The Superstitious Man's Story

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"THERE was something very strange about William's death—very strange indeed!" sighed a melancholy man in the back of the van. It was the seedman's father, who had hitherto kept silence.

"And what might that have been?" asked Mr Lackland.

"William, as you may know, was a curious, silent man; you could feel when he came near 'ee; and if he was in the house or anywhere behind you without your seeing him, there seemed to be something clammy in the air, as if a cellar door opened close by your elbow. Well, one Sunday, at a time that William was in very good health to all appearance, the bell that was ringing for church went very heavy all of a sudden; the sexton, who told me o't, said he had not known the bell go so heavy in his hand for years—it was just as if the gudgeons wanted oiling. That was on the Sunday, as I say.

"During the week after, it chanced that William's wife was staying up late one night to finish her ironing, she doing the washing for Mr and Mrs Hardcome. Her husband had finished his supper, and gone to bed as usual some hour or two before. While she ironed she heard him coming downstairs; he stopped to put on his boots at the stair−foot, where he always left them, and then came on into the living−room where she was ironing, passing through it towards the door, this being the only way from the staircase to the outside of the house. No word was said on either side, William not being a man given to much speaking, and his wife being occupied with her work. He went out and closed the door behind him. As her husband had now and then gone out in this way at night before when unwell, or unable to sleep for want of a pipe, she took no particular notice, and continued at her ironing. This she finished shortly after, and, as he had not come in, she waited awhile for him, putting away the irons and things, and preparing the table for his breakfast in the morning. Still he did not return, but supposing him not far off, and wanting to go to bed herself, tired as she was, she left the door unbarred and went to the stairs, after writing on the back of the door with chalk: Mind and do the door (because he was a forgetful man).

"To her great surprise, and I might say alarm, on reaching the foot of the stairs his boots were standing there as they always stood when he had gone to rest. Going up to their chamber, she found him in bed sleeping as sound as a rock. How he could have got back again without her seeing or hearing him was beyond her comprehension. It could only have been by passing behind her very quietly while she was bumping with the iron. But this notion did not satisfy her: it was surely impossible that she should not have seen him come in through a room so small. She could not unravel the mystery, and felt very queer and uncomfortable about it. However, she would not disturb him to question him then, and went to bed herself.

"He rose and left for his work very early the next morning, before she was awake, and she waited his return to breakfast with much anxiety for an explanation, for thinking over the matter by daylight made it seem only the more startling. When he came in to the meal he said, before she could put her question, 'What's the meaning of them words chalked on the door?'

"She told him, and asked him about his going out the night before. William declared that he had never left the bedroom after entering it, having in fact undressed, lain down, and fallen asleep directly, never once waking till the clock struck five, and he rose up to go to his labour.

"Betty Privett was as certain in her own mind that he did go out as she was of her own existence, and was little less certain that he did not return. She felt too disturbed to argue with him, and let the subject drop as though she must have been mistaken. When she was walking down Longpuddle Street later in the day she met Jim Weedle's daughter Nancy, and said: 'Well Nancy, you do look sleepy to−day!'

"'Yes, Mrs Privett,' said Nancy. 'Now, don't tell anybody, but I don't mind letting you know what the reason o't is. Last night, being Old Midsummer Eve, some of us church porch, and didn't get home till near one.'

"'Did ye?' says Mrs Privett. 'Old Midsummer yesterday was it? Faith, I didn't think whe'r 'twas Midsummer or Michaelmas; I'd too much work to do.'

"'Yes. And we were frightened enough, I can tell 'ee by what we saw.'

"'What did ye see?'

"(You may not remember, sir, having gone off to foreign parts so young, that on Midsummer Night it is believed hereabout that the faint shapes of all the folk in the parish who are going to be at death's door within the year can be seen entering the church. Those who get over their illness come out again after awhile; those that are doomed to die do not return.)

"'What did you see?' asked William's wife.

"'Well,' says Nancy, backwardly—'we needn't tell what we saw or who we saw.'

"'You saw my husband,' said Betty Privettin a quiet way.

"'Well, since you put it so,' says Nancy, hanging fire, 'we—thought we did see him; but it was darkish and we was frightened, and of course it might not have been he.'

"'Nancy, you needn't mind letting it out, though 'tis kept back in kindness. And he didn't come out of the church again: I know it as well as you.'

"Nancy did not answer yes or no to that, and no more was said. But three days after, William Privett was mowing with John Chiles in Mr Hardcome's meadow, and in the heat of the day they sat down to their bit o' lunch under a tree, and empty their flagon. Afterwards both of 'em fell asleep as they sat. John Chiles was the first to wake, and, as he looked towards his fellow−mower, he saw one of those great white miller's−souls as we call 'em—that is to say, a miller moth—come from William's open mouth while he slept and fly straight away. John thought it odd enough, as William had worked in a mill for several years when he was a boy. He then looked at the sun, and found by the place o't that they had slept a long while, and, as William did not wake, John called to him and said it was high time to begin work again. He took no notice, and then John went up and shook him and found he was dead.

"Now on that very day old Philip Hookhorn was down at Longpuddle Spring, dipping up a pitcher of water; and, as he turned away, who should he see coming down to the spring on the other side but William, looking very pale and old? This surprised Philip Hookhorn very much, for years before that time William's little son—his only child—had been drowned in that spring while at play there, and this had so preyed upon William's mind that he'd never been seen near the spring afterwards, and had been known to go half a mile out of his way to avoid the place. On enquiry, it was found that William in body could not have stood by the spring, being in the mead two miles off; and it also came out that at the time at which he was seen at the spring was the very time when he died."

"A rather melancholy story," observed the emigrant, after a minute's silence.

"Yes, yes. Well, we must take ups and downs together," said the seedman's father.