

# The Muniment Room

By H. Pease

My uncle had succeeded late in life to the family estate in the north of England, which was situated on the wild moorland of north-west Yorkshire.

With him the entail would end, and though it was known that the estate had been much impoverished and was heavily mortgaged, still the succession was not a thing 'to be sneezed at.' So my mother, his sister, herself a practical Yorkshire woman, phrased it, and consequently I was bid to accept with gratitude an invitation to visit my uncle in the home of his fathers.

Thither, therefore, I went, yet reluctantly, for my uncle was reputed somewhat eccentric, and a great antiquary, and as he had been early reconciled to Rome and ordained a priest, whereas I came of a sound Protestant stock, I feared we might not find each other's company entirely sympathetic. 'I shall only find in him,' I thought, 'a "snuffy priest," and he in me only an Oxford cub.'

A long drive over the moorland in a pelting storm of sleet and rain was not encouraging, nor was the companionship of the old, deaf Scots groom, who drove me, exhilarating, for he persisted, as the ancient deaf not uncommonly do, in regarding a stranger as a personal grievance gratuitously thrust upon him.

Thus if I blamed the weather he transferred the fault upon myself for having chosen to come upon such a stormy day; and when I inquired after my uncle's health he replied that he was 'well enough so long as folk didn't come hindering him from his studies.'

To this I replied humbly that I had heard he was writing a book upon his family, which was one of the most ancient in the county, and that it was a pity he should be the last of so old and formerly so famous a stock.

'Ay,' retorted my driver, with a glance of scorn out of the tail of his eye, as he flicked upon his white steed, 'ay, there'll maybe be a sair down-come when he's departed.'

After this shaft I sank into silence, and was relieved when I saw the grey, buttressed gables of Startington Hall appear below us grouped amid its trees.

'It certainly looks like a haunted house,' I remarked aloud, though I was merely speaking to myself, 'even though the tradition has no foundation of fact.'

'How do ye ken it's haunted?' retorted my companion, whose hearing seemed to vary with his mood. 'And even if 'tis, there's naething can steer the maister, for tak awa Papistry, he has a hairt o' gold—the bairns aboot here juist love him.'

'So you're not a Papist?' I inquired, smiling.

'No' me,' responded he grimly. 'I come the reet auld Presbyterian stock, and I keep off the maister some o' thae hairpies that are aye after him and his gear.'

He pulled up as he spoke at the porch of the Hall, and as I descended I noted a stooping figure clad in a black soutane coming round the corner of the house evidently to greet me.

As I shook hands with him I could see in a glance that though he might be a recluse and an antiquary he had a lively and gentle heart; for if his face was yellow and his pupils sere there was a wonderfully shy and sympathetic mobility about his lips and face.

'You have had a long, wet drive, I fear,' he said, 'and these wild Yorkshire moorlands are often inhospitable to strangers, yet in time one gets to love them for this, their very bold and uncompromising character. Also, they make rejoice the more in a warm fireside.'

So speaking he led the way through a rounded hall, very poorly furnished, but hung with family portraits interspersed with heads of deer, and many masks of foxes, badgers, and hares.

Turning to the left he opened a door into a small library, which was lined with books from skirting-board to cornice; a ripe fire glowed upon the hearth, and two easy full-bottomed leathern chairs stood on either side.

‘The rougher the weather without,’ said my uncle genially, ‘the warmer the welcome within, and here one may warm both body and soul,’ he pointed to the fire and the well-filled bookshelves.

‘Most of them are my own treasures,’ he added, ‘for the Startington family was given to keep up cellar and stable, rather than the library, as’ probably you know. Most of my time now, however,’ he said in conclusion, ‘is spent in the muniment room upstairs, so that you may count this room as your own, and may smoke as much as you please. Since you are an Oxford man, and all Oxford men smoke, you are bound, syllogistically, to be a smoker. For myself, he added, his hand upon the door-handle, ‘I— like most priests—do not smoke, yet tobacco is not in the index, and we usually take a little snuff occasionally,’ and he tapped upon a small box hidden within his waistband,

Therewith he was gone, and left me to my own devices till dinner-time, or supper rather, for he did not dress.

The next few days passed very enjoyably for me, since the weather was fine, and after studying in my Aristotle all morning, I took long walks over the breezy moorland, and then in the evening after supper made myself very much at home amid my uncle’s books and the burnt sacrifice of tobacco. I was not, however, very long in the house before I found that my uncle was uncommonly preoccupied; something seemed to be weighing upon his mind, for though he unbent at supper-time, and talked by starts excellently over the port wine at dessert, he frequently fell into an abstraction from which only with a mighty effort could he pluck himself and resume his speech.

As I knew him to be engaged upon his family history I thought that his gentle mind must be exercised upon some uncomfortable episode in the life story of an ancestor, and I hit upon the notion that a certain Sir Humphrey Startington—a notable merchant adventurer, who was said to have largely increased the family estate by his traffic in slaves in the seventeenth century—was the family skeleton that was haunting him. I thought perhaps that my uncle’s conscience was whispering in his ear that he should make restitution, and as I knew that he was most eager to find funds to rebuild and redecorate the chapel—now much dilapidated—I assumed that a battle was being waged within his soul between these two opposing claims.

Having arrived at this solution I led up to the subject of family histories in general one evening over the supper-table when he was more than usually inclined to talk and linger over our dessert.

‘Families, I suppose, like nations, wax and wane,’ I said, ‘they become atrophied, if not extinct.’ The port was magnificent—of the year ’64—and I felt oracular. ‘Hence the use of bastards. Robert the Devil from the top of his tower falls in love with the laundrywoman bleaching linen on the green, and in natural course William the Conqueror sees the light of day.’

My uncle interrupted my eloquence.

‘Far more often than people think the fall of a family, ay, or even of a nation, is due to some crime or other which—unrepented and unpurged—has festered in the body and brought corruption with it.

‘I have deeply studied this profound problem, and I might tell you tales of how son has never succeeded father, how gradually a house has sunk into physical decay, and ended in abortion and an idiot.’

Falling into dejection he paused a moment, then with great emotion he repeated the magnificent lines of Hector prophesying the fall of Priam, and his house, and his great town of Troy. His voice trembled and shook sadly as he concluded, ‘My house too has fallen and nears its end, and I alone am left to tell the tale—the tale of a most foul—as I am convinced—and unnatural murder.’

With this he clasped his hands together and looked darkly into the future; then as he rose to bid me farewell and turned towards the door, I heard him murmur to himself: *‘Illa culpa, illa culpa, illa maxima culpa.’*

The door closed; I was left to my pipe and my reverie. ‘It must have been the Buccaneer ho “wrought this deed of shame,” ’ I reflected, but then I understood that he had been ‘reconciled’ to Rome before he died, had given gifts to the Church, built the chapel here, and so ‘made a good end.’ On the other hand I remembered that he had died childless.

The past was dead and gone, however, and did not much interest me, but my uncle’s emotion and distress touched me to the quick, and I determined to avoid the subject henceforth in our conversation.

I went to bed early that night, for I had been a longer walk than usual that afternoon, but whether it was that I was overtired, or could not rid my mind of my uncle’s suffering I know not. The one thing certain was that after a slight doze I became extraordinarily wide-awake.

I was convinced that I heard footsteps somewhere or other in the house, and as I listened with the greatest intentness I distinctly caught the sound of some one treading upon the staircase that led into the hall.

It must be either my uncle—walking perhaps in his sleep—or else the ghost. I sat up in bed to listen the better, and without a doubt caught the sound of a footfall treading on the stone floor, apparently down in the hall below. Curiosity prevailed over alarm; I got up, put on a dressing-gown and socks, and proceeded cautiously without along the corridor.

The footsteps had come to a halt seemingly, for now I heard nothing; and then on a sudden by the light of the waning moon that showed in a faint milk-white aureole through the high window emblazoned with the bugles and caltrops of the Startingtons, that lit the hall below, I saw a dim figure coining up the stair-way towards me upon soundless feet; I drew back in utmost astonishment, and shrank away beside a massive oak cupboard on the landing.

The figure mounted the steps slowly, and as though in pain, passed gently by me with just such a movement of the air as a moth might make in its flight, and with a tiny sound as of a sigh turned to the left and retreated along the passage.

‘’Tis a lady!’ I murmured to myself, overcome with astonishment.

Almost at once I heard a firm tread of feet upon the stairs below, and there mounting quickly another figure now showed at the head of the stairs, and I recognised in the half light that it was my uncle.

He did not pause, but turned at once to the left, and incontinently followed after the fragile figure of the lady, who had disappeared from view into the misty depth of the corridor.

I stood dumbfounded. Here was a double mystery which I felt bound, though a little shaken in my nerves, to unravel.

A-tiptoe I followed after my uncle along the dark passage, feeling my way lest I should knock against the pictures or the various bronze casts that stood on pedestals beside the wall.

The passage turned shortly again to the left and led, as I knew, past my uncle's bedroom to the muniment room situate at the end of the wing.

When I turned the corner there was just sufficient moonlight from the south window to show me the dim figure of my uncle standing within the muniment room, apparently feeling with his hands upon the wall.

As I stood irresolute, but keenly watchful, I saw the sudden purple flame of a match leap up in the darkling room. My uncle had lit a match, and with trembling, excited fingers was applying the flame to a candle that stood on the table.

He held the candle up towards the wall, peering intently upon it, and as I drew nearer on tip-toe I could hear him exclaiming in disjointed utterance.

'She vanished here. Just here. At last, then, I have discovered her grave. Yet the cruelty of it! for I know she was innocent.'

He drew something from his pocket and marked upon the wall therewith; then tapped with his knuckles, and, finding it to resound hollow, cried joyfully, 'Ay, it is as I suspected. quite resonant. Yes! she shall have a Christian burial.' He drew his hand across his forehead, signed with the Cross, louted low before an ikon of the Madonna, and I heard him say fervently:

'Ago tibi gratias, Immaculata.'

Seemingly satisfied, he turned again and narrowly scrutinised the wall once more, then slowly, and as though very tired, withdrew from the room and came back along the passage, and passed within his own chamber.

As he came on I stepped velvet-footed backwards, waited a few minutes at the corner to see if he would come out once more, but as he almost immediately extinguished the light I concluded that his quest was completed for the night, and made my way back to my bedroom.

In the morning I was surprised to find my uncle already in the parlour where usually I breakfasted by myself, for he was used to take his *café au lait* in his own room.

Bidding him good morning I had scarcely taken my seat when he produced a miniature from his pocket, and earnestly gazing upon me inquired what I thought of the character of the individual depicted in it.

I looked upon the medallion with great intentness, for I felt convinced the mystery of the night was connected inseparably with it.

What I saw was a portrait—artistically executed in pastel—of a delicate lady in eighteenth-century costume, with a strangely pathetic expression in her dark brown eyes as of one perpetually striving to understand and to be understood by others. Her mouth also showed the same fragile tenderness of feeling, and altogether she seemed intended to be—if not herself a musician or a poetess—at least the wife of a musician or poet or sculptor.

'Not a strong character,' I replied musingly, 'but a most sweet and delicate lady—one who should pass her time in playing upon the clavichord or the viol d'amore. In sympathy of temperament I think she would be more Italian than English.'

'You are right,' said my companion eagerly, 'she was Italian on her mother's side. But what of her moral character?—that is what I want to know from you—what think you of her constancy?'

I looked again into the deep brown eyes and pondered before I replied. 'I think,' I said slowly, 'I think that where she had once loved she would love ever.'

My uncle's intensity became instantly relaxed, and a joyous look overspread his face.

'I am sure of it,' he said with conviction, 'but I rejoice, nephew, that your sound judgment bears out my intuition; but though you make me happy the thought of the outrageous cruelty of

her death makes me miserable, for there is but one poor thing we now can do for her, that is, to find her bones, and lay them to rest in the graveyard.

‘As for the jealous and inhuman pride of the husband that could thus immure in the walls of his house the tender, loving, fragile bride I can find no adequate words.

‘I cannot rest till I know this for a certainty, or till I have given the poor bones their proper service and burial. I have sent for the village mason—a discreet man enough—and should you care to assist me in my task, nephew, I shall be greatly indebted to you.’

I very readily volunteered my services, for I had been profoundly interested in the cause of my uncle’s abstraction from the first, and the mysterious apparition had enhanced my curiosity.

So the three of us set to work with hammers and chisels, and in the course of a few hours’ work we had proved to my uncle’s satisfaction that his intuition had been correct in that we found the remains of a human body interred within the hollow of the walls; *yet ’twas not the corpse of a woman, as he had surmised, but that of a young man.*