

Black Shuck

Black Shuck may have been a dog, but he certainly wasn't man's best friend as we were about to find out.

Reverend Montague Wynnter and I, Sir Charles Berwick were making our way home from York, driving in my Talbot. It was near midnight on a hazy summer night in 1929 and we were traveling through Cambridgeshire on the way to Ely. We had been delayed longer than expected up in Yorkshire and were running quite late. I was driving on the Littleport to Brandon Creek Road when we came up to a small stone humpback bridge crossing a small brook. There was an unseasonable fog in the area and I must admit I wasn't driving all too carefully being tired from my exertions during the day. We crested the bridge and in the centre of the road stood a large black mastiff, it stayed where it was, nonchalantly, as if it didn't even see the approaching automobile. Instinct made me swerve the car and I drove it into the low wall at the side of the bridge and we both ended up somewhat dazed and bruised. It took a few minutes to recover but the hound had gone when we got out of the car. The Talbot was badly crunched at the front, and it was obvious we wouldn't be going anywhere that night. We had shot through the village of Littleport a couple of miles back so we decided to hobble, injuries and all, back towards the village to knock up the local Innkeeper, it being passed pub hours, and obtain a pair of rooms for the night.

Before I go further I should just describe my friend for he cut an eccentric visage. In appearance he was plump, round-cheeked and generally smiling. He was altogether an eighteenth-century fellow, although of course it was 1929. He wore a soutane and stockings and old-fashioned shoes with silver buckles on them and he wore his hair with curls at either side of his head as if it was a wig from two centuries ago. Whenever he went visiting he always wore a cloak and a shovel hat and carried a silver-topped cane depicting Leda being ravished by

Zeus in the form of a swan, but he was a man of stout heart and decisive action and he was altogether one of the most extraordinary people I knew. For a man in his forties he cut a strange sight. I am the exact opposite being over six feet tall with flaxen hair and rugged features.

We reached the Hare & Hounds Public House which was almost the last building at the southern edge of the village. The sign above the door named the proprietor as a Jonas Thurrock so I knocked him up, loudly. Already our arms were tired of carrying two large suitcases over a two mile stretch, and I was in no mood for niceties.

"Coming!" stated a surly voice some ten minutes later. The door opened to reveal a large set man in his fifties with a balding top and rosy red cheeks. "How may I help you gents," he said .

I forced my way passed him into the public bar and Montague followed with the tavern keeper bringing up the rear.

"Are you the proprietor? We need rooms for the night," I said.

"Aye I'm Thurrock and it's late to be calling, sirs," he said. "We've already closed for the night."

"Now see here, my good fellow, we were in an accident by the bridge down the road apace, my car is a wreck, and we have nowhere else to go, and given that the day has not been so good I'm in no mood-", I said.

"Of course I have rooms, sir," the innkeeper said. "I was just enquiring is all. An accident you say. It'll be this damn fog."

"We nearly hit a big black mastiff on the bridge," I said. "It shouldn't be allowed to let a dog like that roam free at all hours. As soon as it's morning, I'll be around to the owner. Do you know the owner of such a hound?"

"No, sir, no such dog in these parts," then a twinkle came into his eye, " I think you've had a run in with Black Shuck, if it's the bridge down the road a couple of miles, then I guess that's what happened."

"Black Shuck?" I said.

“Yes, it's a phantom dog been seen in these parts for hundreds of years always on that bridge always on foggy nights. Never seen it myself, can't say I want to either, it's said it foretells a death, I think you can consider yourselves to have had a lucky escape,” he said.

“I don't know anything about foretelling deaths, it almost caused two tonight, damn beast. Really, eh, a phantom dog? Well, it seemed real enough, what do you think of that, Montague?” I said.

“Most interesting. Still I think we might look around for a owner see if there are any paw prints leading off into the woods that sort of thing – in the cold light of day, of course,” Montague said.

“Well, you won't find none, sirs, you've met Black Shuck sure as day is day. Here let me get the register, and I'll show you up to your rooms, “ the man said. “Would you both like a drop of whisky to calm your nerves?”

Whilst waiting for the drink I took in the surroundings, it was a quaint pub with black wooden beams, white walls, burnished copper tables and bar and dark oak stools, it had a warm and welcoming feel to it and was typical of a lot of public houses in the rural parts of the country.

We soon found ourselves in comfortable rooms on the first floor of the Inn and we had a comfortable night. We met at breakfast at nine the following morning and made our plans for the day.

“Well, we're obviously going nowhere for a few days, Montague,” I said.

“The car will have to be fixed first. I enquired of Thurrock whether there is a mechanic in the village, and he told me that the blacksmith doubles up, so after breakfast I suggest we go and pay him a visit.”

“I want to do a thorough search around that bridge,” Montague said. “I'm intrigued whether or not we nearly ran into a phantom dog. I'd like to lay my curiosity to rest.”

We found the blacksmith, a heavy set muscular man in his thirties with a full shock of curly black hair and a handlebar moustache, at the half-point through the village down a small lane, when we told him about the car he

harnessed up a pair of dray horses and we walked with him to the bridge, whilst he was busy attaching the car to the horses I picked his brain and Montague was doing a search of the area.

"Do you know of anyone in these parts with a large black mastiff?" I said. "It caused us to crash."

He looked up from his assessment of the Talbot. "I reckon that was Black Shuck that caused your accident, especially on this bridge. This is his bridge."

"You don't honestly expect me to believe in phantom dogs?" I said.

"I reckon I don't expect anything of you, sir. Them's the facts, consider yourself lucky. Old Sam Rawlings was killed by Black Shuck." Now this was a new development.

"Killed you say?"

"He saw the dog's eyes and his limbs became like stone over the course of two weeks, and then he was dead, he were only a young man," he said. "Now the doctor says the shock had given him a stroke but no-one ever heard of a stroke spreading to all the limbs and finally to the heart – no it was Black Shuck as done him in. So's you was lucky you didn't get a closer look at the beast, sir." Montague returned from checking the grass verges at this point. "No sign of anything, Berwick, no paw prints no stool, nothing. Unless the dog stayed on the road and even then in this gravel it would show something and there's nothing." "Well by all accounts we had a lucky escape so let's call it quits, wait for the car and be gone from here," I said apprehensive about what might happen. Unlike Montague I never liked to meddle in the supernatural, although I often found myself wrapped up in it, I still tried to be a doubting Thomas but over the years my no nonsense attitude was being eroded by what I saw and this night I must confess to being quite afraid of this Black shuck.

"Oh no, no, Thurrock said it appears on foggy nights so if tonight is foggy we're coming back to the bridge to settle this matter," Montague said. Soon after we walked back to the village the blacksmith told us that the car would take a week as he needed some parts he would have to send away for. I tried to

dissuade Montague from the course of action he wanted to take, and prayed that the night would be clear, but sure enough at near midnight, we were approaching the bridge in a rather dense fog.

We stood on the crest of the bridge looking south, I hoped nothing would appear but then out of the fog walked the black mastiff, it simply stared at us, didn't bark or growl. Montague was off towards it, I put my arm out to stop him, but he shook me off. When he got close to the hound it leapt at him but made no sound, Montague screamed and covered his face falling onto his back and before my very eyes as the hound landed on the road after the arc of its leap it vanished. My heart fluttered in my chest, and I staggered up to Montague who was lying still on the road. I dragged him to the restraining wall to the left and sat him against it.

"Are you all right, Montague," I said.

"I saw its eyes , its red eyes, Berwick, when it leapt for me, I saw its eyes. I think I may have had a stroke, it fairly put the wind up me, you'll have to help me back to the village, my left arm has gone numb," he said.

I could hardly believe what we saw myself, and I was greatly shaken. I thought we had best get off the cursed bridge before this Black Shuck put in another ghostly appearance..

I placed Montague's right arm over my shoulders and bending over slightly to take account of his short height, I helped him back to the village and the Hare and Hounds. It took some time to make it back and when we did arrive, I asked for Thurrock to send for the village doctor which he did immediately. When Doctor Grimes turned up he did a detailed examination of Montague.

"He's had a severe shock which has resulted in a mild stroke," he said.

"He should get better over the next few weeks but no more strenuous activities."

When I told him where we'd been, and what we'd done he looked flabbergasted and shocked himself but still reassured us that Montague would get better. As Thurrock was taking the doctor to the door I heard them exchange

words and both men stared back at Montague, the doctor shook his head. It was an innocuous but an ominous action. I resolved then and there that we must find some cure for my friend if his condition continued to worsen, which I felt, after seeing the doctor shaking his head, that it was bound to do.

The following morning I went to Montague's room to see whether he was feeling better.

"It's getting worse," he said. "It is spreading down my left leg."

"How does it feel exactly?" I said.

"Like my limbs are turning to stone," He said. "I was thinking last night that maybe this Black Shuck is a witch's familiar and the damned thing is doing her bidding. If we find the witch maybe we can break the spell, or effect, or whatever it has had on me."

Later that day we were drinking in the bar, Montague forced himself out of the bed, although he said he felt like he could sleep through the rest of his life away and that if he wasn't careful that is exactly what he would do. He called Thurrock over to him.

"I have a question," Montague said. "It might seem strange, Mr Thurrock, but if you will just bare with me."

"Ask away then, sir," the barlord said.

"Are there any witches in the vicinity?" Montague said.

"Lord bless me, I never would have dreamt you'd ask that," Thurrock said.

"Any witches? There ain't been witches in these parts since Matthew Hopkins the Witchfinder General came through and killed all the old dears back in the 1600s. I never would have taken you for the superstitious sort, sir."

"Ok, so no witches. Is there an old woman who lives alone near the bridge where we crashed?" Montague said.

"Well Ma Entwistle lives a mile further down the road. She's pretty old but she ain't no witch mind you – she keeps bees," Thurrock said.

Later on that afternoon I helped Montague along, and we went to visit with Ma Entwistle. It was easy to find the track which lay to the left of the road

just over a bit further than a mile beyond the bridge. The path wound its way through a small wood, and we came across a clearing in which stood a thatched cottage in good repair. In front of the building were about a dozen of the white manmade beehives. A large figure in the requisite gear for beekeeping, the big gloves, the hat with a mesh veil, was bending over a hive. When the figure stood up to greet us it was obviously a woman of advanced age, she was a rather robust no-nonsense woman with a shock of gray hair flowing freely down her back. She was dressed in colourful flowing garments – not the current style, not really a style at all unless it was all her own. She had a loud jolly voice.

“How may I help you , gentlemen, come for some of my renowned honey?” she said.

“Yes, sort of,” I said.

She took us inside the cottage, it was delightful within, very well kept with a beautiful oak table in the kitchen at which we all three sat down. I looked around there were no pets around.

“You don't keep a cat?” I said.

“No time, I have thousands of pets with my bees, they take up all my time,” she said. “Now, about that honey?”

Montague decided to try his hand then, “I suppose you use spells to control the bees?” he said. It was by far the most outright preposterous thing I heard him say so far, I thought he should have been a bit more circumspect, but then I expect that the withering in his limbs had removed all caution from him.

“Spells did you just say, man, I never heard such ridiculous claptrap,” she said smiling at us both. “Although it does take a certain sort of magic to keep bees I must admit, but that being a rare skill with the small beggars. Now do you want honey or do you want to talk about nonsense?” But Ma Entwistle was too good natured to be insulted by Montague's insinuation, and we spent an hour drinking herbal tea and chatting about the bees whilst my friend surreptitiously looked around him looking for clues I supposed. We got away with only having to buy six jars of honey- Ma Entwistle had a convincing sales pitch- which she

put in a small bag for us. Walking back up to the road I broached the subject with Montague.

“Well there were no cats or rats or toads around, she's not a witch, Montague, I'm surprised you didn't ask her about Black Shuck.”

“There was no point, even I could see she wasn't guilty as charged. A charming woman I thought. I doubt she could have added anything more to the story of this phantom hound. No I will have to seek the answers somewhere else,” he said.

Over the next few days Montague got worse and worse until by the fifth day all his left side was paralyzed, it was on the fifth day he came up with a plan. We were to go back to the bridge when next there was a fog and confront the creature again, but this time I was to take my shaving mirror. He would say no more other than that the 'classics' had revealed all to him. But no fog came, for nine nights it was clear then on the tenth night when Montague's right leg was also paralyzed the weather answered our prayers and a fog sprang up. We decided that we would leave the village that night no matter what as if the plan failed Montague was more likely to get medical help in London. I had to bodily carry him down to the car at 11.20 pm, and then I brought down the suitcases, we had already paid our bill earlier in the day but Thurrock came to wish us well. I shook his hand, and he looked sympathetically towards Montague who was sat in the car which we had taken possession of a couple of days ago, it now being fixed. We drove off in the Talbot to meet with destiny, or so I felt. I must admit to being scared, if I failed then I might end up like my friend facing an inevitable and early death.

We arrived at the bridge with plenty of time to spare and parked on the crest so that Montague could see what was going on. I got out of the Talbot and retrieved my shaving mirror from the glove compartment. As I was walking down to the southern end of the bridge the dog appeared out of the fog as if he materialized then and there. My heart fluttered, and I felt some panic but I walked steadily towards Black Shuck. I got to perhaps within ten foot of the

hound. Seen up close I noticed it had two glowing red eyes that burnt with the fires of hell and quite fearsome slavering jaws. It was a large black mastiff and must have weighed as much as an average man. I kept the mirror behind me and then made to rush at the dog, but it leapt. One moment it was simply standing staring at me, the next it was in the air. I fell backwards and held up the mirror towards its eyes casting the reflected glow of the eyes back at it. A most remarkable thing happened. Starting at the beast's snout and cascading backwards with a weird fizzing noise to the accompaniment of a soul wrenching howl, the hound turned to stone. I fell onto my back, and it flew over me to shatter on the road above my head. I struggled to my feet, the mirror all but forgotten in my hand, and I examined the rubble that had been Black Shuck. It was a non-descript pile, and I certainly couldn't see the remnants of a dog shape amongst the stone rubble. I kicked the pieces about with my foot and found two red pieces of stone that possibly had been the dog's eyes, I picked them up and pocketed them to keep as souvenirs and then walked back to the car. Montague was standing by the door.

"When it was destroyed my limbs recovered," he said.

"How did you know?" I said.

"I didn't, but it had a medusa like power, it's stare the baleful stare of a basilisk that brings death with one look. My limbs felt as if they were becoming stone so I thought that perhaps what had worked on Medusa, the mirror reflecting back her evil glance, might work on this damn hound, and I was right. Never let me say again that a classical education consisting of hours of repeating by rote the Greek myths is ever a waste," Montague said. "Let's go, we should be in Ely in an hour or two."

With that we got into the Talbot and drove off. Thank God it had worked because although Montague had told me not to look into the eyes of Black Shuck it had been the first thing I'd done and the shock of it had knocked me over just as the beast had leapt for my throat. We had both been lucky.