

The China Bowl

E. F. Benson

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I had long been on the look-out for one of the small houses at the south end of that delectable oblong called Barrett's Square, but for many months there was never revealed to me that which I so much I desired to see—namely, a notice-board advertising that one of these charming little abodes was to be let.

At length, however, in the autumn of the current year, in one of my constant passages through the square, I saw what my eye had so long starved for, and within ten minutes I was in the office of the agent in whose hands the disposal of No. 29 had been placed.

A communicative clerk informed me that the present lessee, Sir Arthur Bassenthwaite, was anxious to get rid of the remainder of his lease as soon as possible, for the house had painful associations for him, owing to the death of his wife, which had taken place there not long before.

He was a wealthy man, so I was informed, Lady Bassenthwaite having been a considerable heiress, and was willing to take what is professionally known as a ridiculously low price, in order to get the house off his hand without delay. An order 'to view' was thereupon given me, and a single visit next morning was sufficient to show that this was precisely what I had been looking for.

Why Sir Arthur should be so suddenly anxious to get rid of it, at a price which certainly was extremely moderate, was no concern of mine, provided the drains were in good order, and within a week the necessary business connected with the transference of the lease was arranged. The house was in excellent repair, and less than a month from the time I had first seen the notice-board up, I was ecstatically established there.

I had not been in the house more than a week or two when, one afternoon, I was told that Sir Arthur had called, and would like to see me if I was disengaged. He was shown up, and I found myself in the presence of one of the most charming men I have ever had the good fortune to meet.

The motive of his call, it appeared, was of the politest nature, for he wished to be assured that I found the house comfortable and that it suited me. He intimated that it would be a pleasure to him to see round, and together we went over the whole house, with the exception of one room.

This was the front bedroom on the third floor, the largest of the two spare rooms, and at the door, as I grasped the handle, he stopped me.

'You will excuse me,' he said, 'for not coming in here. The room, I may tell you, has the most painful associations for me.'

This was sufficiently explicit; I made no doubt that it was in this room that his wife had died.

It was a lovely October afternoon, and, having made the tour of the house, we went out into the little garden with its tiled walk that lay at the back, and was one of the most attractive features of the place. Low brick walls enclosed it, separating it on each side from my neighbours, and at the bottom from the pedestrian thoroughfare that ran past the back of the row of houses.

Sir Arthur lingered here some little while, lost, I suppose, in regretful memories of the days when perhaps he and his companion planned and executed the decoration of the little plot.

Indeed, he hinted as much when, shortly after, he took his leave.

'There is so much here,' he said, 'that is very intimately bound up with me. I thank you a thousand times for letting me see the little garden again.' And once more, as he turned to go into the house, his eyes looked steadfastly and wistfully down the bright borders.

The regulations about the lighting of houses in London had some little while previously demanded a more drastic dusk, and a night or two later, as I returned home after dinner through the impenetrable obscurity of the streets, I was horrified to find a bright light streaming cheerfully from the upper windows in my house, with no

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blinds to obscure it.

It came from the front bedroom on the third floor, and, letting myself in, I proceeded hurriedly upstairs to quench this forbidden glow. But when I entered, I found the room in darkness, and, on turning up the lights myself, I saw that the blinds were drawn down, so that even if it had been lit, I could not have seen from outside the illumination which had made me hasten upstairs.

An explanation easily occurred to me: no doubt the light I had seen did not come from my house, but from windows of a house adjoining. I had only given one glance at it, and with this demonstration that I had been mistaken, I gave no further conscious thought to the matter. But subconsciously I felt that I knew that I had made no mistake: I had not in that hurried glance confused the windows of the house next door with my own; it was this room that had been lit.

I had moved into the house, as I have said, with extraordinary expedition, and for the next day or two I was somewhat busily engaged, after my day's work was over, in sorting out and largely destroying accumulations of old books and papers, which I had not had time to go through before my move. Among them I came across an illustrated magazine which I had kept for some forgotten reason, and turning over the pages to try to ascertain why I had preserved it, I suddenly came across a picture of my own backgarden. The title at the top of the page showed me that the article in question was an interview with Lady Bassenthwaite, and her portrait and that of her husband made a frontispiece to it.

The coincidence was a curious one, for here I read about the house which I now occupied, and saw what it had been like in the reign of its late owners. But I did not spend long over it, and added the magazine to the pile of papers destined for destruction. This grew steadily, and when I had finished turning out the cupboard which I had resolved to empty before going to bed, I found it was already an hour or more past midnight.

I had been so engrossed in my work that I had let the fire go out, and myself get hungry, and went into the dining-room, which opened into the little back-garden, to see if the fire still smouldered there, and a biscuit could be found in the cupboard. In both respects I was in luck, and whilst eating and warming myself, I suddenly thought I heard a step on the tiled walk in the garden outside.

I quickly went to the window and drew aside the thick curtain, letting all the light in the room pour out into the garden, and there, beyond doubt, was a man bending over one of the beds.

Startled by this illumination, he rose, and without looking round, ran to the end of the little yard and, with surprising agility, vaulted on to the top of the wall and disappeared.

But at the last second, as he sat silhouetted there, I saw his face in the shaded light of a gas-lamp outside, and, to my indescribable astonishment, I recognized Sir Arthur Bassenthwaite. The glimpse was instantaneous, but I was sure I was not mistaken, any more than I had been mistaken about the light which came from the bedroom that looked out on to the square.

But whatever tender associations Sir Arthur had with the garden that had once been his, it was not seemly that he should adopt such means of indulging them. Moreover, where Sir Arthur might so easily come, there, too, might others whose intentions were less concerned with sentiment than with burglary.

In any case, I did not choose that my garden should have such easy access from outside, and next morning I ordered a pretty stiff barrier of iron spikes to be erected along the outer wall. If Sir Arthur wished to muse in the garden, I should be delighted to give him permission, as, indeed, he must have known from the cordiality which I was sure I showed him when he called, but this method of his seemed to me irregular. And I observed next evening, without any regret at all, that my order had been promptly executed. At the same time I felt an invincible curiosity to know for certain if it was merely for the sake of a solitary midnight vigil that he had come.

I was expecting the arrival of my friend Hugh Grainger the next week, to stay a night or two with me, and since the front spare room, which I proposed to give him, had not at present been slept in, I gave orders that a bed should be made up there the next night for me, so that I could test with my own vile body whether a guest would be comfortable there.

This can only be proved by personal experience. Though there may be a table apparently convenient to the head of the bed, though the dressing-table may apparently be properly disposed, though it seem as if the lighting was rightly placed for reading in bed, and for the quenching of it afterwards without disturbance, yet practice and not theory is the only method of settling such questions, and next night accordingly I both dressed for dinner in this front spare room, and went to bed there.

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Everything seemed to work smoothly; the room itself had a pleasant and restful air about it, and the bed exceedingly comfortable, I fell asleep almost as soon as I had put out the electric light, which I had found adequate for reading small print. To the best of my knowledge, neither the thought of the last occupant of the room nor of the light that I believed I had seen burning there one night entered my head at all.

I fell asleep, as I say, at once, but instantly that theatre of the brain, on the boards of which dreams are transacted, was brightly illuminated for me, and the curtain went up on one of those appalling nightmare-pieces which we can only vaguely remember afterwards.

There was the sense of flight—clogged, impotent flight from before some hideous spiritual force—the sense of powerlessness to keep away from the terror that gained on me, the strangling desire to scream, and soon the blessed dawning consciousness that it was but with a dream that I wrestled.

I began to know that I was lying in bed, and that my terrors were imaginary, but the trouble was not over yet, for with all my efforts I could not raise my head from the pillow nor open my eyes.

Then, as I drew nearer to the boundaries of waking, I became aware that even when the spell of my dream was altogether broken I should not be free. For through my eyelids, which I knew had closed in a darkened room, there now streamed in a vivid light, and remembering for the first time what I had seen from the square outside, I knew that when I opened them they would look out on to a lit room, peopled with who knew what phantoms of the dead or living.

I lay there for a few moments after I had recovered complete consciousness, with eyes still closed, and felt the trickle of sweat on my forehead. That horror I knew was not wholly due to the self-coined nightmare of my brain; it was the horror of expectancy more than of retrospect.

And then curiosity, sheer stark curiosity, to know what was happening on the other side of the curtain of my eyelids prevailed, and I sat and looked.

In the armchair just opposite the foot of my bed sat Lady Bassenthwaite, whose picture I had seen in the illustrated magazine. It simply was she; there could be no doubt whatever about it.

She was dressed in a bedgown, and in her hand was a small fluted china bowl with a cover and a saucer. As I looked she took the cover off, and began to feed herself with a spoon. She took some half-dozen mouthfuls, and then replaced the cover again. As she did this she turned full face towards where I lay, looking straight at me, and already the shadow of death was fallen on her.

Then she rose feebly, wearily, and took a step towards the bed. As she did this, the light in the room, from whatever source it came, suddenly faded, and I found myself looking out into impenetrable darkness.

My curiosity for the present was more than satisfied, and in a couple of minutes I had transferred myself to the room below.

Hugh Grainger, the ruling passion of whose life is crime and ghosts, arrived next day, and I poured into an eager ear the whole history of the events here narrated.

'Of course, I'll sleep in the room,' he said at the conclusion. 'Put another bed in it, can't you, and sleep there, too. A couple of simultaneous witnesses of the same phenomena are ten times more valuable than one. Or do you funk?' he added as a kind afterthought.

'I funk, but I will,' I said.

'And are you sure it wasn't all part of your dream?' he asked.

'Absolutely positive.'

Hugh's eye glowed with pleasure.

'I funk, too,' he said. 'I funk horribly. But that's part of the allurements. It's so difficult to get frightened nowadays. All but a few things are explained and accounted for. What one fears is the unknown. No one knows yet what ghosts are, or why they appear, or to whom.'

He took a turn up and down the room.

'And what do you make of Sir Arthur creeping into your garden at night?' he asked. 'Is there any possible connection?'

'Not as far as I can see. What connection could there be?'

'It isn't very obvious certainly. I really don't know why I asked. And you liked him?'

'Immensely. But not enough to let him get over my garden wall at midnight,' said I.

Hugh laughed.

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'That would certainly imply a considerable degree of confidence and affection,' he said.

I had caused another bed to be moved into Hugh's room, and that night, after he had put out the light, we talked awhile and then relapsed into silence. It was cold, and I watched the fire on the hearth die down from flame into glowing coal, and from glow into clinkering ash, while nothing disturbed the peaceful atmosphere of the quiet room. Then it seemed to me as if something broke in, and instead of lying tranquilly awake, I found a certain horror of expectancy, some note of nightmare begin to hum through my waking consciousness. I heard Hugh toss and turn and turn again, and at length he spoke.

'I say, I'm feeling fairly beastly,' he said, 'and yet there's nothing to see or hear.'

'Same with me,' said I.

'Do you mind if I turn up the light a minute, and have a look round?' he asked.

'Not a bit.'

He fumbled at the switch, the room leapt into light, and he sat up in bed frowning. Everything was quite as usual, the bookcase, the chairs, on one of which he had thrown his clothes; there was nothing that differentiated this room from hundreds of others where the occupants lay quietly sleeping.

'It's queer,' he said, and switched off the light again.

There is nothing harder than to measure time in the dark, but I do not think it was long that I lay there with the sense of nightmare growing momentarily on me before he spoke again in an odd, cracked voice.

'It's coming,' he said.

Almost as soon as he spoke I saw that the thick darkness of the room was sensibly thinning.

The blackness was less complete, though I could hardly say that light began to enter. Then by degrees I saw the shape of chairs, the lines of the fireplace, the end of Hugh's bed begin to outline themselves, and as I watched the darkness vanished altogether, as if a lamp had been turned up.

And in the chair at the foot of Hugh's bed sat Lady Bassenthwaite, and again putting aside the cover of her dish, she sipped the contents of the bowl, and at the end rose feebly, wearily, as in mortal sickness. She looked at Hugh, and turning, she looked at me, and through the shadow of death that lay over her face, I thought that in her eyes was a demand, or at least a statement of her case. They were not angry, they did not cry for justice, but the calm inexorable gaze of justice that must be done was there . . . Then the light faded and died out.

I heard a rustle from the other bed and the springs creaked.

'Good Lord,' said Hugh, 'where's the light?'

His fingers fumbled and found it, and I saw that he was already out of bed, with streaming forehead and chattering teeth.

'I know now,' he said. 'I half guessed before. Come downstairs.'

Downstairs we went, and he turned up all the passage lights as we passed. He led the way into the dining room, picking up the poker and the shovel as he went by the fireplace, and he threw open the door into the garden. I switched up the light, which threw a bright square of illumination over the garden.

'Where did you see Sir Arthur?' he said. 'Where? Exactly where?'

Still not guessing what he sought, I pointed out to him the spot, and loosening the earth with the poker, he dug into the bed. Once again he plunged the poker down, and as he removed the earth I heard the shovel grate on something hard. And then I guessed.

Already Hugh was at work with his fingers in the earth, and slowly and carefully he drew out fragments of a broken china cover. Then, delving again, he raised from the hole a fluted china bowl. And I knew I had seen it before, once and twice.

We carried this indoors and cleaned the earth from it. All over the bottom of the bowl was a layer of some thick porridge-like substance, and a portion of this I sent next day to a chemist, asking him for his analysis of it. The basis of it proved to be oatmeal, and in it was mixed a considerable quantity of arsenic.

Hugh and I were together in my little sitting room close to the front door, where on the table stood the china bowl with the fragments of its cover and saucer, when this report was brought to us, and we read it together. The afternoon was very dark and we stood close to the window to decipher the minute handwriting, when there passed the figure of Sir Arthur Bassenthwaite. He saw me, waved his hand, and a moment afterwards the front door bell rang.

'Let him come in,' said Hugh. 'Let him see that on the table.'

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Next moment my servant entered, and asked if the caller might see me.

'Let him see it,' repeated Hugh. 'The chances are that we shall know if he sees it unexpectedly.'

There was a moment's pause while in the hall, I suppose, Sir Arthur was taking off his coat.

Outside, some few doors off, a traction engine, which had passed a minute before, stopped, and began slowly coming backwards again, crunching the newly-laid stones. Sir Arthur entered.

'I ventured to call,' he began, and then his glance fell on the bowl. In one second the very aspect of humanity was stripped from his face. His mouth drooped open, his eyes grew monstrous and protruding, and what had been the pleasant, neat-featured face of a man was a mask of terror, a gargoyle, a nightmare countenance. Even before the door that had been open to admit him was closed, he had turned and gone with a crouching, stumbling run from the room, and I heard him at the latch of the front door.

Whether what followed was design or accident, I shall never know, for from the window I saw him fall forward, almost as if he threw himself there, straight in front of the broad crunching wheels of the traction engine, and before the driver could stop, or even think of stopping, the iron roller had gone over his head.