

# Castle Ichabod

By H. Pease

‘When you saw the dog, my dear,’ said my uncle, the Rector, to his wife, ‘almost exactly, if I remember right, a year ago this month of November, what sort of size and colour was it, again? I remember it growled terribly on the top of the wall by the mausoleum, and I thought it must have been a retriever, from your description of it, but it ought really as a wraith to have been a collie,’ and here my uncle slightly contracted his left eye in my direction.

‘I think it must have been a retriever, John,’ replied my aunt gravely, yet I thought a waft from her eye stole towards me as she spoke, ‘for “Geordie” swears it was a tarrible great savage durg; but it may be, of course, that he had forgotten himself and your exhortations, at the King’s Head Last night, and mistaken a collie for a retriever.’ I found it difficult not to smile, for, if my uncle had been ‘pulling my aunt’s leg’ she was certainly twitching his cassock. This was a ‘parlour game’ at the Rectory, as I discovered later, and one in which my aunt always came off the winner.

My uncle now addressed himself to me.

‘You must know, Charles,’ said he, ‘that the northern part of the Castle Park, between the burn and the ring wall, is supposed to be haunted by the wraiths of a shepherd and his collie dog. He was taking a short cut home from our village to the big moor farm beyond the common, and was probably suffering from the old disease of the north; he tried to cross the swollen burn by the stepping-stones, it seems, fell in, and was drowned. The faithful collie had tried to save him, for he was found with him, his teeth fast in his master’s plaid.’

‘I love that collie,’ said my aunt; ‘he ought to have had a headstone with “Faithful unto Death” engraved on it.

‘So he should have had, my dear,’ my uncle assented, ‘had we been here at the time. Well, Charles, the point is that several people have thought ‘Here my aunt moved a little impatiently in her chair. ‘Have been quite sure,’ corrected my uncle, ‘that they have seen the dog or its wraith, but no one has yet seen the shepherd, I believe. Your aunt last autumn saw the dog on the top of the wall that surrounds the mausoleum, jumping up and down and growling dreadfully, and last night our stableman —“Geordie”— a disabled pitman, was chivvied by him across the park from close beside the mausoleum. What can you make of at?’ questioned my uncle, the humorous look an in his eye.

‘Did Geordie run away?’ I inquired magisterially.

‘He ran,’ replied my uncle, smiling, ‘as he pressed it himself, “like a whippet or a hunted hare.”

‘Did you run, Aunt Mary?’ I inquired next.

‘I daren’t, Charlie, to tell you the truth. If I had begun to run I should have screamed, so I ast walked on as fast as ever I could.’

‘Then it didn’t follow you?’ I inquired.

‘No,’ said my aunt, shaking her head; ‘it seemed to me like one of those savage, tied-up mongrels that guard the carts of carriers in the town on market days.’

‘The curious thing,’ interrupted my uncle, who was a keen antiquary, ‘is that the dog should haunt the mausoleum, since it contains not his master, but “Hell-fire Dick,” the last of the

Norman Fitzalans—and so named not only cause he belonged to the famous club, but also, as I gather from tradition, because of his language and complexion.

‘Had he been alive no shepherd had dared trespass in his park, and no dog would have come out alive. So it is curious they should forgather after death.’

My aunt here interposed.

‘Are you not afraid for your uncle’s orthodoxy?’ she asked of me, ‘when he shows himself so sceptical?’

My uncle, discovering that he had put himself at a disadvantage, now suggested that I should—as a lawyer—investigate the matter and give my opinion upon it.

‘Willingly,’ I replied, laughing. ‘The chief witness, I take it, will be your henchman, the redoubtable “Geordie,” aunt being prosecutor, the wraith the defendant, and you, uncle, the sceptical public.’

This being arranged, the subject was dropped, and my uncle gave me further information about the Fitzalans.

‘Undoubtedly they were Normans,’ said he, ‘but descent has been so frequently in the female line that when my Lord Richard—“Hell-fire Dick”—died, he had perhaps no more Norman blood in him than you have. There was this one virtue about him, that he loved the old abode and possessions of his ancestors passionately, and when he died he left directions that he should be buried in the mausoleum on the knoll in the park whence the sea stands out clearly behind the castle.’

He had daughters—wild and high-spirited like their father—who divided up the property between them, and the present owner of the Castle—the representative of the eldest daughter—cares only for his rents and royalties, would sell if he could, and comes here about twice a year for what partridge and pheasant shooting there may be. The coal pits are extending their shafts and workings north-ward, his park will soon be undermined, and the “amenities”—to the auctioneers’ phrase—will soon no longer exist. I think we may truthfully call the great pile of building *Castle Ichabod, for its glory has certainly departed.*’

My uncle thus concluded his tale, then knocked out the ashes of his pipe, and conducted me to my bedroom.

The next morning after breakfast I went in search of ‘Geordie,’ my chief witness, concerning whom my uncle had already given me a little information.

He had when working as a hewer down the pit been disabled by a fall of stone; then as he had been a ‘handy man’ and used to both horses and flowers the Rector had taken him into his service as groom-gardener. ‘Crammed with northern self-sufficiency and a sort of scornful incivility, he has a keen sense of humour and a heart of gold,’ said my uncle, as he forewarned me as to the character of my witness.

Thus fortified, I went in search of ‘Geordie,’ and found him busy tying up chrysanthemums.

Pretending a deep interest in them and a profound admiration of his skill, I soon found I had established friendly relations. Then I offered him a cigarette, and plunged boldly into my examination.

‘Tell me,’ I said, ‘about your adventure with the dog or its ghost in the park two nights ago. My aunt has told me something of her own experience a year ago, and advised me to compare her account with yours, for I am much interested in these occurrences.’

‘Why,’ replied he, nothing loth to talk about himself, ‘it happened this fashion. Aa wes comin’ back through the park cannily enough when close beside the mussulyum oot spangs at us a great ugly brute of a durg wivoot a sound to his pads. Aa ’d heard nowt, but there he was glarin’ at us,

an' showin' his great ugly fangs. "By gox, Geordie," I says to maaself, "it's a mad durg ye have to fettle." Sae I lets oot wiv a kick that would have shifted a bullock, but aal that happened was that he seemed to catch haud o' my trousers, for I felt them rip. Gox! I thinks, 'tis an evil sperrit, sae I set awa like a hare—game leg an' aal—tearin' towards the park wall like a whippet, followed by the evil sperrit that made no sound wiv his pads, but was growlin' terrible aal the time.'

'Then it wasn't a *real* dog?' I interrupted

'*Wasn't a real durg?*' replied Geordie indignantly, his eyebrows puckering and his jowl coming forward aggressively.

'It made no noise with its feet, and you called it a spirit,' I explained hastily.

'Aa's feared o' nowt,' said Geordie, 'that's livin', but when it comes to evil sperrits 'tis the Priest should tackle them. Aa winnot.'

'So it was an evil spirit in the form of a dog,' I suggested; 'but what was the precise form—mastiff, retriever, or collie perhaps, for the Rector says there is a tale of a ghost of a drowned collie that haunts the Park?'

'Collie be damned!' cried he decisively. 'An as for what specie o' durg it was hoo can Aa tell hoo many species there may be in Hell?'

'You had me there,' I acknowledged, smiling. 'Well, tell me how you escaped from the brute.'

'He chivvied us aboot halfway te the wall, an' then I think he gied it up; leastways when Aa gied a keek over my shoulder as Aa drew near it he wasn't there.'

'You didn't hear the dog dashing on you or galloping after you, and yet you heard it growling, and felt it take a piece out of your trousers. It seems half real, half Hell-hound!' I commented.

It's easy talkin'' replied Geordie contemptuously, 'but if he had had a haud o' yor breeks ye'd have knawn he was *damned* real, Aa's warrant ye,' and he spat on the ground with emphasis.

'My aunt saw the hound a year ago,' I continued, 'but it didn't chase her; it only growled and frightened her.'

'Mevvies it kenned she was the Priest's wife,' suggested my companion. Then with a grin, 'Noo, as thoo's his nephew thoo gan and see if it will chivvy thoo, and, if it does, Aa'll bet thoo thoo'll run from it faster than thoo's ever run i' your life afore.'

I turned away with a laugh, saying I was going to look about for the dog's tracks.

'The beggar had ne tracks, Aa warrant thoo,' shouted my informant after me, but he was wrong, for I soon found tracks in the park here and there in the soft grass, and an impress of paws which evidently must have been bandaged—that is, there was a round slot only, no separate pads were showing. The *Hell-hound was evidently club-footed*. As I looked at the imprint a little closer I grew certain that the hound's paws had been bound round with some soft material—linen, calico, or washleather, for one of the coverings had come unloosed and I saw a distinct mark of claws.

I investigated the mausoleum next, and found that there was a wall some four feet six inches high round about it for the evident purpose of protection against cattle. Between this and the circular tomb-containing tower were some yew trees which had thriven well, and now extended their long fingers above and beyond the encircling wall.

The yew branches were so thick and the dews had been so heavy that certainty was out of the question, but I thought I had discovered this at least, that the hound had been lying beneath the bushes, and had given 'Geordie' his hunt from the mausoleum exactly as he had asserted.

I returned to the Rectory, my mind made up. I would borrow a revolver from my uncle, and watch beside the mausoleum all that night.

Fortified by tea, encouraged by my aunt, and chaffed by my uncle, I set off for my sentry post carrying an electric torch, some sticks of chocolate, and a revolver. I approached the mausoleum very warily; a soft west wind was blowing, the night was quiet with alternate swathes of darkness and light as billowy clouds took the moon by storm and passed beyond her. I stayed in the shadow of the trees, beside the knoll, and spied out the landscape, and listened for any tell-tale sound. Beyond the jet-black bastions of Castle Ichabod I could see the white turmoil of the waking sea half a mile to the eastward; I could hear her ancient threnody, but saw no sign of life within the park.

Waiting for the next spell of darkness I walked swiftly up to the protecting wall of the mausoleum, climbed over, and with the torch's aid found a yew branch on which I could sit and observe—whenever it was moonlight—the little dell that ran down to the burn wherein the shepherd and dog had been drowned.

Silence reigned supreme. I could just hear the gentle brushings of the yew branches as they rose and fell upon the wind—the ghostly sighing of a ghostly spirit that had once belonged, perhaps, to the former owner of the Castle.

I was fairly comfortable with my back against the trunk of the yew, and ate chocolate instead of smoking; hours passed, and I had fits of drowsiness, and began to think I was wasting my time.

Then on a sudden I woke with a start; some nerve in my subconsciousness had warned me in time; I was certain some one or something was near that was uncanny.

The moonlight flooded the little dell, I saw a black shadow advancing swiftly on all fours, not unlike a big baboon. What in Heaven's name was it?

A touch of ice slid down my spine—the unknown with its terrors besieged my brain—the apparition was too big for a dog. I gazed, rooted to my perch, unable to move a hand or foot.

The creature drew swiftly closer, then on the sudden rose up; I saw the glint of the moonlight touch on a gun barrel, and discovered that the bearer was a man.

I breathed more freely, but—what was he doing with the gun? Then I caught sight of a dog padding swiftly after the newcomer, who was now close beside the mausoleum, and stood erect beside the wall two yards away from me. I did not stir, but watched him in a fascinated attention. Just as the press of cloud again obscured the moon I saw him take a bag from his back out of which pheasants' tails were distinctly protruding. I almost laughed aloud, for I recognised that it was only a poacher I had to deal with. In one hand I held my torch, in the other my revolver.

'Have you had good sport?' I asked, as I covered him with both my weapons simultaneously. He jumped back in alarm, then, 'Who the devil are you?' he inquired hoarsely, and in another second recovering himself, cried to the dog, '*Sick him, Tyke.*'

'Call off your damned dog,' I retorted, pulling up my feet, 'or I shoot.'

He hesitated a moment, pulling his gun round.

'Quick,' I shouted.

'Down, Tyke,' he said sulkily to his dog, that was already growling and jumping at my trousers. 'What d' ye want, damn ye?' he inquired surlily.

'I wanted to find out about the dog that frightened my aunt up at the Rectory last year and the gardener two nights ago,' I replied, feeling I had the upper hand in the encounter. 'There was a tale of a ghost in the park, and I thought I would investigate it.' The moon had emerged again, and I could see that my poacher was a strong, burly fellow, with a rough, resolute face, who was surveying me as thoroughly as I surveyed him.

'Would you like a brace of pheasants?' he inquired abruptly.

‘No, thanks,’ I said; ‘I’m only here for a day or two.’

‘Well,’ he continued with a touch of defiance, if every yen had their right I’d mevvies be shuttin’ pheasants all day long like aad “Hell-Fire Dick” i’ the monument here, for he was a tarrible favouryte wi’ the women, ye must ken. Why, my grandfether was the very spit image o’ the aad Lord, for I’ve seen his picture up at the Castle. Ay, an’ my name’s Allan as well.’

The man interested me considerably, for he was a splendid figure—compact, alert, with hair cropped like a *poilu*, vivid with life as a sporting terrier—so I inquired what he did for a living when he wasn’t covert shooting.

‘I work doon the pit,’ he replied, ‘any earns a good wage, but whiles I tires ov it an’ longs for a walk up the hedgerows, to hear the partridge call and the pheasant shoutin’ as he gans up to roost, an’ to say to myself, “Aha, my fine fellow, but thoo’ll be I’ my bag to-morrow night, an’ in my kite the night after that.” ’ He paused a moment, then asked suspiciously, ‘Thoo’ll not blab—thoo’ll not tell the police?’

‘No,’ I replied readily, ‘that’s no concern of mine, but I shall have to tell my aunt at the Rectory, for you gave her with your dog a great fright that night she crossed the park a year ago.’

‘If it had been aad “Oleomargarine,” commented my companion, ‘it wud ha’ done him good, for he’s sairly wantin’ a bit exercise.’

Smothering a smile at his irreverent description of my uncle, I asked my poacher a final question.

‘Have you ever seen the ghost of the man or the collie dog they talk about here in the park?’

‘Not I,’ said he, fondling the ears of his savage mongrel retriever, ‘I reckon they’re gliffed o’ my aad Tyke.’

Note.—The individuals described above, and the episode are imaginary, but a ghost is said to haunt the hail, in the form of a lady with a child in her arms, who watches from one of the high windows in ‘lofty Seaton Delaval,’ for the return of a Delaval lover.

It has been suggested that the apparition is due to an optical illusion of light upon the window panes.