

The Drowning Puddle

A Carnacki the Ghost Finder tale by J Patrick Allen

I had received an invitation from Carnacki to join him at his home for a luncheon. Rarely seeing my friend so often during the day I accepted and arrived at the prescribed time. We shared a quiet meal of soup and cheeses, he and I, before repairing to the study.

“What is the special occasion?” I asked as he poured me a coffee from a silver pot.

“I arrived home from a red light séance this morning,” he said. “Late. I thought I should very much like to collect my thoughts and enjoy an early meal.”

With that small preamble he invited me to sit and launched into his tale.

“You’ve doubtless heard the name Peter Borrowych of the Clerkenwell Borrowyches. Yes, I can see it in your eyes. What you may not have heard is that Borrowych has been having a devil of a time keeping servants in his employ. I had not heard this myself until I arrived at his house at nine o’clock last night for a small party and séance.

“The house in question is along a particularly flush stretch of Farringdon. He threw a rousing party, and the company was delightful. The small hiccup in the evening began when we were finishing our meals. Normally, this would have been the cue for Borrowych’s man Wincelas to step in and begin the process of clearing away the course for the next meal, but he did not arrive. Indeed, Wincelas had vanished entirely when Miss Starling had sent for a particular wine from Borrowych’s cellar.

“Borrowych became very understandably cross, but I must tip my hat for the man did not shout nor scream. Indeed, he held onto his patience rather longer than I might have. At the time when the dinner guests were beginning to grumble our gracious host picked up a small bell with which to call his man and gave it a slight ring.

“All eyes watched the door expectantly, but when no sight of Wincelas became evident Borrowych deigned to call out.

“Wincelas!” he called. And still there was no response. Finally Borrowych excused himself from the table. This was when Captain Pevensy leaned over to inform me of the run on servants Borrowych had been experiencing.

“Three in the last two weeks alone. Jove, but you would never think the conditions here so bad. It was in such a state that our man Borrowych was brought low to go hunting for his manservant during a party. I pitied the man, but we thought very little else of it until we heard the scream.

“I stood immediately and ran to help and quite naturally the chatty dinner party followed, doubtless looking for new gossip. The hideous sound of the scream came from an open door leading down into the black of the house’s cellar. I ventured down the stairs, seeing the wan light of a hand torch. From below you could still hear the sound of Borrowych crying out. ‘Wincelas! Wincelas, no!’

“There in the cellar we found him. Borrowych had sunk to his knees at the far end of the chamber and seemed to be sobbing to the floor. When I went over to the man I saw he had collapsed by a shallow puddle of water, no deeper than a hair’s breadth.

“Jove, what is it?” I asked him.

“Borrowych pointed to the puddle. ‘Something has dragged Wincelas to his death. I saw him thrashing in the water, gasping for air!’

“Despite the premise of my presence in the house tonight, some heard his claim and there were dubious looks passed among the lot of them. One callous fellow went so far as to laugh, if only to himself.

“Now in the absence of such noise some unconscious part of my mind started to feel something queer about the room. As you know I always keep an open mind, and it was this that allowed me to detect something unsettling. It was enough to raise the hair on the back of my neck.

“Borrowych, come come. Yes, that’s a good man. Tell me, how many servants have you lost?”

“Since I’ve moved to this house? Eight, sir. They always leave without telling me why.”

“Eight indeed, I thought to myself. Borrowing his hand torch I began to make a full inspection of the place. With the help of the others we managed to turn the cellar upside down in no time. It was then that I began to find certain articles: A cuff-link here, or a bracelet there. Jewelry or personal effects, nothing quite expensive but all of it likely dear to the one to whom it belonged.

“Many of these effects could be found along the wall where I would find leaks of water seeping through the bricks. There were not always puddles of water, but I stepped in enough to feel suspect. Each leak, each puddle was only found along the southern edge of the cellar.

“At last, unable to find more and all of us feeling quite tired, we began to leave. Our most gracious host saw each man and woman up the stairs with a quiet gravity and dignity. I was nearly at the door myself when I heard another shout of surprise from Borrowych. Looking down the stairs I could see a great wisp of lambent mist.

“I rushed down the stairs to join him, only to see an apparition most gruesome in appearance reach out from the mist. She – for it could only have been a woman – grabbed Borrowych by the wrist and dragged him deeper into the cellar, toward the southern wall. The creature was all skeletal, dangling with rotted flesh and rotted white dress and veil flapping in the still air.

“I grabbed him by his free hand and pulled against her, but her bony claws sunk deep into his arm and dragged with inhuman strength. I called for help from those above and heard the rush of footsteps as the rest of the dinner party joined the fray. There were gasps of terror and trills of fright from some of the women present but two men, Captain Winslope and Mister Hawthorne, formed a chain behind me and started pulling.

“We ceded inch after inch to the rotting horror however, and soon she began to drag Borrowych beneath the depths of the pool at the far end of the room as though it were an ordinary pond.

“I ordered the others to brace their feet and I did so as well. We hauled, hard, watching Borrowych’s face vanish beneath the surface of the water. And then there was hope. Two more men from the party joined the line and pulled. Inch by straining inch we retrieved our host from the water’s ab-natural depths. The ghost released her prey at last and the six of us flew back in a mighty pile, Borrowych landing atop as king of the hill, soaking wet and stinking like a sewer.

“The creature gave a distant wail of despair as she sank below the surface of the puddle, and soon all was quiet but for the sound of our huffing and of Borrowych’s terrified gibbering.

“The chiming of the hour saw the entire dinner party upstairs surrounding our host. He sat in his chair, a blanket wrapped around him, while I thrust a cup of tea (and a splash of whisky) into his hands.

“I silenced the room and their questions, and we watched while Borrowych drank the tea. At last the hot drink and fine liquor worked their magic upon his system and he ceased his shaking. He looked me in the eyes, seeming to have aged ten years, and asked me ‘What the devil was that thing?’

“That is what I would very much like to know,” I told him. And then I asked, ‘Your servants, have they all left at night?’

“Without warning, yes. At night all of them.”

“I stroked my chin, casting an eye to the kitchen where the door to the dread cellar stood. ‘I think we may safely assume that this creature has absconded with the majority of your servants, though some may merely have been chased away. And no word of this has ever reached your ears?’

“Borrowych shook his head, staring into his empty cup. ‘Some of the servants expressed discomfort in the house to Wincelas shortly after being hired, but he would scold them for fools and days later they would simply vanish. It was perplexing.’

“How long has this been going on?” I asked him.

“Oh, perhaps six months? I began to lose my old house staff, and then went to the hassle of

hiring new staff. Jove! Poor Wincelas. He served my family since I was a boy.`

“After questioning Borrowych I set a plan to order. I had one of the guests bring me a good length of rope from the house’s tools, and I hailed a cab to retrieve my own usual instruments from home, so necessary to the preservation of life and spirit. Upon my return we secured one end of the rope about my waist and the other end to the banister at the top of the stairs. Thus protected I set about creating a chalk circle around the puddle and making within it the signs of the Saaamaaa Ritual. I lit my candles and smudged thoroughly with garlic, but at the end of it I did not utilize my electric pentacle. I realized to do so would be more hazardous to the living than the dead, owing to the sopping nature of the space being warded against.

“I stayed for a few hours in the dark of the cellar and watched. About one o’clock the mist began to rise again, and I heard that distant mournful call. She rose again from the water and attempted to glide toward me. It was only my own efforts at abjuration that saved my life, I tell you now. She was confined at once to the space within the pentacles. It was only when she was thus contained that I got a good look at her.

“The apparition was reduced to rotted bones and mangled flesh. The dress and veil would once have been white but now bore deep brown and yellow stains, and by Jove she stunk. The smell crossed the barriers and filled the room with the impression of fish and sewage. But I recognized her for what she might have once been. She was a rotting bride.

“Satisfied that she was thus contained I took some pictures for my own edification and put the camera away, retreating upstairs to catch at least a few hours of sleep. In the morning I gave orders to Borrowych to bring in an army of men with shovels and pick axes.

“`Why on earth would you need that?’ he asked me.

“`Our spirit’s manifestation indicates she is much older than the house you occupy, and I suspect that we will find something beneath the floor of the cellar that will reveal all.`

“When I arrived in the cellar to check on the pentacles I found that the circle was quite empty. Supposing the creature temporarily retreated to the dimension from whence she came I began to inspect the wall by the circles. I only noticed the way the creep of water had broken my chalk lines a mere moment before the fog arose again.

“With a cry of fury the spectral bride grasped for me from within a mote of mist. It was only my natural quickness which kept me from the same fate suffered by Wincelas and the rest of Borrowych’s household staff. I retreated up the stairs to await the fullness of daylight and the arrival of the hired men.

“So it was, early this morning, that men hauled brick and dirt away from the wall and the floor. It was only two or three feet down that we discovered a passageway running beneath the house. And from that passageway came the stink of sewage and the sound of fast flowing water.

“Of course! Yes, it was the River Fleet buried beneath Farringdon some years ago for our own protection. When the sun still shone upon it, it was not unheard of for murderers to hide their deeds by casting the bodies into the river. And so I suspected it was the case here, a murder committed long ago by men who might not even survive today. I climbed down into the river passage with a hand torch and cast the light about, searching for something which might cause manifestation of one of the Aeiirii.

“I waded ankle deep into the fetid waters and at last found what I was looking for. Six months ago it must have snagged against a jagged brick and come to a rest. It was the mere bones of a hand, the flesh and clothing long since rotted away. But something remained glinting in the dark beneath our very feet – a golden ring. I took the ring and presented it to Borrowych, ordering him to have the bones burnt to ash and the ring melted down immediately. Secure in the knowledge that he would have the problem eliminated I came home to catch a last few hours of sleep and perhaps a bite with a good friend.”

Carnacki smiled at me upon that and I lifted my glass to him in salute.

“And you’re sure that will eliminate the problem,” I asked him.

He fixed me with a dubious glare. “This is not mere superstition Dodgson. This is science. As long as he followed my orders he will never be troubled by the creature again. Alas, if only he’d

thought to call me beforehand we might have saved many more lives.”

At the end of our conversation Carnacki saw me to the door. We shook hands and exchanged our farewells with promise to meet again soon. As I left his residence I thought to myself, “What an incredibly sad story, to be killed on your wedding day and be left for all eternity seeking the ones who deprived you of such joy.”

c. J Patrick Allen 2015