

# The Warlock of Glororum

By H. Pease

‘But are you sure your father wouldn’t object?’ I asked of my companion—a most bright and amusing Eton boy—to whom I was playing bear leader. ‘Not a bit,’ replied he; ‘my father is a naturalist and Darwinian; not a sceptic, but *Agnosticus suavis* or *Verecundus, ordo cornpositæ*, you know. “Hunt the ghost by all means,” said he, when I suggested a ghost “worry,” and then as he does sometimes over coffee and a cigarette after dinner he talked with a real keen interest on the whole subject. He talked so long that old Mac (the butler) got quite shirty, and finally—after putting his head round the door two or three times—came in like the Lord Mayor and bore off the whisky decanter to the smoking-room. Now, the pater said that the love of the marvellous was native to mankind, and Tertullian had acquired a false credit for his motto, *Credo quia impossibile*, since that was the natural failing of the untrained intellect, and, scientifically speaking, he ought to have been shot sitting.

‘Then he went on to tell a jolly story which some great educationalist had told him of the little girl playing in the garden, who saw Fifine, the poodle, unexpectedly appear, and at Once rushed in crying to her mother, “Mummy, mummy, there’s a bear in the garden!” Her mother, being a wholly unimaginative creature, promptly put Maggie into the corner, and told her to beg God’s pardon for having told a lie. Presently Maggie comes out of her corner radiant, “It’s all right, mummy,” she cried, “God tells me He has often mistaken Fifine for a bear Himself.” No doubt, as he said, Maggie had had a momentary fright, and for half a second had thought of a bear, but she knew, too, that if she stayed to investigate she would find out it was Fifine, so preferring the luxury of the marvellous, she fled crying in to her mother. Sometimes, of course, he added, the ghost is the resultant of some horrible cruelty or murder, mankind, from various motives, refusing to let the memory of the crime die out, but more usually the ghost is born of the early mythopœic imagination of man that cherishes the marvellous. One never hears of a new ghost nowadays. Science, no doubt, is an iconoclast in the matter.’

‘Well,’ said I, ‘how do you propose to proceed? I have gathered that there was once a warlock or wizard here in the sixteenth century—one of your forebears—who bore a most unhallowed reputation. Is he your ghost, or is the ghost the result of his “goings on”?’

‘Both,’ replied Dick, smiling. ‘At least there are a number of tales about him and his misdeeds; one version has it that he built himself a secret chamber wherein he conferred with the “Auld Enemy” in person, and no one has yet discovered his “dug-out.” Here’s a quaint woodcut of the old warlock,’ he continued, taking down as he spoke a foxed print from the wall holding it out for my inspection.

‘Ain’t he a fearsome figure? Looks as if his liver were cayenne pepper. Astrologer, botanist, poisoner, he is said to have been, and I don’t wonder.’

The ancient warlock possessed indeed a most mischancy visage: hard, curious, inhuman eyes he had, thin, sunken cheeks, and a black straggling moustache, the whole surmounted by a great bald dome of brow. ‘By Alchemist out of Misanthropos,’ I suggested, after a lengthy scrutiny, ‘and perhaps Misogynist as well.’ My companion laughed appreciatively. ‘That’s about it,’ he said; ‘yet there *is* a tale of a fisherman’s daughter, the belle of the village below.

‘Well,’ he continued with animation, ‘our job is now to discover his secret chamber. ’Tis as good as a treasure hunt with the supernatural thrown in. By the way,’ he went on, ‘it’s the first

time I've ever been in Glororum Castle, as it is called, for the old place has only just come back to us, that is, to my father as representative of the senior branch of the Macellars, by the death of a cousin who died S.P. What nerves they had, these old chieftains! Fancy, like the Maclean, setting out your wife—even if a trifle *passée*—on the Skerry to drown before your dining-room window, or, like the Macleod, lowering her into the dungeon beneath the drawing-room that you might the better enjoy the charms of Amaryllis—your gardener's daughter—above. Well, it's too late this afternoon to begin our "worry," but to-morrow morning we must start by flagging all the windows with towels, as the inquisitive lady is said to have done at Glamis Castle.'

I willingly agreed to his proposal, which jumped well enough with my own humour, and then as Dick went off to unpack I determined to go without and view the castle from every side.

Dusk was now closing in on the dark and frowning tower that was perched like an osprey upon the basalt cliffs that overlooked the sea. The building was really rather a peel tower than a castle, for it was of no great extent, consisting merely of the tall, gaunt tower with a wing added on to its western side. Situated on the edge of the bare sea, like a lighthouse abandoned, scarred by the fierce nor'-easters, with the mutter of the waves about it below and the scream of sea-fowl above, one could scarce imagine a more desolate or forbidding human abode than fitly-named 'Glower-o'er-'em' Tower.

The neck of land by which it was approached from the west had been protected by a wall, within which a garden had sheltered, wherein the warlock had grown his herbs and poisons, but all was now ruinous and weed-grown, and gave only an added touch to the general forlornness. The place had been let as a shooting-box in recent years, but neither landlord nor tenant had thought it worth while to spend any money on reparation or embellishment. 'Twas indeed a fitting retreat for a warlock or wizard, I thought, as with a final regard I turned to go within doors.

Just at that moment I caught a glimpse of a fisher lass with a pannier rounding the corner. She looked back, and I saw a roguish Romney eye lighting a charming profile. 'Too pretty,' I thought, remembering Dick, as she tripped onward into the shadow of the Tower.

The sea was moaning under a heavy cloud-wrack; away to the west above the Lammermoors the sunset flared like a bale-fire, scattering sparks on the windows of the Tower. 'Twas cheerier within than without, for the walls were thick and kept the wind at bay, the wood fires were lively with hissing logs, and scarce heeded a chance buffet from the down draught lying in ambush within the open chimney-stack. We slept in the wing without any dread of the warlock, for it had been added on to the tower long after his time, and save for the sound of the sea far below, resembling the dim 'mutter of the Mass,' or the spell of a necromancer, I heard nothing throughout the night.

Next morning after breakfast was over Dick produced a pile of towels, which we divided up between us for our voyage of discovery. 'After all,' I said, 'we shan't want many, for bows and arrows in the far past, and later, the window tax, kept the number of openings down.'

We ascended by the ancient stone newel stair that circled up from the old iron 'yett' of the entry to the battlements above, and laid a towel below the sash of every window. In the topmost storey in some servants' rooms that had been long disused we discovered certain windows with broken cords that entirely refused to open.

Dick's way here was of the 'Jethart' kind. He simply knocked a pane out with the poker, and thrust the towel through.

When we had finished we descended in haste and perambulated the tower without, counting up our tale of towels in some excitement.

‘As many windows, so many towels,’ I said with disappointment, as I checked them off carefully.

‘Damn!’ said Dick meditatively. Then after a moment or two’s thought, ‘The old boy’s cell must have been on the roof; he was sure to have been an astrologer. Let’s go up again and start afresh.’ So saying he led the way up to the parapet of the battlements, and there we surveyed the roof. The main part of the roof consisted of a gable covered with heavy stone tiles, but the further part that lay between the north-east and north-west bartizans was flat and covered with lead, and at the verge of this were iron steps that led down to the roof of the new wing below. This latter we did not concern ourselves with, as we knew it dated since the wizard’s day, but carefully examined the stone tiles and the further leads without, however, any discovery resulting.

We were just about to give up our quest when Dick’s quick eyes noticed a chink in the lead that formed the channel or gutter for the rain water leading either way to the gargoyles beneath the bartizans outside.

‘Look here!’ he cried. ‘see the dim light showing! I swear it’s a glimmer of glass. Evidently this particular lead was meant to be drawn aside and admit the light.’ I hastened to the side and peered with him into the dirt-laden crack.

Opening my pen-knife I scraped away the dirt and soon verified his conjecture that there was glass below. ‘You’re right!’ I cried in my excitement. ‘It is glass. Now let’s search and see if we can find anything like a hinge, or at least some indication that the lead could be withdrawn at will.’ We sought all along by the containing wall and found that the lead did not end in a flat sheet, as is usual, against the wall, but was turned over, and evidently continued below.

‘It looks very much as if it was meant to roll up and be turned over like a blind on a roller below,’ I said to my companion.

‘I’m sure of it,’ Dick replied with conviction. ‘I’ll tell you what we must do. We’ll pull up the lead, make sure of the extent of the glass, then go below and search for the wizard’s cell from the exact indication we shall then have of its whereabouts.’

‘Right!’ said I, ‘that’s the method.’

We set to work, and soon had doubled back a strip of lead a foot broad from the centre till the glass ended by the bartizan on either side. We could not pull the lead right back because of the iron steps, which had evidently been inserted when the new wing was built, and now interfered with our further action.

The glass was set in heavy leaded panes, which ere so engrained with the grime of centuries it we could discern nothing through them.

‘We must search for the wizard’s cell from below,’ I said. ‘If we cannot discover it there we must return and break in from above.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Dick, ‘it would be a pity to smash the roof in if we can find an entry below without causing damage.’

The orientation was now easy, and as we studied the position from the parapet we could select the towelled window below which fitted best with the position of the glass roof.

The curious thing was that the window was not situated in the centre, but at the side of the torn up lead.

‘We’ll find out the reason below,’ I said, as we descended in great excitement, hastening on our quest.

The room we made for was one of the disused chambers on the top storey, which we had remarked for its narrowness when we broke the window and thrust a towel through.

‘There must be a secret passage,’ cried Dick, as he flashed his torch upon the walls; ‘we’re not below the glass; we’re to the right hand of it. Wherefore search the left wall.’

Dick’s inference seemed excellent, and full of eagerness I tapped with my knife, he with his poker, all along the western wall.

‘There’s a hollow here,’ cried Dick, overjoyed, as his poker rang with a strange lightness. ‘Let’s hunt for an opening or crack, or some betraying sign.’

‘Here! Look here!’ he shouted. ‘I believe this stone pulls out.’

Hastening to his side and applying my knife to the thin ragged crevice he had discovered, I found the stone was loose. I worked feverishly while Dick held the torch. ‘Now it’s coming!’ I cried, and even as I spoke it fell forward and crashed on to the floor. To us scrutinising the aperture, there seemed evidently a spring or catch concealed behind it.

Thrusting in my arm I pressed it home. A creak sounded; there was a rusty wheeze, and a portion of the wall seemed to shake and move slowly inwards.

‘We’ve got it!’ yelled Dick, as he pressed his shoulder against the receding portion, ‘it’s a wooden door covered over with thin slabs of stone.’

‘Forrard!’ cried Dick. ‘Forrard on!’ and as he shouted he pressed forward down a narrow, dusty aperture towards a chamber beyond where a dim light showed through the begrimed roof above.

I pressed on hotly at his heels through the six feet of passage. We were now within the threshold of the secret cell. But what was that horrible thing beneath the dim sky-light? Dick’s electric torch was failing, and we could not see distinctly, and a very oppression of fear seized upon us both. What was the gruesome object in front that resembled a dead octopus with decayed black arms?

There was a sickly taint in the air, and as I stood there fascinated by fear Dick took a step forward and threw the faint light of his torch upon the atrocious figure.

Surely it was a gorilla grasping its victim, and bending it in to itself as in some horrid act of rape!

Dick advanced yet another foot. Then I perceived that it was worse even than I suspected, for I now distinguished a giant species of *Nepenthes* (*Nepenthes Ferocissimus*) most monstrously developed, clutching in its long arms and horrid ascidium the remains of a human victim—apparently a woman—for a gleam of yellow satin showed beneath the black embrace. Good God! I thought of the ‘fisherman’s daughter’ with a shudder.

I heard the torch drop. Then came a rustling shiver. The monstrous growth had sunk to the floor under pressure of the fresh air!

I thought I had fainted, but the next moment I felt Dick’s hand shaking upon my sleeve, and heard a voice quaver in my ear:

*‘Let’s get out of this! It’s altogether too damned beastly.’*