The Tapestried Room

Rafael Sabatini

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Very well, then," said our host reluctantly. "Since even the ladies insist, you shall hear it. "But I warn you again that it is not a pleasant story."

There was a drawing−in of chairs about the big fireplace in the long library. Outside, the wind clamoured piteously, and through the tall windows the scudding, eddying snow was just visible in the blue−grey twilight. It heightened our relish of the cosy gloom about those blazing yule−logs.

Sir James, with the firelight playing upon his ruddy, shaven face and silver hair, buried his square chin in his ample stock, and proceeded to respond to our insistence by dragging the family skeleton from its cupboard.

"Briefly, then," he began, "it happened in Christmas−week of 1745. My grandmother, Lady Evangeline Margatt, was living here alone at the time; her husband was dead, and her two boys were away from home.

"Three days before Christmas a man presented himself here at the hall and asked to see her. He was a fugitive Jacobite whom King George's men had been seeking for some three months—ever since Culloden, in fact—and who had wandered into England. He had known Lady Evangeline in happier days, and it is believed that at one time they had been betrothed. Knowing her circumstances here, and having got as far as Preston and being in most desperate straits at the time, he came to cast himself upon her mercy.

"To receive and shelter a rebel was a very dangerous thing; but when sentiment prompts them, women can be very reckless. She gave him the shelter he begged, and announced him as a cousin to her household. But it happened that the messengers were hot upon his scent, and on the following evening, as Lady Evangeline and her Jacobite were sitting down to supper, in comes a lieutenant with a posse of red−coats, and my fine Jacobite was carried off and lodged in Preston Gaol.

"Whether her sometime lover believed that Lady Evangeline had betrayed him, or whether he acted from other motives, will never be known. What happened was that on Christmas Eve—that is to say, on the night after his arrest—he broke out of Preston Gaol whilst the guards were carousing. He made his way hither in the dead of night, scaled to the window of her ladyship's room, which is just over the porch; forced his way in, and brutally murdered her.

"He was taken at Lancaster on the day after Christmas, and he was hanged as he deserved. That is all."

A rustle went through the company as Sir James ceased. Then I sat forward to protest against this curtailing of the narrative we expected.

"But the sequel, Sir James—this haunting: what precisely is the traditional story of that?"

"The traditional story, my dear Dennison, is that on every anniversary of the crime the Jacobite is to be seen scaling to the window of the tapestried room—as Lady Evangeline's sometime bedroom has come to be called. It is said that he enters, and that the crime is committed all over again by a ghostly murderer upon a ghostly victim."

Edgeworth's laugh of frank contempt broke harshly upon the general awe. The story had left him undaunted. But then an Irishman who had landed at Lisbon as a lieutenant in 1810 and returned to England as a colonel a short five years later—just after Waterloo—is not easily daunted. "Of course you, yourself, attach no faith to any of this nonsense, James?" he exclaimed uncompromisingly.

As seen in the firelight, the baronet's face wore an expression of doubt as to what he actually did believe. "I don't know," he answered slowly. "I don't think that I either accept or reject the story. I have no proof. That is to say," he added, as if to temper the statement, "no proof afforded me by my own senses.

"But others have both seen and heard the ghost," put in Philip—Sir James's nephew and heir.

Colonel Edgeworth laughed again, softly, in frank derision. A slight frown momentarily drew Sir James's

brows together. It was plain that he did not relish the colonel's contemptuous scepticism, which I secretly shared. Sir James was a man of intense pride in the family and in all that appertained to it; and the ghost, by its relation to the family, was a thing to be treated—like the religious opinions of another—with deference even when not accepted.

"On three separate occasions," he said, "I have been awakened in the small hours of Christmas morning by terrified servants with the announcement that there was some disturbance in the tapestried room."

"Probably a Christmas−party of rats," was Edgeworth's ready explanation. But no one laughed with him, whilst widowed Mrs. Hampton—the sister who kept house for Sir James—mildly repulsed the soldier's suggestion.

"Indeed, no, Colonel Edgeworth," she said. "The tapestried room is by no means given over to rats, as you seem to suppose. Whilst precisely as it was in the eighteenth century, at the time of the event of which we are speaking, it is, nevertheless, in every way kept just as if it were being occupied to−day."

The door opened at this moment, and the butler ushered in a couple of footmen bearing lamps and candles. There was a sigh of relief from the three ladies at the advent of lights—they came so very opportunely, to dissipate the eerieness which our topic had introduced into that darkening room.

Having drawn the curtains upon the ghostly weather outside, the servants noiselessly retired.

"It seems to me a little odd," I ventured then, "That you should never have been tempted to investigate this haunting for yourself, Sir James."

His ruddy face expanded in a smile. "Well—you see," he answered slowly, "it is said that to any member of the family the sight of the Jacobite is of evil omen—a warning, in fact, of approaching death. Now, I ride to hounds a good deal, and, well—." He caressed his neck affectionately, and one or two laughed softly with the amused indulgence which he seemed to solicit.

"That is a disappointing addition," I confessed.

"How?" he inquired.

"It brings your ghost−story down to the level of most other ghost−stories that I have ever heard. A household ghost's appearance to any member of the family invariably conveys a warning of approaching death. I am sorry, Sir James but you have shattered my faith in this Jacobite."

He looked so crestfallen that I began to regret my frankness. And then Edgeworth laughed again, and the crestfallen look on Sir James's face changed to one of annoyance, whilst the ladies looked at us with candid disapproval.

"But, Mr. Dennison," cried Philip's young wife, "Sir James has forgotten to tell you that his father saw the Jacobite on the day before he died."

"A perusal of the theories of M. Puységur will explain that," I answered, for I felt that I was committed now to a definite expression of opinion. "Sir James's father knew himself to be upon his deathbed, and he knew that it was usual for men of his house to see this Jacobite before they died; therefore he saw him."

"In imagination, of course," said Edgeworth, turning his bronzed face towards me.

"Of course," I answered. And then the idea occurred to me: "Anyway, the opportunity to investigate the matter is an excellent one. To−night is the anniversary. If you will allow me to spend the night in the tapestried room—"

"Oh, no, no! Please, Mr. Dennison!" exclaimed the baronet's sister, in agitation.

"But why not, Mrs. Hampton?" I insisted. "I am not afraid of ghosts."

"I really should prefer," said Sir James gravely, "that a guest of mine should not be subjected to any—any—" He fumbled for the word he needed and gave Edgeworth the opportunity of cutting in.

"Fudge!" said the soldier. "The fact of the matter is you're afraid of having this romantic bubble pricked."

For an instant our host's glance was almost choleric. Then, with a sudden smile, he turned to me again. "I will consent, Dennison," he said, "provided that you have a companion. Now, Edgeworth here, who professes to fear neither man nor devil, who sniffs at the very mention of ghosts—"

"Done with you," Edgeworth interrupted eagerly. "We'll hunt this ghost together, Dennison—and, bedad! we'll lay it."

The ladies protested in a body, and Philip was their ally in this. But Sir James, thoroughly stung by the contemptuousness of Edgeworth's disbelief in the family ghost, encouraged the notion now that the colonel was to

bear me company in that vigil.

We sat late at table that night. We had been joined by a couple of neighbours of Sir James's, and after the ladies had left the men settled down to the seasonable carouse, in which Edgeworth bore more than his share—for he was as hard−drinking as he was hard−riding and hard−fighting.

I ventured upon a reminder of what lay before us; but the colonel retorted with a laugh that having fought on the Douro for the preservation to England of the very wine we were drinking, it was unreasonable to desire him to stint himself under any circumstances.

At last we left the table and went to join the ladies for a little while before retiring. And then, towards half−past eleven, our host himself escorted us upstairs to the tapestried room, which had quickly been prepared for us.

A piled−up fire was burning brightly on the hearth. A round mahogany table and two arm−chairs stood immediately before it. On the table there was a silver candelabrum bearing four lighted candles, and a pack of cards, in case we should desire to while away the tedium of our vigil. Upon another table, in one of the recesses made by the fireplace, a tray with glasses, a decanter and a couple of bottles had very thoughtfully been provided.

But I must confess that despite these attempts to render the place cheerful, a chill of apprehension struck through me as I entered that long, low−ceilinged room; nor could the blazing fire and the light of the four candles suffice to dispel the ponderous gloom and the shadows cast by the vast canopied bed of carved walnut. The chamber was partly panelled in oak, partly hung with old tapestries, and this added to its sombreness. The tall window—through which the murderer had entered on that night some eighty years ago—was concealed by faded hangings, and from the very moment that I entered the room I could not conquer the feeling that someone or something was lurking behind them.

By the head of the bed Sir James showed us a door so artfully contrived in the panelling we might have overlooked it altogether. He opened it and disclosed a small ante−room in startlingly pleasant contrast to the gloomy bedchamber.

Dimity curtains festooned the windows; little red roses blossomed at intervals upon the white background of the fresh−looking wall−paper; a couch and a couple of arm−chairs of the “grandfather” type—which, with a table, completed the little room's furniture—were similarly covered in dainty chintzes. An oval gilt−framed mirror adorned the white overmantel, and a fire burned cheerfully in the little grate and was reflected upon the burnished fender. The whole was lighted by a lamp standing upon the table. An air of freshness, and a delicate perfume as of lavender, pervaded the little room.

“It is more cheery in here,” said Sir James, “and my sister thought it as well to have it prepared for you, in case you should wish to change your quarters.”

“Has this room no connection with the murder?” I inquired.

“A slight connection,” Sir James replied. “It was in here that the poor lady's maid was sleeping. She was awakened by her mistress's cries, and attempted to go to her, but found it impossible to open the door.”

“It has no fastening,” said Edgeworth, in the tone of one who unmasks an error.

“But it may have had then,” said Sir James, “or perhaps she was prevented from opening it by her mistress's body which lay against it.”

Although I liked the room less when I had heard of its association with that sinister deed, it remained infinitely preferable to the bedchamber; and when I came to sit alone with Edgeworth in this gloomy apartment, I sighed secretly for the cheerful cosiness of the little ante−room.

Edgeworth did not seem in the least to share my feelings. Reclining in his ponderous arm−chair, he stretched his long legs, in their tight, strapped trousers, and yawned. “This is a damned piece of foolery, after all,” said he. “I wonder how long I shall be able to keep awake. Devilish heady, that port of James's,” he added as if to explain his somnolence; and then with an increasing brogue—“Let's hope this ghost of a Jacobite won't kape us waitin' too long,” he ended, and laughed.

I shivered at the sound of it, and at the eerie, hollow echo which the ceiling seemed to return. He took up the pack and began to shuffle it, suggesting a hand at écarté for small points. I agreed, and we began to play.

My attention, however, was anywhere but upon the game. Beyond all doubt now there was something that was subtly disturbing in the atmosphere of that room. Two or three times I looked round, and it was with

difficulty that I repressed a shudder; things seemed to be stirring in the shadowy corners, and the tapestried curtains before the windows again filled me with an enervating sense that they concealed something. I could swear that the lines in which they fell had undergone a change.

"I wish to Heaven they had given us more light," I burst out nervously. "The gloom is a trifle uncanny when one thinks of the associations of the place."

"Then why the devil do you think of them?" said he. "Egad!" he chuckled, "I thought you were as full−blooded a sceptic as I could wish. But I do believe you've a sneaking belief in these old wives' tales."

I took up my cards in silence, and made a foolish lead. I dared not admit that what he said was true—that the room, or something in it, was acting indefinably but unpleasantly upon me. I played foolishly, and Edgeworth, who had not his match at écarté, won the game with ease. I refused to continue, and he lounged back, yawning again.

"Faith, this is a damned unpunctual ghost," said he presently. "I wonder how much longer we shall have to wait."

He was answered upon the instant. Scarcely had he uttered the words when three distinct taps fell abruptly upon the window beyond the tapestry curtains.

We stared at each other. The faintest alarm showed in Edgeworth's face, whilst as for myself, I felt my skin turn cold and roughen.

"What was that?" I asked, scarcely above a whisper, and the very sound of my voice seemed to increase my fears.

He rose—a magnificently tall, soldierly fellow in his claw−hammer coat and black stock. He had recovered his composure instantly. "Some fool trying to scare us," he snapped. "I'll pepper him, by Gad!" And he stepped to the overmantel, where he had ostentatiously placed a pistol whilst Sir James had still been with us. He snatched it up, and in that moment the treble knock was repeated, more loudly and insistently than before.

It checked his confidence, and again he looked at me with a blank expression in his eyes. Outside, the wind howled and shrieked; it boomed and eddied in the chimney.

Abruptly Edgeworth crossed the room, and flung aside the tapestry curtains. I followed him, for all that my heart was hammering in my throat.

He pulled open the casement windows, disclosing shutters beyond them.

And then, in the very instant that he set his hand to the latch of these, the treble knock came for the third time—quick now and impatient.

I laid a hand on his arm to restrain him; but he shook me off, and sent the shutters crashing back against the wall on either side, where they remained arrested by the catches provided there.

There was nothing to be seen. All was blackness outside—a blackness through which scudded the ghostly snowflakes. The idea of anyone having attempted a practical joke was out of the question, as even Edgeworth realised. Nor was there any tree within fifty yards of the house, whose branches might have accounted for the knocks.

But as the shutters were flung open an icy draught had struck me—colder it seemed to me than could be accounted for by the weather. The candle−flames were beaten over, and the wax made shrouds down the sides of the candles; the hangings of the bed quivered under the touch of that icy breeze, and I could not avoid the horrible feeling that in opening that window in answer to the knocking we had admitted some awful, invisible presence.

Edgeworth closed the casement, and turned to me; his face had lost some of its colour. "Queer!" he said. "Damned queer!" He waited for me to speak; but seeing that I offered no explanation—"How do you account for it?" he asked me.

"I don't," said I; and I moved slowly back towards the table, looking about me with fearful eyes as I went, yet utterly, physically unable to direct my glance towards the bed. "I have no explanation unless—unless it was the Jacobite."

Suddenly something cold touched my face. I cried out hoarsely, in utter terror.

"What's the matter now?" demanded Edgeworth.

"Something touched my cheek," I said, and even as I spoke the touch was repeated. It was precisely as if an icy finger had stroked me from temple to chin.

Edgeworth peered at me, and burst into a laugh. "A snowflake on your hair—it's melting," he explained, and

his assurance entirely returned.

Not so mine. This physical explanation did not quite satisfy me; and then just as, completely unnerved and trembling, I had sunk into one of the chairs, the windows flew open with a crash, and the candles were extinguished by the cold gust that enveloped me.

I cried out, whilst Edgeworth swore. He swung round in the firelit gloom, and closed the windows once more. I sat huddled in my chair, scarcely breathing, whilst he thrust a spill into the fire, and one by one, relighted the candles. His hand shook a little, and his face was undoubtedly pale. Nevertheless—

"Come, come, Dennison! What the devil ails you?" he cried. "It's a fine ghost−hunter you are!"

"Don't talk like that," I begged him.

"And why shouldn't I now?" he blustered. "What's happened, after all? I forgot to latch the window, and the wind blew it open and put the candles out."

Here again were physical explanations. Yet again they failed to satisfy me. Rather I began to form the notion that supernatural forces were employing natural, commonplace media in which to express themselves. And I could not dispel the rooted conviction that something was in this room that had not been here before—something supremely evil. For the tapping at the window, at least, no physical explanation was forthcoming or possible, and it was a significant and uncanny circumstance that since the window had been opened the tapping had not been repeated.

I mentioned this to Edgeworth; but he was entirely, almost angrily contemptuous.

"We don't know what the physical explanation is," said he. "That's all."

He replaced his pistol on the mantelpiece, then stooped to poke the fire. "Tell you what, my boy," he grumbled, "it's devilish cold in this room."

"What do you say to going into the ante−chamber?" I asked him. "We could leave the door open. It's—it's cosier in there."

His dark eyes mocked me. "You can go if you like, Dennison. I undertook to spend the night here, and here I'll spend it though the spooks of all the Jacobites that were at Culloden should come to wish me a merry Christmas."

His mockery jarred upon me; it increased my fears; it seemed like a challenge to this evil thing to manifest itself. I could stand no more of it. Had the tapping at the window recommenced it would have reassured me, I think. But since it did not, my conviction grew firmer than ever that whatever the thing was that had knocked, it had already gained admission.

I got up, conscious that my knees were trembling, seeking in vain to steady them. "I am going, anyway," I grumbled. And without waiting for his answer I went down the room towards the door in the panelling. My eyes sought to avoid the bed; yet I caught a glimpse of the tapestried hangings, and I had a distinct impression that they moved. I checked, almost paralysed by fear, expecting some monstrous thing to leap out upon me as I passed. Then in a panic I dashed forward, wrenched open the door, and sprang into the light, fresh space of the ante−room, followed by Edgeworth's mocking laugh.

I dropped into one of the big chairs by the fire, and for a moment felt more at ease. Presently, however, my fancy began to people the dark space of the open door. The impression grew that someone, or something, was watching me thence.

"Edgeworth!" I called, and my voice was far from steady. "It's infinitely cosier in here. Do come along, and bring the cards with you."

He yawned for answer. "Too sleepy for cards. Besides, I'm all right here. But I wish you'd shut the door. There's an infernal draught."

You will say that I am a coward, and that a man of my temperament has no right to undertake the investigation of supernatural matters. Perhaps so. Anyway, I did not need to be twice invited to shut that door. Had it remained open, I should no more have been able to stay in the ante−chamber than to return to the tapestried room now that I had left it.

So I closed the door, and returned to my seat by the fire. Soon, as my pulses grew calmer, I began to feel ashamed of myself. And then I heard Edgeworth's steps approaching the door of communication. The latch clicked, and he stood under the lintel, a wineglass in one hand and a decanter in the other. "Four fingers of brandy is your most urgent need, my boy. Your nerves have mutinied, and you've been imagining things."

"Did I imagine the taps on the shutters?" I asked him.

"The devil take the taps on the shutters!" said he. But for all his jauntiness, he spilled some of the brandy in pouring for me.

I drained the glass gladly enough.

"Another?" he questioned, raising the decanter again. "It's the very distilled essence of courage."

I refused, and again I begged him to remain with me. But he would not, and he explained his obstinacy.

"The fact of the matter is, Dennison, that it's frightened I am, myself. I am quite frank. I am scared—for the first time in my life. So you'll understand that it's quite impossible for me not to return to that room. You see, 'tisn't cowardly to be scared, Dennison, but it's infernally cowardly to run away when you're scared; and Jack Edgeworth isn't going to turn coward—not for all the disembodied Jacobites in the universe." And with that he swung on his heel, and marched back into the tapestried chamber, slamming the door after him.

I heard him cross to the fireplace, and I heard the creak of his chair as he settled down. He had made the difference between us pitilessly clear. We were both frightened, but I was the only coward of the two. And a coward I must remain, for his confessing to his fears did not tend to give me courage. Rather it glued me where I was, determined that nothing should take me into the tapestried room again that night. It was a determination I was later to disregard. But for the moment I hugged it to myself.

Now the genial warmth of the fire, combining with the effect of the brandy I had drunk, induced a pleasant torpor. For a little while I resisted it; but in the end I succumbed to the extent of resting my head on the tall back of my chair. From that moment I remember nothing until I was very wide awake again, startled without yet knowing the reason for it, my pulses throbbing at the gallop, and my ears straining to listen for something that I knew must come.

I must have slept some hours, for the fire was burning low, and the room had grown chilly.

Suddenly the thing I instinctively awaited came.

Through the wall from the tapestried chamber I heard Edgeworth calling my name in a terrified, choking voice. "Dennison! Dennison!"

"I sprang up at the sound, and I felt as if I had been suddenly plunged into cold water. Horror fettered me where I stood.

And then came the sound of a falling body—just outside the door of communication, just where the murdered lady had fallen. I distinguished a swishing, dragging noise, a groan, and, finally—and most terrific of all—a faint cackle of indescribably malicious laughter.

For a spell I continued to stand there, staring with wild eyes at the closed door, expecting I knew not what to make its horrible appearance. At last, as the silence continued, I shattered the trammels that paralysed me, and sprang forward. I lifted the latch, and pushed. But the door would not give. There was something against it.

And on the instant Sir James's words recurred to me: "Her maid attempted to go to her assistance, but found it impossible to open the door—. She may have been prevented by her mistress's body, which lay against it."

My hand fell from the latch, limp with fear. I backed away from the door, cursing my own and Edgeworth's folly in tampering with this dreadful matter.

Then I almost cried out in fresh terror. Something was coming under the door—something black and gleaming, and narrow as the blade of a table−knife. Fascinated and uncomprehending, I watched it. As it advanced it began to take a sinuous course, but when it reached an irregularity in the blocked floor it slowly spread there, and at last I began to understand its nature. It was fluid, and it was not black, but red—deep red. It was blood!

At once it flashed through my mind that just so must the blood of the murdered woman have crept under the door which her maid could not open on that night eighty years ago, even as I could not open it to−night.

The murder was being re−enacted by ghostly murderer and ghostly victim, down to the minutest detail. *But* was *the victim a ghostly one?*

My fears for Edgeworth surged up again, and they conquered my horror to the extent of enabling me to take up the lamp and quit the room by the door leading to the corridor. Outside the tapestried room I hesitated for a moment. I rapped on the panels.

"Edgeworth!" I called. "Edgeworth!"

There was no answer—no sound. Realising that if I delayed, my courage might desert me again, I seized the

handle and flung the door open.

From the threshold, holding the lamp on high, I beheld the disorder of the room. The table had been overturned and all light extinguished. The cards and the candles were scattered on the floor, and prone near the door in the panelling, his legs against it, lay Edgeworth. His right arm was flung straight out, and his head rested sideways upon it.

That he was dead the first glimpse of his livid face assured me. Further, there was no movement in the horrid, glistening puddle in which he lay; so that it was quite plain that the blood had ceased to flow from whatever wound had been dealt him.

All this I noted in the one brief glance I stayed to bestow upon the room. Then, still lacking the courage to enter, I fled shouting down the corridor, towards the servants' quarters.

Within five minutes I returned accompanied by the butler and one of the footmen, who had been aroused and had promptly responded to my call.

Thus reinforced, I led the way into that room of horror. They checked a moment at the sight that met them. Then the butler approached the body, whilst I held the lamp on high. He knelt a moment beside Edgeworth. I saw his broad shoulders tremble, and he looked up at me with a grin which at first I imagined to be of sheer horror, but to which was presently added a chuckle.

First in bewilderment, then in slowly dawning comprehension, I stared at the thing he held up for my inspection. It was a broken Burgundy bottle. The blood upon the floor was blood of grapes.

An explanation is scarcely needed. Edgeworth, to bolster up his failing courage, had emptied the decanter of brandy. He must have been on the very point of succumbing to it when he took up one of the bottles of Burgundy. It would be at that moment that he stumbled against the table, and the crash of its fall was the sound that had awakened me. In the dark he had called out to me with the last glimmer of consciousness; he had even attempted to reach the door of communication; and then the brandy had felled him—utterly, inertly drunk. In falling he had broken the bottle, and it was almost a miracle that he had not hurt himself upon it.

He attempted next day to cover up his behaviour by a cock−and−bull story of a supernatural visitor. But the ridicule with which he and I were covered as ghost−investigators was not encouraging. In self−defence I cited the incident of the tapping on the shutter, and even succeeded in impressing them with it. But when the shutters were examined it was discovered that a long strip of iron from one of the hinges had become loose and had been used by the gale as a knocker.

And yet there are times when, thinking it all over again, I am not satisfied. I remember the uncanny eerieness of the place, and I catch myself wondering once more whether, after all, supernatural causes may not have been finding expression in natural effects.

RAFAEL SABATINI.