

The Terror in the Library

The following is a faithful and accurate transcription made Wednesday 18th December 1940, from the audio recording found by officers when attending the property in question. This transcription comprises evidence for presentation in the inquest concerning the death of Captain A. Howard.

This is Freddie Howard, recording... that is to say, ah...I wish to record certain details concerning the death of my sea dog brother, Alexander Howard, before setting pen to paper. Tomorrow, by light of day, I'll write this down but for now it's important I record the facts while fresh in my mind.

It is eleven thirty pm on Monday the...16th of December.

I suppose I shall start with my father taking the property in Devonshire. Rockcliffe, our home at Clifton in the north of Bristol, has been inhabited by Howards for the last two centuries, but my father sought to break tradition following the bombing of the city museum half a mile from our door. With Bristol razed by the Luftwaffe that night a month or so ago, and my father's offices at Berkely Square destroyed, he thought it prudent to move the household to the country. Devonshire being suitably close but suitably rural made it his preferred choice.

I say move the household, but the staff had already been much slimmed to supplement the war effort, so Rockcliffe was shuttered with a caretaker staff while just cook and housekeeper accompanied my parents to Devon.

Fortuitously our property agent happened to know of a suitable house in the village of Combe Wyndham in the north of that beautiful county. The owner of some fifty years or so had died quite suddenly at the outbreak of war and his successors were in no great rush to sell, values being low and sales quite to the rear of people's minds. This being the case a reasonable

rental was agreed through to summer, with the option to extend the lease beyond should that be desired.

Sleepy North Devonshire is not the place for a man of twenty-five, but the injury I had sustained at Dunkirk and which had invalided me from the war had begun to impede my passage from my Kensington flat to the nearest shelter at Piccadilly. The increasing ferocity of the night raids had not yet persuaded me to leave London, but the benefits the salted country air would have on my recovery tipped the balance.

And so it was that a similar arrangement was struck, that I should spend Christmas at Combe Wyndham, with the option to extend if so desired.

Seaward House, as the place was rather unimaginatively named since that's all it faced, had been constructed for the previous owner some fifty years past in the mock Tudor-cum-gothic style typical of these parts, all steep gables and wide timbered overhanging eaves that would seem more at home in Switzerland than England. It was pleasant enough, though having some eight or nine principal bedrooms far smaller than Rockcliffe. Given the size of the household and the entertaining planned for the season I had no doubt it would prove sufficient for my parents' requirements.

I have no need to describe the house in further detail for it has no bearing on events save for the library, which stands at the extreme eastern end of the house and looks onto, by way of large French doors, a rather pleasant terrace with a wonderful prospect over the cliffs to the sea. It was in this room I had set my station and was generally to be found on an evening, gazing over the dark waves in the company of my tobacco and my father's single malts.

I'd arrived in my Jenson at the end of the first week of December, a little over a week ago, and instantly appreciated the place. Clutching the crest of a hillside where steep wooded valleys meet the dark and churning sea, it looked north towards Wales, which the agent assured us would be visible from that terrace should we stay until warmer temperatures descended, though at present even the sea was obscured most of the day by mists.

The house is situated on north walk, another imaginative name which I discovered on the first day to lead to a glorious spot known locally as The Valley of the Rocks, with a stroll in the opposite direction winding down to the village.

Directly below the house, nestled in a shallow bay protected on three sides by steep cliffs, sits the village of Combe Wyndham itself, linked to the top of the hill – if a traveller is on foot – by way of either the aforementioned winding tree-umbrellaed path or a Victorian water-

powered funicular railway which clings impossibly to the thickly wooded hillside. By day three I had descended this engineering wonder to find not a golden treasure at its terminus, but reward nonetheless in the form of several decent taverns. These cater to the trawermen and a favourable ratio of native women, since many of the healthy men not already engaged in critical jobs had gone eastward in the defence of Empire. I confess despite being on restorative leave I took to wearing my uniform and carrying my stick, lest I be judged by the same.

The only occurrences of note during those few days were the landlord of The Ship - one of the inns in the village - clamping up when I mentioned we'd taken Seaward, and a waitress in a local tea room muttering something about it being an ungodly place, though neither - nor any others I pressed - cared to elaborate.

Considering matters ungodly it was perhaps ironic that it was the local parson, who I encountered among the wild ponies and goats on one of my strolls in the aforementioned Valley of the Rocks, who seemed pleased by our renting of Seaward. Strangely he remarked that it was good to see the place in use again after standing so long uninhabited; indeed he had been concerned the place might fall to disrepair. I thought this queer since the previous occupant had only died around the outbreak of war just over a year ago, but he too refused to be drawn on what I had by then considered local superstition.

I include these statements as some aspects will become quite relevant, but these discussions were, you understand, so few and far between as to make but slight impression on me at the time, hence by the end of that first week I'd quite forgotten about my club, and this being adverse weather for golfing I imagined my foreseeable days were agreeably planned. I'd even begun to fantasise I may be back for the shooting in late summer, far from the regular thump of incendiary bombs and other horrors of war. How wrong I was, that horrors of an entirely different nature would wrench from me this idyllic life, beginning that very night.

My father had left for a week in London tying up various business matters prior to the festive period, and my Mother was with my aunt at Surrey awaiting him. I had the run of Seaward, save for the staff who had long retired to bed.

Owing to the circumstances of the previous owner's demise the house had been let furnished, including that well-stocked library. My evenings had thus far been spent perusing the spines while sipping my way through my father's excellent single malts, but this night I was sat later than usual, engrossed in a tome so weighty it required the support of a side table. For this reason I was sitting not in my usual chair by the window, but instead had with some effort

shunted the Recordiola – on which I am documenting this – along the side table to make space, and was ensconced within a comfortable wingback chair in a rear corner of the room, with just the table lamp lighted.

At first I thought the faint sound was the scratching of a rat or worse, a family of mice, somewhere beneath the floorboards. I removed my eyes from the study of vernacular Edwardian architecture and instead tried to focus my ears. It emanated not from beneath the floor at all but from the shelves, somewhere behind me. The sound was akin to nails softly scraping board and not unlike the noise a nest of wasps had made chewing through my bedroom window frame at Rockcliffe, only slower, more deliberate somehow.

I did my best to ignore it for some time to continue my architectural education but the sound grew more persistent, until finally I was forced to close the book and sit back in the chair. I sipped the whisky and imagined what manner of creature – for I was positive it must be some small rodent indigenous to these parts – would be chewing behind the shelves, and therefore what manner of pest controller's services I should need to engage in the morning.

I could not with any confidence ascertain whether it was the lateness of the hour, my position in the room and the direction I was facing, or the lamp which had made the difference, but regardless – something had prompted the events which happened next.

I realised I was suddenly terribly cold. The smouldering logs in the grate at the other side of the room had thus far held off the worse of the winter nights but for the past few days I had left the library prior to the fire burning down. I was wrestling with the decision to put another log on or retire to my room, but both would require me stretching my aching limbs and leaving the chair. While I pondered this decision I saw my breath was fogging in the cold air, and a thin rime of ice had formed on the inside of the French doors.

The curtains were drawn back at either side, to facilitate my gazing at the distant lights at sea. They billowed softly, and I made a note to check for holes and draughts around the frame the next morning.

As I gazed at the ice, wondering how it had suddenly got so cold in the room as to elicit such an effect, I jumped back in my chair at the sight of a figure on the other side of the doors. The silhouette in the moonlight, hazy through the ice, presented as a distorted shadow projected onto the frosted glass.

'You there!' I said, with as much bluster and bravado as I could muster at short notice.
'This is trespass!'

The shadow wavered, and I was heartened as I supposed the figure must have moved at the sound of my voice. That is, until I realised that the shadow was being cast by light battling against the combination of the potted cypress and the bird bath, both of which stood at the end of the terrace and both of which were now, from my vantage point, in line with the moonlight which streamed through the windows. As I looked harder I could make out the lines of the stem, the way it flickered to and fro in the breeze. I breathed in relief, long and loud, at my tired eyes and overactive imagination.

The clock in the hallway struck midnight. The lamp fizzed, dimming slightly. I took a more generous gulp of whisky, my mind made up that it was indeed time to retire. It was when I reached to push myself from the chair that I saw it.

The shadow had moved, and this time not in the breeze as a potted cypress is apt to.

It now stood inside the French doors.

I pushed back into the chair with a leap of my heart.

The shadow – for I cannot describe it as anything but, having no discernible features – was being cast against the far wall just inside the windows, as if a man were standing between there and the lamp to my side. Of course, were a man standing inside the room to cast such a shadow, I should have been looking directly at him, but the room was empty.

Empty except for a horrible darkness in the shape of a man, bent up the wall and across the gilt picture frames, motionless.

The shadow began to waver slightly, and I realised that it had assumed a different shape. No longer a two-dimensional darkness cast against a wall, it had taken on a third dimension, and while it still stood next to the wall it simultaneously seemed to stand quite apart from it. It was as if a shadow had adopted a life of its own away from its owner, the unbound dark half of a soul.

The hairs on my arms stood, a wave of ice crystallised within me. The shape grew darker as the room grew colder, the shadow flickered in the mist of my breath. It was still vague, a black void darker than darkness. Worse, from its bearing – despite it having no features, much less eyes, I had the distinct and uneasy feeling it was looking at me.

As my mind raced to interpret the signals from my eyes, a feeling began to creep through my body. My limbs froze hard as the ground outside as a suffocating terror manifested within my muscles.

I was paralysed. I screwed my eyes shut but when I opened them the thing had moved several feet, now standing nearer the middle of the room, quite motionless. I held my breath, terrified that it would somehow see me for what I was and take exception to me in some way.

The thing remained.

It somehow seemed to radiate distilled fear in the same way a fire radiates heat. A feeling of great dread, helplessness and depression, an absence of anything good emanated from it in waves, I knew somehow that this malicious entity meant me harm. I had to get away from it but how, with my muscles unable to move?

I glanced to the door leading into the hall, and to the windows, seeking an exit route which would take me furthest from that horrible thing. When I looked back I cried aloud, for it had moved again.

The thing now stood rock still not three feet from me, though it could have been a mile away for all I could perceive of it. An indistinct darkness, a shadow upright, visible only by means of the lamp. I had the impression that if I'd doused that light, the thing would have disappeared, blending into the rest of the shadows. But I dared not, for I feared that if it could not be seen... then perhaps it could move unrestrained. Perhaps it could do more than move; now it was closer the ice had frozen me to my very core.

The clock in the hallway struck quarter past the hour. Incredibly it had somehow been fifteen minutes since the apparition had arrived and still I had not moved, and neither had it, remaining rooted to the rug.

I looked again at the door, willing my limbs to stir, and when I looked back all was darkness. The thing had shuffled closer, now immediately in front of the chair and no clearer. But there was a difference, and an extremely disconcerting one at that.

The arms were raised, outstretched, the faint blunt ends almost reaching me. My vision dimmed, I willed my mouth to open, to shout, but it was as if it were stuck. It was akin to one half-waking from a nightmare, trying to scream aloud with no movement or sound possible. I shrank back into the chair, pushing myself into the cushions. The chair scraped on the floorboards, the only sound since I'd cried out, save for the clock in the hallway whose ticking seemed to be growing louder.

The noise of the chair seemed to have broken the spell, I forced my legs to move and pushed the chair back further, increasing the distance between myself and that hideous form. It remained standing, arms out. More than ever I had the distinct impression that this thing, this

entity, this shadow, very definitely meant me harm. I also had the distinct impression that this harm would be visited upon me the next time I looked away or closed my eyes, though in what form I could not know. For how long could I wait, how long until a blink lengthened, or until sleep overtook me? I dare not find out.

I pushed back further, it did not move. Emboldened by the movement, I slid sideways from the chair, keeping my eyes on it. From the side I could see its stance, its terrible leaning gait as it reached, motionless as if cast in tallow, towards the chair.

I shuffled sideways to the door.

A sound reverberated about the room, I looked to the door involuntarily as the clock in the hall struck the half hour, and when I realised what I'd done I quickly looked back.

The shadow had moved again, now standing exactly where the chair had been, arms still raised.

I reached for the handle, opening the door slowly lest its creaking hinges awake the presence to either my location or to my having moved. A triangle of light from the hallway spilled across the rug, I carefully held the door and backed out, eyes still on the shape, which never moved.

I closed the door softly, and once free from the spell that same terror energised me into taking the stairs quicker than ever before. I sprinted to my room on the first floor, locking the door and sitting on the bed, eyes trained on the white painted wood glowing in the moonlight.

Nothing further came.

I awoke the next morning in the warmth of my bed, clothes over the stand in the corner and curtains closed. When I opened them I found the sun failing to find a break in the thick cloud, the whole landscape bathed in thick grey.

After dressing I discovered a fresh pot of tea in the dining room and cook singing to herself as she prepared breakfast, as she often had at Rockcliffe. Evidently nothing had troubled her sleep last night. I decided to keep the events to myself but as I approached the library door, cup of tea in hand, the whole affair seemed to melt from my mind. Though the meagre daylight outside was hardly deserving of the label, it nonetheless did its job of dispelling those terrible thoughts to the point where they receded almost to mere imaginings.

This was confirmed when I finally found the courage to step into the library and found the chair in its usual position. Behind it, the large book was back on the shelf, though I didn't remember replacing it.

I retreated from the library, safe in the knowledge that the events must have somehow been a form of nightmare, some waking dream, sleep paralysis or other such phenomena. As I sat to breakfast I gazed out over the waves and my thoughts, as they often do, turned once more to the safety of my brother, Alexander, out there somewhere. For where I had joined the Army in '37, he had followed my father into the Navy.

I hadn't believed in the power of thought and manifestation, but perhaps Alexander had felt my gaze on those cold evenings leading up to that filthy morning, for it was at that moment that I received a telephone call from him quite out of the blue.

He was the last person I'd expected to hear from on that wintry morn, but his voice instantly lifted me. His destroyer had survived a U-Boat attack in a convoy in the Atlantic and was undergoing repairs in Bristol of all places, and upon undertaking a surprise attack of his own on Rockcliffe and finding only news of our departure for the countryside, he'd telephoned immediately.

His injuries amounted to broken fingers and some burns gained in the service of evacuating men from afflicted areas of the ship, and though not serious, they at least afforded him the benefit of unexpected Christmas leave to recuperate in the hospitable Devonshire sea air - though quite how convalescence looking out at the Atlantic was classed as healing for a Navy man, I'm not sure. I dared not share this notion, for I was inspired at the thought of company.

Thus it was that I found myself that afternoon wrestling the big Jenson through the narrow lanes of Exmoor in driving sleet, which grew to thick snow the further I progressed inland.

Following a short drive I arrived at Mortehoe railway station, darkening under a heavy afternoon sky. It had been months since I'd last seen Alexander, and even a few days of war can permanently change a man. My brother had always been tall and athletic, school captain of both the cricket and rugby teams, but now he stooped, walking with an unusual gait - the effect, I surmised, of long periods at sea. The weight of unspoken horrors pulled at his shoulders far more than the kit bag slung across them, but anything he had witnessed was not reflected in his eyes, for they sparkled with familiarity as he climbed in beside me.

The last time we'd spent any time together was shortly after my injury at Dunkirk and subsequent transfer to the war Office. We caught each other up on the drive back, stopping at an inn south of Ilfracombe for a pie, though he could hardly touch his. I noticed when he removed his overcoat that he was thin, whereas I'd put more weight on, owing in large part to my knowledge on where to source various rationed food items in London.

When enquiring as to his journey, acquaintances in Bristol, anything about his recent days he merely mumbled. He seemed distant, confused, and disoriented, his need for recuperation was more severe than our telephone conversation had revealed. I'd seen the same in men in hospital following Dunkirk; survival does not always mean life goes on. The intense unrelenting pressure of being stalked by U-Boats had evidently taken its toll on my brother.

We talked mostly of times long past, or he listened to my tales of London while sliding his fork around his plate. It was only when we set off in the car again that he enquired about Seaward.

'It'll be a jolly enough spot come spring,' I said. 'But I don't mind telling you, in this weather, facing nothing but thick fog from every window, it can seem a rather claustrophobic place.'

'You always think anywhere other than Rockcliffe gloomy.'

'This is something else,' I replied.

'Look, I could see you were shaken while we were eating.' He contemplated for a moment as we sped between flashing hedgerows, then turned to look at me. 'What's wrong with the house?'

My brother had preceded me by three years, and so for as long as I can remember he's had insight into my thoughts and moods.

'I suppose you're right; it's just...not Rockcliffe.'

'Neither is Salisbury Place in London, but you're comfortable enough there.'

I took a breath as I changed gears to negotiate a high-hedged corner, then glanced at him. 'Alex, do you remember the east wing of school?'

'Of course,' he chuckled. 'No pupil forgets the tales of the walled-up skull...'

'The skull found in the walls was real enough, it was on display in the cabinet, but do you believe in its haunting?'

He considered for a moment before replying. ‘I believe a great many pupils thought it haunted. I’ve spent a long time at sea now, under difficult circumstances. There’s a reason seafarers are the most superstitious people on Earth. The mind is a powerful thing, and seldom to be trusted.’

‘As I recall the skull was to be laid to rest with the rest of the body, which would end the haunting. Some such nonsense anyway.’ My brother had always been the more practical of us so I continued with caution to avoid scorn. ‘But I know you don’t believe something like that could bind a soul, that something could perhaps linger on in a location.’

As usual he answered my question with a question. ‘Ahhh. Am I to take it you believe Seaward to be haunted?’

‘No...’ I accelerated down the twisting road approaching Combe Wyndham, switching up through the gears. ‘There’s just... a feeling about the place.’

‘There’s far more to worry about in this world right now than ghosts and haunted houses. Concern yourself about horrors which actually exist.’

I pressed the subject no further, and since we were now rumbling through the sleet-filled roads approaching the village I turned to playing tour guide.

Cook and housekeeper had the day off and had travelled into Barnstaple, so we unloaded Alexander’s kit bag into an empty house. I showed him up to the room at the front which I’d had made up for him, then took him into the library for a swift drink.

He shuddered as he entered. ‘I see what you mean about the place.’ He walked to the shelves, pulling at different spines and inspecting old books. ‘It’d be cheerful enough in the sun but it’s a rum looking place in this weather.’

‘I may stay on to test that theory,’ I said, tapping my bad leg. ‘Some rather good exercise to be had, with reasonable drinking at the end.’

‘Speaking of which you mentioned we’re fending for ourselves tonight – you can show me one of these inns, whichever has the largest fire and the best ale selection.’

And so we changed and walked down the hill to the village proper, I having a hearty stew and a pleasant conversation with a now-familiar barmaid of the Ship while Alexander regaled its resident fishermen with tales of the Atlantic convoys, finding kinship over deadly storms and freak waves.

I'd quite forgotten the events of the previous night, banished by the cheery inn, by ale, and by my brother's presence. But as we walked back up through those thick woods, my thoughts turned again to my experience.

I decided not to share anything, electing instead to see what happened.

And so, by design quite unknown to Alexander, we both set up station in the library clutching tumblers of father's whisky. Over the time that we'd been talking I had surreptitiously taken care to recreate the scene; I had removed that same hefty architecture book and placed it on the side table next to the Recordiola, then switched on the lamp. But despite me taking care to reconstruct everything, tonight there were three differences, all of which I considered necessary.

The first was I'd arranged for Alexander to sit in the wingback chair by the shelves. It follows that the second difference was that I'd pulled over another chair and sat ready nearby. The final difference was that I'd taken care to leave the door open, to provide as rapid an escape route as possible, should the need arise. I was by this time entirely convinced that the previous night's terror had been a nightmare, but taking precautions nonetheless. I could see through into the hall, and hear the grandfather clock near the foot of the stairs ticking inexorably towards midnight.

'I say,' said Alexander, leaning forward to interrupt my tales of blitz London, 'did you hear that?'

I shook my head, eager for him to continue.

'Mice,' he said simply. 'Probably moved in after the old fella passed. We'll go into the village tomorrow, set some good traps down before pa returns.'

I strained my ears and fancied I could hear the scratching too now.

'Throw another log on,' Alexander said.

'But the fire's blazing,' I said, shivering myself. I noticed the windows had acquired a sheen, the moon beyond appeared as if viewed through thin satin. Gradually the ice crept in from the edges as my breath fogged between us. In the corner of my eye the curtains twitched, as if moved by a breeze.

The door slammed shut, making us both jump.

Alexander chuckled, his thoughts clearly returning to our conversation that afternoon. 'A draught...by Jove!' he leapt from his chair, clutching the arm as if afraid he'd topple.

‘You see it?’ I asked, my eyes trained on the shadow.

‘I don’t know what I see,’ he said, bony fingers white on the tumbler. He placed it on the side table and straightened up. ‘A trick of the light, or...’ his voice tailed off.

Despite company I felt that same frozen dread begin to creep through my intestines, and I suspected my brother felt the same since his forehead beaded with sweat, his hand shaking on the chair arm.

He turned to look at me. ‘Freddie, this is what you alluded to earlier?’

I nodded and quickly looked back, Alexander gasped. The shadow had closed half the distance, a void in the centre of the room where colour and contrast had been turned down. It seemed to emanate terror, both my brother and I were equally frozen in fear despite the bravado of comradeship.

With effort he shuffled away from the chair. ‘Why does it not move?’

‘Come towards me,’ I said. ‘Slowly. Keep your eyes upon it.’

He did so, and gradually we moved around the perimeter of the room, not taking our eyes from the abomination. Only when we reached the door did I look at Alexander, and realised he was looking at me with horror-filled eyes. I panicked and looked back at the room, only to see the shadow had mercifully moved away from us and now stood alongside the chair in the corner.

I touched Alexander’s arm and pointed. ‘It walks from the windows to the bookcase.’

He opened the door. ‘I cannot stay in this room any longer. The dread I feel...’

I was only too happy to leave the room, and did so. We closed the door softly and conducted a tactical retreat along the hall.

‘Such cold as I’ve never felt,’ said Alexander. ‘But that...thing...I cannot explain what that might be.’

‘It penetrates your soul,’ I agreed. ‘I would previously have welcomed an experience such as this, I have always had a fascination in the occult but now, I cannot explain the feeling...’

He nodded. ‘That thing, whatever it was, very definitely has malicious purpose,’ said Alexander.

We sat in the dining room, watching the hallway carefully, discussing what we had experienced. With some admonishment for keeping things from him, he asked me to explain

the previous night's occurrence. I did so, explaining that it had seemed the only way to truly know that I had not dreamt the whole thing, and gradually we recovered sufficiently to begin to doubt that we had actually seen anything still, exploring theories of shared hallucinations and suchlike before retiring to bed.

Despite seeking plausible and Earthly explanations, neither of us had wanted to step foot in that room again before going up.

The following morning I breakfasted alone. I'd found a note from Alexander to explain that he'd left early with a head full of ideas, so before lunch I walked down to the village to call on an RAF officer on leave at the nearby Wyndale Hotel. We dined then persuaded an elderly couple to join us for a few hands of bridge before strolling along the piled sandbags on the promenade. We walked round by the old manor house which I noted had been requisitioned by an evacuated Bristol school, somewhat vindicating my father's decision to move from that city, though how I wished fate had dealt us that building instead.

By the time I'd left to walk back up to the house darkness was creeping through the trees. My heart began to beat a little faster as I neared Seaward, the reprieve of daylight was temporary, giving way to the terror of night to come.

I found cook had prepared an excellent dish of Clovelly herring, and learned from our housekeeper than my mother and father would be returning to Devonshire in two days' time. Alexander and I had agreed not to share any information with the staff lest their superstitious minds lead them to desert. We had not yet decided on what, if anything, we would tell our parents.

I dined alone that evening just as at breakfast, then busied myself with a pack of playing cards in the sitting room, until I was about to go up to bed when Alexander finally returned.

He was drenched to the marrow in his waxed overgarments, blue with cold, but his eyes shone with the delight of untold knowledge, which he assured me he would impart forthwith.

As he hustled from his ragged overcoat he told me he'd had a fruitful day hunting down information, some of which I guessed was to be found in the cardboard tube tucked beneath his arm.

'You see I had to leave before sunrise,' he said, 'in order to catch those trawermen before they went out.'

‘Really, you’re supposed to be convalescing, which in your case surely involves some measure of staying away from the sea.’

‘I always tell you to take anything any seaman says with a pinch of salt,’ he shrugged off a scarf and hung it by the door, ‘But there is a healthy medium to be found if one marries these tales to experience.’

‘And what tales did you hear?’

‘Did you know this house’s previous owner – a man by the name of Mr Edward Montagu, though I don’t suppose that matters – did not, in fact, pass away?’

‘I have heard the name, of course. But the place has stood empty, hence his relatives let the place to pa?’

‘Ah, well I should clarify. Two years ago the sole beneficiary of Mr Edward Montagu – his brother, since he had never married nor had children – applied via the Cestui que Vie Act 1666 to have him declared dead. Presumed in absentia since seven years prior to that, in the winter of 1931, Mr Edward Montagu simply vanished.’

‘Vanished?’

Alexander picked up the cardboard tube, waving it to punctuate his sentences. ‘The man was somewhat a recluse, an eccentric and sullen one at that, and so was not missed from the village for some time. Further, he often travelled north to visit his brother at short notice without informing his staff of his intentions. They continued working for a week before Edward’s brother telephoned to enquire as to his health. Well naturally the staff put two and two together and called the police in.’

‘They found no trace?’

‘Not a thing. But understand this – they found no evidence to suggest he had ever left Seaward at all. No clothes or effects missing, his cases still in their place. No cab man, no witness, no inn along any route in any direction. The staff had left him one evening, and in the morning there was no trace.’

‘Were his bank accounts used? The man was evidently wealthy enough to disappear should he be so inclined.’

‘His bank accounts, investments, portfolio of properties and business interests, all untouched. There was one strange thing. All jewellery – there were several familial pieces, rather a horde of hereditary items – were never found, *have never been* found.’

‘But the family must have accessed the house, searched...’

Alexander held up a hand. ‘Of course a simpler explanation is that, once Montagu’s disappearance became known to the servants, one or more of them – fearing unemployment – simply secreted the stuff away. In any case, despite searches, nothing was ever recovered.’

‘There’s a simpler explanation,’ I said with a wry smile. ‘Mr Montagu took his more liquid assets and fled. Was he in debt? Business trouble? Taxes? Or something to do with the war, perhaps those precious items found their way to Germany or elsewhere?’

‘I’m merely recounting the facts as told to me,’ he said. ‘We may stand here and put forward any number of theories.’

‘Doubtless your seafaring friends have their own?’

‘Of course.’ Alexander smiled. ‘Jenny Greenteeth and water demons and so on. But they were all sure of one thing. The last person to see Mr Montagu was his valet, at close to midnight,’ he grinned at me then looked at the clock. ‘But we must hurry, it is nearly midnight now.’

‘I am not going in there!’ I said. ‘I have suffered that apparition twice now. I’m not sure anything could entreat me to make it a third.’

‘Terrified we may have been, but we were not harmed. We will stand by the door. Come quickly, and I’ll tell you the rest of the tale.’

‘No fear. Tell me the rest of the tale and I’ll make up my own mind. Or by all means, explore your theories yourself while I wait out here.’

‘I’ll only tell if you come inside the library. Look, it’s a minute to midnight.’

His excitable manner intrigued me – he’d been just as scared as me last night but it was now thoroughly dispelled. Whatever he carried in that cardboard tube was worth seeing.

‘Very well, but I am standing by the open door. With a foot in it, in case it decides to close again.’

‘As you wish.’ He led the way, and resumed his tale. ‘Well his valet left him here,’ he opened the door to the library,’ in that chair shortly before midnight, but when he checked a short time later before retiring Montagu was not here, nothing but the remains of a fire in the grate, a half-finished glass of whisky, and a book on the table.’

‘So Montagu had gone to bed?’

‘As the staff thought.’ Alexander switched on the table lamp. ‘But upon examination his bed had not been slept in. No, whatever happened to cause Mr Montagu to vanish from the Earth happened in this room.’

‘One suspects it has to do with our visitor.’

Alexander positioned the cardboard tube on the chair and hurried back to the door. ‘I have a theory, which I am about to test.’

I positioned myself as close to the wall as I could, eyes trained on the French doors.

The room was cold, our breath fogged. The lamp on the table fizzed with static and dimmed slightly and there, in the corner, the shadow stood, patiently waiting.

The terror I’d previously felt returned with a jolt so fierce I almost bolted from the room. I would have, but my feet were rooted to the spot. The horror of proximity to that shape was palpable, my brother felt it too, I could hear him breathing deeply, steeling himself.

‘It emits such a sense of dread,’ he whispered, voice breaking into a quiet stutter. ‘I have never felt such terror, such...’

‘The complete absence of good.’ I noticed his hands were trembling.

He clenched them and inhaled sharply. ‘It moves only when unseen,’ he continued. ‘Close your eyes.’

‘But...’

‘Terrifying this apparition may be, it did not harm us.’

‘Perhaps we gave it no reason to.’

He closed his eyes. ‘Close your eyes for one second.’

I did, and when I opened them I saw the shadow had indeed moved, as we suspected it might – but this time it had not moved toward us. Rather, it had continued the course of previous nights, towards the chair in the corner.

‘See there,’ Alexander whispered. ‘The thing is not here for us.’

We closed our eyes again, and this time it had moved to within a foot of the chair.

‘The shelves,’ whispered Alexander. ‘Always the shelves.’

‘A particular book?’ I said.

‘We shall see.’

He asked me to look away, and when I looked back the thing had returned to the middle of the room.

‘It hovered about the shelves,’ said Alexander, ‘before moving away again.’

‘We are in uncharted territory,’ I said, only too aware that we had previously fled prior to this point. ‘Let’s leave.’

A book slid and dropped from the shelf of its own accord, as if to challenge me to move.

I looked at the shadow with no small amount of trepidation and realised it was standing now square on to us. The lack of features made it impossible to be sure, but the way it had stopped, it was as if it were watching us.

I slid sideways along the wall, eager to leave the room.

‘Be gone!’ Alexander took a step forward. ‘Leave this place.’

The shadow did not move.

Alexander took another step, his hands clenched white by his sides. ‘Leave us!’ he said, louder this time.

The shadow seemed to shimmer like heat above a summer lane.

‘It does not come for us,’ Alexander said from the side of his mouth, eyes still trained on the thing. ‘Turn away.’

I closed my eyes and instantly heard Alexander gasp. ‘Keep your eyes closed, it will not move while you watch but it moves now. Listen to me, keep them shut.’

I could hear Alexander moving back towards the door.

‘It comes closer,’ he said. ‘Do not move an inch!’

I felt an intense cold as I’ve never felt, coursing through me in waves.

‘Now it’s going. Be gone! Leave us in peace, for God’s sake! Freddie it’s leaving, it is no more.’

I opened my eyes. The windows showed the moon clearly, condensation ran down the glass as warmth returned.

‘We’re quite safe now.’ Alexander was already by the chair, cardboard tube in hand. ‘It will not come back.’

‘How did you know it’d leave?’ I asked.

‘It doesn’t come for us, it has a different purpose.’ He opened a cap from one end of the tube and took out a roll of papers.

I pointed at the papers. ‘It comes for that?’

‘I was away so long today because I’ve been up to the city. After I spoke with the trawermen I took a cab to Barnstaple and the train to Bristol.’ He unrolled the papers.

‘To what end?’ I persisted. ‘What are these?’

‘I went to see the land agent about the property.’ He spread the papers on the floor, I could see they were structural diagrams for Seaward. ‘These are copies of the plans he had in his sale file. What do you notice?’

I looked at the plan and orientated myself. ‘I see the library here,’ I traced my finger along the hall and through the doorway. ‘It looks as though another window has been added?’

‘No doubt during the building to take better advantage of the morning sun. But look here,’ he jabbed a finger on the back wall of the room.

‘I’m not sure what you’re getting at.’

‘How long is this room?’ he asked.

‘I’d say,’ I looked from one end to the other, ‘a good 20 feet or so.’

‘23, if you take the shelves into account’ he said, always more accurate and more particular than I. ‘But look here.’

The diagram gave the length of the room as 30 feet.

‘They altered the plans?’

‘No.’ He traced a finger on the doorway and pointed at the wall. ‘See there is the door in the correct place, and the hallway and room beyond correspond.’ He stood and walked to the chair, moving it away from the shelves. He then began to take books from them, placing them on the floor. ‘This is where we heard scratching sounds. Aha!’

There was a click and a section of shelves moved outwards an inch.

‘A secret room?’ I exclaimed. ‘This wall of shelves is a partition wall.’

I jumped to my feet, thoughts of ghosts and horrors temporarily banished by this new adventure.

He swung the shelf away to reveal a large safe door. ‘And here, I fancy, are those lost heirlooms.’

He took the handle and pulled it down, the well machined hinges swung open soundlessly. Musty air swirled out.

‘It was not locked,’ I said with a cough.

‘I suspect we know the reason why not.’

As the door swung open further light from the lamp penetrated the darkness, revealing what we already knew.

There, prostrate on the floor, lay the skeletal remains of Mr Edward Montagu, fingers outstretched at the safe door, clawing his way towards help that never arrived.

Behind him on metal shelves and a table sat several jewellery boxes, through which I confess Alexander and I could not help having a swift peek, purely to satisfy our curiosity. I confess also, upon seeing the diamond rings in one box, to having the briefest notion of taking a discoverer’s fee for myself, one which would easily pay my outstanding club fees and gaming dues back in London – but we softly closed everything and retired, resolving to telephone the police the next morning, since there being some nine years or so since Mr Montagu’s death, there’s didn’t seem to be sufficient urgency to call them out tonight.

This morning was an unusually bright and sunny one, sparkling the crests of the dark waves in the bay below. The weather had lifted in concert with my heart. I breakfasted alone again and then, eager to get started, went up to rouse my brother.

I found only a tidy bed and no trace of him. Presuming he had left early again, I decided to take it upon myself to call the police. Braving the crisp air with only a sporting jacket I strolled the short distance to the police office in the village to make my report.

I will not relate all details save for the fact that the police investigation has so far been painless for all involved. Montagu’s brother was happy to have the family mystery solved, but rather happier, one suspects, to be in possession of the familial horde. The jewellery was boxed, itemised, and taken away pending the coroner’s inquest next week and subsequently to be distributed to the appropriate beneficiaries.

I was told a post-mortem was quite impossible given the body’s state of decay, but the coroner and detective agreed that Montagu appeared to have passed from natural causes – either a buildup of noxious gases, dehydration, or failure of the heart. Scratches on the inside of

the door showed where Montagu had desperately clawed at the exit, demonstrating his being alive for some time while entombed in the safe.

The man's former valet was tracked to a house in Tiverton, and a swift telephone conversation revealed two details which had not seemed important at the time of the original missing persons investigation. The first; it being only the valet's second month in the role, and him having no knowledge of the safe. Indeed Mr Montagu had been a recluse, and the staff tracked and questioned thus far have shown he trusted this knowledge to no-one, it seems.

The second pertinent fact was that when the valet had come in to see Mr Montagu to bed and found the room empty - Montagu being at that time inside the safe, whose door was only the slightest fraction ajar - he had tidied round, switching off the lamp and arranging the chair back by the shelf. In this manner he had inadvertently pushed the shelf closed against the safe door, in turn closing it, sealing the safe shut. I had noted that the interior door surface sported no handle.

One can only imagine Montagu's anguished pleas for help, falling muffled onto an empty room. His mistrust of his staff had been his undoing; if he had only shared this knowledge the valet may have been aware, or at the very least the safe would have been checked when his disappearance arose.

I did not, of course, inform the police of Montagu's desperate scratchings which we had heard, nor of the thing we had seen, the nature which Alexander and I had debated long into the night.

He was firmly of the opinion that the thing had been the man's damned soul, returning night after night to claim its body, perhaps enlisting our support in its sinister mission. He cited the instance of the skull found in the wall at our old school, the haunting of which stopped when the skull was finally laid to rest in hallowed ground.

I myself was of a different opinion entirely; that the thing had been the Reaper, come to collect.

The day was passed quickly, with police statements and investigators tramping through the house. I took the opportunity for a stroll ending with a late lunch at The Ship, and so it was not until early evening, when all had departed, that I finally returned to Seaward.

There was one new letter on the stand by the door, which I tore open too quickly to realise it had been addressed to my father, rather than to me.

I instantly recognised the type of letter, for I have written several myself. I suspect by now you have guessed its contents, so I will not relate them word for word, but instead summarise in a couple of sentences.

My brother, Alexander, had been killed two days ago mid-Atlantic in a U-Boat attack on his convoy. Due to the obvious need for secrecy it had not been possible to report this fact until the present time, when the surviving ships and crew members had reached port at Bristol.

I dashed upstairs to find his room exactly as I'd last seen it, made up and immaculate. I immediately summoned the cook and housekeeper, who testified that they had in fact not seen Alexander at all these past days.

I telephoned the land agent at Bristol, who repudiated the notion that he had met with Alexander yesterday, but did note that the plans to Seaward were, regrettably, missing from his files. I jumped in the Jenson, quickly rushing to Combe Wyndham at the foot of the hill where I interrogated the barmaid of The Ship. Yes, she remembered our chat the night before last but no, she could not remember any other man with me, nor could the trawlermen recall having met a Navy man. The big Jenson tore up the miles to Ilfracombe, where I pulled in at the tavern we'd stopped at on the way home. The landlord there remembered me well enough as the man who'd ordered two meat pies and only eaten one, while seemingly conversing with himself.

And so it was that I returned to Seaward some half an hour ago to begin recording this message, while the shock of this news is fresh, and while the words of those who I had spoken to could not be remoulded in my mind by the passing of another night in this foul place.

Having recounted the tale from the beginning, it is now my firm belief that my brother appeared to assist me in my time of need. I have no doubt that the moment of his telephone call that morning was his moment of passing, and that something had held him here, bound to this world, to me, to steer me from danger.

I only wish I could have discussed matters with him, so many questions, so many things to say before he went. But I recall now how confused he had been when I'd asked after his journey down on the train, how he could not speak of certain events that had happened in the last day or so, his general mumbling malaise. He had not himself understood his fate.

I also recall how the thing in this room had not moved while I gazed upon it, but had moved freely when I'd looked away. I'd felt its presence, close, but it had moved off at my brother's command. A guardian of sorts, a force stronger than the dark energies temporarily

occupying this room. Had he protected me from some ill manifestation, some demon or dreadful spirit?

What's...

No... We were wrong!

That face! Montagu!

Dear God! It crawls!

At this point in the recording loud banging sounds are heard, which would correspond with the items of furniture that were found overturned.

Montagu! Stay back!

Mr Howard can be heard banging on the door, though examination by officers found it to be unlocked and in fine working order.

Help me, help damn you!

No! Take back your damn ring, and return to hell!

At this point screams are heard, along with garbled noise. The recording ends shortly after midnight.

It is noted that Captain Alfred 'Freddie' Howard was found on the floor of the library just inside the doorway.

In his hand he was clutching a single diamond ring, subsequently found to belong to the estate of the late Mr Edward Montagu.

Cause of death is unknown at this stage.

D.L Marshall won a northern writers' award in 2018 for what would become his debut novel *Anthrax Island*.

Its sequel *Black Run* was a Times book of the month, and the third book in the trilogy *77 North* was longlisted for the 2024 CWA's Ian Fleming Steel Dagger Award.

He has written extensively for award-winning docu-drama podcasts and had numerous short stories published.

He is represented by Phillip Patterson at Marjacq, and lives in Yorkshire with his partner and children.

Praise for the John Tyler trilogy

Think Alistair MacLean, but turbo-charged

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Grabs the attention like a fire alarm and never gives up

The Times

Absolutely thrilling stuff... the go-to in a new-wave of thriller writers

The Scottish Sun

If James Bond came from Yorkshire... a breathless roller-coaster journey

Sheffield Telegraph