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# The HAUNTED WOOD of ADOURE

BY ELLIOT  
O'DONNELL



"Then came silence, broken only  
by the sounds of dripping blood."

**T**HERE were three of us, Alphonse Duroque, literary editor of the *Lyons Gazette*, Gus Lawrence, sub-editor of the *Chicago Saturn*, and myself, and we were seated in the parlor of the only inn in Gretagne, discussing ghosts.

Presently Lawrence exclaimed, "Did you ever hear of an executioner being haunted? I have met quite a number in my time—Pete Barrow of St. Louis, Ed Gover of Saratoga, and a host of others, but when I have asked them if they have ever seen a ghost—and who more likely than a man who has sent so many people into the next world?—they have only laughed."

"That's in America," Duroque re-

marked quietly. "There seems to be some antagonism in that country of yours, either in the soil, or the atmosphere, or the people, that keeps ghosts away. In France it is different. I know an executioner in Lyons who once had a very startling experience with a ghost."

"Tell us about it," I chimed in.

"*Eh bien*," Duroque observed, "and remember it is true. I guarantee it. Vibert, who narrated it to me, never lies. He is—what do you call it?—the very incarnation, embodiment of veracity, and it happened to him, himself. At the time it occurred he had only recently been appointed to the post of assistant executioner in the

Province of Bayenne, which, you doubtless know, lies about fifty miles to the southwest of the Cevennes. Well, one afternoon—to be correct it was the last afternoon in 1900—he left Ravignon, the town where he resided, and set off on his bicycle, one of the old-fashioned sort—push-bikes I think you call them—for Delapour, to make arrangements for an execution which was to take place there in a week or so's time. His knowledge of Bayenne was, at that period, very limited, and as he had forgotten to bring his road map with him, he had to stop frequently to ask the way. This, added to the roughness of the roads, which, for a considerable distance were undergoing repair, delayed him very considerably, and it was almost dusk when he reached Blanchepard, a tiny town lying barely half-way on the road to Delapour. Feeling hot and tired and badly in need of refreshment, he stopped at an inn and ordered refreshments."

"Wise man!" Lawrence remarked. "For a Frenchman, extremely sensible."

"Bayenne red wine and chicken," Duroque observed, ignoring the interruption, "are excellent things when one is tired, and Vibert did justice to them both. Indeed, he dallied so long over his meal that the dusk had given place to darkness and the shadows of night were already conspicuous by the roadside when he finally got up from the table and asked mine host the nearest way to his destination.

"The nearest way to Delapour," mine host replied, his eyebrows contracting in a slight frown, "is through the wood of Adoure, but I do not advise you to go that way tonight."

"And why not, pray?" Vibert asked. "Is the track very bad?"

"Mine host shook his head.

"No," he said, "the track is not bad. It isn't good—none of the roads in this part of Bayenne are good just at present, but it is passable. It is

the wood itself, *monsieur*; it has not a good reputation."

"Not a good reputation!" Vibert ejaculated. "Bears, or robbers? Which?"

"No, *monsieur*, neither one nor the other. The wood is haunted; and tonight, remember, is New Year's Eve."

"Surely it is only on Midsummer's Eve and All Hallow's E'en that the spirits of the dead wander," Vibert laughed.

"That is so, *monsieur*," mine host said gravely. "It is the spirits of the living that are seen tonight and they sometimes rehearse deeds and scenes that are none too pleasant. If *monsieur* is wise he will shun the wood and get to Delapour by way of Baptiste and St. Gabrielle."

"Is that a much longer way?" Vibert asked.

"It is longer by about five miles," mine host replied.

"That settles it, then," Vibert answered lightly. "Ghosts or no ghosts I go through the wood," and after settling his account with mine host, he once again mounted his machine and set off in the direction of the Wood of Adoure. Pedalling quickly through the main street of the little town that looked bright and festive, as it should do on New Year's Eve, he soon gained the high road, stretching as far as he could see into the gloomy countryside ahead of him. A few farm teams returning from their labor in the fields passed him, and an Old World, slow-going wagon, with its tinkling bells, swinging lamp, and quaintly clad driver; and these were the only cheery sights and sounds he was destined to encounter for some time.

For many a mile after this the road led up a gradual ascent and Vibert was exposed to the full fury of a sudden windstorm that howled and moaned piteously. Having at last gained the summit of the hill he found himself on a seemingly inter-

minable plateau. Overhead ragged clouds drifted over a wild, lowering sky, and all around him no living thing was visible, except a few rooks, whose croaking voices blended well with the sighing of the wind.

"Anxious to escape from this inhospitable spot, Vibert rode on as quickly as possible and eventually came to some crossroads, where a signpost pointed down a very steep descent to the Wood of Adoure. Some half-hour's careful riding, for the ground was very rocky and full of ruts, at length brought him to the confines of a forest of seemingly vast extent. He guessed at once it was the Wood of Adoure. He got off his bicycle to relight his lamp, which had suddenly gone out, and then, remounting his machine, pushed along a narrow track bordered on either side by tall trees, whose knotted and gnarled trunks gleamed a ghostly white wherever the moonbeams fell on them.

"The valley in which this wood was situated was far below the level of the road he had recently been traversing, and the wind, which had swept with great force across it, was here scarcely noticeable, and no sound save the faintest rustling of the trees tops far overhead and the occasional crackling of brushwood under the feet of some wild animal of the night was to be heard.

"Having arrived at a comparatively smooth piece of ground, albeit the descent was into a slight hollow, he was pedalling rather fast down it, when either a hare or a rabbit shot across his path, and in swerving to avoid it, he crashed into a boulder and was pitched over the handlebar of his machine. After a few seconds he got up, feeling rather dizzy and shaken, to find the front of his bicycle practically crumpled up. He was deploring the prospect of being obliged to perform the rest of his journey on foot, trundling the two wheels along with him as best he could, when

through the naked branches of the trees, away in the distance, he espied a light.

"He at once made for it and found, to his joy, it proceeded from a small house on the banks of a swift-flowing and very swollen stream. In answer to his repeated raps, the weather-beaten door was at length very cautiously opened, and a girl appeared on the threshold, with a lamp. By its sickly light he saw she had black hair, very dark and rather obliquely set eyes, high cheek bones and perfectly even teeth that gleamed like pearls. She was good-looking, but it was in rather a strange way, and there was a curious glitter in her eyes as she stared at him that reminded him of the glitter he had seen in the eyes of leopards and other big animals of the cat tribe. Like so many French women, even of the poorer classes, she had very shapely hands, with long, tapering fingers and almond-shaped nails that shone like agates.

"In response to his request for a night's lodging she demurred, but, on his pleading inability to go any farther, owing to his complete state of exhaustion, she told him he could wait in the hall while she went to consult her husband.

"Apparently the house was very old. The hall was low-ceilinged, and stone-flagged, and on one side of it was an angle, and on the other a broad oak staircase leading to a gallery. Several oil paintings in tarnished frames hung on the oak-paneled walls and in one corner stood a great grandfather clock, a fishing-rod and blunderbus.

"Vibert had no time to take in further details, for the girl now suddenly appeared in the gallery and telling him to come up stairs, bade him, before he did so, carefully to latch and lock the front door.

"On entering the room into which she ushered him, he received a surprise that almost amounted to a shock, for seated in an armchair by the fire

was a feeble old man, who rose to greet him with difficulty.

"My husband," the girl said shortly, avoiding Vibert's wondering gaze as she spoke. "He is an invalid." And she pointed to an array of medicine bottles on the mantelshelf. "Henri!" and she raised her voice almost to a shout, "this is the gentleman who wants a bed."

"He can have one," the old man croaked. "Six francs bed and breakfast, and you pay me, not her. Money is not safe with women, they are too addicted to spending it." And he gave a feeble laugh which ended in a wheeze.

"Asthma is one of his complaints," the girl explained. "He is seldom free from it. You would like some supper?"

"If it is not giving you too much trouble," Vibert said, gallantly. "I am famished."

"Give him some ham and milk," the old man chimed in. "That is all we can do for you, *monsieur*, and it will be two francs extra. Food in these parts and at this time of the year is dear, very dear." And leaning forward in his chair, he waved his skinny hands over the crackling pine logs—the only cheerful sound, Vibert thought, in the house.

"Supper over—he consumed it, conscious all the time that the dark, sloe-like eyes of the girl-wife were fixed on him with a strangely intent expression—he asked to be shown to his room. It was in a long corridor, lighted at the farthest end by an oriel window. The room, in keeping with the rest of the house, was low-ceilinged and oak-paneled and had many curious nooks and corners, besides several cupboards inset in the walls. In the center of the room stood a great, grim-looking four-poster bed, with the usual ponderous canopy, and over this and everything hung an atmosphere of gloom.

"DIRECTLY the girl was gone, Vibert scrambled into bed. He put his lighted candle on a little table close to the head of the bed, but well out of the way of the curtains, and for some minutes read an evening paper he had bought during his journey. Tired after his long ride, however, he gradually dozed off, leaving the candle still burning.

"He awoke suddenly and completely, with a vivid sense of being no longer alone. Opening his eyes he stared round, without lifting his head from his pillow, and reassured no one was in the room, he was about to close them again, when he suddenly heard the tap, tap of high-heeled shoes on the polished oak floor of the corridor, faint but distant, and growing nearer and nearer. All his faculties at once on the alert, he sat up in bed and listened. Saving for those sounds all was silent, with a death-like oppressive silence such as one never experiences save in lonely country places.

"There was not even a breath of wind stirring the leaves on the branches of the great elm trees outside, and inside not even the friendly scratching of a mouse to be heard behind the wainscotting. Nearer and nearer drew those footsteps, cautious, rather hesitating, but all the same persistent. They came right up to the door of Vibert's room and halted. Vibert could feel someone was there listening, intent on catching the sound of his breathing in order to tell if he were asleep or awake. Recollections of stories he had heard about murders in wayside inns came crowding into his mind and filled him with cold terror. It was so hopeless to be trapped here in this remote wood, miles away from any village or town and, in all probability, far away from any other dwelling, and he was unarmed, too. Like a fool he had forgotten to bring his revolver.

"He had a knife, a small pocket

dagger, it was true, but of what use would that be against bludgeons or firearms? Would it not be better, he thought, to take the plotters by surprise and either burst through or attack them, than to have them suddenly burst into the room and attack him? Besides, the suspense was intolerable. Naturally brave and impulsive, he decided to adopt the former course.

"Getting out of bed without making a sound, and tiptoeing noiselessly across the room, he turned the key quickly in the door and tore it open, expecting to see, if not several, at least one person; namely, the wearer of the high-heeled shoes. To his utter amazement, however, the corridor was absolutely empty. Nothing was to be seen there saving the moon, shining clear and bright through the oriel window, and on the walls, looking out from their gilt frames, the calm, immovable faces of men and women, ancestors, presumably, of the old man who occupied the house.

"Vibert stood for some time straining his ears, but he could catch no sound, not even the ticking of the clock in the hall beneath. Thinking it very odd, but persuading himself that he must have been mistaken and that the sounds he had heard were due to rats, he shut the door softly and locking it, got back into bed.

"Once more he fell asleep, but only to awake, as before, very abruptly, and with a sensation of intense horror. The moonbeams poured in through the window and illuminating the curtains on either side of it, made them appear like tall specters. They gleamed, too, with an unearthly whiteness across the bed, and Vibert, constrained somehow to follow their course, observed that they shone with a peculiar intensity upon the door, and he could not remove his eyes from it. The handle of the door, especially, had a horrible fascination for him, and he kept watching it. He strove with all his might to look elsewhere, but he could not. All his senses seemed to be forcibly centered on it.

Then, suddenly, he gave a great start. God in heaven, was it fancy or reality? The door-handle was turning.

"Slowly, very slowly, it turned and the door began equally slowly to open. He tried to move, to do something, but he could not. His limbs refused to act, he was paralyzed, paralyzed and tongue-tied. Still the door kept on opening, while the moonbeams seemed to get whiter and colder and the room fuller and fuller of them. Then, round the door there suddenly appeared a head and face, a bullet-shaped, close-cropped head, with very projecting ears and dark, gleaming eyes that wandered round the room and at last settled on the bed with ferocious glee.

"Vibert now became conscious of someone lying on the bed by his side. He saw nothing, for he was unable to remove his gaze from the face in the doorway, but he could hear the person beside him breathing, the deep, heavy inhalations of a person wrapped in profound slumber. Meanwhile the door kept on opening, and at last, into the room with soft, cat-like motion stepped a broad-shouldered, muscular man, holding in one hand a large horn-handled knife, the sharp blade of which gleamed hideously in the moonlight. Behind him, holding a basin in her hands, was the girl-wife, a look of horrible cruelty in her sloe-like eyes. They approached the bed noiselessly, apparently too intent on the object by Vibert's side to notice Vibert himself. In a large mirror, i. e., a cheval glass that stood facing the foot of the bed, Vibert now saw, reflected with frightful clarity, everything that happened. He saw the man seize hold of the head of the recumbent person by his side, whom he now recognized with a thrill as the old husband of the girl. He saw the girl place her basin under her husband's neck and he watched her face light up with unholy glee as the cruel knife, flashing through the moonbeams, was drawn ruthlessly across the old man's throat. There was one

awful gurgling groan and then silence, broken only by the ghastly sounds of rushing, dripping blood. For some minutes neither of the murderers stirred, but stood by their victim, alternately gazing at him and at each other. Then suddenly Vibert caught them in the mirror looking at him. His candle had long since gone out, and the moon being at this moment suddenly obscured behind clouds, the room was now plunged in utter darkness.

"Vibert made a colossal effort to move and free himself from the fearful terror which rendered him powerless. It was in vain.

"After what seemed an eternity the bed creaked and a big, coarse hand gripped him by the throat. At this juncture human nature succumbed and he fainted.

"WHEN he recovered consciousness and opened his eyes, the early morning sun was pouring in through the window-panes and someone was rapping loudly at the door. It was the young wife with his breakfast of coffee and a roll and fresh country butter. He looked round, in fearful expectancy of seeing some signs of the terrible drama he had witnessed in the night. There were none, and when he tried the door it was still locked on the inside.

"Much puzzled, for his experience seemed far too real and vivid for a dream, he took in his breakfast, and after consuming it, dressed and went downstairs.

"To add to his bewilderment the old husband who had played such a ghastly rôle in the midnight tragedy was sitting in front of the log fire in the parlor smoking serenely and occasionally wheezing.

"'I hope *monsieur* slept well,' the girl wife said, as Vibert, having settled his account, prepared to depart.

"'I had some rather queer dreams,' Vibert replied, looking with no little admiration at her teeth, which, as I

have already remarked, glistened like pearls.

"'Ah, *monsieur*, it was New Year's Eve,' the girl laughed. 'If they were unpleasant, I hope they won't come true.'

"'I hope not, too,' Vibert said dryly, and bidding her good-bye, he picked up his broken bicycle and resumed his journey.

"TEN months later he was at Bap-  
tiste, this time in the capacity of executioner. It was a sudden call. Emile Guilgant, his chief, had been taken ill and he was called upon to act in his stead. Hitherto he had merely been Guilgant's understudy. He knew little about the case, saving that a man named Bonivon was to be guillotined for the murder of Gaspard Latour, a well-to-do, retired wine merchant of Marseilles. The murder had been committed in the Cevennes district and Latour's wife had assisted in it. Although she was probably the instigator of the crime, the judge who tried her, having regard to the verdict of the jury (French juries are noted for their leniency where women are concerned), merely sentenced her to a term of imprisonment. That was all Vibert knew; he was ignorant of the exact spot where the crime had been committed and of the details of the case which had shocked all Bayenne.

"He did not see the condemned man till a few minutes before the execution, when, in company with two warders, he entered his cell to pinion him. He then received a shock. The man was the exact counterpart of the murderer in his dream or vision or whatever else it was that he had had on New Year's Eve in the Wood of Adoure. This man that he was about to execute had the same bullet-shaped head, the same projecting ears, the same dark eyes and the same short, broad figure. Also, he had the same huge, coarse hands. Vibert would have known them anywhere; he had felt their grip, and a shudder ran through him as he looked at them.

“As their eyes met, an expression of bewilderment came into those of the murderer, which expression suddenly gave way to a look of recognition, mingled with diabolical hatred. Vibert said nothing; he simply pinioned the man, and walked with him to the scaffold.

“When it was over and he was lurching with several of the officials

of the prison, he asked them where the murder had taken place and how it was done.

“ ‘Why, don’t you know?’ one of them replied. ‘What curious chaps you executioners are! In the Wood of Adoure, of course. Bonivon cut poor old Latour’s throat, while Madame Latour held a basin to catch the blood.’ ”