

The Hanged Bride

I first heard Mad Harry's strange tale in the snug of the King's Head in Seaton St Clement's. The locals were quick to tell me of the village eccentric—how he wandered alone at night muttering to himself, his strange habit of picking flowers in Spring to place in ancient graveyards. They recounted his screams when strangers materialised from the mists that hang over these empty lands in winter. Nobody knew his age. His hunched gait and the wrinkles that covered his face like a spider's web hinted at someone in his nineties or more, although local gossip placed him in his seventies.

I'd moved to Seaton St Clement's a month earlier, after thirty years teaching medieval history at Cambridge. The old manor was for sale and nowhere else in England could I afford a house of that age in such excellent condition.

The village lies deep in the Norfolk fens, fifteen miles southwest of Kings Lynn. Few strangers dare to visit. To reach it, one must traverse a narrow road beside a deep drainage ditch which proved the doom of many travellers when snow and ice blanket the land. The ageing population scrapes past five hundred, but it still supports a parish church and a pub: the King's Head. Before the mechanisation of farming, it boasted three taverns and a second place of worship to succour its fifteen-hundred souls.

I'd learned that the King's Head regained its original name in the nineteen-sixties. Before then, a fading sign proclaimed it as the Hanged Bride. Its fifteenth-century origin is still visible despite various ill-judged renovations.

The current church, built on the northern edge of the village, honours St Peter. On the eastern side, my house adjoins the churchyard of the edifice that once celebrated St Clement's. The site of the church is marked by a jumble of small stones, the larger ones having been removed to facilitate the building of workers' cottages. The lichen-encrusted tombstones surrounding the ruin still stand, some leaning at impossible angles, the names of the lost ground illegible by the winds and rain that scour the flatlands of the Fens.

When Harry sat down beside me in the snug, I asked him if he recalled why they changed the pub's name. He didn't answer at first. It took three pints, which I funded, to

loosen his tongue. The bride was Sarah Jenkins, the daughter of a farmer in the late seventeenth hundreds. She married the son of the squire who owned my house. He proved a bad lot, adulterous and violent. A month after the marriage, Sarah's anguish drove her to stab him as he caroused in the tavern with a whore from a neighbouring village. Her father-in-law being the magistrate, justice was swift, and a mob hanged her on a hastily erected gibbet outside the pub. The publicity the case attracted led to increased trade and persuaded the landlord to alter the tavern's name to maintain its notoriety.

During this explanation, I noticed a tear in Harry's eye. Despite my request, he did not expand on his sorrow.

I returned to the King's Head the next evening, but Harry did not arrive. Instead, I fell into conversation with other old worthies keen to recount local legends relating to the bride. I learned her spirit haunted the abandoned churchyard. Some claimed they had heard her sobs on moonless nights drifting across the fields beyond the old church. Over the years, several men had died mysteriously within its confines, each with the unmistakable signs of sheer terror etched on his face.

The few who survived an encounter with the bride had portrayed her as a nightmarish monster, a hunched body clad in the tattered remnants of her trousseau. Their incoherent accounts suggested a ghoul with sharp teeth, her face a skull with blazing red eyes, fingernails six inches long.

I remained dubious about such tales, but curiosity drove me to the library in Kings Lynn the next day, where I accessed their news archive. I was intrigued to discover records of unexplained deaths in the graveyard—the last of these only eight years before. One reporter supported a theory that the village being remote, centuries of inbreeding had amplified some congenital deficiency in the victims. Another suggested these tragedies were the consequence of noxious fumes emanating from the decaying cadavers beneath the ground.

I met Harry the following week. On this occasion, I quizzed him on the fate of St Clement's. Perhaps I was the first to engage him in conversation for days, for his reticence evaporated and he resumed his remarkable account of the actual hanged bride.

The village authorities ordered that Sarah's corpse should be buried outside St Clement's boundary, as befitted a murderess. Her family were so incensed at her treatment that one dark night they moved a section of the church wall to enclose her grave with those others mouldering in consecrated ground. The parson and the squire resolved to restore the original borders of the churchyard without delay. Before work could start, a bolt of lightning struck the steeple, sending tons of masonry into the nave and crushing the parson. When the squire died the next day, presumably from a heart attack, the villagers saw these events as divine retribution and abandoned St Clement's for ever.

One night a twenty-year-old Harry staggered home from the Hanged Bride after quaffing several jars of ale. His cottage lay on the other side of the ruined church. The graveyard's evil reputation meant villagers normally avoided it, but the bravado of strong beer persuaded Harry to take a shortcut.

He quickly regretted this decision when the ghostly figure of a woman clad in white emerged from behind a tombstone.

He described her as beautiful, a contrast to the village myths. Her hair fell fair and long, her eyes blue, her figure slim. The paleness of her skin made the red mark of the rope stand out on her neck. Something in her demeanour filled him with fear, and he dare not escape as she glided towards him. He stumbled backwards and tripped over a fallen tombstone. The apparition advanced to stand over him.

At that point, his tale became consistent in one respect with what I had been told. She pointed at him with what he described as a long, sharp fingernail.

'Answer me a single riddle,' she said, 'and the truth will save you. Fail and you will join your fellow liars in Hell.'

Harry trembled as he told me his story. He recalled how he lay petrified, fully aware of his terror, fear having rendered him sober in an instant. At that moment, he experienced alternate visions of Heaven and Hell and was certain the woman held the keys to both. A simple man with scant schooling, he had no skill with riddles. He knew little of the world. He shuddered as she bent down to whisper in his ear.

'How can I trust a man to be faithful and true?'

No answer came. In the warmth and camaraderie of the tavern, he'd laughed at the stories of the countless victims who must have faced the same question and failed. He looked around for inspiration, but all he saw were the grey memorials to the dead, one of which would soon rise above his lifeless body if he did not reply.

The tombstones...

'Set him in a grave,' said Harry.

The woman stood upright, a smile on her face.

'I have waited centuries,' she said, 'for an honest man. Go, but do not forget me.'

He remembered blinking and finding himself lying alone.

When he finished his story, he sat staring into the distance. I failed to read his expression—fear, longing, perhaps even regret.

I met Harry often after that. He refused to discuss the hanged bride, but revealed he never married. Our last meeting was six months ago, not in the King's Head, but in the lane that runs past the former church.

'Soon,' he said as I approached. I asked him what he meant. He responded with a muttered farewell and sped on his way.

Harry suffered a stroke a week later. A concerned neighbour glanced through a window to find him lying in his kitchen. After leaving hospital, Harry's condition remained poor and doctors recommended a nursing home. He survived for thirteen days. I take credit for persuading the village to fund his funeral, and we laid him to rest in the shadow of St Peter's.

You may wish to draw your own conclusion about what happened next.

An unfounded accusation about a nurse at the institution where he died led to the coroner demanding an exhumation. When police opened Harry's coffin, no corpse lay within.

Suspicion immediately fell on the accused nurse and her family, but this soon evaporated when investigators pointed out that other alleged victims in more accessible graves had been left unmolested.

Rumours of body-snatchers and black magic cults abounded. The undertakers faced accusations of leaving the coffin empty and selling his organs.

I, and I believe my fellow-villagers, never mention the newly grown briar and rose that sprang up overnight in the ancient churchyard of St Clement's.

If the hanged bride is united with a lover she trusts, then none dare interfere.