

A Phantom Toe

By Anonymous

I am not a superstitious man, far from it, but despite all my efforts to the contrary I could not help thinking, directly I had taken a survey of my chamber, that I should never quit it without going through a strange adventure. There was something in its immense size, heaviness and gloom that seemed to annihilate at one blow all my resolute skepticism as regards supernatural visitations. It appeared to me totally impossible to go into that room and disbelieve in ghosts.

The fact is, I had incautiously partaken at supper of that favorite Dutch dish, sauerkraut, and I suppose it had disagreed with me and put strange fancies into my head. Be this as it may I only know that after parting with my friend for the night I gradually worked myself up into such a state of fidgetiness that at last I wasn't sure whether I hadn't become a ghost myself.

"Supposing," ruminated I, "supposing the landlord himself should be a practical robber and should have taken the lock and bolt from off this door for the purpose of entering here in the dead of the night, abstracting all my property, and perhaps murdering me! I thought the dog had a very cutthroat air about him." Now, I had never had any such idea until that moment, for my host was a fat (all Dutchmen are fat), stupid-looking fellow, who I don't believe had sense enough to understand what a robbery or murder meant, but somehow or other, whenever we have anything really to annoy us (and it certainly was not pleasant to go to bed in a strange place without being able to fasten one's door), we are sure to aggravate it by myriads of chimeras of our own brain.

So, on the present occasion, in the midst of a thousand disagreeable reveries, some of the most wild absurdity, I jumped very gloomily into bed, having first put out my candle (for total darkness was far preferable to its flickering, ghostly light, which transformed rather than revealed objects), and soon fell asleep, perfectly tired out with my day's riding.

How long I lay asleep I don't know, but I suddenly awoke from a disagreeable dream of cutthroats, ghosts and long, winding passages in a haunted inn. An indescribable feeling, such as I never before experienced, hung upon me. It seemed as if every nerve in my body had a hundred spirits tickling it, and this was accompanied by so great a heat that, inwardly cursing mine host's sauerkraut and wondering how the Dutchmen could endure such poison, I was forced to sit up in bed to cool myself. The whole of the room was profoundly dark, excepting at one place, where the moonlight, falling through a crevice in the shutters, threw a straight line of about an inch or so thick upon the floor—clear, sharp and intensely brilliant against the darkness. I leave you to conceive my horror when, upon looking at this said line of light, I saw there a naked human toe—nothing more.

For the first instant I thought the vision must be some effect of moonlight, then that I was only half awake and could not see distinctly. So I rubbed my eyes two or three times and looked again. Still there was the accursed thing—plain, distinct, immovable—marblelike in its fixedness and rigidity, but in everything else horribly human.

I am not an easily frightened man. No one who has traveled so much and seen so much and been exposed to so many dangers as I, can be, but there was something so mysterious and unusual in the appearance of this single toe that for a short time I could not think what to be at, so I did nothing but stare at it in a state of utter bewilderment.

At length, however, as the toe did not vanish under my steady gaze, I thought I might as well change my tactics, and remembering that all midnight invaders, be they thieves, ghosts or devils, dislike nothing so much as a good noise I shouted out in a loud voice:

“Who’s there?”

The toe immediately disappeared in the darkness.

Almost simultaneously with my words I leaped out of bed and rushed toward the place where I had beheld the strange appearance. The next instant I ran against something and felt an iron grip round my body. After this I have no distinct recollection of what occurred, excepting that a fearful struggle ensued between me and my unseen opponent; that every now and then we were violently hurled to the floor, from which we always rose again in an instant, locked in a deadly embrace; that we tugged and strained and pulled and pushed, I in the convulsive and frantic energy of a fight for life, he (for by this time I had discovered that the intruder was a human being) actuated by some passion of which I was ignorant; that we whirled round and round, cheek to cheek and arm to arm, in fierce contest, until the room appeared to whiz round with us, and that at least a dozen people (my fellow traveler among them), roused, I suppose, by our repeated falls, came pouring into the room with lights and showed me struggling with a man having nothing on but a shirt, whose long, tangled hair and wild, unsettled eyes told me he was insane. And then, for the first time, I became aware that I had received in the conflict several gashes from a knife, which my opponent still held in his hand.

To conclude my story in a few words (for I daresay all of you by this time are getting very tired), it turned out that my midnight visitor was a madman who was being conveyed to a lunatic asylum at The Hague, and that he and his keeper had been obliged to stop at Delft on their way. The poor fellow had contrived during the night to escape from his keeper, who had carelessly forgotten to lock the door of his chamber, and with that irresistible desire to shed blood peculiar to many insane people had possessed himself of a pocketknife belonging to the man who had charge of him, entered my room, which was most likely the only one in the house unfastened, and was probably meditating the fatal stroke when I saw his toe in the moonlight, the rest of his body being hidden in the shade.

After this terrible freak of his he was watched with much greater strictness, but I ought to observe, as some excuse for the keeper’s negligence, that this was the first act of violence he had ever attempted.