

A Riverside Ghost

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

Mr. Vero Shaw, the well-known writer on racing and sport, told me the following interesting experience of his own, and has kindly allowed me to mention his name in connection with it.

“Some years ago,” said Mr. Shaw, “I was staying at a well-known riverside village, when I met with a curious experience which has never been satisfactorily explained.

“On my last evening there I took my three dogs, a bulldog and two toy spaniels, for a long stroll, and was returning home to supper, when I resolved to take a short cut, as it was getting rather late. To do this I had to go through a narrow passage about a hundred and fifty yards long, which any one who has ever stayed in the place will remember. On the left side of it was a high wall, and on the other a rather low paling enclosing a meadow, which stretched away to the right.

“It was a hot night, and there was a brilliant ‘fisherman’s moon,’ which made it almost as light as day. Every object was plainly to be seen, and I could see all over the meadow for a considerable distance.

“When I was about half-way down the passage I saw, just in front of me, a dark, swarthy-looking man standing sideways to me and looking over the paling on the right. He wore a blue pilot coat, light lavender boating trousers, and a speckled straw hat, and he looked like a typical longshoreman, excepting for his foreign appearance. His profile was turned towards me, and I could see his face quite distinctly. I wondered what he was doing there at that time of night, but concluded that he had come out, like myself, for a stroll, as the weather was so tempting. Anyhow, I quite failed to recognize him as a resident in the village.

“When I was quite close to him I heard a sudden scuffle behind me, and, turning round, I saw the three dogs running away as fast as their legs would carry them. I called and whistled, but, although they were usually very obedient, they did not take the slightest notice, but fore off as if they were possessed.

“I turned round again, expecting to see the man, but, to my astonishment, he had vanished! He could not possibly have passed me, and if he had gone on ahead I must have seen him, for he would not have had time to get beyond the passage, and must have been still in view. There were no trees near behind which he could have hidden even if he had jumped the paling, and the meadow stretched bare and flat under the moonlight, with not a soul walking over it. The wall, I may add, was unclimbable.

“I certainly thought it very odd, but did not attach much importance to the affair, and went on.

“When I got back to my cottage the three dogs, who had gone home the longest way, were all sitting on the doorstep, looking very cowed and miserable. I subsequently told the friend who was staying with me all about it, and, the next day, the landlord of the adjoining riverside hotel, and got laughed at for my pains.

“Three months later I again went down to the village, and stayed at the hotel mentioned for the whole winter. Only those who have wintered by the river can possibly understand the charm of it. The majority of people think of the riverside in winter as a bleak and

desolate reflection of summer joys. On the contrary, the Thames country-side has a characteristic freshness and beauty; and a long walk on the towpath in January or early February when snow has fallen or the level fields are white with frost is a most enjoyable experience.

“The evenings, it is true, were long and dreary, and had to be spent indoors. Every night there was a kind of village gathering at the hotel, and men used to drop in from round about for a hand of nap and a quiet smoke

“Among the callers one evening was a man I will call Sutton, who came from one of the neighbouring villages. He was a very well-known character locally, and always drove a disreputable, broken-winded old pony, which, however, was clever and very knowing, and had got into settled ways and habits. For one thing, after a certain time in the day he could never be induced to go in the direction that led *from* home—he was not to be even flogged away from it, for he evidently considered that his day’s work was done and that no one had a right to expect more from him.

“On this particular evening, after the little party had dispersed, I was sitting up with the landlord to smoke a last pipe before going to bed.

“Presently we heard the violent galloping of a horse and the sound of wheels, and the landlord jumped up at once and went to the window, saying, ‘A horse has runaway.’

“The wheels stopped. We both went outside, and there was Sutton, with a face as white as a sheet and shaking from head to foot with agitation. He could not speak, so we tied up the old pony and led him inside, wondering what had happened.

“When he had had a drink and pulled himself together, he told us that he had had an awful fright.

“The old pony had been going quietly along towards home, when suddenly he shied violently, and Sutton saw a man standing under a lamp in the middle of the street. The pony turned round and bolted back like mad, a thing so unlikely for him to do that Sutton was terrified out of his wits.

“ ‘What was the man like? I asked Sutton.

“ ‘He looked like a foreigner,’ he replied; ‘very dark and pale, with a small black moustache. He was standing under a lamp, so I could see him quite plainly. Who could be out there at this time of night? I’m sure he wasn’t a real man at all.’

“The landlord gave me a look, but he said nothing until Sutton had driven off. Then he said solemnly, ‘Now, Mr. Shaw, I really believe you *have* seen a ghost.’

“I may add that I am not a bit nervous in any way, and would gladly sit up all night alone in any haunted house you like, if only I could have my revolver and a dog with me. But there certainly *was* something queer about that foreign-looking man, because my dogs and the old horse evidently thought so, and animals are seldom mistaken.

“Did I see a ghost? I’m sure I don’t know. But what I should like to find out is: what made my dogs and Sutton’s pony run away?”