

The Malevolent Stray

Upon my arrival at the Porters' Lodge, a tall man, named Grimes, took charge of my belongings saying he'd see they were taken to my rooms. His colleague put a call through to a Professor Bartholomew, who dashed over, introduced himself in a cheery manner and said that I was expected at the Faculty Drawing Room. He was a wiry, nervous type, whose gown didn't sit right. Adding to the comical effect, his hair was so bushy that his mortar board rested an inch above his head, making one wonder why he was considered the best man to greet me. My new role would require me to rub along with staff and students alike, even so, I had expected to be met by my deputy or the chairman of the board or some such.

Bartholomew led me across the Quad and said, in a low, conspiratorial voice, that Fenton-Ash, Langtry and Dunham had all applied for the position of Provost.

"Those are the only internal applicants I know of. I applied as well but, as far as I'm concerned, the better man won. I suspect my colleagues and I weren't offered the position because of a certain stipulation. Therefore, you must have accepted without insisting upon it. I can't decide whether that makes you very brave or foolhardy. There's no need to answer. I won't have to wait long for the answer."

I was unable to respond as I couldn't tell if Bartholomew was being welcoming, albeit in an oblique way, or his opening gambit had been to insult me. Not that a response was required. He had begun pointing out architectural features on the red-brick additions, which one could make out beyond the older college buildings, thereby denying me the opportunity to find out about the nature of the stipulation and what his colleagues' disappointment might mean. He talked about the improved drainage system and the subsidence, which had been discovered since the interviews. Yet, all the while I was distracted. I wondered whether Bartholomew had alerted me so I knew not to flaunt my success, or if I could expect the other gentlemen to work against me behind my back.

Despite having told me that I was expected in the Faculty Drawing Room, Bartholomew took me to the chapel, where he passed me over to the Director of Music. Dr Searle had an unenthusiastic handshake. I

consoled myself that it was probably just as well as my hand was still recovering from Bartholomew's fierce grip. It was harder to dismiss the withering look he gave me. When it failed to resolve into a more genial expression, I had to revise my assessment of him to account for his permanent look of disdain.

He clasped his hands behind his back, having directed me down the aisle. After we had walked past the first section of pews in silence, he mentioned casually that, if I was still in my post in a year's time, he would put on a special performance. Before I could retort 'Why wouldn't I be?', he launched into a monologue about the stained-glass windows. He talked interestingly upon the subject but they did not require my attention within minutes of commencing my employment.

When we approached the South door again, having retraced our steps, there was a rather well-stuffed man waiting for us. Searle said under his breath, "That's Dr Ripley, Professor of Classics. He's hard of hearing. You're going to have to speak up."

Searle gave the introductions and left me in the care of Ripley, who shouted remarks about the weather at me.

As we skirted round the fountain in the Quad, without warning, he bent down to tighten his shoelace. He said that I was not to blame myself if it didn't work out. His voice was directed away from me and muffled. Nevertheless, I was certain I had heard him correctly. Faced with the man's ample posterior, I found myself ill-placed to challenge him. Undoubtedly, he would have asked me to repeat myself several times until he had got my meaning, thereby, anyone in a Quad-facing room would have understood that there was already a question mark over my employment. Naturally, I didn't want to invite any misunderstanding or fan the flames of gossip.

When I finally made it to the Faculty Drawing Room after the bizarre detour, I was handed a cup of tea by Professor Digby-Barnes. He quipped that I might want to see whether I like the place before I unpack my things, then walked off before I could say, 'It feels like I've come home'.

In many ways it did. At least I liked the closed world of a college, to have very few concerns other than maintaining systems which promote the pursuit of knowledge. But, then, I'm not like most men or

academics for that matter. Others pursue golf or go off hiking or like to travel. I am content to let them experience discomfort, to find themselves pressed between other travellers on over-crowded trains or to wilt in the heat. That's not to say, I always get my wish. My work forces me out, requires me to give lectures, to be an active member of various societies and to sit on several boards. And, there are always documents in various archives one wishes to consult.

In the Faculty Drawing Room, pictures of men associated with the college's illustrious past decorated the walls above the oak panelling. They looked down at the gathering with stern and disapproving expressions as though they meant to frighten off anyone with a weak disposition.

Whilst there was much satisfaction to be had in being part of a continuum, I was at my most content when surrounded by books, pouring over them or reading them. I had yet to be shown the famous library and, for that matter, my rooms and my study therein.

I had just taken a sip of over-brewed tea when I espied the Bursar approaching, whom I recognised from my interview. He wore a look of fierce determination, leading me to suspect he was about to tell me that there were insufficient funds to deal with the subsidence. In the same instance, I overheard Dr Stratton, Head of Science and the rugby team's coach, who was standing only a few metres away with his back to me, telling a huddle of staff that he would lay money on the new Provost going the same way as those before him; that is to say, above the chatter in the room and the scrapping of furniture and the clattering of crockery in the next room, indicating that preparations for lunch were already underway.

As no one had approached who might be a potential ally, I was at a loss as to whom I could consult to find out to what kind of vipers' nest I had unwittingly stumbled into.

Finding my lacklustre reception rather irksome, I took my teaspoon and chimed it against my cup, calling for silence. When the last murmur was killed by the general hush, I launched into an impromptu speech, describing my role as a great honour and a challenge, one that I was more than equal to. I ended by calling 'Dismissed!', as I wanted to assert my authority. It caused a commotion that was akin to finding oneself in a chicken coop surrounded by squawking, ill-tempered fowl. The Faculty, who were clearly used to

gathering well before lunch to have a glass of a sherry, consult the daily papers or chat, were thrown into turmoil not knowing where they were expected to go or what they were expected to do. So much for having a few weeks to get the measure of the place, allowing me to find out exactly where to target my efforts. If my appointment had been unpopular before, I had not helped myself by causing an Arctic blast to sweep through their cosseted privilege.

Professor Fenton-Ash stepped forward, introduced himself and said he had been tasked to show me to my rooms. As soon as we found ourselves in a quiet corridor, he hinted that, whenever one of my longer-serving predecessors had come up against any problems, invariably, he had discovered there had been one cowardly instigator, who had whipped his colleagues up into a frenzy before stepping back so he could deny all knowledge.

Just as he was about to name the person, I held up my hand to silence him. Fenton-Ash paused then tried again and said, "Bart..."

"No buts', I demanded, pretending to have misheard him. "You were taking me to my rooms," I prompted.

He walked on to the end of the corridor.

"These are your rooms," he said, opening the door.

He invited me in as though he were an usher at the theatre herding in late-comers, thus he appeared to be courteous whilst revealing his contempt. His faux gallantry served to mask the door.

As we had approached my rooms, I couldn't help but notice that the college administration hadn't removed the name plate of a Provost who had left back in January. Why his and the four subsequent appointments had ended so suddenly after only a matter of days or weeks had all been explained away at my interview as though it were a common occurrence in every institution.

I had only been at the college two hours at the most, already I was convinced that some stratagem was being employed to make me want to quit, although I was at a loss as to the reason why. I wondered how far reaching it was, whether all the Faculty Heads were part of the plot. Whilst individually the catalogue of

negative comments I had had to endure didn't amount to much, collectively they were enough to deaden any man's spirits.

My guide delayed our entry by flailing his arms about to illustrate some great catastrophe he predicted would happen in the cosmos several hundred years hence. Even though I was standing at the threshold of my rooms, I was in no apparent danger of seeing them.

It was the oddest thing, but the temperature noticeably dropped. Moreover, Fenton-Ash appeared to be regarding me as though he was expecting a reaction or for me to say something. I was not about to give him the satisfaction, so I continued to listen to his incessant chatter, which showed no signs of letting up.

He stared fixedly at me and I held his gaze as though we were both aware that it had become a battle of wills. I wondered whether he expected me to turn and leave without even entering my rooms. People talked about cold spots in old houses, which were supposedly associated with hauntings. Was this what I was feeling?

I finally lost my patience and barged past him.

The first two rooms, a reception room and an adjoining study weren't at all what I had expected. Only its generous proportions and a large fireplace with a worked marble surround suggested status. Otherwise, it looked dingy, as though I had been given accommodation more befitting a student. There were square, sooty marks on the walls where pictures had hung. In short, if I had been offered the rooms at a B&B, I would either have demanded better or I would have tried my luck elsewhere.

The rooms took up a corner of the main building. Its windows overlooked the Quad on one side and, I presumed, out onto the street on the other. I could tell that the windows of the rooms associated with day time activity would remain in shadow for the hours that counted, lending them a dreary atmosphere.

Fenton-Ash stood just inside the door observing me as I flicked on the light switches and turned on the desk lamp and opened the windows. I noticed a faint wry smile on his face as though he were party to a secret. He was clearly determined to stay either to satisfy his curiosity or to delight in my misfortune at having acquired such badly appointed rooms.

As I moved about, I had to be careful not to trip over my suitcases and bags, which had been left in the middle of the floor.

“Your rooms may seem dreadfully quiet now, Sir, but, once the students start arriving, you won’t be short on unexpected visitors.”

Even the additional glow of three lightbulbs made no difference. I switched on a standing light in the study and the two table lights on the sideboard in the reception room. Still the light failed to reach into the corners, ensuring the two rooms remained as uninviting as the grave.

One talks of chasing away the gloom when one wants to rid oneself of a general malaise or ennui. I felt I had been doing just that, only it was something outwardly that had the power to dampen one’s spirits, something that occupied the space.

A rationalist would argue that I was feeling a draft and had an aversion to the unfamiliar. Moreover, the fusty smell was tricking me into thinking there was something strange and unpleasant lurking in my rooms. I’d rather there was a rational explanation as the alternative was a far more frightening prospect. I suspected the Faculty knew about it as it explained the various comments staff had made. But, why hadn’t anything being done about it? Perhaps, they saw whatever it was as a means of testing the mettle of their latest Provost. More likely, they didn’t want to make it official or go public lest they invited ridicule and the college lost its distinguished reputation and status.

I picked up my cases and piled them up on the sideboard between the lights. The bags I tossed onto the arms chairs. In doing so, I was surprised to find that my reception room had a Turkish rug and a fine one at that. I had been so distracted I hadn’t registered it.

I walked back to the door.

“There’s still some time to go before lunch,” Fenton-Ash said, glancing at his watch.

I replied, “I want you to go directly to the Bursar. Tell him to order a new name plate for the door which simply says ‘Private’ and I expect to see you back here five minutes before lunch is served.”

Whereupon I began closing the door to drive him out.

When his footsteps had disappeared down the corridor, I shut my eyes, lifted my arms, and took five steps forward. I can't say I have ever had to turn to such comic measures before, but it seemed to me that was exactly what was required. Indeed, with my eyes closed, the sense which can tell if something is untoward and detect subtle changes in a room's atmosphere was sharpened.

After a good minute or so of trying to determine what it was I was sensing, I decided nothing bad had happened in the room, as logic dictated this would be marked by the person's desperation or bleak state. Without a doubt, what I could feel was a presence. I could sense it more with my right hand, which pointed to the corner of the reception room, than my left, which pointed towards the study.

I lifted my right foot and swung it forward. It met with the couch. I turned towards my right and took three cautious steps forward. The cold room felt distinctly colder.

I took another three steps forward. The room felt as if someone had plunged me into an ice bucket.

There was something festering in the corner. I could feel its malevolence pulsating.

There was a knock and the door burst open.

"Sir," Fenton-Ash said. "The Bursar isn't in his office. Is everything alright, Sir? You look as though you're playing 'Pin the tail on the donkey'."

"Without a blindfold, a tail and a donkey? Don't be ridiculous, Professor! Surely, you've heard of the Coburg-Kant technique?" I said in an exasperated tone.

"No, I haven't," Fenton-Ash said, sounding like he wasn't entirely convinced.

I was against lying but needs must.

"Well, the Bursar isn't hiding in my rooms. I suggest you establish where he was last seen and start your search there. And, I shouldn't have to tell you never to enter my rooms or office unless invited to do so," I said, wishing him gone.

When he had closed the door, I slumped into the armchair furthest away from the offending corner.

A minute or two later I heard talking below one of my windows. I got up and moved as close as I dared without being seen.

“So, what’s the new governor like?” enquired an uncouth sounding man.

I couldn’t hear the response. Perhaps the answer was signalled.

“Do you think this one will stick around?” asked the first man.

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” the second man answered. I recognised the voice of Fenton-Ash. “Are you a betting man, Grimes? How about a tenner that I’m the new governor, as you put it, by Christmas?”

I remembered that Grimes was the college porter who had taken my luggage.

“Nah! Not if you reckon you’ll be in by Christmas. But, I’ll shake hands on a Lady Godiva, Sir.”

“Right you are, Grimes,” Fenton-Ash agreed.

I slumped back onto the armchair and stared at the suitcases on the sideboard, hoping that, if I stared long and hard enough, they might turn into a crystal decanter, filled with something strong, and a glass.

I glanced at my watch. I had under half-an-hour to consider what I could do about the thing that lurked in the corner of the room.

I thought of my father. He was the most superstitious person I knew.

Salt! My father would throw salt over his shoulder to ward off evil.

That was a start, however, I needed to have a clearer idea of what it was I was dealing with. Maybe it liked to cause a disturbance like a Poltergeist, therefore, it was only likely to move objects and break things. Or, perhaps it was the kind of entity that makes one so desperate one has to leave to save ones sanity.

It struck me that the presence seemed animal-like in the way it had cowered away from me. I had grown up with dogs so I was familiar with canine behaviour. Whilst there was every chance I was mistaken, if I was right, I needed to act fast as the presence was not necessarily tied to the corner of the room. Like most predatory animals, once it realised it could easily get the better of me, it was likely to attack. I wondered how I was going to sleep in my rooms... like a tramp: with one eye open. Regardless, once it was in a position of dominance, I would no longer be able to corner it and contain it.

I was not much further forward but, at least, there was some immediate action I could take. I ran out of my rooms and headed straight for the kitchens. I caused consternation along the way as I collided with

people and things. I heard someone comment, "That wouldn't be our new Provost bolting already? That's quick even by our standards?".

As for the head cook, it seemed I had gone from one malevolent presence straight to another.

"What are you doing in *my* kitchen?" he demanded as jets of steam spurted out from various juddering, lidded cooking pots, making it seem like I had inadvertently wandered into Hell's anti-chamber.

"*Your* kitchen? I think you'll find that it is *my* kitchen. Give me as much salt as you can spare. A bag should do it," I said, between gasps as I caught my breath.

The kitchen staff pretended not to notice.

The head cook didn't move.

"Get out of *MY* kitchen!" he roared, glowering at me.

I drew breath ready to launch into a tirade then realised there was a quick and easy solution.

"A pound for anyone who can tell me where the salt is kept and five pounds for anyone who can give me a bag of salt," I shouted, as I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out my wallet. I produced a crisp note and waved it in the air.

A large kitchen porter, who looked like he could stand up to the head cook, appeared from right at the back of the kitchen and lumbered forward in an ungainly fashion. He was carrying a bag of salt.

"Where do you want me to carry it, Sir," he asked.

"Here's your fiver," I said, slipping it into his pocket. "I'll take it from here. Oh, and the name?"

"The name's Fletcher, Sir,"

"Good man, Fletcher!"

I hoped the staff who hadn't moved to help me might spend the rest of the day reflecting on Fletcher's fiver and what they could have bought with it.

I then returned to my rooms.

I was about to start pouring the salt when I was struck with an idea. I pushed the armchairs and couch towards the door. I took hold of the Turkish rug and flipped over the far corner towards me. I poured a

generous line of salt onto the carpet underneath in an arc from wall to wall in front of the offending corner. Next, I righted the rug and moved the furniture back into position. Neither Fenton-Ash nor a housekeeper would suspect a thing. Given Fenton-Ash had unwittingly let it be known he was in the frame to replace me, if I left the college, I didn't want to reveal my hand.

I closed my eyes to check if the presence was now trapped in the corner. At first, I couldn't sense anything, but, then, with considerable relief, I felt it. It was subdued suggesting it knew I had curtailed its antics for now. Even so, I would be taking the precaution of putting salt around my bed just in case.

I heard some students talking below my window as I was preparing to go to bed. I had got as far as switching the light on in my bedroom and had wandered back into the reception room to switch off the standing-light.

Given the novelty of having them about, I went into the unlit study, so I could sneak a peek.

I espied a group of dishevelled, rowdy students, looking like they'd spent the evening going from one public house to the next. The more mature looking students were daring the other three, who had to be Freshers, to venture into my rooms, switch on a light and take something as proof that they had completed the challenge. I suspected this was what Fenton-Ash had meant when he had said that, once the students start arriving, I wouldn't be short on unexpected visitors.

I was amused. What were they hoping to grab? My walls were still bare and the shelves were still empty. Until my rooms had been painted it would be a waste of effort to put out my books. The Bursar hadn't exhausted all his excuses yet, so there was no telling when it would be organised. Yet, the porters had the audacity to enquire daily 'What's happening with your tea chests, Sir? They're in everyone's way.' If I had them moved, they would be even less inclined to have my rooms painted, hence the stalemate. I suspected that their lack of cooperation was related to my little problem.

“They’re afraid of the gh-ost! They’re afraid of the gh-ost!” the older boys began chanting.

This was an interesting development, especially as the older students were suggesting the Freshers ought to be more afraid of the ghost than incurring my wrath.

The tallest Freshman, the one with the dark hair, capitulated and said he would make the attempt.

I hastened to my bedroom, grabbed the torch I kept on my bedside table, then went back into the reception room and stood so that, when the door was opened, I could shield behind it. By the time the Fresher became aware I’d been lying in wait, it would be too late.

It wasn’t long before I heard footsteps in the corridor. Moments later the door handle made a faint rattle and began to turn very slowly. When the door swung open, it didn’t let in any light, suggesting the light in the corridor had been switched off as a precaution. I saw a dark shape enter the room. When it reached the middle of the floor, I pushed the door closed with a bang and flicked on the light switch. The Fresher let out a startled yelp.

I heard, “Scram!” and “Quick! Get out of here!” bellowed outside, indicating the Freshman was being abandoned to his fate.

“Sir, I can explain,” stammered the lad.

“An explanation is exactly what I’m after. Take a seat!” The Fresher sunk into the nearest armchair. “Perhaps you’d care to tell me about the entity that haunts my rooms.”

The Fresher looked at me wide-eyed and bewildered. He clearly hadn’t prepared for the possibility that he might get caught and was at a loss as to what to do or say. It was only momentary. When he had recovered his composure sufficiently, he kept glancing over my shoulder at the door as though he couldn’t wait to leave and over his own shoulder as if checking to make sure nothing was there.

“There’s not much to tell. I probably don’t know any more than you do, Sir.”

“Go on!” I encouraged.

“I don’t know how much is true but a former Provost liked to invite his friends to his rooms, in the darkest months, to tell ghost stories of his own invention. Being an academic, he couldn’t resist showing

off the extent of his knowledge and had told tales of ancient daemons that were probably best left to slumber in some forgotten weighty tome on a dusty library shelf.

“The story goes that he inadvertently summoned some evil entity. Whilst it didn’t trouble the Provost, whom it must have seen as its master, it has driven every subsequent Provost out. They say one poor chap jumped out of the window to escape it, but that’s got to be an embellishment.”

The lad appeared to be shivering even though the dying fire was still giving off plenty of heat.

“Here! Have a bottle of whiskey,” I offered. “That should warm you up.”

“Thank you,” stammered the Fresher.

It was with some regret that I handed him the bottle as I had only just bought it that morning, but all indications suggested that the lad was particularly sensitive to the entity and was in sore need of a stiff drink.

“Right, off you go!” I said. “Oh, you’d better have my torch. Don’t want you having an accident. But, return it mind!”

Before getting up, the lad clutched the bottle and torch with one hand and extended the other.

“Toby Hadley-Bright, Sir,” he said.

After the Fresher had slunk out, it was my turn to occupy the armchair.

What was to be done about the stray in my rooms?

I wondered what my father would do.

He binned household refuse, threw garden waste onto a bonfire and grass clippings went onto the compost heap. If he could make money from a disused or surplus item, he sold it, failing that, he donated it to charity.

Conversely, if he had lost something, he would pray to St. Anthony. Bizarrely, it had always worked, which begged the question: what was the benefit to the saint? Did Saint Anthony ever get fed up with looking for lost items? Was there a finite number of times one could call upon the saint before it became an abuse of his goodwill?

I had heard of a bird in Africa which will lead humans to honey, but the spoils must be shared otherwise, the next time, it would lead them into the path of a dangerous animal. Did the saint ever feel tempted to do something similar? It made me resolve that, if I called upon Saint Anthony again, I really ought to donate to charity as a form of payment.

It occurred to me that the daemonic stray in my rooms was effectively lost, begging the question: did St. Anthony stretch to removing lost items and returning them to where they belonged?

I slid off the armchair into a kneeling position and began to pray. I gave to a different charity each month anyway, but I promised to make a generous one-off donation first thing in the morning, if St. Anthony removed the entity from my rooms.

I was rudely awoken by hammering on my door. It was still dark outside. I opened it, bleary-eyed.

It was Hadley-Bright come to return my torch.

“Sorry to wake you so early, Sir. You did say I had to return it. I’ve got rowing practice and I didn’t know if you would need it,” he said. A puzzled look crept over his face. “You’ve changed your room. It’s not how it was last night.”

He was so consumed by this thought, he stepped past me without seeking permission to enter and stood in the middle of the Turkish rug.

“Have you moved a piece of furniture to another room? There was something in that corner,” he said, pointing to where the evil presence had lurked. “Didn’t you have a big, dark wardrobe or cupboard there?”

“I decided to get rid of it,” I answered.

“It’s a huge improvement. I much prefer it how it is now, Sir. All the room needs now is a fresh lick of paint and your things,” he said, and left.

As soon as he had shut the door, I got dressed. I was all eagerness to settle-up with St. Anthony and to tell Grimes in the Porters’ Lodge that, come Christmas, he wasn’t to let Fenton-Ash renege on his bet. In

fact, if anything, he should try and up the bet again, if the opportunity presented itself.