

Casting the Runes



15th April 1902 Dear Mr Karswell

I am returning your paper on 'The Truth of Alchemy', which you have kindly offered to read at our next club meeting. Unfortunately, we do not feel able to accept your offer.

W. Gayton, Secretary.

18th April 1902 Dear Mr Karswell

I am afraid that I am not able to arrange a meeting with you to discuss your offer to read a paper on alchemy. However, the club considered your offer most carefully, and we did not refuse it until we had asked for the opinion of an expert in these matters.

W. Gayton, Secretary

20th April 1902

The Secretary writes to inform Mr Karswell that it is impossible for him to give the name of any person or persons who were asked for an opinion on Mr Karswell's paper on alchemy. The Secretary also wishes to say that he cannot reply to any further letters on this matter.

'And who is Mr Karswell?' asked the Secretary's wife. She had called at his office and had just picked up and read the last of these letters.

'Well, my dear,' replied her husband, 'just at present Mr Karswell is a very angry man. All I know about him is that he's rich, lives at Lufford Abbey in Warwickshire, and considers himself to be an alchemist. And I don't want to meet him for the next week or two. Now, shall we go?'

'What have you been doing to make him angry?' asked the Secretary's wife.

'The usual thing, my dear. He sent us a paper, which he wanted to read at our next meeting. We showed it to Edward Dunning - almost the only man in England who knows about these things - and he said it was no good, so we refused it. Now Karswell wants to see me about it and to find out whose opinion we asked for. Well, you've seen my reply to that. Of course, you mustn't say anything about it to anyone.

'You know very well that I would never do a thing like that. Indeed, I hope he doesn't discover that it was poor Mr Dunning.'

'Why do you say "poor" Mr Dunning?' said the Secretary. 'He's a very happy man and quite rich,

I believe. He has a comfortable home and plenty of time to spend on his hobbies.'

'I only meant that I would be sorry for him if Mr Karswell discovered his name and made trouble for him.'

'Oh yes! He would be poor Mr Dunning then,' agreed her husband.

The Secretary and his wife were lunching with friends that day, a Mr and Mrs Bennett, who came from Warwickshire. Mrs Gayton decided to ask them if they knew Mr Karswell. However, before she could do so, Mrs Bennett said to her husband:

'I saw Mr Karswell this morning. He was coming out of the British Museum as I was driving past.'

'Did you really?' said her husband. 'I wonder what brings him up to London.'

'Is he a friend of yours?' asked the Secretary, smiling at his wife.

'Oh no!' said Mr and Mrs Bennett together.

'He's one of our neighbours in Warwickshire,' explained Mrs Bennett, 'but he's not at all popular. Nobody knows what he does with his time and they say he believes in all kinds of strange and unpleasant things. If he thinks you have been impolite to him, he never forgets it, and he never does anything kind for his neighbours.'

'But, my dear,' said her husband, 'you're forgetting the Christmas party he gave for the children.'

'Oh no, I'm not,' replied his wife. 'That's a good example of what I mean.' She turned to the Secretary and his wife. 'The first winter he was at Lufford this horrible man invited all the village children to a Christmas party at his house. He said that he had some of these new moving pictures to show them. Everyone was rather surprised because they thought that he didn't like children; he used to be very angry if any of the village children came on to his land. However, the children all went and a friend of ours, Mr Farrer, went with them to see that everything was all right.'

'And was it?' asked the Secretary.

'Indeed it was not!' replied Mrs Bennett. 'Our friend said it was obvious that Mr Karswell wanted to frighten the children to death, and he very nearly did so. The first film was "Red Riding Hood", and the wolf was so terrible that several of the smaller children had to leave the room. The other films were more and more frightening. At the end, Mr Karswell showed a film of a little boy in the park surrounding Lufford Abbey - every child in the room could recognize the place. There was a horrible creature in white following the little boy. At first, you could see it hiding in the trees, then it became clearer and clearer and at last, it caught the little boy and pulled him to pieces. Our friend said that it gave him some very bad dreams, so you can imagine how the children felt. Of course, this was too much and Mr Farrer told Karswell that he must stop it. All Mr Karswell said was: "Oh! The dear children want to go home to bed, do they? Very well, just one last picture."

'And then he showed a short film of horrible creatures with wings and lots of legs. They seemed to be crawling out of the picture to get among the children. Of course, the children were terribly frightened and they all started screaming and running out of the room. Some of them were quite badly hurt because they were all trying to get out of the room at the same time. There was the most awful trouble in the village afterwards. Several of the fathers wanted to go to Lufford Abbey and break all the windows, but the gates were locked when they got there. So you see why Mr Karswell is not one of our friends.'

'Yes,' agreed her husband. 'I think Karswell is a very dangerous man. I feel sorry for anyone who makes an enemy of him.'

'Is he the man,' asked the Secretary, 'who wrote a History of Witchcraft about ten years ago?'

'Yes, that's the man,' replied Mr Bennett. 'Do you remember what the newspapers said about it?'

'Yes, I do,' said the Secretary. 'They all said that it was a really bad book. In fact, I knew the man who wrote the sharpest report of them all. So did you, of course. You remember John Harrington? He was at Cambridge with us.'

'Oh, very well indeed. But I had heard nothing of him between the time we left university and the day I read about his accident in the newspaper.'

'What happened to him?' asked one of the ladies.

'It was very strange,' said Mr Bennett. 'He fell out of a tree and broke his neck. The mystery was why he had climbed the tree in the first place. There he was, an ordinary man walking home along a country road late one evening, and suddenly he began to run as fast as he could. Finally, he climbed up a tree beside the road; a dead branch broke, he fell and was killed. When they found him the next morning, he had a terrible expression of fear on his face. It was quite clear that he had been chased by something and people talked about mad dogs and so on, but no one ever found the answer. That was in 1889 and ever since then his brother, Henry, who was also at Cambridge with us, has been trying to find out the truth of what happened. He thinks that someone wanted to harm his brother but, of course, he has never been able to prove anything.'

After a pause, Mr Bennett asked the Secretary, 'Did you ever read Karswell's History of Witchcraft?'

'Yes, I did,' said the Secretary.

'And was it as bad as Harrington said?'

'Oh yes. It was badly written but what it said was very bad too, although Karswell seemed to believe every word of what he was saying.'

'I didn't read the book but I remember what Harrington wrote about it,' said Mr Bennett. 'If anyone wrote like that about one of my books, I would never write another, I'm sure.'

'I don't think Karswell feels the same way,' replied the Secretary. 'But it's half past three; we must go. Thank you for an excellent lunch.'

On the way home Mrs Gayton said, 'I hope that horrible man Karswell doesn't discover that it was Mr Dunning who said his paper was no good.'

'I don't think he's likely to do that,' replied her husband.

'Dunning won't tell him and neither shall I. The only way Karswell might find out is by asking the people at the British Museum Library for the name of anyone who studies all their old books about alchemy. Let's hope he won't think of that.'

But Mr Karswell was a very clever man.

One evening, later in the same week, Mr Edward Dunning was returning from the British Museum Library, where he had been working all day, to his comfortable home. He lived alone there, except for the two women who cooked and cleaned for him. A train took him most of the way home, then he caught a bus for the last mile or two. He had finished reading his newspaper by the time he got on the bus so he amused himself by reading the different notices on the windows opposite him. He already knew most of them quite well, but there seemed to be a new one in the corner that he had not seen before. It was yellow with blue letters, and all he could read was the name 'John Harrington'. Soon the bus was nearly empty and he changed his seat so that he could read the rest of it. It said:

REMEMBER JOHN HARRINGTON OF THE LAURELS, ASHBROOKE, WARWICKSHIRE,
WHO DIED 18TH SEPTEMBER 1889. HE WAS ALLOWED THREE MONTHS.

Mr Dunning stared at this notice for a long time. He was the only passenger on the bus when it reached his stop, and as he was getting off, he said to the driver, 'I was looking at that new notice on the window, the blue and yellow one. It's rather strange, isn't it?'

'Which one is that, sir?' asked the driver. 'I don't think I know it.'

'Why, this one here,' said Mr Dunning, turning to point to it. Then he suddenly stopped - the window was now quite clear. The blue and yellow notice, with its strange message, had completely disappeared.

'But I'm sure...' Mr Dunning began, staring at the window. Then he turned back to the driver. 'I'm sorry. Perhaps I imagined it,' he said.

He hurried off the bus and walked home, feeling rather worried. The notice had been there on the window; he was sure of it. But what possible explanation could there be for its disappearing like that?

The following afternoon Mr Dunning was walking from the British Museum to the station when he saw, some way ahead of him, a man holding some leaflets, ready to give to people as they passed. However, Mr Dunning did not see him give anyone a leaflet until he himself reached the place. One

was pushed into his hand as he passed. The man's hand touched his, and gave Mr Dunning an unpleasant surprise. The hand seemed unnaturally rough and hot. As Mr Dunning walked on, he looked quickly at the leaflet and noticed the name Harrington. He stopped in alarm, and felt in his pocket for his glasses, but in that, second someone took the leaflet out of his hand. He turned quickly - but whoever it was had disappeared, and so had the man with the leaflets.

The next day in the British Museum, he was arranging his papers on the desk when he thought he heard his own name whispered behind him. He turned round hurriedly, knocking some of his papers on to the floor, but saw no one he recognized. He picked up his papers and was beginning to work when a large man at the table behind him, who was just getting up to leave, touched him on the shoulder.

'May I give you these?' he said, holding out a number of papers. 'I think they must be yours.'

'Yes, they are mine. Thank you,' said Mr Dunning. A moment later, the man had left the room.

Later, Mr Dunning asked the librarian if he knew the large man's name.

'Oh yes. That's Mr Karswell,' said the librarian. 'In fact, he asked me the other day who were the experts on alchemy, so I told him that you were the only one in the country. I'll introduce you if you like; I'm sure he'd like to meet you.'

'No, no, please don't,' said Dunning. 'He is someone I would very much prefer to avoid.'

Usually Mr. Dunning looked forward to an evening spent alone with his books, but now he wanted to be with other people. Unfortunately, the train and the bus were unusually empty. When he reached his house, he was surprised to find the doctor waiting for him.

'I'm sorry, Dunning,' said the doctor. 'I'm afraid I've had to send both your servants to hospital.'

'Oh dear!' said Mr Dunning. 'What's the matter with them?'

'They told me they'd bought some fish for their lunch from a man who came to the door, and it has made them quite ill.'

'I'm very sorry to hear that,' said Mr Dunning.

'It's strange,' said the doctor. 'I've spoken to the neighbours and no one else has seen anyone selling fish. Now, don't worry. They're not seriously ill, but I'm afraid they won't be home for two or three days. Why don't you come and have dinner with me this evening? Eight o'clock. You know where I live.'

Mr Dunning enjoyed his evening with the doctor and returned to his lonely house at half past eleven. He had got into bed and was almost asleep when he heard quite clearly the sound of his study door opening downstairs. Alarmed, he got out of bed, went to the top of the stairs, and listened. There were no sounds of movements or footsteps, but he suddenly felt warm, even hot, air round his legs. He went back and decided to lock himself into his room, and then suddenly, the electric lights all

went out. He put out his hand to find the matches on the table beside the bed - and touched a mouth, with teeth and with hair around it, and not, he said later, the mouth of a human being. In less than a second, he was in another room and had locked the door. And there he spent a miserable night, in the dark, expecting every moment to hear something trying to open the door. But nothing came.

When it grew light, he went nervously back into his bedroom and searched it. Everything was in its usual place. He searched the whole house, but found nothing.

It was a miserable day for Mr Dunning. He did not want to go to the British Museum in case he met Karswell, and he did not feel comfortable in the empty house. He spent half an hour at the hospital where he found that the two women were feeling much better. Then he decided to go to the Club for lunch. There, he was very glad to find his friend the Secretary and they had lunch together. He told Gayton that his servants were in hospital, but he was unwilling to speak of his other problems.

'You poor man,' said the Secretary. 'We can't leave you alone with no one to cook your meals. You must come and stay with us. My wife and I will be delighted to have you. Go home after lunch and bring your things to my house this afternoon. No, I won't let you refuse.'

In fact, Mr Dunning was very happy to accept his friend's invitation. The idea of spending another night alone in his house was alarming him more and more.

At dinner that evening, Mr Dunning looked so unwell that the Gaytons felt sorry for him and tried to make him forget his troubles. But later, when the two men were alone, Dunning became very quiet again. Suddenly he said:

'Gayton, I think that man Karswell knows that I was the person who advised you to refuse his paper.'

Gayton looked surprised. 'What makes you think that?' he asked.

So Dunning explained. 'I don't really mind,' he continued, 'but I believe that he's not a very nice person and it could be difficult if we met.'

After this Dunning sat in silence, looking more and more miserable. At last, Gayton asked him if some serious trouble was worrying him.

'Oh! I'm so glad you asked,' said Dunning. 'I feel I really must talk to someone about it. Do you know anything about a man named John Harrington?'

Very surprised, Gayton could only ask why he wanted to know. Then Dunning told him the whole story of the notice in the bus, the man with the leaflets, and what had happened in his own house. He ended by asking again if Gayton knew anything about John Harrington.

Now it was the Secretary who was worried and did not quite know how to answer. His friend was clearly in a very nervous condition, and the story of Harrington's death was alarming for anyone

to hear. Was it possible that Karswell was involved with both men? In the end, Gayton said only that he had known Harrington at Cambridge and believed that he had died suddenly in 1889. He added a few details about the man and his books.

Later, when they were alone, the Secretary discussed the matter with his wife. Mrs Gayton said immediately that Karswell must be the link between the two men, and she wondered if Harrington's brother, Henry, could perhaps help Mr Dunning. She would ask the Bennett's where Henry Harrington lived, and then bring the two men together.

When they met, the first thing Dunning told Henry Harrington was of the strange ways in which he had learnt his brother's name. He described his other recent experiences and asked Harrington what he remembered about his brother before he died.

'John was in a very strange condition for some time before his death, it's true,' replied Henry Harrington. 'Among other things, he felt that someone was following him all the time. I'm sure that someone was trying to harm him, and your story reminds me very much of the things he experienced. Could there be any link between you and my brother, do you think?'

'Well,' replied Dunning, 'there is just one thing. I'm told that your brother wrote some very hard things about a book not long before he died and, as it happens, I too have done something to annoy the man who wrote that book.

'Don't tell me his name is Karswell,' said Harrington.

'Why yes, it is,' replied Dunning.

Henry Harrington looked very serious.

'Well, that is the final proof I needed,' he said. 'Let me explain. I believe that my brother John was sure that this man Karswell was trying to harm him. Now, John was very fond of music. He often went to concerts in London, and always kept the concert programmes afterwards. About three months before he died, he came back from a concert and showed me the programme.

"I nearly missed this one," he said. "I couldn't find mine at the end of the concert and was looking everywhere for it. Then my neighbour offered me his, saying that he didn't need it any more. I don't know who he was - he was a very large man."

'Soon after this my brother told me that he felt very uncomfortable at night. Then, one evening, he was looking through all his concert programmes when he found something strange in the programme that his large neighbour had given him. It was a thin piece of paper with some writing on it - not normal writing. It looked to me more like runic letters in red and black. Well, we were looking at this and wondering how to give it back to its owner when the door opened and the wind blew the paper into the fire. It was burnt in a moment.'

Mr Dunning sat silent as Harrington paused.

'Now,' he continued, 'I don't know if you ever read that book of Karswell's, The History of Witchcraft, which my brother said was so badly written.'

Dunning shook his head.

'Well,' Harrington went on, 'after my brother died I read some of it. The book was indeed badly written and a lot of it was rubbish, but one bit caught my eye. It was about "Casting the Runes" on people in order to harm them, and I'm sure that Karswell was writing from personal experience. I won't tell you all the details, but I'm certain that the large man at the concert was Karswell, and that the paper he gave my brother caused his death. Now, I must ask you if anything similar has happened to you.'

Dunning told him what had happened in the British Museum.

'So Karswell did actually pass you some papers?' said Harrington. 'Have you checked them? No? Well, I think we should do so at once, if you agree.'

They went round to Dunning's empty house where his papers were lying on the table. As he picked them up, a thin piece of paper fell to the ground. A sudden wind blew it towards the open window, but Harrington closed the window just in time to stop the paper escaping. He caught the paper in his hand.

'I thought so,' he said. 'It looks just like the one my brother was given. I think you're in great danger, Dunning.'

The two men discussed the problem for a long time. The paper was covered in runic letters, which they could not understand, but both men felt certain that the message, whatever it was, could bring unknown horrors to its owner. They agreed that the paper must be returned to Karswell, and that the only safe and sure way was to give it to him in person and see that he accepted it. This would be difficult since Karswell knew what Dunning looked like.

'I can grow a beard,' said Dunning, 'so that he won't recognize me. But who knows when the end will come?'

'I think I know,' said Harrington. 'The concert where my brother was given the paper was on June 18th, and he died on September 18th, three months later.'

'Perhaps it will be the same for me,' Dunning said miserably. He looked in his diary. 'Yes, April 23rd was the day in the Museum - that brings me to July 23rd. Now, Harrington, I would very much like to know anything you can tell me about your brother's trouble.'

'The thing that worried him most,' said Harrington, 'was the feeling that whenever he was alone, someone was watching him. After a time I began to sleep in his room, and he felt better because of that. But he talked a lot in his sleep.'

'What about?' asked Dunning.

'I think it would be better not to go into details about that,' replied Harrington. 'But I remember that he received a packet by post, which contained a little diary. My brother didn't look at it, but after his death I did, and found that all the pages after September 18th had been cut out. Perhaps you wonder why he went out alone on the evening he died? The strange thing is that during the last week of his life all his worries seemed to disappear, and he no longer felt that someone was watching or following him.'

Finally, the two men made a plan. Harrington had a friend who lived near Lufford Abbey; he would stay with him and watch Karswell. If he thought they had a chance to arrange an accidental meeting, he would send a telegram to Dunning. Meanwhile, Dunning had to be ready to move at any moment and had to keep the paper safe.

Harrington went off to his friend in Warwickshire and Dunning was left alone. He found waiting very hard, and was unable to work or to take any interest in anything. He felt that he was living in a black cloud that cut him off from the world. He became more and more worried as May, June, and the first half of July passed with no word from Harrington. But all this time Karswell remained at Lufford Abbey.

At last, less than a week before July 23rd, Dunning received a telegram from his friend:

Karswell is leaving London for France on the boat train on Thursday night. Be ready. I will come to you tonight. Harrington.

When he arrived, the two men made their final plan. The boat train from London stopped only once before Dover, at Croydon West. Harrington would get on the train in London and find where Karswell was sitting. Dunning would wait for the train at Croydon West where Harrington would look out for him. Dunning would make sure that his name was not on his luggage and, most importantly, must have the paper with him.

On Thursday night, Dunning waited impatiently for the train at Croydon West. He now had a thick beard and was wearing glasses, and felt sure that Karswell would not recognize him. He noticed that he no longer felt himself to be in danger, but this only made him worry more, because he remembered what Harrington had said about his brother's last week.

At last, the boat train arrived and he saw his friend at one of the windows. It was important not to show that they knew each other, so Dunning got on further down the train and slowly made his way to the right compartment.

Harrington and Karswell were alone in the compartment, and Dunning entered and sat in the corner furthest from Karswell. Karswell's heavy travelling coat and bag were on the seat opposite him, and next to where Dunning was now sitting. Dunning thought of hiding the paper in the coat but realized that this would not do; he would have to give it to Karswell and see that Karswell accepted it. Could he hide Karswell's bag in some way, put the paper in it, and then give the bag to him as he got off the train? This was the only plan he could think of. He wished desperately that he could ask Harrington's advice.

Karswell himself seemed very restless. Twice he stood up to look out of the window. Dunning was just going to try to make his bag fall off the seat when he saw a warning expression in Harrington's eye - Karswell was watching them in the window.

Then Karswell stood up a third time, opened the window and put his head outside. As he stood up, something fell silently to the floor and Dunning saw that it was a thin wallet containing Karswell's tickets. In a moment, Dunning had pushed the paper into the pocket at the back of the wallet. Just then, the train began to lose speed as it came into Dover station, and Karswell closed the window and turned round.

'May I give you this, sir? I think it must be yours,' said Dunning, holding out the wallet.

'Oh, thank you, sir,' replied Karswell, checking that they were his tickets. Then he put the wallet into his pocket.

Suddenly the compartment seemed to grow dark and very hot, but already Harrington and Dunning were opening the door and getting off the train.

Dunning, unable to stand up, sat on a seat on the platform breathing deeply, while Harrington followed Karswell the little way to the boat. He saw Karswell show his ticket to the ticket collector and pass on to the boat. As he did so, the official called after him:

'Excuse me, sir. Has your friend got a ticket?'

'What do you mean, my friend?' shouted Karswell angrily.

'Sorry, sir, I thought there was someone with you,' apologized the ticket collector. He turned to another official beside him, 'Did he have a dog with him or something? I was sure there were two of them.'

Five minutes later, there was nothing except the disappearing lights of the boat, the night wind, and the moon.

That night the two friends sat up late in their room in the hotel. Although the danger was past, a worry remained.

'Harrington,' Dunning said, 'I'm afraid we have sent a man to his death.'

'He murdered my brother,' replied Harrington, 'and he tried to murder you. It is right that he should die.'

'Don't you think we should warn him?' asked Dunning.

'How can we?' replied his friend. 'We don't know where he's going.'

'He's going to Abbeville,' said Dunning. 'I saw it on his ticket. Today is the 21st. We could send a telegram in the morning to all the main hotels in Abbeville saying: Check your ticket - wallet.'

Dunning. Then he would have a whole day.'

After a pause, Harrington agreed. 'I see it would make you feel happier,' he said, 'so we'll warn him.'

The telegrams were sent first thing in the morning but no one knows if Karswell received any of them. All that is known is that on July 23rd a man was looking at the front of a church in Abbeville when a large piece of stone fell from the roof and hit him on the head, killing him immediately. The police reported that nobody was on the roof at the time. From papers found on the body, they discovered that the dead man was an Englishman, named Karswell.

Some months later Dunning reminded Harrington that he had never told him what his brother had talked about in his sleep. But Harrington had only said a few words when Dunning begged him to stop.

- THE END -

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