

The Meerschaum Pipe

by

L. A. LEWIS

November 17th.

Never having tried keeping a diary before, it will be amusing to see whether I have enough mental energy to go on with it. At all events my new-found leisure will not give me the excuse of being too busy. The only question about it is—shall I find anything worth recording in this quiet, country existence? Well, it pleases me to begin with such a trifle as my own enjoyment in this property I have bought, and, after all, I am writing for myself and not for others.

My ability to retire and settle down at the early age of forty is a cause of gratitude to the Gods of Chance, who gave me such rapid commercial success in the 'slump' years when so many others were feeling the pinch. I just happened to strike the right propositions all the time, and now I can play the Squire in my new 'domain' and look forward to the idyllic life which next summer will bring, fishing and pottering about these beautiful, unspoilt backwaters. Not that I despise the country and its pursuits in winter—being country-bred—particularly in this fine old house. I shall find all the entertainment I need for the long evenings sorting through the books and all the lumber with which it is stocked, and by next winter I hope to have made friends who will come round for billiards or cards.

Perhaps I may marry again, for 'Heronay' should possess a hostess, but I fear I could never bring to another union the zeal of my first romantic attachment so quickly ended in one of the London air raids.

I feel myself lucky to have got 'Heronay' at such a bargain price, and suppose it would have cost me a good few thousands more, but for the bad name it derives from its former occupant. After standing empty, however, for so many years, the dilapidation was great, and I could see how the agents jumped at my offer.

It is rather strange how a house can continue to bear an ill repute from the misdemeanours of a tenant, even years after his or her death, though no doubt this place holds very gruesome associations for many of the local residents. One can excuse Harper his crimes on the ground of his undeniable lunacy, but his 'reign of terror', conducted from here, must have been a ghastly period for the neighbourhood, especially in view of the shocking mutilations he always practised. Still, he died long ago in Broadmoor, and it is thought that the ground was cleared of all his victims. I have had the exterior entirely re-faced, and I think 'Heronay' may now claim to be purged of his influence.

Well, I seem to be rambling on—a good start for the diary, anyway, if I can keep it up! Now I will close for to-day, and spend the rest of the evening looking over my new possessions.

November 18th.

A bright day for the time of year, crisp and frosty. Had a call from the Vicar, who asked, among other things, if I proposed to join the local Hunt. Told him that I was no horseman, but hoped to do a bit of shooting when more completely settled. He then touched on the poor maniac, my predecessor, and I asked him if he thought the dreadful record of the place would affect my welcome in the village. He replied that he was sure the people in the other big houses would soon forget Harper when they realised the hospitality of the new owner and saw how the whole estate had been cleansed of its former unkempt appearance. The villagers, though, would take longer to accept me to their confidence, and I must not be surprised if tradesmen refused to deliver goods after dark, as the grounds of 'Heronay' were popularly supposed to be haunted. He made his exit, after inviting me to dinner next week, when he promised I should meet some of my new neighbours at

the Vicarage. I shall welcome the change from solitude, although my evenings here will not be dull while I have so many of Harper's belongings to look through. He appears to have had no next-of-kin, which accounts for all the furniture being sold with the house. Before his dementia overtook him he must have been a man of refinement. His library is a book-lover's paradise, and his personal knick-knacks and ornaments mostly of quite intrinsic value. While rummaging in the drawers of the study desk last night I found a remarkably fine meerschaum pipe, which he must have smoked for many years, to judge by the degree of colouration of the bowl. It has an amber mouth-piece set in gold, and is, in fact, quite an ornament. I intend to clean it up and give it a place of honour on the mantel-shelf. My man can polish it when he starts on the china. As an ex-army batman, polishing is a hobby with him.

Incidentally, I must consider engaging a staff of servants now that I am about to meet new people. Jobson can manage quite well in a flat, as he has done for so long during my City career, but we shall need more than occasional daily help, if we are to entertain as I hope to be entertained. That's all for to-day. I shall consult the local registry—if any—in the morning.

November 19th.

An irritating set-back to-day. Called on Miss Simms the post-mistress, who acts as domestic registrar, and she promised to send round some applicants for my household jobs. Left her, thinking the matter as good as settled, and stayed at home till lunch-time, but nobody called. Now she has rung up to say that she 'can find no one suitable at the moment'. On reflection, I thought her a bit evasive during the interview, and am inclined to suspect the cause is all this superstitious rubbish the Vicar mentioned. Suppose I shall have to get servants from elsewhere, but it is very ridiculous. My alterations have given the place quite a modern appearance, and there is nothing sinister about the grounds at night. Evidently the local proletariat keep dwelling on the secret burials that used to take place, and imagination has done the rest.

Spent the earlier part of the evening thinking things over, and planning for the future. I must seriously consider taking another wife. She might solve the servant problem more readily, and a hostess is really essential for entertaining married guests; but I

don't fancy the notion a bit. Mary's memory is still too fresh even after all these years. . . . Perhaps a lady housekeeper?

Jobson has made a splendid job of the meerschaum, which looks, as I said before, definitely ornamental. I have a great fancy for this class of pipe myself, though I have never achieved such superb 'colour' in any of my own. I am, in fact, tempted to sterilize the stem of this one and see how it tastes. It should prove a ripe smoke. It has never occurred to me before to smoke another man's pipe—much less that of a homicidal maniac—but I think washing the mouthpiece with lysol and scouring the bowl-stem with a hot wire should destroy any possible germs. . . .

November 20th.

I carried out my intention before retiring last night, and so enjoyed my smoke that I felt disinclined for writing up any more of this diary. With a load of my favourite tobacco, and a good fire in the study, the time passed like lightning. Really speaking, I think I must have dozed, though the meerschaum was still burning well when I saw by the clock that it was well past my usual bedtime. To-day I feel rather unrested, though I was sleeping soundly when Jobson called me. Most likely I have spent too much time indoors lately browsing among the relics of Harper's tenancy. When I am getting daily fresh air and exercise I never dream—but I am under the impression that my sleep was disturbed last night, though I cannot recall any details. I shall take a walk round the grounds now and blow the cobwebs away before lunch. . .

Later.

My morning walk very beneficial and brightened by parading my new acquisition. Saw the Vicar and Dr Corbett, the local G.P., passing my drive gates, and they complimented me on the 'colour' of it. As they made no reference to Harper I took it they did not recognize it as his, and I did not choose to enlighten them. My ramble took me to a strip of waste ground enclosed by a shrubbery and a walk where I am told, two of Harper's victims were buried—their trunks at least. It seemed an ideal spot for a murder, and I could almost enter into his distorted point of view—at least as far as the spice of secrecy was concerned.

There must be a grim fascination in committing a crime that rouses the countryside and then watching the police go off on

false scents. Harper went about his butchery for months without attracting the least suspicion. Evidently he can have shown no outward symptom of insanity between the attacks, and must have exercised amazing caution in executing his horrible tasks; yet his dementia was of an extreme kind, as was shown by the distorted artistry of his mutilations.

Employed the afternoon and evening in a fruitless journey to the County town—twenty miles away—in search of domestics. Interviewed several candidates who happened to be at the Registry Office, but as soon as I mentioned my address they made various excuses not to accept service with me. The popular aversion to ‘Heronay’ is very widespread, it seems, and it looks as if I shall have to engage my staff in London. Most annoying.

Found some newspaper cuttings in the course of my evening’s exploring among Harper’s belongings. They all related to his criminal career, and I could picture him gloating over the horror which his monstrous ‘recreation’ was instilling in the public mind. Having been abroad at the time I was not well up in the history of this butcher, and so took the trouble to read the cuttings through. Apparently he was actuated by no personal motives but from a general lust to kill, and his victims were invariably women. The most revolting feature of the murders was his habit of severing the head and limbs with a sharp hatchet and leaving them on the scene for identification, while carrying away the trunk for addition to a sort of museum which is supposed to have been kept in some room of the house.

The subsequent interring seems only to have been affected when decomposition rendered it necessary, as the police deduced from the remains.

November 21st.

Another disturbed night, judging by this morning’s lassitude—though again I have no clear recollection of my dreams beyond the feeling that they were of a distressing and even frightening nature. Also I am convinced that I did—for me—quite an unprecedented thing. I noticed earth stains on my feet when getting into my bath, and Jobson found more of them on the bed-linen, from which it is clear that I must have walked in my sleep. I have always regarded this as a sign of mental unbalance, so told Jobson I had gone down to the garden, fancying I heard an intruder. He must have wondered why I did not wear my slippers,

but is too well trained to offer such criticism. I have never had a day's illness in my life, and I do not like this symptom of nerve trouble—especially as I spent most of yesterday out-of-doors. I shall spend to-day on the links and get my lunch at the Club House.

Later.

A splendid game of golf with a member to whom the Secretary introduced me, and another round, by myself, in the afternoon. I should sleep well to-night. Meanwhile a sensation has arisen in the village by the discovery of a dead body in Arningham Woods. It appears to be a case of murder, the victim being a young girl from a gypsy encampment nearby. The postman told me that her throat had been cut and that one of the hands, severed at the wrist, was missing.

The last I take to be a piece of village gossip originating in Harper's dismembering proclivities. I understand the affair is regarded as probably a crime of jealousy and that the police are looking for a young basket-maker who left the camp this morning.

Enough diary for to-day. Just half an hour's smoke, and I shall not want any rocking.

November 22nd.

Once more a shockingly restless night—this time caused by definite nightmares. Though I fell asleep at once and do not remember awakening until Jobson brought my tea, I feel as if I had been 'on the tiles'. Most of the time I seemed to be pacing endless corridors and clambering up and down stairs burdened by some weighty object which I was trying to conceal. What it was I cannot remember, except that it seemed both precious and repulsive simultaneously, and that I was in a panic in case anyone find me with it. I examined my feet on rising for any traces of sleep-walking, but could find no such evidence. One thing, however, puzzled me—namely, that I appeared to be wearing different pyjamas from those in which I went to bed. Still, most of my sleeping-suits resemble each other, being all black silk and varying only in the braiding, so I may have been mistaken. Somnambulism apart, though, if these exhausting dreams continue I must ask Corbett for a tonic. It will be a good opportunity to mention the matter if I can persuade him to a round of golf this afternoon.

Later.

I was wrong, it would seem, to start this diary wondering if I should find enough to write about in so rural a spot. The murder of the gypsy girl has now been followed by the mysterious disappearance of a cottager's daughter. By a coincidence she is one of the prospective maids I interviewed two days ago, and, although in service in the County town, was spending the week-end here with her family.

Apparently she went out for a solitary walk late last evening and she has not been seen since, nor has she returned to her employer's residence. The discovery of blood-stains in a little-used lane near the village has, of course, given rise to a crop of ugly rumours, but as none of the girl's clothing or belongings has come to light I see no reason to connect the two facts. Quite probably a case of elopement. . . .

I was about to close my diary for the day when Jobson entered my study in a great state of agitation. He had been taking a moonlight walk in the grounds near one of the boundary walls when he noticed some unusual object in a tussock of grass. Stooping to examine it, he saw, to his horror, that it was a human hand! As he finished describing the finding of it he produced the horrible thing from a roll of newspaper and laid it on my desk, when, overcoming my natural revulsion, I inspected it under a powerful reading-lamp. Though no student of anatomy, I judged it to be the hand of a woman, partly, I dare say, on account of the cheap and gaudy rings which adorned two of the fingers. These baubles seemed, in a vague way, familiar, and I supposed that I had seen their wearer at some time in the village. Naturally, I rang up the police without loss of time, and have spent the last hour talking with the Inspector—a very capable man who, as a young member of the force, was instrumental in Harper's arrest. He not only confirmed the rumour of the gypsy's hand having been cut off, but positively identified it with Jobson's grim 'find'. He thinks that the basket-maker, an unsuccessful suitor, must have taken the hand as a keepsake and then, fearing to keep so terrible a reminder, have thrown it over my wall in his flight. This theory gives them a clue to the direction in which he was travelling, and the Inspector spoke hopefully of an early arrest.

November 26th.

The events of the past few days have occupied my mind to the exclusion of all other matters. My diary has been neglected, and I must recapitulate. So far from rustic uneventfulness, I seem to have landed myself in the middle of a Grand Guignol play.

A fresh series of crimes identical with those of my perverted predecessor has broken out in the neighbourhood, and the surrounding country is teeming with police, press men, and morbid sightseers. By having the gates locked I have been able to keep most of them off this property, but I caught two reporters astride the wall near Harper's 'cemetery' yesterday, and had Jobson turn them away. The village is in a state of siege, as no woman will venture out after dark, and even by daylight they go in twos and threes. A rumour that Harper had not died at Broadmoor, but had escaped, rapidly gained ground, and I found myself wondering if this were the case. The police, however, assure me that he died years ago and that so far from any such escape being 'hushed up' a warning would be broadcast to all districts. Hard upon the heels of Jobson's discovery of the hand came news of a second mutilation during the ensuing night. The head, arms and legs of Dr Corbett's cook were found lying on a tombstone in the churchyard. The torso was missing. The night after, another woman's head and limbs were left neatly piled by the roadside not far from the Assembly Rooms. They must have been placed there in the early morning hours, as a local dance held there was not over till well after midnight. It is very disturbing to have this dangerous lunatic on one's doorstep, apart from the noisy crowd of sightseers who came to pry around—and even picnic on!—the sites of his crimes. To add to all this discord (and perhaps resulting from it) my own health is causing me serious anxiety. It seems impossible for me to get a decent night's rest even with the sedative that Corbett prescribed. My sleep is constantly broken by the most hideous nightmares, in one of which, last night, I even dreamt that I was accompanying Harper on one of his nocturnal escapades. The beginning of the dream remains utterly chaotic, but I distinctly remember standing in a field over the corpse of a woman whom he had dismembered.

Though I could not see the man distinctly he seemed to be constantly at my side compelling me to busy myself hiding the traces of his handiwork. As often, I believe, happens in dreams

when we do things as a matter of course that are completely foreign to our nature, I felt myself lacking all volition to resist Harper's influence and, in fact, quite entering into the spirit of his requirements. I buried the woman's clothes in a ditch, covering them carefully with earth and dead bracken, and arranged parts of the body on a gate, balancing the head on one post and hanging the limbs in a row on the bars. The rest of the nightmare is like a fogged photographic plate, save that I repeated my former impression of tramping great distances with a heavy burden—in this instance a nude female torso.

Such ghastly dreams must indicate some kind of ill-health, and if Corbett cannot stop them I shall consult a specialist.

Later.

Jobson has just come back from the village with fresh news which, to me at any rate, appears horribly significant. Another woman's head and limbs have been found, balanced on a gate dividing two nearby pastures. Jobson's description corresponds unpleasantly with my dream. Is it possible that I am somehow spiritually *en rapport* with Harper's ghost through the medium of a common dwelling-place? I have never imagined myself in the least 'psychic'. And then, how explain the finding of an actual corpse (or, at any rate, parts of one) in view of Harper's decease? No: obviously a different maniac, but with similar tendencies, must be at large, and I do not see why the 'aura' of Harper's possessions should bring me in touch with *him*—unless, perhaps, there is some malignant 'elemental' native to these parts which prompts the killings and which may, to some extent, influence anybody living locally. But this is too wild a speculation. I have never believed in such things. Jobson, by the way, found a telegram for him at the Post Office telling him of a sister's illness. He is a sterling friend and servant, so I told him that he must of course, take a few days off to see her. He demurred at first on the ground that I should be unable to get local help, but I could see he really wanted to go. He has accordingly left to catch a late train, and I have the house to myself.

November 27th.

Another outrage last night, and another nightmare for me! This time it is Miss Simms, the post-mistress, whose remains were found on her own counter by her daily help, who arrives to make

early tea at seven o'clock. The unfortunate woman can have had no chance to resist her attacker as, though she had neighbours on both sides, no outcry was heard. The trunk, as usual, had been carried off. Whether my nightmare had, again, any connection with this crime I cannot recall. I am only aware of the sensation, to which I have now grown accustomed, of carrying things about and of being a fugitive. Towards morning however, I had an amazingly vivid dream to the effect that I came down the stairs from an upper floor at present disused, entered the bathroom and carefully washed my hands and feet, without, for some reason, turning on the light. This recollection came back as soon as I opened my eyes, and, being convinced that I had been guilty of actual sleep-walking on at least one previous occasion, I went at once to the bathroom to look for traces of my suspected earlier visit. But nothing turned out to be disarranged, and I was left in doubt until, after preparing and eating a light breakfast, I decided to explore the upstairs rooms.

One of the first things to catch my eye was a black tassel, similar to those of my pyjama girdles, projecting from under a locked door. I remembered having seen the key to this door hanging in a cupboard under the main staircase, but on going to get it found it had disappeared, and I am now forced to a conclusion that I hate to face. Apart from the evidence of somnambulism, which, in itself, I resent as a weakness, I cannot overlook the connection between my dreams and the nightly butchery that is being enacted.

Is it conceivable that, in my sleeping state, I have been actually present at one or more of these murders, and even—dreadful thought!—handled the dismembered cadavers? My whole mind shrinks from this theory; but it is otherwise hard to explain the subconscious urge to wash, the locking up of a (possibly *stained*) pyjama-suit, and the hiding of the keys. Good God! I must be under hypnotic suggestion, and if I am seen and recognized in this state I shall be thought guilty of the actual crimes themselves!

It has occurred to me that my bad nights may be due to excessive smoking—for I have lately been inseparable from my—or rather Harper's—meerschaum. To test this I shall abstain from it to-night and make do with a couple of cigarettes.

November 28th.

It is finished. And the meerschaum pipe is burnt in the largest fire I could build into my grate! I only write this last page of my diary for the sake of my next-of-kin—to assure them that, whatever my own condition, there is no *hereditary* taint. The pipe alone was to blame. When my writing is done I shall go out into the grounds and shoot myself under God's clean daylight sky!

I stuck to my intention of smoking nothing stronger than cigarettes, and for the first time in a week passed the early hours of the night in untroubled repose. Later, however, the restlessness must have returned, for a falling log awoke me to find myself sitting by the study fire—smoking the meerschaum. As I came to full consciousness I experienced the sudden waning of an abstract horror—indefinable but intense. It passed so quickly, though, that within a few seconds I doubted its very existence. Everything seemed normal, the room was still comfortably warm, and I felt too wide awake to seek my bed at once. Instead I said aloud and quite cheerfully, 'Well, if my sleep-walking only brings me down here for a smoke, there's no great harm done', and as the meerschaum was drawing satisfactorily I decided to sit up and finish it. If only I had suspected and burned the damnable thing then! An habitual smoker always derives a soothing effect from puffing at a pipe, and it was the marked superiority of the meerschaum in this respect that had attached me to it so strongly. Now, within a few moments, so pleasant a drowsiness crept over me that I heaped more logs on the fire, determined to finish the night where I sat rather than risk finally arousing myself by a journey back to bed. But if sleep came back—and it did, heavily—it was not the revitalizing, dreamless slumber that I wanted, but a fantastic string of the disjointed nightmare scenes in which I was constantly hunted from place to place by unseen pursuers and carrying in my arms a naked torso. At length these visions gave way to a sort of silent, oppressive darkness, and that, in turn, to pictures of my own earlier life, so that I shook off the menace of the former and looked happily at sane and wholesome things.

I forgot that Mary had long been dead, and thought that she lay beside me in our old room at Hampstead. She was asleep, to judge by her quietness, and I had just awakened; but she lay very still in my arms. I bent my head forward and tried to touch her face with my lips—but it eluded me—and, with an effort, I

opened my eyes. I was back in my own bed at 'Heronay', and, of course, there was no face on the pillow beside me.

Yet I did indeed hold something in my arms down under the bedclothes—something that felt like the body of a woman, *but was very cold and still*. I slid my feet out of the bed *sideways without turning back the sheet*.

The missing bunch of keys lay on my pedestal cupboard, but I shall not belatedly explore that upper room. I know too well what it contains.