

A Lost Weekend

By Derek G Rogers

“Your turn Henry!” He’d been dreading those words since being told on his arrival that he, and three others, had been drawn by lots to tell a ghost story after dinner. Alex and Mary never held simple dinner parties, there was always a theme. The last time it was famous film couples, Henry and Margaret, his wife, had been Bonny and Clyde. Tonight, since it was Halloween, it had to be a ghost story. He consoled himself with the thought that at least they hadn’t been asked to dress in weird costumes for the occasion.

He nodded his acceptance, re-lit his cigar and rose slowly from the elegant table at which they had all just enjoyed a magnificent meal. “Well.” He began. “The difference between my story and those that have gone before is that mine is true and the person to whom it happened is here in this room.” He stopped and looked down at his wife. “Margaret will confirm everything I say.” Eleven pairs of eyes left him for a moment and fixed on her. She, knowing the story he was about to tell, just nodded.

The eyes reverted to Henry and he continued. “You all know my company sponsored the “Three Peaks Race” some time ago, some of you came to the launch party in London. Well, the prize-giving event was held in late November that year in Barham, Wales, I was delegated to represent the company and present the prizes to the winners. We decided to take the children and make a weekend of it. We couldn’t stay at a hotel in the town; they had been fully booked for months. The booking agent arranged for us to stay at a recently opened hotel just outside. You can imagine the journey to Wales, I’m sure.” His words were rewarded with knowing nods around the table, they all had children “We arrived in Barham a bit later than we’d planned and the children were getting irritable, so I stopped at a pub to ask the way to our hotel. I assumed the odd look from the barman was reserved just for strangers, but after a second or two he told me I couldn’t miss it, it was just off the main road between Barham and a village with an unpronounceable name.”

Henry spread his hands expressively and with a rueful look said, “Of course, I did miss it. Actually, I missed it several times, but eventually I found the turn off and then the hotel.” He described how magnificent it looked in the gathering dusk of the autumn evening. A renovated original Tudor building set in beautiful gardens, lights shining out through the leaded windows promising warmth and comfort. He described in detail the inside, it was just as impressive. Oak panelling, wood block flooring, period furniture set tastefully around a spacious lounge. A beautiful display of flowers sat in the centre of an old oak table. A blazing fire in a great inglenook fireplace was warming two dogs, a Great Dane and a brindle Staffy. It

looked like a film set. They all loved it on sight and agreed the agents were right; this was a superb place to enjoy a quiet weekend.

Henry's account of the evening and in particular his description of the Presentation Dinner raised some knowing smiles, they all knew how well the yachting fraternity enjoyed itself on such occasions. "We arrived back at the hotel at about a quarter past midnight and, after checking to see that the children were OK, crashed into bed absolutely exhausted." Again the smiles around the table showed him they had all been there.

Henry paused, looked around him, noted the attentive looks and continued. "I'd been asleep for quite some time when I was jolted awake by a fierce dig in the ribs." His glance towards Margaret brought a slight, very slight smile to her lips.

"Did you see that? she hissed at me. I struggled to focus on what she was saying. Eh....what?.... I said. "Did you see that?" She repeated the question and sounded irritated." Henry looked around the table at the men and as his glance passed they nodded sympathetically. "You can imagine how I felt...still half asleep. We were now both sitting up in bed, I trying desperately to gather my thoughts, she pointing over my shoulder towards the window "Over there you must have seen it!" She said, and this time it was a statement not a question. I shook my head dumbly. She tried a different tack. "Well you must have heard it!" she said. There was now a note in her voice I hadn't heard before. I tried to calm things down a bit. See what? I said; I was sound asleep! How could I have seen or heard anything? But I wasn't getting away with it as easily as that. Margaret turned and faced me. "There was a girl! They were chasing her!" I was awake alright now....I could see she was deadly serious so I asked her who was chasing the girl. More to gain time to think than anything else."

Pausing to let the tension build, Henry's hand went to his forehead and gently rubbed it as he recalled how he had desperately tried to get his mind into some sort of order. He introduced a worried timbre into his voice. "I got out of bed, switched on the light, and noticed it was two-thirty. I said the first thing that came into my head. Was it a bad dream love?" He saw his male friends nod sympathetically, agreeing it couldn't have been anything else.

Another long draw on his cigar, then, through a cloud of fragrant smoke, told them that his wife hadn't found his suggestion at all helpful. Her reply had been sharp and clear, frosty even. She couldn't have had a bad dream because her side of the bed was so uncomfortable she hadn't been able to get to sleep. Her attitude now as she sat at the table demonstrated that her feelings hadn't changed. Henry took another puff at his cigar, paused a second, then looking intently at his friends said "I want you all to really

think about this, imagine yourselves in that room, at that time of night, no booze involved though I wish there had been! At least that would have provided some sort of explanation. I put the question to you. What would you have done?"

Without waiting for an answer Henry continued. "I asked Margaret to tell me again, in detail, what had happened. She glared at me and told me I never listened to her properly. It was obvious to me even in my half-asleep state that something very frightening had shaken her, and I was concerned for her, so I didn't rise to the remark, instead I asked her to tell me again...please. I asked as gently as I could and took hold of her hand. She told me that she knew it sounded weird but she was convinced she had seen a troop of Roundhead Soldiers chasing a young woman dressed in white. They had come through one wall and vanished through another. She pointed to the walls on my side of the room." Henry walked slowly from his seat to stand behind his wife. "If it had been anyone else telling me this story," he said quietly. "I would either have laughed or called a doctor, but this was Margaret, the one person in the world whose reliability is, for me, beyond question and she was still clearly very frightened. I tried to reassure her by walking around the room and banging my hand, rather theatrically on the walls she mentioned. There was only one door...it was on her side of the room."

Returning to his former position and with every eye firmly fixed on him, Henry continued. "We talked about it for quite a while, but whatever I suggested could possibly be the reason for her 'dream' (I insisted on calling it a dream) she remained adamant about what she had seen. We agreed to change sides of the bed in the hope that whatever had troubled her wouldn't do so again. It didn't but the following morning she said that her bed felt as if she had been lying on Brighton Beach. We could only hope the day they had planned would drive the memory of the bad night's sleep from her mind. "

The exquisite old brandy in front of him was very persuasive; Henry sipped it appreciatively and after a slow draw on his cigar took up the story again. "The children were already up and ready, they joined me as I passed their room. The grandfather clock in the hall told me it was just seven o'clock. There was no one else about, not even the dogs. We all went out into the gardens. They were fantastic, obviously designed and maintained by someone who loved gardening and was good at it. Needless to say breakfast was up to the same standard as everything else.

While the others went back to the rooms to finish packing I went to pay the bill."

As Henry paused again, Margaret began looking distinctly agitated and as though she was about to interrupt Henry's flow. She didn't though she just sat and waited. She clearly knew what was coming and was disturbed by the memory. Henry noted her discomfort, shared it though he didn't show it, and hurried

on. "The cashier was serving an elderly American man with a scholarly air about him. I heard them chatting as she took his American Express card. The cashier asked if he had found what he was looking for. He shook his head and told her "Nope, I guess I was misinformed, I'll go back and check my sources. I'll probably be back though, great place to relax this." Clearly whatever disappointment he had suffered, he had enjoyed his stay. Before the cashier could begin to pay attention to me I saw the American stop at the front door, turn and say. "You did say it happened in the front of the house....here.....?" He pointed with his free hand to the right side of the door.

"That's right sir." Her lilting Welsh voice assured him. "Just to the right, by the stone fountain." I'd no idea what they were talking about at that stage so I just watched him go out, turn right and vanish in the direction of the fountain. Now free the cashier turned her charm onto me. "Such a nice man" she said as she took my Gold Card. "He's a ghost hunter you know."I couldn't believe what I had just heard. A ghost hunter? I said, I sounded like an echo, frankly I felt like one. She told me the American had come to study ghosts in old British houses. He was unlucky here though he hadn't seen them. It was at this point that Margaret joined me. She'd heard the tail end of the conversation. She leaned over the counter and said tersely. "I did!"

"Really? What did you see?" "The cashier was desperate to know the details and the Welsh accent had become even stronger. "

"Margaret told her in graphic detail what she had seen, with heavy emphasis on my obvious disbelief in the whole thing. "Oooh how exciting" The Welsh intonation was improving every time he tried it. "No one has seen them for quite some time, you were very lucky!" She assured us. Margaret wasn't convinced and told her that she hadn't felt very lucky at the time. You can imagine the tone..."

"I tried to support Margaret's story. Just a second, I said, are we to believe that a troop of Roundhead soldiers chased a young woman through two solid brick walls in the middle of the night and just vanished?" Henry smiled ruefully at the memory of the reactions of the Welsh Cashier. "No! No! No! That is not it. Not at all!" He tried again to imitate her Welsh accent. "You see, during the English Civil War there was a roundup of all Roman Catholics in this area. They were told to swear allegiance to Cromwell and the Protestant Faith or be put to death. Some swore others didn't. The young girl was one of those that didn't. She lived in this house and having escaped returned here pursued by a troop of Roundhead soldiers. They chased her along a corridor that used to run along the front of the house, through where your bedroom is now. She ran down the back stairs and out into the garden. They caught up with her near the stone fountain. It's still there; you may have seen it this morning when you went out for a walk in the

garden. (I said that I had seen it.)”

He paused to get as much effect as he could, then told them what happened by the fountain. “They caught her and executed her on the spot. Just chopped her head off with their swords.” He had said it quietly but he couldn’t have had a greater effect if he had shouted at the top of his voice. There was more, he told them that the Cashier had just smiled when he asked her why the ‘Ghosts’ didn’t affect the dogs. Here Henry adopted a conspiratorial look and glanced at all the men. “You chaps will all know the sort of smile I mean It’s the sort of smile that when you see it on a woman’s face, you know you’ve just lost an argument.” Encouraged by the understanding nods he received and beginning to enjoy the Welsh accent bit, he pressed on. “Oh! The dogs, they don’t sleep here,” she told me sweetly, “nor would I, nor my family, that’s why we don’t sleep here, we all sleep in our house in the village!”

From the looks around the table Henry knew he had their full attention and began to extract every drop of tension from the moment that he could. “I can’t describe the uncomfortable feeling that came over me as the import of her words sank in,” he told them quietly and added. “I just paid the bill and we left.” As if anticipating the end of the story, Henry’s cigar had gone out; he placed it carefully in the ash-tray. “You may think this was the end of the matter, I did, or rather hoped. But it wasn’t.” He put his hand back onto Margaret’s shoulder. “We have discussed that weekend so many times since that we decided recently to re-examine the whole thing. I always kept copious notes in my diary entries about all sorts of events and occasions I had been involved with, so I just needed to remind myself of the dates, places, names etc, find the name of the hotel, find it on the map and go there. Straightforward enough!”

His glance around the silent table assured him that his audience was still wrapped up in his story. He gave a somewhat theatrical shrug of his shoulders and continued. “That’s not how it worked out. To start with I was surprised to find there was no entry in my diary for that weekend, it was just blank! But I couldn’t possibly have forgotten to make an entry and a brief report on an event of that importance, surely? The try as we might, we couldn’t find the hotel, the road leading to it or even the village on the Ordnance Survey map. All we could find at the end of what was clearly a cart track was a sign indicating the position of an ancient monument! OK then, I thought, I’d ring the travel agents; I did and found they had gone out of business long ago. I finally rang my now retired secretary to ask her to check her records; she did and found no entry for that weekend though she remembered the event well. The trail was dead. I can’t offer any explanation for all this; I still find it difficult to believe myself. So perhaps you would like to ask Margaret if I have accurately reported the story of what has become known in our family as The Lost Weekend.”

As he returned to his seat he exchanged a smile with Margaret. If there were to be any questions he knew he could rely on her to tell the truth.

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