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THE DEMON IN THE SWAMP

A Novelet of
Forest Horror

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CABRAL

THE SHADOW OF THE VALLEY OF DEATH

A Novelet of Weird Illusion

By DON JOSEPH

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION



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Chamber of Centuries

By
John Russell Fearn

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the title *Within That Room!*.

We came over the brow of the hill at twilight. Back of us was the last dying flush of the summer sunset, ahead of us the sprawling, ill-organized little township of Calford. Somehow, the sight of the place came as a shock to me.

After the happy days of marriage and honeymoon, the whirlwind travel in and between cities, it was exceedingly depressing to find the journey's end a shambles of makeshift shops and houses, dominated on the eastern side by a solitary residence in its own grounds.

'That the place?' I asked Jane, as our car coasted down the long slope.

She gave a quiet nod but did not speak. I had noticed that expression of gloom on her usually bright young face for some time now. Her dark eyes stared sombrely through the windscreen.

'Well, anyway, you sure didn't exaggerate when you said the place was gloomy,' I murmured presently. 'But I still think it's a lot of bunk—about the phantom, I mean. There aren't any such things—'

She turned on me suddenly, just as she always did when I derided her notions on spooks.

'It's true enough, Dick! Oh, why did you have to insist we come back to make sure? We could have made our home in New York as you suggested, and I could have sold this old place. We—'

'Now wait a minute, Jane! I'm not having my wife going all through the rest of her life haunted by a crazy memory. I'm going to prove to you that it's simply your own imagination that has conjured up the ghost theory. We're going to stay in this old place of yours for the rest of the vacation, and before it's over I'll prove how wrong you are.'

She gave a rather bitter smile. 'All right. But you'll see . . .'

I sped up through the town and in five minutes was driving up the elm-lined entrance to the residence. The trees were in full foliage, wet and sticky with summer evening dew. Jane rang the doorbell while I unloaded our bags from the rumble seat.

A thin, dark-eyed woman with skin too tight for her bones opened the door and gave a little exclamation.

'Well, Miss Jane! Glad to see you back . . . Good evening, sir,' she added, as I came up the steps.

We spent a few moments in introductions. The woman was the housekeeper, Mrs. Baxter. With her husband, who was odd-job man and general factotum, she kept the place in general order. My inner thought was that it must be a pretty lonely job. Old Baxter himself, who took the car into the garage, was strong for his age, grey-haired, and with a certain hard fixity of expression, which I could not like.

When we sat down to dinner in the immense and rather chilly dining hall Jane asked Mrs. Baxter a question.

'Has anything happened? Has—has *he* appeared yet?'

The woman shook her head. 'Not yet, Miss Jane. It's only the twenty-first of June yet, you know; *he* only appears on the longest day—tomorrow.'

Jane nodded moodily. I saw Mrs. Baxter hesitate for a moment, then she went on earnestly:

'Why don't you leave, Miss Jane? Why don't you get out of this place? Take that offer from Chicago and sell the place. Don't worry about Tom and me. We'll get fresh places. You're married now, and a young wife like you oughtn't to be in a gloomy old place like this.'

'Good advice, and she'd probably take it except for me,' I put in calmly. 'It was my idea to come back here, and I'm stopping here until I lay the family ghost. Once that's done, we're

leaving anyway. I believe you folks have lived here so long the place had gotten into you—but not so me. I've led a city life and no ghost in existence can give me the jitters.'

Mrs. Baxter eyed me steadily for a moment, a queer look on her face. Then she shrugged her shoulders and went out without a word.

'Listen, Jane,' I went on quietly, 'I want the whole truth on this. So far, you have only given me snatches. What is the real dope on this family phantom?'

'It dates back to Eighteen Hundred,' Jane said, pondering. My great-great-great grandfather was Sir Jonathan Melrose, an English lord. He was a great traveler, journeyed to various lands, made plenty of friends and also plenty of enemies. The enemies he made mainly by practical jokes, which were not infrequently pretty alarming, even dangerous. Anyway, he made Hampshire, the English county where he resided, too hot for him by one of his stunts. He had to quit England—but rather than do just that, he decided to take his residence, the Elms, with him. So he had it transported to America here, stone by stone, and rebuilt. In those days there was no village in Calford, of course.'

'So I imagine. What happened then?'

'His enemies followed him to America, so the record reads, and killed him in his bedroom upstairs. In a letter he wrote just before his death—which he seemed to realise was imminent—he said that his presence would forever haunt the room and that he would return in person on the night of June 22nd at seven in the evening, in every year thereafter until the house should be demolished. Certainly his presence is always noticeable in the room. There is an atmosphere of the grave in that locked chamber in the east wing.'

'And he had appeared at the times predicted?'

'All save three occasions. He has become a legend. Successive generations have seen him, successive generations have been appalled by the mystic forces in the room. My father and mother knew of them. I have known them just once. I have grown up with the legend, and the truth was passed on to me two years ago when my father died. My mother died when I was born, as you know. It was after father's death that the Baxters came in to look after things. I went away for a while. I rambled round to different places, met you, and—Well, you know the rest.'

'This bedroom you speak of has always been locked up?'

Jane nodded. 'Except for investigations by professional followers of psychic phenomenon. They've said there *is* psychic power in that room. No person can stay in it above three minutes without collapsing.'

'Charming place,' I murmured, and Jane looked at me seriously.

'Now you know why I want to get away, why I was so against us coming back here.'

I patted her hand gently. 'I'm only doing it to eradicate the fear of the unknown which has been with you ever since you were a child,' I told her slowly, 'I don't believe for a moment that Sir Jonathan actually returns. Anyway, he's an original ghost,' I added, grinning. 'Most of them come about Christmas time; he chooses midsummer! Nice going!'

'Honestly, Dick, it isn't a joking matter,' Jane said going on with her dinner rather huffily. 'You'll find that out tomorrow, when he appears.'

'How long does he stop as a rule?'

'About three minutes, then he fades as mysteriously as he appears.'

I went on eating, thinking hard. So Sir Jonathan had been a practical joker, had he? Maybe this was a posthumous trick beating anything he had done during his life. I started putting odds and ends together. Jane, mesmerized by the constant superstition of the place, could not

see things as detachedly as I could. It struck me as queer for a ghost to turn up at midsummer, and even queerer for his presence to turn any body crazy at any time of the year. I did not credit the psychic implications. No ghost, surely, would fix the date and time of his coming so accurately?

‘Well?’ Jane asked quietly, and I started from my preoccupation.

‘I’m going to have a look at that room tonight before the old boy shows up.’ I stated quietly.

She gave a sigh. ‘All right—but I’m warning you it’s dangerous. I’d much rather you didn’t,’ she added earnestly, getting up and coming round to me.

‘There’s no other way to start an investigation.’ I pulled my fountain pen flashlight from my pocket and tested it. ‘Come—let’s be looking.’

She hesitated for a moment, then seeing I was determined, she led the way from the room and up the broad, ancient stone staircase to the upper floor. We passed down a long and exceedingly drafty corridor to the east wing.

Immediately we got to it, I felt my spirits start to sink. There was something peculiar about this section of the old residence. It was more than gloomy, it was positively sepulchral.

‘That’s the door, third along,’ Jane said, straining to keep her voice steady. ‘The key is in the lock, as it has always been. Please be careful Dick—*please!*’

She clung to my arm tightly as I moved along. I wished my resolution had not so depleted itself in the journey from downstairs. The corridor we were in had a broken window at one end. Beyond it, the elm trees were motionless in the summer evening gloom. Outside, crickets and night life were making the devil of a row. Under our feet lay a thick carpet of dust—the dust of centuries since this wing of the house had been completely abandoned with the beginning of the appearances of Sir Jonathan.

At last we stopped outside the third door. The key was coated in rust and left red streaks on my fingers as I turned it. It made a noise like a corncrake. The squeak of the old-fashioned but still useable lock, and the further scrape of hinges as the door swung inward, sounded like thunder in our tense, expectant ears.

I heard Jane breathing hard, I felt her try ineffectually to pull me back. The pair of us stood motionless on the threshold of the room, my small light flashing an investigatory beam in all directions. The beam was not steady, for I was trembling. It was not so much because I was frightened but because my nerves were all shot to pieces. Jane too, was dithering like a jelly.

The beam revealed a floor thick with dust, stirred into a fine haze in the air. Place was stuffy too, long sealed. There were three windows of heavy stained glass, thickly dirty. Outside it seemed that rain had washed them into smeary streaks.

The rest of the room contained exceptionally old-fashioned furniture thick with dirt. There was a four-poster bed, a wardrobe, chairs, several other oddments. I began to move into the centre of the room, leaving Jane in the doorway.

The moment I got into the middle of the room something happened! It was just as though all the demons of hell suddenly leaped out at me and seized my vitals. A wave of intense dizziness made my head spin like a top. I dropped my torch and cried out at the same time. Unnameable horrors lurked in the gloom. I felt bestial emotions surge through me. In two seconds of time I was changed into something hunted and demoralized. My sanity was being whipped away from me by unknown forces. Hammering, beating horror flooded my brain . . .

Wheeling round, I saw the oblong that was the doorway and blundered toward it. I literally fell through it with Jane clawing at my arms. She slammed the door of the room and turned the key . . .

Slowly, very slowly, the horrible thoughts receded from my mind—but I felt like a wet sack as I got to my feet, knees trembling, perspiration streaming down my face. Covered as it was in dirt and cobwebs, I must have made a sorry picture.

Jane turned a sheet-white face to me.

‘Now you see?’ she whispered.

‘I see—but I don’t understand,’ I replied unsteadily. ‘There is *something* in that room, sure—but it’s got to have a logical explanation.’

She stamped her foot hysterically. ‘Oh, Dick, why don’t you realise that the room is genuinely haunted? There are no explanations for such things! One—one just accepts them.’

‘Yeah? Well, I’m not going to!’ I was feeling confident again now. I took her arm and we went downstairs together. As we went, I did some more thinking.

‘Considering everything,’ I said slowly, when we were back in the sitting room, ‘I’d say we both suffered from some sort of nervous depression—intense depression, conviction of horror such as assails a chronic neurotic or a potential suicide. In the centre of that room, reason was nearly blasted out of me.’

She looked at me gravely. ‘It’s not for us to dabble, Dick. It’s some sort of evil presence. I’m sure of it!’

‘Old wives’ bunk,’ I grunted. ‘Just the same, I admit it wants thinking over. Nothing more we can do about it at the moment so let’s get to bed and reason it out in the daylight. Come on.’

We passed Mrs. Baxter on the stairs and she eyed us steadily.

‘Everything is prepared,’ she announced. ‘Will there be anything more?’

‘Nothing,’ Jane said. ‘Nothing at all, thanks. Goodnight.’

I watched the old girl go down the staircase and was pretty sure that she kept her eye on both of us all the time we went along the upper landing. I glanced toward that deserted, windy east wing and shuddered. The memory of that awful room died hard . . .

It was close on one in the morning when a slight creaking sound in the corridor outside awoke me. I sat up, listened. Though I could not be dead sure it had sounded like softly treading feet.

‘Jane! Jane, wake up,’ I shook her gently.

‘I heard it,’ she responded, rising up beside me. ‘I haven’t been asleep . . . Somebody creeping about. But why?’

‘Soon find out,’ I retorted. ‘Grab some clothes.’

As we dressed hastily, I searched round for some kind of weapon. The heavy fireplace poker was all I could discover—and there was my heavy flashlight if need be. Thus armed, I stepped out into the silent corridor with Jane beside me. Like wraiths we crept down the cavern of stairs. In the hall there did not appear to be anything unusual. The old grandfather clock was ticking solemnly.

‘I suppose it must have been the Baxters?’ Jane whispered.

‘Guess so. Couldn’t have been anything else, could it? But where are they?’

She thought for a moment. ‘Perhaps in the cellars,’ she said quickly. ‘There are dozens of them sprawled round under this place.’

‘Lead on,’ I said, holding her arms.

We went across the hall to a door under the staircase. It was swinging open.

‘They’re down here, right enough,’ Jane muttered. ‘Be careful. Mask your light.’

The spotlight revealed a flight of stone steps. When we had reached their bottom, Jane led the way with some nervousness through caverns of stone, some of them still stacked with cobwebby bottles of wine, others filled with all manner of junk, until we came to one in which reposed a locked door, on the further wall. But there was a light under that door!

I doused my torch immediately and Jane clutched my arm.

‘Must be the Baxters—but what on earth can they want down here?’

We moved to the door together and pushed it gently. It was solid teak and firmly locked. For a moment we stood puzzling, listening to strange metallic clanks and thuds from within the cellar. So thick was the door, no sound of voices penetrated.

‘A mirror,’ I said softly. ‘That’s what we want! Can you grab one?’

‘This do?’ She took a tiny minimizing mirror from the compact fitted to her dress belt. I lowered it to the crack at the door base and stared into it. But I did not see much to help me.

I got a narrow focus vision of what was beyond. I could see two pairs of feet, a man and a woman’s, together with a collection of metal rods on the floor, and an oil lamp. That was all, except that one of the rods was stained with curious, darkly glistening substance.

Jane looked after me, then shook her head. ‘Got me licked,’ she sighed.

‘We’ll look at the place when they’re out of the way,’ I said finally. ‘For the time being, let’s move. They won’t know we’ve been down here after them, I don’t suppose. Come on.’

Back in the safety of our room, we looked at each other grimly.

‘Can’t make it out,’ Jane said, frowning.

‘I’d give plenty to find out if they’re connected with that chamber of horrors on the east wing,’ I muttered.

‘Can’t be—in the cellar. No connection. No, they’re up to something quite apart from the horror room. This whole place crawls with mystery. I begin to think it would be a good idea to sell it and be done with it.’

‘Was that what Mrs. Baxter meant at dinner time when she referred to that offer from Chicago?’

Jane nodded. ‘There’s a man willing to buy this place for a building scheme. Says pulling the place down will kill all ghosts anyway. Not that that worries him. He wants to put up a block of flats here.’

‘Here?’ I echoed. ‘Out in the wilds? And he’s in Chicago?’

‘He buys up lots of places all over the country. He offered two thousand dollars for this.’

‘What!’ I yelped, aghast.

‘With ghost,’ Jane added seriously. ‘Maybe the mechanics of business are too deep for me, but it seemed a good price—’

‘Gyping, with murder thrown in,’ I retorted. ‘No, we’ll do a bit of ghost-laying ourselves without the help of Chicago, thanks. The ghost should turn up tomorrow anyway. So, until tomorrow night we’ll lie quiet and give the Baxters no reason to suspect anything. Right?’

She nodded slowly. ‘All right. But I still think it would be better to sell . . .’

Jane and I spent the next day idling about, doing nothing to attract attention, though I did feel pretty sure the Baxters had some notions up their sleeve. I even had my suspicions that they knew we had followed them the previous night. Maybe we’d left footprints in the cellar

dust. Anyway, though quite respectful in their behaviour, they were rather chilly. Mrs. Baxter in particular had difficulty in keeping herself amiable as she served first lunch and then dinner.

There had unfortunately been no opportunity of getting down secretly to that cellar, and to have sent the Baxters away from the house on some pretext would only have served to arouse their suspicions and perhaps precipitate something. Altogether, it was a pretty melancholy, depressing day.

But at last it drew to a close. At a quarter to seven I said briefly to Jane: 'We'd better be getting upstairs.'

The long beams of the sinking sun were cast in bars across the east wing corridor when we reached it, revealing it in all its grime and dilapidation. We hesitated outside the door of the horror room, then I turned the key and flung the door wide, backing away immediately.

A faint sensation of horror began to grip me. My knees started to tremble. Jane actually cried out and clutched my arm.

'Steel yourself!' I panted. 'We've got to see this thing through this time. Hold on!'

She nodded rather desperately and stared with me into the chamber. It looked rather different, with the sunlight glancing into it. The stained and blotched walls, for instance, were covered in many parts with fleshy-looking nodules, something I had not observed last time by flashlight. Nothing else was changed. My small light still lay where I had dropped it.

The conviction of horror seemed to come in waves as we stood there, but its force was nowhere near that existing inside the room itself. We both stood trembling helplessly, watching as the sun moved from the third window to the second, then to the first and last, illuminating half its dirty length. Down in the hall, the grandfather clock chimed seven strokes with disagreeable solemnity.

Suddenly Jane gripped my arm—but I knew already what she meant. Something was forming in the middle of the room—the vague, misty outline of a man's figure. The spectacle was decidedly uncanny in the half-light, especially with the wafting waves of horror beating round.

'Dick, I can't stand this,' Jane panted, white to the lips. 'It's too awful!'

Just the same she did not go away. She was too fascinated for that.

The figure increased in density with the moments and finally took on the quite discernible impression of a man of middle age, attired in old-fashioned clothes, one hand dramatically out-thrust.

I stared at it blankly, hypnotized—then, at a sudden unexpected sound, we both whirled round. Baxter was right beside us, a gun in his hand.

'Jane!' I yelled, whirling her to me, but I had no time for more. Baxter jumped forward, seized the pair of us and bundled us into the room, slammed and locked the door on us.

Wild terror roared into our brains immediately. Jane screamed with sheer bodily anguish and I felt my head spinning. Obscene thoughts, vile urges, clattered through my mind, and that damned ghost stood staring at me, pointing. Jane dropped to the floor, unconscious.

Chattering and muttering to myself, laughing insanely for no reason, I charged at the ghost. I went right through it and collided violently with the wall. My hands slapped into those rotten fungoid growths and snapped them off. An overpowering stench, and with it increased madness, surged to my brain.

Instinctively I pinched my nostrils to shut out the smell—and became aware of something else at the same time. The horror abated a little. Weakly I staggered to the window, slammed

my fist right through it. The stained glass smashed—and with it the ghost vanished! I stared stupidly, comprehending vague notions. The cool evening wind blew gloriously in my face.

I caught Jane up, hauled her inert form to the window and smashed out the remaining glass. She lay in my arm, gulping, slowly recovering. With the fresh air, the horror slowly receded, left us weak and trembling.

‘The ghost.’ Jane whispered. ‘It’s gone!’

‘Yeah—and I think I know why,’ I retorted. ‘In fact, I think I’ve tumbled to the whole rotten set-up in this room. Come on—outside. I’ve things to ask that swine, Baxter.’

We got through the window onto the low-built road running beneath it. It was not particularly difficult to reach our own bedroom. Once more I picked up my handy poker and crept to the door.

I opened it just as footsteps came hurrying along the landing. It was Baxter, obviously racing back from the east wing after being sure we had got the full benefit of the room’s horrors. When he saw me, he slid to a stop, hesitated momentarily in amazement, then fired.

His aim went wide because I hurled the poker at the same moment. It struck him right across the hand and brought a yelp of anguish from him. In one leap, I’d snatched his weapon from the floor.

‘Not so smart, eh, Baxter?’ I snapped. ‘Jane, phone for the police from the bedroom.’

She turned back to comply, and while she was at the instrument Mrs. Baxter appeared on the top landing, started violently. But I’d seen her.

‘Come here, you!’ I shouted. ‘Beside this precious husband of yours!’

They backed to the wall and stood waiting, grim-faced.

‘They’re coming,’ Jane said, behind me.

‘Good.’ I looked at the Baxters steadily. ‘You can save yourself a lot more trouble by spilling everything. What’s in that cellar?’

Baxter smiled bitterly. He knew the game was up. ‘So it was you two that followed last night. I figured as much.’ He shrugged. ‘Oil,’ he said briefly.

I whistled. ‘Now I begin to figure things out! You mean the rods were for a test bore?’

‘Yeah. Worked properly, there’d be a gusher. We figured to drive the girl out, have the property bought cheap, and go to town. We knew from charts of the district, there was oil somewhere around here—that’s why we came as servants. We knew about the ghost legend too, and decided to play it up for all it was worth to drive Miss Jane out—’

‘You deliberately arranged all that?’ Jane shouted hotly.

‘Not all of it,’ I said grimly. ‘The ghost was actually caused by a tiny figure in the stained glass, wasn’t it? Just as stained windows embody little cherubs, angels, so forth.’

Baxter nodded sourly.

‘Guessed as much when I put my fist through it,’ I breathed. ‘I know now why Sir Jonathan stipulated the 22nd of June. It is the longest day, and the only day likely for the sun to reach that particular window. The climate is fairly reliable so the effect would not often miss. You see, Jane, it was a little image in the glass, obviously put there by Sir Jonathan as one of his jokes or whims. The sun acted like a carbon arc and projected a photo-like picture on the dust always floating in the room. Sir Jonathan may have intended to frighten his enemies, but instead he succeeded in scaring his descendants.’

Jane shook her head. ‘But the windows were dirty,’ she cried. ‘How could—’

‘Possibly you saw to it that that image was kept clean, eh Baxter?’ I demanded.

‘Yes, damn you. All we wanted to do was frighten Miss Jane out—but tonight I was desperate and—’

‘But the horror of that room?’ Jane whispered.

‘Fungoid growth,’ I said. ‘They give off some sort of gas which, when inhaled, is a tremendous depressant to the nerves. Queer sort of fungoid. It’s name, I believe, is *barinuth*—sometimes called the Climbing Toadstool. It’s a South American plant and grows in shady places in damp. It gives off an odour, which affects the nerves and brain. Sir Jonathan, a world traveller, probably picked it up in his travels and added it to his ghost idea. Its roots are in the cellar and it grows up between the walls. Damned ingenious—’

I broke off and glanced up sharply. The sound of an approaching police siren came clearly on the night air.

The authorities gave the Baxters five years apiece for their crimes. I kept my word to them and soft-pedalled their attempted murder. They were, I felt sure, more fools than rogues, and I did not want to have too much on my conscience.

We had the oil checked by experts. That was a year ago.

Anytime you wish, you will be welcome at the Melrose Oil Concession, and if you ask for Jane or me you can have the verification of the story I’ve told. We live in New York now, however. The old house with its jinx was destroyed to make room for the gushers, and with it went the mystical chamber of centuries, which had nearly bereft the girl I love of her reason.

[The end of *Chamber of Centuries* by John Russell Fearn]