

THE EXPERIMENT



In the last days of December, Dr Hall, the village priest, was working in his study when his servant entered the room, in great alarm.

'Oh, Dr Hall, sir,' she cried. 'What do you think? The poor Squire's dead!'

'What? Squire Bowles? What are you saying, woman?' replied the priest. 'I saw him only yesterday-'

'Yes, sir, I know,' said the servant, 'but it's true. Mr Wickem, the clerk, has just brought the news on his way to ring the church bell. You'll hear it yourself in a moment. Listen! There it is.' And sure enough, the bell then began to ring, long and slow, telling the people of the village that someone had died.

Dr Hall stood up. 'This is terrible,' he said. 'I must go up to the Hall at once. The Squire was so much better yesterday. It seems so sudden.'

'Yes, sir,' agreed the servant. 'Mr Wickem said that the poor Squire was taken ill very suddenly with a terrible pain. He died very quickly, and Wickem said they want him buried quickly too.'

'Yes, yes; well, I must ask Mrs Bowles herself or Mr Joseph,' said the priest. 'Bring me my coat and hat, please. Oh, and tell Mr Wickem that I would like to see him when he has finished ringing the bell.' And he hurried off to the Hall.

When he returned an hour later, he found the clerk waiting for him.

'There's a lot of work for you to do, Wickem,' he said, 'and not much time to do it.'

'Yes, sir,' said Wickem. 'You'll want the family tomb opened, of course...'

'No, no, not at all,' replied Dr Hall. 'The poor Squire said before he died that he did not want to be buried in the family tomb. It is to be an earth grave in the churchyard.'

'Excuse me, sir,' said Wickem, very surprised. 'Do I understand you right? No tomb, you said, and just an earth grave? The poor Squire was too ill to know what he was saying, surely?'

'Yes, Wickem, it seems strange to me too,' said the priest. 'But Mr Joseph tells me that his father or I should say his stepfather, made his wishes very clear when he was in good health. Clean earth and open air. You know, of course, the Squire had some strange ideas, though he never told me of this one. And there's another thing, Wickem. No coffin.'

'Oh dear, oh dear!' said Wickem. 'There'll be some talk about that. And I know that old Mr Wright has some lovely wood for the Squire's coffin - he's kept it for him for years.'

'Well,' said Dr Hall, 'those are the Squire's wishes, so I'm told, so that's what we must do. You must get the grave dug and everything ready by ten o'clock tomorrow night. Tell Wright that we shall need some lights.'

'Very well, sir. If those are the orders, I must do my best,' said Wickem. 'Shall I send the women from the village to prepare the body?'

'No, Wickem. That was not mentioned,' said the priest. 'No doubt Mr Joseph will send for them if he wants them. You have enough work to do without that. Good night, Wickem.' He paused. 'I was just writing out the year's burials in the church records. I didn't think that I'd have to add Squire Bowles' name to them.'

The Squire's burial took place as planned. All the villagers and a few neighbours were present and the Squire's stepson Joseph walked behind the body as it was carried to the churchyard. In those days, nobody expected the Squire's wife to come to the burial. The Squire had no family except his wife and stepson, and he had left everything to his wife.

But what was everything? The land, house, furniture, pictures, and silver were all there, but no money was found. This was very strange. Squire Bowles was quite a rich man; he received plenty of money from his land every year, his lawyers were honest, but still there was no money. The Squire had not been mean with his money. His wife had all she needed, he sent Joseph to school and university, and he lived well. But still he earned more money than he spent. Where was it?

Mrs Bowles and her son searched the house and grounds several times but found no money. They could not understand it.

They sat one evening in the library discussing the problem for the twentieth time.

'You've been through his papers again, Joseph, haven't you?' asked the mother.

'Yes, Mother, and I've found nothing.'

'What was he writing the day before he died, do you know? And why was he always writing to Mr Fowler in Gloucester?'

'You know he had some strange ideas about what happens to a person's soul when he dies. He was writing to Mr Fowler about it but he didn't finish the letter. Here, I'll read it to you.'

He fetched some papers from the Squire's writing table and began to read.

My dear friend,

You will be interested to hear about my latest studies, though I am not sure how accurate they are. One writer says that for a time after death a man's soul stays close to the places he knew during life - so close, in fact, that he can be called to speak to the living. Indeed, he must come, if he is called with the right words. And these words are given in an experiment in Dr Moore's book, which I have copied out for you. But when the soul has come, and has opened its mouth to speak, the caller may see and hear more than he wishes, which is usually to know where the dead man has hidden his money.

Joseph stopped reading and there was silence for a moment.

Then his mother said, 'There was no more than that?'

'No, Mother, nothing.'

'And have you met this Mr Fowler?'

'Yes. He came to speak once or twice at Oxford.'

'Well,' said the mother, 'as he was a friend of the Squire, I think you should write to him and tell him what... what has happened. You will know what to say. And the letter is for him, after all.'

'You're right, Mother,' replied Joseph. 'I'll write to him at once.' And he wrote that same evening.

In time, a letter came back from Gloucester and with it a large packet; and there were more evening talks in the library at the Hall. At the end of one evening, the mother said: 'Well, if you are sure, do it tonight. Go round by the fields where no one will see you. Oh and here's a cloth you can use.'

'What cloth is it, Mother?' asked Joseph.

'Just a cloth,' was the answer.

Joseph went out by the garden door, and his mother stood in the doorway, thinking, with her hand over her mouth. Then she said quietly, 'It was the cloth to cover his face. Oh, I wish I had not been so hurried!'

The night was very dark and a strong wind blew loud over the black fields; loud enough to drown all sounds of calling or answering - if anyone did call or answer.

Next morning Joseph's mother hurried to his bedroom.

'Give me the cloth,' she said. 'The servants must not find it. And tell me, tell me, quick!'

Her son, sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands, looked up at her with wild, red eyes.

'We have opened his mouth,' he said. 'Why, oh why, Mother, did you leave his face uncovered?'

'You know how hurried I was that day,' she replied. 'I had no time. But do you mean that you have seen it?'

Joseph hid his face in his hands. 'Yes, Mother, and he said you would see it, too.'

His mother gave an awful cry and caught hold of the bedpost.

'He's angry,' Joseph went on. 'He was waiting for me to call him, I'm sure. I had only just finished saying the words when I heard him-like a dog growling under the earth.'

He jumped to his feet and walked up and down the room. 'And now he's free! What can we do? I cannot meet him again. I cannot take the drink he drank and go where he is! And I'm afraid to lie here another night! Oh, why did you do it, Mother? We had enough as it was.'

'Be quiet!' said his mother through dry lips. 'It was you as much as I. But why spend time talking? Listen to me. It's only six o'clock. Yarmouth's not far, and we've enough money to cross the sea - things like him can't follow us over water. We'll take the night boat to Holland. You see to the horses while I pack our bags.'

Joseph stared at her. 'What will people say here?'

'You must tell the priest that we've learnt of some of the Squire's money in Amsterdam and we must go to collect it. Go, go! Or if you're not brave enough to do that, lie here and wait for him again tonight.'

Joseph trembled and left the room.

That evening after dark, a boatman entered an inn at Yarmouth, where a man and a woman were waiting, with their bags on the floor beside them.

'Are you ready, sir and madam?' he asked. 'We sail in less than an hour. My other passenger is waiting by the boat. Is this all your luggage?' He picked up the bags.

'Yes, we are travelling light,' said Joseph. 'Did you say you have other passengers for Holland?'

'Just one,' replied the boatman, 'and he seems to travel even lighter than you.'

'Do you know him?' asked Mrs Bowles. She put her hand on her son's arm, and they both paused in the doorway.

'No,' said the boatman. 'He keeps his face hidden, but I'd know him again by his voice - he's got a strange way of speaking, like a dog growling. But you'll find that he knows you. "Go and fetch them out," he said to me, "and I'll wait for them here." And sure enough, he's coming this way now.'

In those days, women who poisoned their husbands were burnt to death. The records for a certain year at Norwich tell of a woman who was punished in this way, and whose son was hanged afterwards. No one had accused them of their crime, but they told the priest of their village what they had done. The name of the village must remain secret, because people say there is money still hidden there.

Dr Moore's book of experiments is now in the University Library at Cambridge, and on page 144, this is written:

This experiment has often proved true - to find out gold hidden in the ground, robbery, murder,

or any other thing. Go to the grave of a dead man, call his name three times, and say: 'I call on you to leave the darkness and to come to me this night and tell me truly where the gold lies hidden.' Then take some earth from the dead man's grave and tie it in a clean cloth and sleep with it under your right ear. And wherever you lie or sleep, that night he will come and tell you truly, waking or sleeping.

- THE END -

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