

# **The Spectral Coach of Blackadon**

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"You have heard of such a spirit, and well you know  
The superstitious, idle-headed eld  
Received and did deliver to our age  
This tale of Herne the Hunter for a truth."

Merry Wives of Windsor.

THE OLD vicarage-house at Talland, as seen from the Looe road, its low roof and grey walls peeping prettily from between the dense boughs of ash and elm that environed it, was as picturesque an object as you could desire to see. The seclusion of its situation was enhanced by the character of the house itself. It was an odd-looking, old-fashioned building, erected apparently in an age when asceticism and self-denial were more in vogue than at present, with a stern disregard of the comfort of the inhabitant, and in utter contempt of received principles of taste. As if not secure enough in its retirement, a high wall, enclosing a courtelage in front, effectually protected its inmates from the prying passenger, and only revealed the upper part of the house, with its small Gothic windows, its slated roof, and heavy chimneys partly hidden by the evergreen shrubs which grew in the enclosure. Such was it until its removal a few years since; and such was it as it lay sweetly in the shadows of an autumnal evening one hundred and thirty years ago, when a stranger in the garb of a country labourer knocked hesitatingly at the wicket gate which conducted to the court. After a little delay a servant-girl appeared, and finding that the countryman bore a message to the vicar, admitted him within the walls, and conducted him along a paved passage to the little, low, damp parlour where sat the good man. The Rev. Mr Dodge was in many respects a remarkable man. You would have judged as much of him as he sat before the fire in his high-back chair, in an attitude of thought, arranging, it may have been, the heads of his next Sabbath's discourse. His heavy eyebrows, throwing into shade his spacious eyes, and indeed the whole contour of his face, marked him as a man of great firmness of character and of much moral and personal courage. His suit of sober black and full-bottomed periwig also added to his dignity, and gave him an appearance of greater age. He was then verging on sixty. The time and the place gave him abundant exercise for the qualities we have mentioned, for many of his parishioners obtained their livelihood by the contraband trade, and were mostly men of unscrupulous and daring character, little likely to bear with patience, reflections on the dishonesty of their calling. Nevertheless the vicar was fearless in reprehending it, and his frank exhortations were, at least, listened to on account of the simple honesty of the man, and his well-known kindness of heart. The eccentricity of his life, too, had a wonderful effect in procuring him the respect, not to say the awe, of a people superstitious in a more than ordinary degree. Ghosts in those days had more freedom accorded them, or had more business with the visible world than at present; and the parson was frequently required by his parishioners to draw from the uneasy spirit the dread secret which troubled it, or by the aid of the solemn prayers of the church to set it at rest for ever. Mr Dodge had a fame as an exorcist, which was not confined to the bounds of his parish, nor limited to the age in which he lived.

"Well, my good man, what brings you hither?" said the clergyman to the messenger.

"A letter, may it please your reverence, from Mr Mills of Lanreath," said the countryman, handing him a letter.

Mr Dodge opened it and read as follows: "MY DEAR BROTHER DODGE, I have ventured to trouble you, at the earnest request of my parishioners, with a matter, of which some particulars have doubtless reached you, and which has caused, and is causing, much terror in my neighbourhood. For its fuller explication, I will be so tedious as to recount to you the whole of this strange story as it has reached my ears, for as yet I have not satisfied my

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eyes of its truth. It has been told me by men of honest and good report (witnesses of a portion of what they relate), with such strong assurances, that it behoves us to look more closely into the matter. There is in the neighbourhood of this village a barren bit of moor which had no owner, or rather more than one, for the lords of the adjoining manors debated its ownership between themselves, and both determined to take it from the poor, who have for many years past regarded it as a common. And truly, it is little to the credit of these gentlemen, that they should strive for a thing so worthless as scarce to bear the cost of law, and yet of no mean value to poor labouring people. The two litigants, however, contested it with as much violence as if it had been a field of great price, and especially one, an old man, (whose thoughts should have been less set on earthly possessions, which he was soon to leave,) had so set his heart on the success of his suit, that the loss of it, a few years back, is said to have much hastened his death. Nor, indeed, after death, if current reports are worthy of credit, does he quit his claim to it; for at night-time his apparition is seen on the moor, to the great terror of the neighbouring villagers. A public path leads by at no great distance from the spot, and on divers occasions has the labourer, returning from his work, been frightened nigh unto lunacy by sight and sounds of a very dreadful character. The appearance is said to be that of a man habited in black, driving a carriage drawn by headless horses. This is, I avow, very marvellous to believe, but it has had so much credible testimony, and has gained so many believers in my parish, that some steps seem necessary to allay the excitement it causes. I have been applied to for this purpose, and my present business is to ask your assistance in this matter, either to reassure the minds of the country people if it be only a simple terror; or, if there be truth in it, to set the troubled spirit of the man at rest. My messenger, who is an industrious, trustworthy man, will give you more information if it be needed, for, from report, he is acquainted with most of the circumstances, and will bring back your advice and promise of assistance.

"Not doubting of your help herein, I do with my very hearty commendation commit you to God's protection and blessing, and am, Your very loving brother, ABRAHAM MILLS."

This remarkable note was read and re-read, while the countryman sat watching its effects on the parson's countenance, and was surprised that it changed not from its usual sedate and settled character. Turning at length to the man, Mr Dodge inquired, "Are you, then, acquainted with my good friend Mills?"

"I should know him, sir," replied the messenger, "having been sexton to the parish for fourteen years, and being, with my family, much beholden to the kindness of the rector."

"You are also not without some knowledge of the circumstances related in this letter. Have you been an eye-witness to any of those strange sights?"

"For myself, sir, I have been on the road at all hours of the night and day, and never did I see anything which I could call worse than myself. One night my wife and I were awoke by the rattle of wheels, which was also heard by some of our neighbours, and we are all assured that it could have been no other than the black coach. We have every day such stories told in the villages by so many creditable persons, that it would not be proper in a plain, ignorant man like me to doubt it."

"And how far," asked the clergyman, "is the moor from Lanreath?"

"About two miles, and please your reverence. The whole parish is so frightened, that few will venture far after nightfall, for it has of late come much nearer the village. A man who is esteemed a sensible and pious man by many, though an Anabaptist in principle, went a few weeks back to the moor ('tis called Blackadon) at midnight, in order to lay the spirit, being requested thereto by his neighbours, and he was so alarmed at what he saw, that he hath been somewhat mazed ever since."

"A fitting punishment for his presumption, if it hath not quite demented him," said the parson. "These persons are like those addressed by St Chrysostom, fitly called the golden-mouthed, who said, ÔMiserable wretches that ye be! ye cannot expel a flea, much less a devil!" It will be well if it serves no other purpose but to bring back these

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stray sheep to the fold of the Church. So this story has gained much belief in the parish?"

"Most believe it, sir, as rightly they should, what hath so many witnesses," said the sexton, "though there be some, chiefly young men, who set up for being wiser than their fathers, and refuse to credit it, though it be sworn to on the book."

"If those things are disbelieved, friend," said the parson, "and without inquiry, which your disbeliever is ever the first to shrink from, of what worth is human testimony? That ghosts have returned to the earth, either for the discovery of murder, or to make restitution for other injustice committed in the flesh, or compelled thereto by the incantations of sorcery, or to communicate tidings from another world, has been testified to in all ages, and many are the accounts which have been left us both in sacred and profane authors. Did not Brutus, when in Asia, as is related by Plutarch, see "

Just at this moment the parson's handmaid announced that a person waited on him in the kitchen, or the good clergyman would probably have detailed all those cases in history, general and biblical, with which his reading had acquainted him, not much, we fear to the edification and comfort of the sexton, who had to return to Lanreath, a long and dreary road, after nightfall. So, instead, he directed the girl to take him with her, and give him such refreshment as he needed, and in the meanwhile he prepared a note in answer to Mr Mills, informing him that on the morrow he was to visit some sick persons in his parish, but that on the following evening he should be ready to proceed with him to the moor.

On the night appointed the two clergymen left the Lanreath rectory on horseback, and reached the moor at eleven o'clock. Bleak and dismal did it look by day, but then there was the distant landscape dotted over with pretty homesteads to relieve its desolation. Now, nothing was seen but the black patch of sterile moor on which they stood, nothing heard but the wind as it swept in gusts across the bare hill, and howled dismally through a stunted grove of trees that grew in a glen below them, except the occasional baying of dogs from the farmhouses in the distance. That they felt at ease, is more than could be expected of them; but as it would have shown a lack of faith in the protection of Heaven, which it would have been unseemly in men of their holy calling to exhibit, they managed to conceal from each other their uneasiness. Leading their horses, they trod to and fro through the damp fern and heath with firmness in their steps, and upheld each other by remarks on the power of that Great Being whose ministers they were, and the might of whose name they were there to make manifest. Still slowly and dismally passed the time as they conversed, and anon stopped to look through the darkness for the approach of their ghostly visitor. In vain. Though the night was as dark and murky as ghost could wish, the coach and its driver came not.

After a considerable stay, the two clergymen consulted together, and determined that it was useless to watch any longer for that night, but that they would meet on some other, when perhaps it might please his ghostship to appear. Accordingly, with a few words of leave-taking, they separated, Mr Mills for the rectory, and Mr Dodge, by a short ride across the moor, which shortened his journey by half a mile, for the vicarage at Talland.

The vicar rode on at an ambling pace, which his good mare sustained up hill and down vale without urging. At the bottom of a deep valley, however, about a mile from Blackadon, the animal became very uneasy, pricked up her ears, snorted, and moved from side to side of the road, as if something stood in the path before her. The parson tightened the reins, and applied whip and spur to her sides, but the animal, usually docile, became very unruly, made several attempts to turn, and, when prevented, threw herself upon her haunches. Whip and spur were applied again and again, to no other purpose than to add to the horse's terror. To the rider nothing was apparent which could account for the sudden restiveness of his beast. He dismounted, and attempted in turns to lead or drag her, but both were impracticable, and attended with no small risk of snapping the reins. She was remounted with great difficulty, and another attempt was made to urge her forward, with the like want of success. At length the eccentric clergyman, judging it to be some special signal from Heaven, which it would be dangerous to neglect, threw the reins on the neck of his steed, which, wheeling suddenly round, started backward in a direction towards

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the moor, at a pace which rendered the parson's seat neither a pleasant nor a safe one. In an astonishingly short space of time they were once more at Blackadon.

By this time the bare outline of the moor was broken by a large black group of objects, which the darkness of the night prevented the parson from defining. On approaching this unaccountable appearance, the mare was seized with fresh fury, and it was with considerable difficulty that she could be brought to face this new cause of fright. In the pauses of the horse's prancing, the vicar discovered to his horror the much-dreaded spectacle of the black coach and the headless steeds, and, terrible to relate, his friend Mr Mills lying prostrate on the ground before the sable driver. Little time was left him to call up his courage for this fearful emergency; for just as the vicar began to give utterance to the earnest prayers which struggled to his lips, the spectre shouted, "Dodge is come! I must begone!" and forthwith leaped into his chariot, and disappeared across the moor.

The fury of the mare now subsided, and Mr Dodge was enabled to approach his friend, who was lying motionless and speechless, with his face buried in the heather.

Meanwhile the rector's horse, which had taken fright at the apparition, and had thrown his rider to the ground on or near the spot where we have left him lying, made homeward at a furious speed, and stopped not until he had reached his stable door. The sound of his hoofs as he galloped madly through the village awoke the cottagers, many of whom had been some hours in their beds. Many eager faces, staring with affright, gathered round the rectory, and added, by their various conjectures, to the terror and apprehensions of the family.

The villagers, gathering courage as their numbers increased, agreed to go in search of the missing clergyman, and started off in a compact body, a few on horseback, but the greater number on foot, in the direction of Blackadon. There they discovered their rector, supported in the arms of Parson Dodge, and recovered so far as to be able to speak. Still there was a wildness in his eye, and an incoherency in his speech, that showed that his reason was, at least, temporarily unsettled by the fright. In this condition he was taken to his home, followed by his reverend companion.

Here ended this strange adventure; for Mr Mills soon completely regained his reason, Parson Dodge got safely back to Talland, and from that time to this nothing has been heard or seen of the black ghost or his chariot.