

The Devil's door

By John Garland

We had eaten rather too well in a restaurant owned by friends of ours. We had eaten far too much and were feeling the effects of a rather excellent red wine, when I chanced to say to my companions:

'You don't believe in ghosts do you? You're all men of the twentieth century and such things have no place here amidst ether and electricity.'

My partner and associates, rather befuddled by drink shook their heads, though one of them looked like he might tell a story if pushed.

'Well look,' I said. 'It's almost Christmas and they always used to tell cracking ghost stories on the radio, by James, Le Fanu or Edgar Allan Poe. I tell you what, lets all make up a story an meet up next week here for dinner. I'll stump up first prize; a fortnight in France at a friend's villa for the story we all agree is the best one.'

There was a murmuring at this, and although I am no great raconteur or teller of stories I found them all sitting upright at the table, curious now, eager to learn more. I drained my glass and stood up a little unsteadily. 'No, no more clues. Get your thinking caps on. Best one wins a holiday.'

'But what if you win?' said my friend Kirsty.

'Pfah,' I said. 'That'll never happen.'

'But if it does...' her husband Simon pressed. I stopped and plucked out the first thing I could think of.

'Well if I win, then you all have to come and stay with me for Christmas, no excuses.'

There was a mixture of amusement and embarrassment at this for I think they felt awkward. I live alone and I think they thought I was trying to get some company or curry favour.

'No no,' I said. 'I won't win so you won't have to abandon your families at Noel. But you **did** ask what I wanted... Is it a deal?'

There was an interlude while the bill was divided, totted up, a recount demanded by those who hadn't drunk wine, a demand from the end of the table for another tenner and questions over the etiquette of tipping. Finally though the bill got paid and as they left one by one they shook my hand and agreed. They would take part in my little game.

I don't think they realised what they/we were doing, the hornet's next that we were kicking up. It seemed such a simple idea, a ghost story competition

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I'll move now to the week before Christmas when we met again. It was unusual for we only met socially every six to twelve months, but this was different. I had done my best to fend off texts, emails and voicemails asking for advice or hints. The villa in France was big and luxurious but more than that they all seemed taken with the idea of the competition.

I remained calm, smiled and gave them answer I used to give to all my students. 'Be true to yourself. Write of what you know.' How I wish now that I could unsay those words, untext that advice, I've not slept properly for a month now, though the medicine and the whiskey helps.

Its why I'm writing it down now. I'm hoping this is one ghost story that can be put to bed. I don't want you to judge my story, or JP's for that matter. It doesn't matter whether you believe it or not. Its a bit like wanting someone to believe in lightning - its irrelevant, and not believing won't make it go away.

I mentioned a moment ago that it was JP, or Jean-Paul's story, so I'll try to tell it as he told it to us.

One roast lamb and chinese chicken in the comfortable old farmhouse in Craneborough. If you don't believe in ghost stories, shut your ears now.

I won't convince you, but that's hardly the point.

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JP's Tale

'You know I work with me dad in the reclamation business out at Fordingbridge.'

JP stops and takes a drink.

'This story is to do with something we found whilst we on a recce. It's not really a ghost, but...' JP stalls.

'Well anyway, I'll tell it and then you be the judge of it.

'My dad and I run Recluse Reclamation, green futures they call it. We save old panels of stained glass, brass taps, weather vanes, keys of brass, unpainted tiles and ugly old radiators - we plug up the rust, strip off some of the paint, repair them and sell them on to a new owner. We get some good stuff,' there are a few nods around the table at this.

We get some good stuff in this neck of the woods, though sometimes we go to some pretty odd places. Occasionally we will get a request for something special, an ornamental fireguard, a vintage tractor seat for a boutique kitchen - this time it was a door our client Mr Wooten wanted. A feature piece he said, in a plummy accent, you know something really special, something you'll never forget. I've a mind to have it as a show piece he said. Wooton was a nasty piece of work, he'd been seen in the village with a blonde on his arm who wasn't his wife, and he was uncommonly rude and bigoted. Still he paid well for antiques and he'd kept the wolf from the door for us over years. So we kept his request in the back of our minds as we saved stuff from houses bound for demolition, and picked up stuff at auction. We'd looked a month and not seen anything when my old dad says to me. The Sandler place up Dimrill StCuthbert - that's where we'll find something for old Woolie bugger. I'm a bit politer with the customers but Dad's one of a dying breed, the

cheeky sort of sod who says what he thinks and damn the consequences.

We found so much good stuff that day, It was a real treasure trove. Dutch painted tiles, wooden stair spindles, stained glass panels, even a crystal chandelier. All abandoned all ours for the taking. Demolition was due for next week and curiously we were the only ones there. Its a small world and usually reclamation people get the drop on a 'new' house and will travel across four or five counties to get in on the action. I thought it was odd at the time but decided not to question our great fortune. Dad seemed reluctant to talk while we were loading the van - just finish the job John-Paul he kept on saying - Do the job that's in front of you. He seemed nervous, which wasn't like him and he would never stay beyond three o' clock. I thought he was worried about Mum who'd been ill a few times recently. Only now do I realise that he had some idea of whose house it was we were working in

Charles StJohn Olivier Michael Gabrielle was a 16th century Venetian architect beloved by Charles II Niklaus Pevsner would later declare a love fro 'Oriel windows and herringbone window arches (for 'those eloquent pillars and delicate lintels,')

Gabrielle was expelled in 1645 accused of witchcraft and solacious behaviour, but no one ever heard of him leaving England.

The house had a chequered history, never staying in one family for longer than a generation. I was surprised though that it was up for demolition. Dad wouldn't talk, though I'd later learn that the family had paid to have the house pulled down brick by brick. To build a chapel and a modest country retreat.

All I knew was that Dad had found Mr Wooton's feature. It was a feature I can scarcely begin to describe...

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To say it was a door is to do it an injustice, It was a magnificent work of art and artisanship. Once long ago it must have been painted, for here and there were flecks of paint that remained stubbornly on the carvings. The door was formed of six great panels, chisled carved and morticed together with great care. We had carefully removed it from a door to a decaying study, but it looked to us as if it had once been the front door.

As we loaded it carefully into the flatbed, covered it with hessians I got my first misgiving, when the sacking moved over it. The thing was covered with ornate carvings I thought, like a misericord, and the cloth must have caught on one of those. I thought know more about it, but moved it to the workshop where Dad and I worked.

Dad had hit upon the excellent de of turning the old door into a glass topped coffee table to act as a show piece for old Wooton, 6 diays he worked on that piece morning noon and night. If he seemed paler than usual, and more tetchy I put it down to the extra work he was putting in and the late nights he was pulling. I asked him how it was going and he snorted 'fine fine!' and we left it at that.

He denied working on the table into the early hours, which puzzled me because I could see know reason for him to lie to me about it. We lost a few household ornaments and on Wednesday the cat refused to come into the house, but all these things I ignored, or rather did not see were a part of a large pattern.

Thursday morning saw Mr Wooton come to view his prize feature. He was bowled over, but tried not to show it. When you've been in the trade a while you get to know the expression on a hooked punter's face. His eyes were bright, and his voice was animated even while he struggled to remain sanguine about it.

'It's a nice piece, Harold. Quite nice. Where did you get it?'

My Dad, smiled and tapped his nose. A good reclaimist is often reluctant to reveal his source. 'It's got provenance he said, if that's what you're thinking 'bout.'

Indeed, said Wooton. We could see he was itching to touch it, he thrust his hands deep into the pocket of his mustard corduroys and strolled around the outside edge of the table.

I'll give you 50 for it.

My dad laughed. 'Yeh roight, and the 2 on top of it

'Fifty two Mr Bentley?' said Wooton archly,

NO.' Said my dad crossly. 'Two hundred and fifty.' It was unlike dad to lose his temper with a customer but I put it down to the late nights.

Wooton just laughed. 'Dear boy, The thing is full of woodworm and half the paints come off... his voice trailed lazily.

Look, I can see you put a bit of work into it, the glass top is nice, and I like the legs. What say we to hundred?'

I moved between them because I could see my dad was about to lose his temper.

Look, Why don't you leave it Mr Wooton.' I said in what I hoped was a placating manner. 'You don't want it, and my father obviously doesn't want to sell at that price. It did belong to Lord Gabrielle, you know, the infamous rake of the 1700s

'1645 muttered my dad under his breath.

Gabrielle? Said Wooton, his voice raising a little. 'Who the devil tell is he?' his voice was dripping with scorn now.

I could have sworn I heard something crack, a scratchy noise come from deep within the door.

'Go to Hell!; Shouted my father. 'Just go to Hell!'

And this time I heard the squealing of hinges, though there were none left on the door I'd made sure of that myself.

Dad! I said turning to face him, please. I'm sure we can come to some...

I've never seen anyone's hair turn white before. I hope that I never will again. That's what happened to my dad though. When I turned back to Wooton I found to my horror that the room was empty.

The lights had grown brighter for a second, making all the shadows seem darker, but there was no sign of Wooton. It was as if he had never been there.

There's not much more to tell strangely. We moved Wooton's car to the edge of the new forest, tipped it into a ditch where the police found it a month later. Wooton's wife seemed strangely calm, almost happy, when we saw her, and the police didn't have too

many questions for us to answer.

Yes we'd seen him, no my father had been unwilling to sell him the table, no we didn't know where he was now.

Only the last was a falsehood. We never talked about it, my father and I, but we both had seen that carved door shutting, seen the red glimmer of light beneath the wooden edge wink out. I think we both knew exactly where my father has unwittingly sent Mr Wooton that night.

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JP won the holiday, we all felt he deserved it. John Paul is a plumber now, he says he's had enough of things with a past and that he know's where he stands with a radiator. Strangely Harold Bentley hasn't been seen round the village for a while now, and John Paul refuses to talk about the subject.