

## The Curse of the Witch

The talk had veered round to runes and curses and witches, one bleak December evening, where a few of us sat warm in easy chairs round the cheery fire of the Billiards Club.

"Do you believe in witches?" one of us said to Jorkens.

"It isn't what I believe in that matters so much," said Jorkens; "only what I have seen."

"Have you seen one?" the other man asked.

"I know how they work," he said.

"And how do they work?" we asked him.

"Well," Jorkens said, "I want to be strictly accurate. I had once a fairly good glimpse of how one of them worked, but I can't say more than that. Different witches in different countries may perhaps have various methods. And yet I doubt it: I imagine they travel more than we suppose, and meet and talk many things over. Many a blackened patch under a hedgerow may have been a meeting place for queer discussions, and the comparing of strange notes. But who knows? Who knows?"

And somehow I feared that Jorkens was about to drift from the particular to the general, and though he might have had much to say on that that could have been instructive, yet we should have got no story. "You met a witch once, Jorkens?" I asked.

"I didn't meet her," said Jorkens. "She had probably been dead three hundred years when I chanced upon her locality. But I certainly met something of her work."

And without any further stimulus of any sort from

me he gave us his story. "It's a curious thing, when I was young," he said, "there used to come on me at times an instinct such as some birds have. Swallows I mean, corncrakes, cuckoos and all those. I felt driven southwards, felt that I must migrate. So one day I started South, and kept on till I came to Spain, walking mostly. All through France, and on foot through the Pyrenees. And one day I came to a village that somehow seemed right. Nothing there jarred on me, the roofs of the small houses comforted me, quaint chimneys seemed to beckon; little old doorways looked as though in a moment that was almost trembling to come, they would break into wooden green smiles. Over it hung the lazy sunshine of Spring, on which hawks balanced lightly, and whither went up the sound of bells from below. It almost seemed to be roofed and sheltered by sunlight and fading vibrations of bells, interlaced in a dome. That's how it seemed to me, and something at once soothed my restlessness, and I went to an inn and stayed. Probably the roofs of barns in some quiet valley have the same hold on a wandering swallow. One can't say what it is.

"The inn was of course uncomfortable, I didn't mind that; the only thing I minded was that as the night went on, and a large moon rose and I wanted to get to sleep, the most infernal howling of dogs began. The room that I had been given by the old couple that owned the inn looked out from the edge of the village over a lonely moorland, and a mile away over the hills and hollows of this wild country I could see the black shape of a large house, from which the melancholy uproar came. I could not have believed that it was so far, for the sound seemed almost underneath my window, but the old inn-keeper that showed me up to my room said, at the first howl, 'The hounds in the Casa Viljeros.' And he pointed with his hand out of the window to the dark shape of the house. I asked no more about it then, for my curiosity had not been aroused and excited; it sounded no more at first than the ordinary baying of hounds that

are a little disturbed or uneasy before they sleep; and so the old man left me and went downstairs and I knew no more than the name of the dark house where there were hounds. Through sleepless hours while the baying of these hounds rose into long howls, I wished a hundred times that I had questioned him, as far as my Spanish would go. There was a horror in knowing nothing. Even the strange story I got next day, perhaps even the whole story, which I shall never know, might have made that night less horrible. It was hearing those cries going up from some terror of which I knew nothing, that made it worse than if I had known the cause. For it was from some terror that those hounds were howling; one after another they spoke with little uneasy yelps, drawn out at last into one long wavering howl. Had it been human beings shouting a mile away one could not have heard their words, and might well have been in the dark as to what they debated among them; but those that have not any words in their language are not to be so mistaken, and their tones when they speak are as clear to Englishman or to Spaniard as to whatever roves on soft feet through open moors in the night. So there I sat all night listening to terror, and never knowing what the terror was. It was no use trying to sleep, for it was not only the noise that kept me awake: had words that I could not understand been shouted, however close, I should have got to sleep in time. But when one's understanding is involved, when one knows the message but knows not why it is sent, then wonder awakes and all one's mind is active. At first in the silence that followed the long howls I thought they had finished and that the terror was over; but always as soon as a few seconds had passed a low whimper would come quavering over the moor, then another, and then another a little louder, and then again the long cry burdened with terror. Separate voices at first, and I even tried to count them; but an hour or so after midnight, as though their forebodings had gathered force and accumulated, the yelps and whimperings all drew

together, and rippled into a howl in which every voice was wailing. Nothing stirred on the grey moor, nobody entered or left the dark house; the hounds howled on and on, voicing their fear of a mystery to which I had no key. And even when dawn at last lifted a little of the weight of foreboding, by changing the shape of the scene over which it had brooded so long, bringing hills into view that one had not seen before, and taking away a frown from the faces of others; even then the terrified hounds, though weary of howling, were whimpering mournfully in the early light.

“What was it? What was that terror of which they told so unmistakably? Before bright morning came I may have slept a little; however that be, as soon as the old man called me, and afterwards as I had breakfast with him and his wife, I asked him for all he could tell of the house called Casa Viljeros; and on the evening of the same day I talked to the Americans who had bought the house, sitting for an hour with them over a few cocktails at the hotel in the town ten miles away, and getting from them pretty well all they knew; and I talked a bit with the gardener at the house; I got everybody’s story except that of the Viljeros family, who from the old Marquis downwards would say never a word. And from all I heard I put this tale together.

“Nobody knew the age of Casa Viljeros. It was not like an English house, of which people say Queen Anne, Queen Elizabeth, or King Stephen: nobody knew. And the family of Viljeros was far older than the house. Their grand old motto stood out in stone over the door, ‘Never the Moors.’ It meant that the Moors should never hold Spain; and whatever topic the family might discuss, especially if they talked of the Government’s policy, as they sometimes did in the evening, the old Marquis nearly always brought it round to that policy of his family, often ending the discussion for the night with the very words of the motto. And the time came, so the gardener said, when all the money was gone. The Marquis had little concerned himself with it when it was

there, and could hardly believe it was not there: the wealth of a hidalgo seemed too natural to boast of, even in thought, and too much a part of his natural state to be gone while he still lived. And yet it was gone.

“But that his very house should go, and such a house as Casa Viljeros, was to him so utterly terrible, that he did not sell it as other men sell their houses, showing which is the key of the front door and which the key of the cellar, but kept one thing untold.

“And the Americans came, the family of Stolger. The business must have been done mostly by letter, for when first the gardener saw them they came into the house and the old family went out after little more than an hour. There were six of them, Gateward Stolger and his wife, Hendrik the eldest son, about twenty-five, two daughters and Easel, a boy of about sixteen. They all walked into the house; and there was the old Marquis, still there with his daughters, clinging to the home to the very last moment. Gateward Stolger had once seen the house from the outside, years ago on a holiday; but none of the Stolgers had ever been inside it. The money had been paid and the queer hurried bargain concluded, and nothing remained to be done but to show the new owners the way upstairs, and to tell them which was the boudoir and which was the library, and one other thing, that was never told them. The Stolgers had bought it lock, stock and barrel; furniture, sheets and everything; and had the idea of hunting there during the winter, and had brought their own hounds with them, the hounds I heard.

“And so the old hidalgo showed them round, with a great sombre politeness. They went from room to room; and, whatever glamour was hoarded there for the ancient Spanish family, the Americans saw none they would care to sit in till they came to the great library. Against this they could say nothing, indeed for some moments they could not speak at all; that splendid piece of the past merely held them spellbound. Evening was coming on and the room was dim: down the middle of

the long room you saw the gloaming, and on either side the darkness of old carved wood and great shadows; it passed through the mind of one of them that they looked on a piece of the very history of Spain set in a strange darkness. One more room the old Marquis showed them, and that was all. And then the eldest of his two daughters spoke to him. 'Won't you tell them about . . . ?' she said.

" 'Oh, yes,' he said at once, 'the laundry.' And he began to tell the Americans where that was; and the daughter said no more; and yet there remained an expectancy on her face, a listening to every word that her father said, a hope each time he spoke that he was about to tell the new owners what she wanted. They all went out into the old walled garden then, and it was on one of its narrow paths while passing by a clump of old boles of quince, among which the gardener was working (as much as he ever did), that the Marquis dropped behind and said to his daughter: 'All that it is necessary for him to know about the house I shall tell him.'

"And she said, 'But, Father, you must tell him about the curse.'

" 'No,' he said in such a way that she might have seen that further words were useless, 'we have borne it for ten generations, so they can now.'

" 'Wel' she said. 'But we are of steel, steel of Toledo. How will they ever . . . ' but he would have no more of it: he was hit too hard by the loss of Casa Viljeros to be capable of ordinary right sympathies; and his daughter saw that she could do nothing more for the strangers that were so light-heartedly entering her home. And the other daughter dared say nothing at all. If any more was said there is no trace of it.

"That evening with the last of the light the Viljeros family lumbered away in a wonderful old carriage, and the Americans entered the house with a few servants, and the hounds arrived and were well enough housed in the stables.

“They had dinner cheerily enough, but for the gradual approach of a certain uneasiness; and then they went to sit in the long library, which was lighted now by nearly a gross of candles. For a little while they walked round the room, looking at the faces of the satyrs carved on great chests and cupboards, and wondering what romances slept through the ages wrapped in their blackened leather along the shelves. But soon they found that they were going on tip-toe, and knew from this they were offending against the hush, and sat down and spoke in whispers. They seemed to think that, if they sat still for a while, the silence brooding among the shadows would pass. Yet it was far otherwise, for the frowns on the faces of the satyrs seemed rather to increase in grimness, and every shadow that slipped from its place as a candle flickered began to look like a warning. And when Easel went out and got twenty or thirty more candles, the shadows that were driven further away seemed only to gather together with grimmer intent in the corners. Soon it seemed they were boding something, seemed that whenever you caught one of the dark corners with the tail of your eye it was threatening you, a warning you only lost when you looked straight at it. Look straight at it then, the reader may say. But which was right, the straight gaze or the tail of the eye? And while you looked straight at one sinister shadow, there were dozens more all round that went on with their warnings. They spoke little of all this, scarce spoke at all, all waiting for the strangeness of the house, as they called it, to go away; but nothing material or immaterial left that house after the old hidalgo and his daughters had rocked away down the road in their wonderful carriage. Here they were in the long library with whatever the ages had given to that dark house: travellers across the Atlantic might come and go, but the mystery of Casa Viljeros kept house with its own communion of shadows. As the candles burned lower imperceptible changes occurred in the shadow assembly;

some grew taller, some blacker, but one and all seemed to grow, and the whole room with them, more menacing, more foreboding, more sure of a doom. They got fresh candles and the three men carried them all over the room, sending the darker shadows scurrying away from their lurking-places; they had done it to cheer the women, and to show they were not afraid, but the leaping shadows driven from their old corners brought anything but cheer, and all the Stolger family knew that things were going badly with their new possession if it had come already to showing they were not afraid. And very soon they came back to their chairs and all moved closer together; and the shadows slipped back to their places and the menace was deeper yet.

“Had they spoken they knew that things would have been better, that the echoes of their own voices might have been stronger than whatever it was that they would not yet put a name to; and this they tried to do, but by now they were all of them speaking only in whispers. They should have spoken out, they should have shouted, they should have told stale jokes or sung common songs, and they might have set up some sort of a rampart from scraps of the twentieth century to hold back this ancient thing, whatever it was, that was filling the room with terror; but they spoke in whispers, and that dark influence came at them right down the ages. And hour by hour it grew in intensity. I suppose they were afraid to go to bed. Midnight found them still there, sitting all close together, and the menace of the unknown influence deeper. Easel, the youngest, had at one time drawn his revolver, but the moment he did it he saw himself what a childish act it was; the revolver looked so sharp of outline and shiny among the vague forms of those threatening shadows. And the leers seemed to deepen upon the lips of the satyrs. With the flare of a candle, with the sudden turn of an eye, a few letters of faded gilt would light up now and then on the back of some sombre book, half a word of Spanish whispering with-

out meaning out of the years that were troubling them, and blinking away with its warning all untold.

"A few more candles had been collected now and then, until they saw that by multiplying candles they only multiplied shadows, and that there was something more in the gloom than what could be driven away by a few of these little flames. They saw too, or felt or knew, that whatever darkness the candles drove back from the little circle in which they sat huddled together only lurked just out of sight behind some edge of old timber, waiting to stalk out upon them as soon as the candles dwindled, surely and swiftly in all the majesty of their darkness.

"It was not the dwindling of the candles, it was not any fading of the light from their flames, that brought a great change after midnight; it was something that lay in the very shadows themselves, something that earlier in the night had been dormant, or not ascertainable by human emotions, and that was now active and stirring and not to be overlooked by human fears. Against this terror they did nothing further now, carried no more candles about, drew out no more youthful revolvers, but recognized themselves in the grip of some influence against which such things were idle. And the curse, for such it was, gloomed, multiplied and foreboded; and there they sat, a little castaway group, lost as though the twentieth century had suddenly foundered, amidst an encroaching power from an age of which they knew nothing.

"What were they to do? As the night went on the curse grew stronger and darker, as though the witch that had anciently laid it upon that house were forcing it down on it with both hands, mass upon mass of it out of dark and dangerous air; while out of the shadows rose up those oaken satyrs larger than man, with scorn on their carven lips. What could they do if they daren't leave that little circle in which they sat close together in the brightest part of the room, and daren't speak

louder than whisperings? More and more ominous grew the shadows. And then Hendrik speaking out loud said to his father: 'Look here, Dad, I've travelled in South America; I know magic when I see it. And I've seen something of witchcraft. There's a curse here, in this room; there's no doubt of it.'

"They all started a bit at that. And Hendrik went on. 'Well, I'm only putting it into words,' he said. 'Don't you all feel it?'

"They had nothing to say to that: they could not say it was not so.

"'Let's take the car over to Hurgos,' he said. 'They've an hotel there called the Annunciation. Let's live there. And let's start now.'

"And at that moment the hounds, that were never quite easy in their new kennels, gave tongue at the moon. And Hendrik went on: 'Let's keep the hounds in here, to show them what we think of their Spanish curses.'

"'In the library?' said his father.

"And all Hendrik answered was: 'They ought to have told us there was something wrong about the damned place.'

"'But why should it affect us?' said his father.

"'Well, doesn't it?' said Hendrik.

"And that they found unanswerable.

"With one speaking his mind and the rest only whispering, you can easily guess how it went. 'We can come over whenever we want,' Hendrik explained. 'It mayn't be so bad by day.'

"They went there and then. And they turned the hounds into the library as Hendrik had said.

"Why the witch laid that curse all those ages ago I never enquired of the gardener, nor what exactly it was. But I felt I knew something of it myself, though it could not be put into words, from listening to those hounds all night in the library. Something was there that they knew of and told to the night, and too much book-learning and living in towns had blunted my ears to

the sense of it. It was something that . . . but no words of mine can make it clear to you now. You should have heard those hounds a mile away over the moor, howling, howling, howling.”