’

Maxwell now opened his eyes, looked about him dizzily, then said faintly, ‘Where am I?’ Then still faintly, so low that only I caught the words, ‘*I could swear it was Wharton himself.*’

Thereon we took him upstairs, undressed him and put him to bed, and after he had had his dose of sal volatile the doctor departed, assuring me that my friend was ‘all right,’ but that he would look in again about midday.

I saw him off at the front door, then I turned to the ‘Boots,’ and said in his ear, ‘Look here, I’m going out to see if I can’t find out who the fellow was who tackled my friend. If I want to be let in before daybreak I’ll come and tap on your window in the yard.’

I slid a *pourboire* into his hand and went off softly across the street to the church once more, for I felt almost certain that the fellow—whoever he was—would come back some time or another to see how his victim had fared, since conceivably the blow might have proved mortal. Once in the churchyard I made my way on tip-toe to the graveside. There I waited in the re-entering angle of the transept, where the shadow of the the church was darkest, in the hope of Maxwell's assailant soon returning to the scene of the encounter. I did not venture to light my pipe, fearing the smell of tobacco might discover me.

I waited with infinite patience till the moon lost her radiance and a pale light glimmered through the eastern trees. Nothing had stirred, no sound had I caught save that of an owl in the distance.

I returned to the inn, knocked up 'Boots,' went silently to bed, and slept late.

As soon as I was up I went to see how Maxwell fared, and found him sitting up and drinking a cup of tea.

He looked a little pale, but otherwise was not much worse for his misadventure.

'Now,' I said, after congratulating him on his recovery, 'if it doesn't excite you too much tell me exactly what occurred in the churchyard night, for 'tis an absolute mystery to me, besides having given me an awful "gliff," old fellow, for I have been wondering what might have happened if I hadn't by the merest chance discovered you in your premature grave.'

'I should probably have got an infernal chill, old chap, had it not been for your kindly foresight,' he replied with a smile; then with a change of tone he went on, 'But it was the most extraordinary adventure conceivable—so extraordinary that you'll scarcely credit me in relating it.'

'I felt curiously attracted by the old church and the tomb within, so I went across after leaving you and wandered about the churchyard. Close beside the corner of the north transept was the empty grave, as you know, and beside it a quaint old headstone with an interesting coat-of-arms upon it. I knelt down and tried to decipher the blazon in the moonlight.'

'Suddenly I felt as if some one were near me—some one with an ill intent, and, turning, saw stepping out of the shadow a figure with its face outlined against the moon, the exact image of the Lord Warden on the tomb in the transept. I felt the same access of rage I had experienced in the church sweep over me. I clenched my fists unconsciously. "You're one of the false Maxwells?" he said threateningly. "And you're a damned murderer," I retorted, and let out at him with my fists. At that moment I felt a sharp, stinging blow on my temple, and, reeling backward, tripped and fell—in a night of stars as it were—all of a huddle into the empty grave.'

Maxwell stopped, looked me directly in the face. 'That's all I remember—and that's an exact description of my strange adventure.'

Whilst I was recovering from my astonishment at his weird story, the doctor was announced, and came forward to shake hands with his patient.

'Tell the doctor,' said Maxwell to me, 'exactly what I have told you, and let us hear what he has to say.'

I obeyed, and when I had concluded I inquired if he felt able to put any faith in the relation.

'Doctors are often a sceptical folk,' he replied a smile, 'but if they are wise they try to account for things. Once out of curiosity I stayed a night in a "haunted house," as it was called, and I confess I did not like the experience. I had that curious feeling as of a hostile presence which your friend evidently had both in the church and in the churchyard. I saw nothing, but I had strange impressions borne in on me, and I heard noises I could not account for.'

‘Have you ever heard of any one having encountered the form or wraith of this Lord Warden of old?’ I inquired.

‘I don’t think any one in the village would wander in the churchyard after dark,’ he replied, smiling. Then he rose up to go, saying he had another appointment, but promised to call again in the afternoon with a sleeping draught, and hoped his patient would be quite well in the morning.

I accompanied him to the inn door, and went down the street with him.

‘Tell me,’ I said, ‘exactly what you do think, for if I mistake not you were purposely reticent with my friend just now.’

‘I was,’ he said, after a pause, ‘because I had reasons. Promise not to mention to your friend either now or at any time later—’ I gave the required promise, and waited eagerly for his response.

‘Well,’ he said slowly, ‘I once got a “gliff” myself in exactly the same place as I made a short cut through the churchyard one autumn evening. I was not thinking of the dead Warden or the tomb in the transept, and yet ’twas none other that I saw.’

Then he added gravely, ‘These things are not good for the nerves. Wherefore I would advise you to take your friend off as soon as possible, and don’t let him visit the churchyard again.’