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PALLINGHURST BARROW.

I.

RUDOLPH REEVE sat by himself on the Old Long Barrow on Pallinghurst Common. It was a September evening, and the sun was setting. The west was all aglow with a mysterious red light, very strange and lurid—a light that reflected itself in glowing purple on the dark brown heather and the dying bracken. Rudolph Reeve was a journalist and a man of science; but he had a poet's soul for all that, in spite of his avocations, neither of which is usually thought to tend towards the spontaneous development of a poetic temperament. He sat there long, watching the livid hues that incarnadined the sky—redder and fiercer than anything he ever remembered to have seen since the famous year of the Krakatoa sunsets—though he knew it was getting late, and he ought to have gone back long since to the manor-house to dress for dinner. Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, his hostess, the famous Woman's Rights woman, was always such a stickler for punctuality and dispatch, and all the other unfeminine virtues! But, in spite of Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, Rudolph Reeve sat on. There was something about that sunset and the lights on the bracken—something weird and unearthly—that positively fascinated him.

The view over the common, which stands high and exposed, a veritable waste of heath and gorse, is strikingly wide and expansive. Pallinghurst Ring, or the "Old Long Barrow," a well-known landmark, familiar by that name from time immemorial to all the country-side, crowns its actual summit, and commands from its top the surrounding hills far into the shadowy heart of Hampshire. On its terraced slope Rudolph sat and gazed out, with all the artistic pleasure of a poet or a painter (for he was a little of both) in the exquisite flush of the dying reflections from the dying sun upon the dying heather. He sat and wondered to himself why death is always so much more beautiful, so much more poetical, so much calmer than life—and why you invariably enjoy things so very much better when you know you ought to be dressing for dinner.

He was just going to rise, however, dreading the lasting wrath of Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, when of a sudden a very weird yet definite feeling caused him for one moment to pause and hesitate. Why he felt it he knew not; but even as he sat there on the grassy tumulus, covered close with short sward of subterranean clover, that curious, cunning plant that buries its own seeds by automatic action, he was aware, through no external sense, but by pure internal consciousness, of something or other living and moving within the barrow. He shut his eyes and listened. No; fancy, pure fancy! Not a sound broke the stillness of early evening, save the drone of insects—those dying insects, now beginning to fail fast before the first chill breath of approaching autumn. Rudolph opened his eyes again and looked down on the ground. In the little boggy hollow by his feet innumerable plants of sundew spread their murderous rosettes of sticky red leaves, all bedewed with viscid gum, to catch and roll round the struggling flies that wrenched their tiny limbs in vain efforts to free themselves. But that was all. Nothing else was astir. In spite of sight and sound, however, he was still deeply thrilled by this strange consciousness as of something living and moving in the barrow underneath; something living and moving—or was it moving and dead? Something crawling and creeping, as the long arms of the sundews crawled and crept around the helpless flies, whose juices they sucked out. A weird and awful feeling, yet strangely fascinating! He hated the vulgar necessity for going back to dinner. Why do people dine at all? So material! so commonplace! And the universe all teeming with strange secrets to unfold! He knew not why, but a fierce desire possessed his soul to stop and give way to this overpowering sense of the mysterious and the marvellous in the dark depths of the barrow.

With an effort he roused himself, and put on his hat, which he had been holding in his hand, for his forehead was burning. The sun had now long set, and Mrs. Bouverie-Barton dined at 7.30 punctually. He must rise and go home. Something unknown pulled him down to detain him. Once more he paused and hesitated. He was not a superstitious man, yet it seemed to him as if many strange shapes stood by unseen, and watched with great eagerness to see whether he would rise and go away, or yield to the temptation of stopping and indulging his curious fancy. Strange!—he saw and heard absolutely nobody and nothing; yet he dimly realized that unseen figures were watching him close with bated breath, and anxiously observing his every movement, as if intent to know whether he would rise and move on, or remain to investigate this causeless sensation.

For a minute or two he stood irresolute; and all the time he so stood the unseen bystanders held their breath and looked on in an agony of expectation. He could feel their outstretched necks; he could picture their strained attention. At last he broke away. "This is nonsense," he said aloud to himself, and turned slowly homeward. As he did so, a deep sigh, as of suspense relieved, but relieved in the wrong direction, seemed to rise—unheard, impalpable, spiritual—from the invisible crowd that gathered around him immaterial. Clutched hands seemed to stretch after him and try to pull him back. An unreal throng of angry and disappointed creatures seemed to follow him over the moor, uttering speechless

imprecations on his head, in some unknown tongue—ineffable, inaudible. This horrid sense of being followed by unearthly foes took absolute possession of Rudolph's mind. It might have been merely the lurid redness of the afterglow, or the loneliness of the moor, or the necessity for being back not one minute late for Mrs. Bouverie-Barton's dinner-hour; but, at any rate, he lost all self-control for the moment, and ran—ran wildly, at the very top of his speed, all the way from the barrow to the door of the manor-house garden. There he stopped and looked round with a painful sense of his own stupid cowardice. This was positively childish: he had seen nothing, heard nothing, had nothing definite to frighten him; yet he had run from his own mental shadow, like the veriest schoolgirl, and was trembling still from the profundity of his sense that somebody unseen was pursuing and following him. "What a precious fool I am," he said to himself, half angrily, "to be so terrified at nothing! I'll go round there by-and-by, just to recover my self-respect, and to show, at least, I'm not really frightened."

And even as he said it he was internally aware that his baffled foes, standing grinning their disappointment with gnashed teeth at the garden gate, gave a chuckle of surprise, delight, and satisfaction at his altered intention.

II.

There's nothing like light for dispelling superstitious terrors. Pallinghurst Manor-house was fortunately supplied with electric light; for Mrs. Bouverie-Barton was nothing if not intensely modern. Long before Rudolph had finished dressing for dinner, he was smiling once more to himself at his foolish conduct. Never in his life before—at least, since he was twenty—had he done such a thing; and he knew why he'd done it now. It was a nervous breakdown. He had been overworking his brain in town with those elaborate calculations for his *Fortnightly* article on "The Present State of Chinese Finances"; and Sir Arthur Boyd, the famous specialist on diseases of the nervous system, had earned three honest guineas cheap by recommending him "a week or two's rest and change in the country." That was why he had accepted Mrs. Bouverie-Barton's invitation to form part of her brilliant autumn party at Pallinghurst Manor; and that was also doubtless why he had been so absurdly frightened at nothing at all just now on the common. Memorandum: Never to overwork his brain in future; it doesn't pay. And yet, in these days, how earn bread and cheese at literature without overworking it?

He went down to dinner, however, in very good spirits. His hostess was kind; she permitted him to take in that pretty American. Conversation with the soup turned at once on the sunset. Conversation with the soup is always on the lowest and most casual plane; it improves with the fish, and reaches its culmination with the sweets and the cheese; after which it declines again to the fruity level. "You were on the barrow about seven, Mr. Reeve," Mrs. Bouverie-Barton observed severely, when he spoke of the after-glow. "You watched that sunset close. How fast you must have walked home! I was almost half afraid you were going to be late for dinner."

Rudolph coloured up slightly; 'twas a girlish trick, unworthy of a journalist; but still he had it. "Oh dear, no, Mrs. Bouverie-Barton," he answered gravely. "I may be foolish, but not, I hope, criminal. I know better than to do anything so weak and wicked as that at Pallinghurst Manor. I *do* walk rather fast, and the sunset—well, the sunset was just too lovely."

"Elegant," the pretty American interposed, in her language.

"It always is, this night every year," little Joyce said quietly, with the air of one who retails a well-known scientific fact. "It's the night, you know, when the light burns bright on the Old Long Barrow."

Joyce was Mrs. Bouverie-Barton's only child—a frail and pretty little creature, just twelve years old, very light and fairylike, but with a strange cowed look which, nevertheless, somehow curiously became her.

"What nonsense you talk, my child!" her mother exclaimed, darting a look at Joyce which made her relapse forthwith into instant silence. "I'm ashamed of her, Mr. Reeve; they pick up such nonsense as this from their nurses." For Mrs. Bouverie-Barton was modern, and disbelieved in everything. 'Tis a simple creed; one clause concludes it.

But the child's words, though lightly whispered, had caught the quick ear of Archie Cameron, the distinguished electrician. He made a spring upon them at once; for the merest suspicion of the supernatural was to Cameron irresistible. "What's that, Joyce?" he cried, leaning forward across the table. "No, Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, I really *must* hear it. What day is this to-day, and what's that you just said about the sunset and the light on the Old Long Barrow?"

Joyce glanced pleadingly at her mother, and then again at Cameron. A very faint nod gave her grudging leave to proceed with her tale, under maternal disapprobation; for Mrs. Bouverie-Barton didn't carry her belief in Woman's Rights quite so far as to apply them to the case of her own daughter. We *must* draw a line somewhere. Joyce hesitated and began. "Well, this is the night, you know," she said, "when the sun turns, or stands still, or crosses the tropic, or goes back again, or something."

Mrs. Bouverie-Barton gave a dry little cough. "The autumnal equinox," she interposed severely, "at which, of course, the sun does nothing of the sort you suppose. We shall have to have your astronomy looked after, Joyce; such ignorance is exhaustive. But go on with your myth, please, and get it over quickly."

"The autumnal equinox; that's just it," Joyce went on, unabashed. "I remember that's the word, for old Rachel, the gipsy, told me so. Well, on this day every year, a sort of glow comes up on the moor; oh! I know it does, mother, for I've seen it myself; and the rhyme about it goes—"

‘Every year on Michael’s night
Pallinghurst Barrow burneth bright.’

Only the gipsy told me it was Baal’s night before it was St. Michael’s; and it was somebody else’s night, whose name I forget, before it was Baal’s. And the somebody was a god to whom you must never sacrifice anything with iron, but always with flint or with a stone hatchet.”

Cameron leaned back in his chair and surveyed the child critically. “Now, this is interesting,” he said; “profoundly interesting. For here we get, what is always so much wanted, firsthand evidence. And you’re quite sure, Joyce, you’ve really seen it?”

“Oh! Mr. Cameron, how can you?” Mrs. Bouverie-Barton cried, quite pettishly; for even advanced ladies are still feminine enough at times to be distinctly pettish. “I take the greatest trouble to keep all such rubbish out of Joyce’s way; and then you men of science come down here and talk like this to her, and undo all the good I’ve taken months in doing.”

“Well, whether Joyce has ever seen it not,” Rudolph Reeve said gravely, “I can answer for it myself that I saw a very curious light on the Long Barrow to-night; and, furthermore, I felt a most peculiar sensation.”

“What was that?” Cameron asked, bending over towards him eagerly. For all the world knows that Cameron, though a disbeliever in most things (except the Brush light), still retains a quaint tinge of Highland Scotch belief in a good ghost story.

“Why, as I was sitting on the barrow,” Rudolph began, “just after sunset, I was dimly conscious of something stirring inside, not visible or audible, but——”

“Oh, I know, I know!” Joyce put in, leaning forward, with her eyes staring curiously; “a sort of a feeling that there was somebody somewhere, very faint and dim, though you couldn’t see or hear them; they tried to pull you down, clutching at you like this: and when you ran away, frightened, they seemed to follow you and jeer at you. Great gibbering creatures! Oh, I know what all that is! I’ve been there, and felt it.”

“Joyce!” Mrs. Bouverie-Barton put in, with a warning frown, “what nonsense you talk! You’re really too ridiculous. How can you suppose Mr. Reeve ran away—a man of science like him—from an imaginary terror?”

“Well, I won’t quite say I ran away,” Rudolph answered, somewhat sheepishly. “We never do admit these things, I suppose, after twenty. But I certainly did hurry home at the very top of my speed—not to be late for dinner, you know, Mrs. Bouverie-Barton; and I *will* admit, Joyce, between you and me only, I was conscious by the way of something very much like your grinning followers behind me.”

Mrs. Bouverie-Barton darted him another look of intense displeasure. “I think,” she said, in that chilly voice that has iced whole committees, “at a table like this, and with such thinkers around, we might surely find something rather better to discuss than such worn-out superstitions. Professor Spence, did you light upon any fresh palæoliths in the gravel-pit this morning?”

III.

In the drawing-room, a little later, a small group collected by the corner bay, remotest from Mrs. Bouverie-Barton's own presidential chair, to hear Rudolph and Joyce compare experiences on the light above the barrow. When the two dreamers of dreams and seers of visions had finished, Mrs. Bruce, the esoteric Buddhist and hostess of Mahatmas (they often dropped in on her, it was said, quite informally, for afternoon tea), opened the flood-gates of her torrent speech with triumphant vehemence. "This is just what I should have expected," she said, looking round for a sceptic, that she might turn and rend him. "Novalis was right. Children are early men. They are freshest from the truth. They come straight to us from the Infinite. Little souls just let loose from the free expanse of God's sky see more than we adults do—at least, except a few of us. We ourselves, what are we but accumulated layers of phantasmata? Spirit-light rarely breaks in upon our grimed charnel of flesh. The dust of years overlies us. But the child, bursting new upon the dim world of Karma, trails clouds of glory from the beatific vision. So Wordsworth held; so the Masters of Tibet taught us, long ages before Wordsworth."

"It's curious," Professor Spence put in, with a scientific smile, restrained at the corners, "that all this should have happened to Joyce and to our friend Reeve at a long barrow. For you've seen MacRitchie's last work, I suppose? No? Well, he's shown conclusively that long barrows, which are the graves of the small, squat people who preceded the inroad of Aryan invaders, are the real originals of all the fairy hills and subterranean palaces of popular legend. You know the old story of how Childe Roland to the dark tower came, of course, Cameron? Well, that dark tower was nothing more or less than a long barrow; perhaps Pallinghurst Barrow itself, perhaps some other; and Childe Roland went into it to rescue his sister, Burd Ellen, who had been stolen by the fairy king, after the fashion of his kind, for a human sacrifice. The Picts, you recollect, were a deeply religious people, who believed in human sacrifice. They felt they derived from it high spiritual benefit. And the queerest part of it all is that in order to see the fairies you must go round the barrow *widershins*—that is to say, Miss Quackenboss, as Cameron will explain to you, the opposite way from the way of the sun—on this very night of all the year, Michaelmas Eve, which was the accepted old date of the autumnal equinox."

"All long barrows have a chamber of great stones in the centre, I believe," Cameron suggested tentatively.

"Yes, all or nearly all; megalithic, you know; unwrought; and that chamber's the subterranean palace, lit up with the fairy light that's so constantly found in old stories of the dead, and which Joyce and you, alone among moderns, have been permitted to see, Reeve."

"It's a very odd fact," Dr. Porter, the materialist, interposed musingly, "that the only ghosts people ever see are the ghosts of a generation very, very close to them. One hears of lots of ghosts in eighteenth-century costumes, because everybody has a clear idea of wigs and small-clothes from pictures and fancy dresses. One hears of far fewer in Elizabethan dress, because the class most given to beholding ghosts are seldom acquainted with ruffs and farthingales; and one meets with none at all in Anglo-Saxon or Ancient British or Roman costumes, because those are only known to a comparatively small class of learned people; and ghosts, as a rule, avoid the learned—except you, Mrs. Bruce—as they would avoid prussic acid. Millions of ghosts of remote antiquity must swarm about the world, though, after a hundred years or thereabouts, they retire into obscurity and cease to annoy people with their nasty cold shivers. But the queer thing about these long-barrow ghosts is that they must be the spirits of men and women who died thousands and thousands of years ago, which is exceptional longevity for a spiritual being; don't you think so, Cameron?"

"Europe must be chock-full of them!" the pretty American assented, smiling; "though Amurrica hasn't had time, so far, to collect any considerable population of spirits."

But Mrs. Bruce was up in arms at once against such covert levity, and took the field in full force for her beloved spectres. "No, no," she said, "Dr. Porter, there you mistake your subject. You should read what I have written in 'The Mirror of Trismegistus.' Man is the focus of the glass of his own senses. There are other landscapes in the fifth and sixth dimensions of space than the one presented to him. As Carlyle said truly, each eye sees in all things just what each eye brings with it the power of seeing. And this is true spiritually as well as physically. To Newton and Newton's dog Diamond what a different universe! One saw the great vision of universal gravitation, the other saw—a little mouse under a chair, as the wise old nursery rhyme so philosophically puts it. Nursery rhymes summarize for us the gain of centuries. Nothing was ever destroyed, nothing was ever changed, and nothing now is ever created. All the spirits of all

that is, or was, or ever will be, people the universe everywhere, unseen, around us; and each of us sees of them those only he himself is adapted to seeing. The rustic or the clown meets no ghosts of any sort save the ghosts of the persons he knows about otherwise; if a man like yourself saw a ghost at all—which isn't likely—for you starve your spiritual side by blindly shutting your eyes to one whole aspect of nature—you'd be just as likely to see the ghost of a Stone Age chief as the ghost of a Georgian or Elizabethan exquisite.”

“Did I catch the word ‘ghost’?” Mrs. Bouverie-Barton put in, coming up unexpectedly with her angry glower. “Joyce, my child, go to bed. This is no talk for you. And don't go chilling yourself by standing at the window in your nightdress, looking out on the common to search for the light on the Old Long Barrow, which is all pure moonshine. You nearly caught your death of cold last year with that nonsense. It's always so. These superstitions never do any good to any one.”

And, indeed, Rudolph felt a faint glow of shame himself at having discussed such themes in the hearing of that nervous and high-strung little creature.

IV.

In the course of the evening, Rudolph's head began to ache, as, to say the truth, it often did; for was he not an author? and sufferance is the badge of all our tribe. His head generally ached: the intervals he employed upon magazine articles. He knew that headache well; it was the worst neuralgic kind—the wet-towel variety—the sort that keeps you tossing the whole night long without hope of respite. About eleven o'clock, when the men went into the smoking-room, the pain became unendurable. He called Dr. Porter aside. "Can't you give me anything to relieve it?" he asked piteously, after describing his symptoms.

"Oh, certainly," the doctor answered, with that brisk medical confidence we all know so well. "I'll bring you up a draught that will put that all right in less than half an hour. What Mrs. Bruce calls Soma—the fine old crusted remedy of our Aryan ancestor; there's nothing like it for cases of nervous inanition."

Rudolph went up to his room, and the doctor followed him a few minutes later with a very small phial of a very thick green viscid liquid. He poured ten drops carefully into a measured medicine-glass, and filled it up with water. It amalgamated badly. "Drink that off," he said, with the magisterial air of the cunning leech. And Rudolph drank it.

"I'll leave you the bottle," the doctor went on, laying it down on the dressing-table, "only use it with caution. Ten drops in two hours if the pain continues. Not more than ten, recollect. It's a powerful narcotic—I dare say you know its name: it's Cannabis Indica."

Rudolph thanked him inarticulately, and flung himself on the bed without undressing. He had brought up a book with him—that delicious volume, Joseph Jacobs's "English Fairy Tales"—and he tried in some vague way to read the story of Childe Roland, to which Professor Spence had directed his attention. But his head ached so much he could hardly read it; he only gathered with difficulty that Childe Roland had been instructed by witch or warlock to come to a green hill surrounded with terrace-rings—like Pallinghurst Barrow—to walk round it thrice, widershins, saying each time—

"Open door! open door!
And let me come in,"

and when the door opened to enter unabashed the fairy king's palace. And the third time the door did open, and Childe Roland entered a court, all lighted with a fairy light or gloaming; and then he went through a long passage, till he came at last to two wide stone doors; and beyond them lay a hall—stately, glorious, magnificent—where Burd Ellen sat combing her golden hair with a comb of amber. And the moment she saw her brother, up she stood, and she said—

"Woe worth the day, ye luckless fool,
Or ever that ye were born;
For come the King of Elfland in
Your fortune is forlorn."

When Rudolph had read so far his head ached so much he could read no further; so he laid down the book, and reflected once more in some half-conscious mood on Mrs. Bruce's theory that each man could see only the ghosts he expected. That seemed reasonable enough, for according to our faith is it unto us always. If so, then these ancient and savage ghosts of the dim old Stone Age, before bronze or iron, must still haunt the grassy barrows under the waving pines, where legend declared they were long since buried; and the mystic light over Pallinghurst moor must be the local evidence and symbol of their presence.

How long he lay there he hardly quite knew; but the clock struck twice, and his head was aching so fiercely now that he helped himself plentifully to a second dose of the thick green mixture. His hand shook too much to be Puritanical to a drop or two. For a while it relieved him; then the pain grew worse again. Dreamily he moved over to the big north oriel to cool his brow with the fresh night air. The window stood open. As he gazed out a curious sight met his eye. At another oriel in the wing, which ran in an L-shaped bend from the part of the house where he had been put, he saw a child's white face gaze appealingly across to him. It was Joyce, in her white nightdress, peering with all her might, in spite of her mother's prohibition, on the mystic common. For a second she started. Her eyes met his. Slowly she raised one pale forefinger and pointed. Her lips opened to frame an inaudible word; but he read it by sight. "Look!" she said simply.

Rudolph looked where she pointed.

A faint blue light hung lambent over the Old Long Barrow. It was ghostly and vague, like matches rubbed on the palm. It seemed to rouse and call him.

He glanced towards Joyce. She waved her hand to the barrow. Her lips said "Go." Rudolph was now in that strange semi-mesmeric state of self-induced hypnotism when a command, of whatever sort or by whomsoever given, seems to compel obedience. Trembling he rose, and taking his bedroom candle in his hand, descended the stair noiselessly. Then, walking on tiptoe across the tile-paved hall, he reached his hat from the rack, and opening the front door stole out into the garden.

The Soma had steadied his nerves and supplied him with false courage; but even in spite of it he felt a weird and creepy sense of mystery and the supernatural. Indeed, he would have turned back even now, had he not chanced to look up and see Joyce's pale face still pressed close against the window and Joyce's white hand still motioning him mutely onward. He looked once more in the direction where she pointed. The spectral light now burnt clearer and bluer, and more unearthly than ever, and the illimitable moor seemed haunted from end to end by innumerable invisible and uncanny creatures.

Rudolph groped his way on. His goal was the barrow. As he went, speechless voices seemed to whisper unknown tongues encouragingly in his ear; horrible shapes of elder creeds appeared to crowd round him and tempt him with beckoning fingers to follow them. Alone, erect, across the darkling waste, stumbling now and again over roots of gorse and heather, but steadied, as it seemed, by invisible hands, he staggered slowly forward, till at last, with aching head and trembling feet, he stood beside the immemorial grave of the savage chieftain. Away over in the east the white moon was just rising.

After a moment's pause, he began to walk round the tumulus. But something clogged and impeded him. His feet wouldn't obey his will; they seemed to move of themselves in the opposite direction. Then all at once he remembered he had been trying to go the way of the sun, instead of widershins. Steadying himself, and opening his eyes, he walked in the converse sense. All at once his feet moved easily, and the invisible attendants chuckled to themselves so loud that he could almost hear them. After the third round his lips parted, and he murmured the mystic words: "Open door! Open door! Let me come in." Then his head throbbed worse than ever with exertion and giddiness, and for two or three minutes more he was unconscious of anything.

When he opened his eyes again a very different sight displayed itself before him. Instantly he was aware that the age had gone back upon its steps ten thousand years, as the sun went back upon the dial of Ahaz; he stood face to face with a remote antiquity. Planes of existence faded; new sights floated over him; new worlds were penetrated; new ideas, yet very old, undulated centrically towards him from the universal flat of time and space and matter and motion. He was projected into another sphere and saw by fresh senses. Everything was changed, and he himself changed with it.

The blue light over the barrow now shone clear as day, though infinitely more mysterious. A passage lay open through the grassy slope into a rude stone corridor. Though his curiosity by this time was thoroughly aroused, Rudolph shrank with a terrible shrinking from his own impulse to enter this grim black hole, which led at once, by an oblique descent, into the bowels of the earth. But he couldn't help himself. For, O God! looking round him, he saw, to his infinite terror, alarm, and awe, a ghostly throng of naked and hideous savages. They were spirits, yet savages. Eagerly they jostled and hustled him, and crowded round him in wild groups, exactly as they had done to the spiritual sense a little earlier in the evening, when he couldn't see them. But now he saw them clearly with the outer eye; saw them as grinning and hateful barbarian shadows, neither black nor white, but tawny-skinned and low-browed; their tangled hair falling unkempt in matted locks about their receding foreheads; their jaws large and fierce; their eyebrows shaggy and protruding like a gorilla's; their loins just girt with a few scraps of torn skin; their whole mien inexpressibly repulsive and bloodthirsty.

They were savages, yet they were ghosts. The two most terrible and dreaded foes of civilized experience seemed combined at once in them. Rudolph Reeve crouched powerless in their intangible hands; for they seized him roughly with incorporeal fingers, and pushed him bodily into the presence of their sleeping chieftain. As they did so they raised loud peals of discordant laughter. It was hollow, but it was piercing. In that hateful sound the triumphant whoop of the Red Indian and the weird mockery of the ghost were strangely mingled into some appalling harmony.

Rudolph allowed them to push him in; they were too many to resist; and the Soma had sucked all strength out of his muscles. The women were the worst: ghastly hags of old, witches with pendent breasts and bloodshot eyes, they whirled round him in triumph, and shouted aloud in a tongue he had never before heard, though he understood it instinctively, "A victim! A victim! We hold him! We have him!"

Even in the agonized horror of that awful moment Rudolph knew why he understood those words, unheard till then. They were the first language of our race—the natural and instinctive mother-tongue of humanity.

They haled him forward by main force to the central chamber, with hands and arms and ghostly shreds of buffalo-hide. Their wrists compelled him as the magnet compels the iron bar. He entered the palace. A dim phosphorescent light, like the light of a churchyard or of decaying paganism, seemed to illumine it faintly. Things loomed dark before him; but his eyes almost instantly adapted themselves to the gloom, as the eyes of the dead on the first night in the grave adapt themselves by inner force to the strangeness of their surroundings. The royal hall was built up of cyclopean stones, each as big as the head of some colossal Sesostris. They were of ice-worn granite and a dusky-grey sandstone, rudely piled on one another, and carved in relief with representations of serpents, concentric lines, interlacing zigzags, and the mystic swastika. But all these things Rudolph only saw vaguely, if he saw them at all; his attention was too much concentrated on devouring fear and the horror of his situation.

In the very centre a skeleton sat crouching on the floor in some loose, huddled fashion. Its legs were doubled up, its hands clasped round its knees, its grinning teeth had long been blackened by time or by the indurated blood of human victims. The ghosts approached it with strange reverence, in impish postures.

"See! We bring you a slave, great king!" they cried in the same barbaric tongue—all clicks and gutturals. "For this is the holy night of your father, the Sun, when he turns him about on his yearly course through the stars and goes south to leave us. We bring you a slave to renew your youth. Rise! Drink his hot blood! Rise! Kill and eat him!"

The grinning skeleton turned its head and regarded Rudolph from its eyeless orbs with a vacant glance of hungry satisfaction. The sight of human meat seemed to create a soul beneath the ribs of death in some incredible fashion. Even as Rudolph, held fast by the immaterial hands of his ghastly captors, looked and trembled for his fate, too terrified to cry out or even to move and struggle, he beheld the hideous thing rise and assume a shadowy shape, all pallid blue light, like the shapes of his jailers. Bit by bit, as he gazed, the skeleton seemed to disappear, or rather to fade into some unsubstantial form, which was nevertheless more human, more corporeal, more horrible than the dry bones it had come from. Naked and yellow like the rest, it wore round its dim waist just an apron of dry grass, or, what seemed to be such, while over its shoulders hung the ghost of a bearskin mantle. As it rose, the other spectres knocked their foreheads low on the ground before it, and grovelled with their long locks in the ageless dust, and uttered elfin cries of inarticulate homage.

The great chief turned, grinning, to one of his spectral henchmen. "Give a knife!" he said curtly, for all that these strange shades uttered was snapped out in short, sharp sentences, and in a monosyllabic tongue, like the bark of jackals or the laugh of the striped hyena among the graves at midnight.

The attendant, bowing low once more, handed his liege a flint flake, very keen-edged, but jagged, a rude and horrible instrument of barbaric manufacture. But what terrified Rudolph most was the fact that this flake was no ghostly weapon, no immaterial shred, but a fragment of real stone, capable of inflicting a deadly gash or long torn wound. Hundreds of such fragments, indeed, lay loose on the concreted floor of the chamber, some of them roughly chipped, others ground and polished. Rudolph had seen such things in museums many times before; with a sudden rush of horror, he recognized now for the first time in his life with what object the savages of that far-off day had buried them with their dead in the chambered barrows.

With a violent effort he wetted his parched lips with his tongue, and cried out thrice in his agony the one word "Mercy!"

At that sound the savage king burst into a loud and fiendish laugh. It was a hideous laugh, halfway between a wild beast's and a murderous maniac's: it echoed through the long hall like the laughter of devils when they succeed in leading a fair woman's soul to eternal perdition. "What does he say?" the king cried, in the same transparently natural words, whose import Rudolph could understand at once. "How like birds they talk, these white-faced men, whom we get

for our only victims since the years grew foolish! ‘Mu-mu-mu-moo!’ they say; ‘Mu-mu-mu-moo!’ more like frogs than men and women!”

Then it came over Rudolph instinctively, through the maze of his terror, that he could understand the lower tongue of these elfish visions because he and his ancestors had once passed through it; but they could not understand his, because it was too high and too deep for them.

He had little time for thought, however. Fear bounded his horizon. The ghosts crowded round him, gibbering louder than before. With wild cries and heathen screams they began to dance about their victim. Two advanced with measured steps and tied his hands and feet with a ghostly cord. It cut into the flesh like the stab of a great sorrow. They bound him to a stake which Rudolph felt conscious was no earthly and material wood, but a piece of intangible shadow; yet he could no more escape from it than from the iron chain of an earthly prison. On each side the stake two savage hags, long-haired, ill-favoured, inexpressibly cruel-looking, set two small plants of Enchanter’s Nightshade. Then a fierce orgiastic shout went up to the low roof from all the assembled people. Rushing forward together, they covered his body with what seemed to be oil and butter; they hung grave-flowers round his neck; they quarrelled among themselves with clamorous cries for hairs and rags torn from his head and clothing. The women, in particular, whirled round him with frantic Bacchanalian gestures, crying aloud as they circled, “O great chief! O my king! we offer you this victim; we offer you new blood to prolong your life. Give us in return sound sleep, dry graves, sweet dreams, fair seasons!”

They cut themselves with flint knives. Ghostly ichor streamed copious.

The king meanwhile kept close guard over his victim, whom he watched with hungry eyes of hideous cannibal longing. Then, at a given signal, the crowd of ghosts stood suddenly still. There was an awesome pause. The men gathered outside, the women crouched low in a ring close up to him. Dimly at that moment Rudolph noticed almost without noticing it that each of them had a wound on the side of his own skull; and he understood why: they had themselves been sacrificed in the dim long ago to bear their king company to the world of spirits. Even as he thought that thought, the men and women with a loud whoop raised hands aloft in unison. Each grasped a sharp flake, which he brandished savagely. The king gave the signal by rushing at him with a jagged and saw-like knife. It descended on Rudolph’s head. At the same moment, the others rushed forward, crying aloud in their own tongue, “Carve the flesh from his bones! Slay him! hack him to pieces!”

Rudolph bent his head to avoid the blows. He cowered in abject terror. Oh! what fear would any Christian ghost have inspired by the side of these incorporeal pagan savages! Ah! mercy! mercy! They would tear him limb from limb! They would rend him in pieces!

At that instant he raised his eyes, and, as by a miracle of fate, saw another shadowy form floating vague before him. It was the form of a man in sixteenth-century costume, very dim and uncertain. It might have been a ghost—it might have been a vision—but it raised its shadowy hand and pointed towards the door. Rudolph saw it was unguarded. The savages were now upon him, their ghostly breath blew chill on his cheek. “Show them iron!” cried the shadow in an English voice. Rudolph struck out with both elbows and made a fierce effort for freedom. It was with difficulty he roused himself, but at last he succeeded. He drew his pocket-knife and opened it. At sight of the cold steel, which no ghost or troll or imp can endure to behold, the savages fell back, muttering. But ’twas only for a moment. Next instant, with a howl of vengeance even louder than before, they crowded round him and tried to intercept him. He shook them off with wild energy, though they jostled and hustled him, and struck him again and again with their sharp flint edges. Blood was flowing freely now from his hands and arms—red blood of this world; but still he fought his way out by main force with his sharp steel blade towards the door and the moonlight. The nearer he got to the exit, the thicker and closer the ghosts pressed around, as if conscious that their power was bounded by their own threshold. They avoided the knife, meanwhile, with superstitious terror. Rudolph elbowed them fiercely aside, and lunging at them now and again, made his way to the door. With one supreme effort he tore himself madly out, and stood once more on the open heath, shivering like a greyhound. The ghosts gathered grinning by the open vestibule, their fierce teeth, like a wild beast’s, confessing their impotent anger. But Rudolph started to run, all wearied as he was, and ran a few hundred yards before he fell and fainted. He dropped on a clump of white heather by a sandy ridge, and lay there unconscious till well on into the morning.

When the people from the Manor-house picked him up next day, he was hot and cold, terribly pale from fear, and mumbling incoherently. Dr. Porter had him put to bed without a moment's delay. "Poor fellow!" he said, leaning over him, "he's had a very narrow escape indeed of a bad brain fever. I oughtn't to have exhibited Cannabis in his excited condition; or, at any rate, if I did, I ought, at least, to have watched its effect more closely. He must be kept very quiet now, and on no account whatever, Nurse, must either Mrs. Bruce or Mrs. Bouverie-Barton be allowed to come near him."

But late in the afternoon Rudolph sent for Joyce.

The child came creeping in with an ashen face. "Well?" she murmured, soft and low, taking her seat by the bedside; "so the King of the Barrow very nearly had you!"

"Yes," Rudolph answered, relieved to find there was somebody to whom he could talk freely of his terrible adventure. "He nearly had me. But how did you come to know it?"

"About two by the clock," the child replied, with white lips of terror, "I saw the fires on the moor burn brighter and bluer: and then I remembered the words of a terrible old rhyme the gipsy woman taught me—

"Pallinghurst Barrow—Pallinghurst Burrow!
 Every year one heart thou'lt harrow!
 Pallinghurst Ring—Pallinghurst Ring!
 A bloody man is thy ghostly king.
 Men's bones he breaks, and sucks their marrow.
 In Pallinghurst Ring on Pallinghurst Barrow;"

and just as I thought it, I saw the lights burn terribly bright and clear for a second, and I shuddered for horror. Then they died down low at once, and there was moaning on the moor, cries of despair, as from a great crowd cheated, and at that I knew that you were not to be the Ghost-king's victim."



Transcriber's Note

This text has been preserved as in the original, including archaic and inconsistent spelling, punctuation and grammar, except that obvious printer's errors have been silently corrected.

[The end of *Pallinghurst Barrow* by Grant Allen]