

## **Tales from the Bar I: The Uncanny**

After checking Marko was 'OK for pop' – he was sipping at a glass of ginger beer, as usual – Bill went over to the bar to order a pint of bitter and a packet of crisps. Salt and vinegar, as always. Bill was not, shall we say, prone to innovation.

'You'll be pleased to know that the hydrostatic transmission on the new tram loco seems to be working,' Bill informed Marko as he walked back to their table on the far side of the room to the bar. 'Have to admit I've never had to deal with high-pressure hydraulics before, so I'm really pleased Jeff took the lead with the project.'

'That's good news,' responded Marko. 'Have you done any track testing yet?'

'Oh, no, we've not fitted the controls into the cab yet. Indeed we're still working on the cab. Though as that's mostly wood it's a different team of volunteers and they've got a bit behind as several of them have had things crop up which needed dealing with. One of them lost his wife only a month ago.'

'That expression always makes me smile. Though I know it shouldn't.

"Losing" someone does sound like they might be found again anytime soon.'

'I didn't mean it in that sense Marko,' replied Bill, clearly a little offended.

'Where would we be without hydraulics?' deflected Marko, realising Bill never did get the difference between literal expressions and metaphorical ones used as figures-of-speech.

'Indeed. No mechanised coal mining, no JCBs on building sites, no efficient farm equipment, much less effective plastics moulding machines, and I wouldn't like to think how much else besides,' Bill answered. 'And it was all possible because of the invention of hard chrome plating.'

'Really?' Marko queried. 'Why's that?'

'It's rather simple really, at least the concept is,' Bill continued. 'Because of the pressures involved in hydraulics the tolerances of the seals need to be very precise. Any grit and dirt could cause wear, making the critical seals fail. But chrome is one

of the hardest of metals and – when applied in the special way developed for hard chrome plating – makes the steel underneath the plated coating resistant to wear.’

‘I see,’ Marko responded, struggling to keep up with this new insight.

‘My father knew the man who developed the process for hard chrome plating.’ Marko realised that Bill was now in his element and let him carry on talking, with just a few nods of the head to encourage him. ‘Must have been in the early 1950s. Having come up with the idea the inventor – I seem to think his name was Goodman – bought an existing electroplating company in Nottingham – I have no idea of the name – and developed the process commercially.’

Marko was surprised at Bill’s admission of forgetting the name of the company. He was used to Bill remembering even the most obscure names. Marko realised that perhaps Bill had never known the name of the business. Bill was still continuing with his monologue, not looking at Marko directly. Marko smiled and nodded anyway, encouraging his friend to continue.

‘Initially most of the business was for the National Coal Board who were introducing hydraulic pit props and mechanised coal extraction – long-wall cutters and conveyor belts and so forth. You can imagine that the dust in a mine would quickly cause wear on moving parts if they weren’t really abrasion resistant.’

‘Indeed,’ was all that Marko felt he needed to say.

‘What Mr Goodman had not envisaged is that a small-time manufacturer of farm trailers based in Rocester would invent a hydraulic-powered tipping trailer. Which needed the hard chrome coating to make it resistant to farm use.’

‘And abuse, I imagine,’ Marko interjected.

‘And then,’ continued Bill without acknowledging Marko’s remark, ‘five years later, the farm equipment maker came up with a much more complex arrangement of hydraulics to power the world’s first back-hoe loader. And that was so successful the demand for hard chromed hydraulic parts increased exponentially.’

Bill paused and, for once looked at Marko. Unusually Marko seemed lost for words.

‘Surely you know who the inventor of that back-hoe loader was, Marko?’ Bill asked. Marko shook his head. ‘Joseph Cyril Bamford,’ prompted Bill. Marko still looked bemused. ‘Though only his initials became synonymous with the vehicles,’ Bill more helpfully added.

‘Ah, of course, “JCB”! Why didn’t I see that one coming?’ Marko laughed at himself. ‘Yes, I suppose without all the technology and manufacturing techniques in place then building sites and farm yards would not have become so mechanised from the 1950s onwards.’

‘Mr Bamford deserves all the credit he got. But Mr Goodman, so far as I am aware, has been forgotten. But without his innovations in metal plating then other peoples’ successes might never have happened, or only at a later date.’ Bill then paused and reached for his crisps, seeming to have come to a conclusion to his recollections.

‘Yes, I’m sure it takes lots of innovations to come together to make big changes in manufacturing and what can be manufactured,’ Marko added in a rather rambling manner.

Bill paused for even longer than usual. Marko suspected he knew why and didn’t interrupt. This was the first time he and Bill had met up since the night at Friar’s Ambling ruins. Even though it was now almost three weeks later and, hitherto, Marko had always met up with Bill in the bar at Le Strange Arms every Tuesday. He knew Bill was unsettled by any change to his routines and tried hard not to let him down.

Marko wasn’t looking forward to discussing what had happened but knew that it was inevitable the two of them would have to discuss it this evening. The talk about hard chrome plating, Marko thought, may well have just been Bill’s way of dealing with his own difficulties about broaching the subject. Eventually Bill asked whether Marko still had any bruises from when he took a tumble.

Marko himself paused. Truth to tell, he was struggling to face up to the inevitable conversation about what had happened on the stairs. Not only had he been physically shaken up – as anyone would be, tumbling down a flight of stone stairs – but mentally he had no way of coping with an experience which defied rational explanation. And this, he thought wryly, from someone who never panicked when

dealing with unexpected situations while scuba diving. He was well-known for his ability to keep calm and breathe slowly as his students were trained to do – though rarely succeeded if difficulties did arise.

‘Are you alright Marko?’ Bill enquired, confused by his normally quick-witted friend who had an immediate response to any remark. ‘Is it something you would prefer not to talk about?’

‘Well, as you were the only other person there, I suppose you are the only person who I can share any thoughts with,’ Marko acknowledged. ‘I know you told Penny Drayton when she was driving you home, but that evening is the only time I’ve met her and I doubt if our paths will cross by accident, as it were.’

‘The bruises have gone now, thank you,’ Marko reassured Bill. ‘Thankfully there was nothing worse than that.’ Looking at Bill, even though Bill, as usual, was avoiding eye contact. Marko continued ‘Are you really sure I didn’t stumble on one of the steps near the top? It didn’t feel like that to me. It really did feel like someone much larger than me – and there’s plenty of them about, that’s for sure – had given me a hefty push with his shoulder.’

‘I am inclined to think you were shoved by a ghostly presence Marko. Norman the custodian says something similar has happened at least twice before,’ Bill contributed. ‘He thinks it’s the ghost of Archbishop Stigand who owned most of Norfolk in the years before the Norman Conquest and, unusually, retained his lands under William the Conqueror. At least for a few years. He acquired the original house at Friars Ambling and rebuilt it in the newly-fashionable Norman style. Soon after that he fell out with the king and died in prison. It does seem he wasn’t liked by the ordinary folk either and may have had the nickname “Stronghand”.’

‘Maybe literally if he was in the habit of pushing people he didn’t like down stone staircases,’ Marko observed. ‘Though what I did to annoy his ghost I’ve no idea. Did you see someone – or something – push me?’

‘No, Marko, I did not. I simply surmised that was the most likely scenario. Though of course what Norman told us would have some influence on my thinking.’

Marko was relieved. He would not want anyone else to have seen that apparition. He himself was not sure he'd been shoved – though it felt like it – or simply made an involuntary step backwards out of fear, losing his balance as his foot failed to connect with the step below. Whether he was shoved or lost his footing was less important to Marko at the time, he was simply relieved that he'd remained as relaxed as he could be as he tumbled down the stone staircase and hadn't broken any bones. But the memory of what he saw in that second or less wasn't going to go away as quickly as the bruises had already done.

This pause in conversation was also broken by Bill. 'Walter de la Mere made an interesting remark to the effect that "Any event in this world that seems to wear even the faintest cast or warp of strangeness, is apt to leave a disproportionately sharp impression on one's senses."'

'Well, yes indeed,' replied Marko. 'That's a rather fine way of putting things. Certainly this particular "warp of strangeness" left a sharp impression on me.'

Bill continued. 'I must admit that I was brought up to think that only material things are real. Everything else – whether thoughts or something more paranormal – is never fully real, just something constructed by human perception and thinking.'

Blimey, thought Marko, this is Bill at his most profound. Even by his standards. But Marko just smiled and nodded.

'But I came across a philosopher who wrote that this makes science more like an exorcism,' continued Bill.

'Why's that? Sounds rather dramatical for a philosopher!' rejoined Marko.

'Well, in my words not his, science aims to rid the mind – "exorcise" if you prefer a stronger word – of anything that can't be understood in terms of laws of physics. But, the philosopher asked, perhaps it's the dogma of materialism needs to be exorcised from our minds.' Bill paused but Marko didn't feel he was on the same level as Bill, so just nodded.

'If done correctly, though it rarely is,' Bill continued, 'science is a method of inquiry into the unknown. Results can't be known in advance. Science is at its most useful

when it changes our understanding of the world. And materialism does not provide the best understanding. Though outside the realms of nuclear physics and astronomy, there is little consensus on what a non-materialistic understanding of the world might be based on.'

'Indeed. I'm sure,' offered Marko. 'Vaguely reminds of the someone from about a hundred years ago who devoted his life to phenomena that scientists of the time couldn't explain, or simply believed couldn't happen. His name was Charles Fort and I think the term "Fortean" is still used by some people as a collective term for anomalous phenomena.'

'Oh, Marko, you have heard about Charles Fort too? Penny was trying to tell me about him but she didn't seem to be able to remember much. She doesn't have my sort of memory I'm afraid, though she does seem to know a little bit about a great many things that I have never come across.'

'The thing about Fort was that he regarded so-called "anomalous phenomena" as little different to the supposedly well-understood "normal world",' contributed Marko. 'Indeed, it's almost as if Fort wanted us to think about the ordinary world as just as anomalous, despite any number of scientific explanationisms.'

Bill paused. 'That sounds remarkably like something de la Mare said. I can't remember it exactly as I've only read it but it's not the ghosts who appear in his stories that are strange. It's the sense of living in an "ordinary world" which is even stranger. I wonder if de la Mare had read anything Mr Fort had published?'

'Not that good on dates of birth and death myself,' acknowledged Marko, 'but I'm fairly sure de la Mare was born around the same time as Charles Fort. The only reason I know is because H.P. Lovecraft is also a close contemporary too, though a few years younger. I tend to think of them all as the progeny of Henry James.'

Marko resisted the temptation to repeat his usual pun of referring to Lovecraft as 'H.P. Saucecraft' as he knew it would only perplex Bill. 'Let me get you another pint, Bill,' Marko offered, deliberately trying to break the thread of the conversation. 'That one seems to have gone down a bit quicker than usual for you.'

'You're very kind, Marko. But no thank you. Clearly I'm a little more thirsty than usual. But I feel I should pay for my own bad habits, not someone else. Are you OK for pop?'

It was abundantly obvious that Marko's glass was empty, so Marko simply shrugged and smiled at Bill. 'Seems not? Are you OK to fund my bad habits just for one evening?'

'Oh, I think I can manage that, Marko. Just this once.'

While Bill was at the bar Marko phoned Dave to say he would indeed be arriving a little later than usual, and was he OK to doing the setting up. A few days ago, when Marko had arranged to meet up with Bill, he'd made contact with the best of his diving students and said for once his early evening meet up with Bill might run a little late. He led Dave to believe it was something important about their work at the railway which needed resolving.

Bill came back and asked if the phone call he'd taken was urgent. 'No, no, Bill. Just me making a call to check that it was OK if I arrived a little later than usual at the baths for the training session. To be fair, it's a good pretext to give the best of the lads a chance to prove to himself he's perfectly capable of doing the setting up. These days I'm only really needed for the actual underwater sessions.'

'Anyway Bill. What's this I heard about Penny being hand-in-hand with a ghost at the time?' Marko intentionally wanted to change the conversation now he had been reassured that Bill had not witnessed everything at the top of the stairs.

'Well, Marko, I can only tell you what she told me. The gist of it is that while you were climbing the stairs Norman was telling Penny about Queen Isabella, who was the wife of Edward II and banished to Friars Ambling because of supporting a failed rebellion. I have to admit I went to the library to check up on who she was as it wasn't something they taught us at school.'

'Quite right,' said Marko with a smile. 'I seem to think the "failed rebellion" was instigated by the queen and her lover. Not what the present-day "royal family" would think appropriate for the school curriculum.'

'Well, Marko, don't forget I went to school long before the present curriculum. But I suppose the ideal of a happily married royal family was already being promoted by the Queen Mother when I was a youngster.'

'Anyway,' Marko interjected. 'Let's get back to what happened at the vigil.'

'So far as I can make out – I need to ask Penny again – Norman had gone off to check the batteries on some of the equipment... '

'Oh yes,' said Marko, 'he seemed to need to do that rather often. If anyone was going to stage-manage any special effects then that would be a perfect excuse.'

'Marko, I don't think Norman was doing any such thing.'

'I agree fully, Bill. But Norman's equipment did need rather a lot of checking.'

'Indeed, that seems to be the case. Penny says that she was on her own, walking back towards the main entrance when she saw a woman dressed in a dark full-length dress. Penny was somewhat surprised to see her as she thought there was only the four of us, but says she didn't feel in the least frightened. She just assumed this woman was Norman's wife or a friend who had "dressed the part" and had arrived before us.'

'I thought there was only the four of us as well. And remember Norman turned the alarms off just before we went in. So it seems unlikely anyone was inside before us.'

'Well, we have to assume Norman really turned the alarms off and wasn't just going through the motions,' Bill replied. 'And he probably knows about "dead spots" inside where the alarms are not triggered so someone could remain undetected. But once I've reached the end of Penny's account I don't think we need concern ourselves about any such deceit.'

'How was the woman dressed?'

'Well, Marko, apart from the small torch Penny was using, there was no other light, so – other than the woman's dress fitting well – Penny said it was difficult to make out many details. Penny says she doesn't know enough about medieval fashions but

they seemed to be right for the period. What Penny did notice,' Bill continued, 'is that the woman must have been wearing a pomander, as there was a distinct smell of both roses and sandalwood.'

'Did I pick up correctly that the woman had a conversation with Penny?'

'Hardly a conversation, Marko, but she did speak. Twice. The woman didn't introduce herself but simply asked Penny if she would like to see her garden and at the same time reached out her gloved hand as if to guide her. Penny, now thinking this was some sort of re-enactment, took her hand. She says the glove was more like fur than velvet and seemed to have some embroidery.'

'Moleskin?'

'Well, Marko, yes that would perhaps feel partway between fur and velvet. I hadn't thought of that.'

'But how many re-enactors go to the trouble of catching enough moles to make a pair of gloves from? Not something you can buy on eBay. Or at least I hope not,' Marko rejoined.

'Indeed I hope not too.'

'What happened after that?'

'Within a few yards of where they had met there was a doorway, although no door. The woman let go of Penny's hand and walked through first. They were in a space surrounded by walls, lower than the main ruins. The woman stopped and said, "It was once all around here." Penny turned to look around, trying to work out how it could have once been a garden. And when she turned back to where the woman was standing she was on her own.'

'How long had this "look around" taken her?' Marko enquired.

'I didn't ask her Marko. But I got the impression only a matter of seconds.'

'How did Penny feel at this point?' Marko continued.

‘She says she wasn’t frightened. She just assumed the re-enactor had learnt how to make a swift exit, expecting Penny to be disconcerted by her disappearance.’

‘Was she?’

‘Not at that moment. She still thought this was a real woman. Only after she went back and found Norman and told him she’d found his companion – only for Norman to quite genuinely deny all knowledge – did her knees go weak, as she put.’

‘I can imagine,’ was all Marko felt able to say.

‘Norman then said he’d had almost the same experience himself a year or so before, being taken by the hand into the same yard area and being told this was where her garden had been. And quite frequently when walking around the ruins – even when there hadn’t been visitors – he had encountered a whiff of roses that didn’t quite smell like roses. Norman thanked Penny for picking up on the sandalwood oil – it did fit his memory of the smells.’

‘Yes, amazing how well we can recall smells,’ Marko observed.

‘Norman then told Penny that he’d done some research and discovered that Queen Isabelle did indeed have a large garden which was mostly built over after her death.’

‘I wonder,’ mused Marko. ‘Whether Norman is, in some subtle way, responsible for there being so many preternatural beings at the ruins.’

‘You’re not suggesting he’s, as you put, “stage-managing” special effects?’ Bill replied. ‘I don’t think these experiences can be explained away so easily.’

‘No, me neither,’ confirmed Marko. ‘And I don’t think, despite something he said himself, it’s necessarily his psychic abilities which are attracting them.’

‘So what is then, Marko?’

‘That he’s a really good custodian. He keeps the place very clean and tidy. From what he said it wasn’t a trait his predecessor shared.’

'Why would that have anything to do with whether or not there are ghosts, or whatever we chose to call them?' queried Bill 'Wouldn't some dust and cobwebs suit them better?'

'I think the dust and cobwebs come only from horror film set designers. Not many people know this but in the Scandinavian sagas there is an expression *ganga alfrek*. Now all this means literally is 'go to drive the elves away'. Although bear in mind back then their ideas about elves were a bit more complicated than ours.'

Bill for once looked directly at Marko.

'However,' continued Marko, 'the context in which the phrase *ganga alfrek* was used is that the person was going off to defecate.' He paused for dramatic effect. Bill remained silent. 'You see, a dislike of dirt or even untidiness are the traits of tutelary spirits around the world. Many religions insist on "ritual purity".'

Bill remained silent but was no longer looking at Marko. Eventually he said, 'That's really interesting Marko. I would never have realised that. So by tidying and cleaning the ruins supernatural "spirits" might come back as if they were guardians.'

'Only they are not really supernatural,' Marko countered. 'In my book they are "preternatural" – which means "beside nature" rather than "above nature". They are almost part of this world, just less often seen.'

'Indeed more often heard than seen,' Bill noted.

'Or even smelt,' Marko rejoined, 'as with Norman's awareness of the roses and sandalwood oil pomander seemingly worn by Queen Isabella.'

'You've explained a lot to me tonight, Marko. I am very grateful. There had been a lot I was struggling to – as you would put it – "get my head around". But aren't you getting very late for the training session at the baths?'

'Oh, strewth, yes! I really am late now. If I don't get a move on it'll cost me a round of drinks at the bar afterwards. Same time, same place, next week then Bill?'

‘Yes, that would be good Marko. I’m much more settled knowing we can meet up each Tuesday evening again.’

## Sources

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