

'Ghost stories to chill your blood'

HAUNTED



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THE CASTLE GHOSTS

Joseph Delaney

THE CASTLE GHOSTS

I LOOKED UP at the castle and tried to be brave. After all, I wasn't going to be imprisoned there. I was going to guard the prisoners: murderers, common criminals and convicted witches. That was my job. Or at least it would be once I'd finished my training.

There was a new moon, slender and horned, about to be overwhelmed by the dark clouds blustering in from the west. I shivered but not just with cold. I'd heard stories about the castle after dark, about things long dead that walked its damp corridors.

The building was large and forbidding, set on a high hill about three miles from the nearest town and surrounded by a dense wood of sycamore and ash trees. It was constructed from dark, dank stone with turrets, battlements and a foul-smelling moat that was rumoured to contain the skeletons of those who had attempted to escape.

I'd never wanted to be on the night shift. But my feelings counted for nothing. Orders were orders and, after just two weeks preliminary training, I'd been told to report one hour after sunset. But, being unused to going to bed in the afternoon, I'd overslept. I was already over half an hour late and castle guards were supposed to be punctual.

There was a clanking grinding sound and then the portcullis began to rise. They knew I was there. Nobody approached the castle without being noticed. Behind the portcullis there was a huge wooden door studded with iron. It was another five minutes before that opened and I waited patiently as a light drizzle began to drift into my face.

At last the door started to grind back on its hinges to reveal a burly guard. He scowled at me. 'Name?' he demanded.

‘Billy Calder,’ I answered.

He knew my name and knew exactly who I was; he’d been letting me in every day for my training. But he was following the rules. Anyone entering had to identify himself.

‘You’ll be working under Adam Colne. There he is,’ he said, pointing to a man in the distance who held a huge bunch of keys. ‘He’s waited over half an hour for you and he’s not best pleased to say the least. I wouldn’t like to be in your shoes, boy.’

I approached Adam Colne warily. He was big and scary with a reputation for being tough and ruthless. He’d once thrown a trainee guard from the battlements into the moat. The boy had been lucky to survive. Colne stared at me hard, without blinking, making me feel very nervous. It was the first time we’d met and I knew I hadn’t made a good impression.

‘You’re late!’ Colne growled. ‘There are only six guards on the night shift and it’s important that we are all present. So it won’t happen again, will it, boy? Those who work for me never make the same mistake twice. Not if they want to carry on breathing. You have to know your place in the scheme of things. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes, sir,’ I answered.

‘Good, as long as we’ve got that straight I’ll forget your lateness and we’ll make a fresh start from now. You’ll be happy here, boy. We’re just like a close-knit family on the night shift.’

I didn’t know much about families because my parents had died when I was very young. I’d been brought up in an orphanage. This was my first job since I’d turned fifteen and had been thrown out to make my own way in the world. I was a stranger to the district and hadn’t made any friends yet.

‘So first things first,’ Colne continued. ‘Do you know why you’ve been transferred to the night shift?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Somebody asked for you. Somebody politely requested your presence. Someone we have to keep sweet. “Let the young Calder boy guard at night,” she begged. Wouldn’t you like to know who she is?’

I nodded. I hadn’t got a clue.

‘Then why don’t you take a guess?’

Who could it be? There were some female as well as male prisoners but certainly no female jailers. The castle was run by men. But as far as I was aware, I knew no one imprisoned in this castle – or any castle for that matter.

‘Is it one of the prisoners, sir?’

‘Her name is Netty and she *was* one of the prisoners, boy. But she’s a prisoner no longer.’

That didn’t make any sense. If she’d been released why had she requested my presence on the night shift?

‘Where is she now?’ I asked.

‘Mostly she’s to be found in Execution Square. One of her favourite places it is, because that’s where they hanged her.’ My face must have shown my shock. ‘Netty is a ghost, and we need to keep her sweet or it’s bad news for everybody. Some call her “Long-Neck Netty” on account of how stretched her neck was by the rope. But don’t let her overhear you using that name. She doesn’t like it. Even when she’s in a good mood she raps and bangs and wakes up the prisoners. Sometimes she turns the milk sour or gives us nightmares. No, it don’t do to cross Netty. So follow me, boy! If it’s you she wants on the night shift, it’s you she’ll get.’

He walked off swinging his big bunch of keys, and I followed him through a tunnel and into the castle yard.

‘But how does she know who I am, sir?’ I asked.

‘Must have seen you during your training and taken a shine to you.’

‘Are we going to see her now?’ I asked, my knees beginning to tremble. The thought of facing a ghost had

suddenly turned me right off the job. *Why on earth had I wanted to be a prison guard?*

'Nobody *goes to see* Netty, boy. She comes to see you. No doubt she'll turn up when she's ready. Of course there's more than one ghost haunts this prison.' He pointed at two cell windows high on the wall. It wasn't time for lights out yet and they were the only two cells in darkness.

'We never put prisoners in those two cells, boy. Not now, anyway. Know why?'

'Are they haunted, sir?'

'They're haunted all right, but by exactly what we're not sure. About ten years ago the castle was filled to bursting with prisoners so we had to use those two cells. We knew they were supposed to be haunted by something unpleasant but there were no precise records, so we took a chance and locked up two drunken farm hands for the night. Got into a fight they had, and then battered the parish constable who'd tried to separate them.

'The morning after, they were trembling like leaves in an autumn storm. And both told the same tale. In the middle of the night something invisible but very strong had grabbed them by their throats and tried to drag them into the wall. But that weren't all . . .'

Colne stood there for a while staring into the darkness, shaking his head and muttering to himself as if he were reliving the experience. He seemed to have forgotten all about me.

'What happened? I asked.

'Well, as I said, the castle cells were all occupied so we had to put them back in the same quarters again the following night. Come dawn we regretted it. We should have sent them off elsewhere to be locked up, but we hadn't the man power to transport 'em. In the morning one of them was dead. He'd been strangled and there were fingermarks embedded in his throat. His eyes were bulging too - it wasn't a pretty sight. But the other had

disappeared; or at least most of him had. There was a large pool of blood on the cell floor, and in it were his teeth.'

'His teeth? Was that all that was left of him?'

'His dentures, boy, to be precise, which were made out of wood. And whatever had taken him couldn't get them through the stone wall as well. Flesh and bone, yes, but not Rowan wood. It's a wood that has certain properties. Witches aren't supposed to be able to touch it and some say it wards off dark apparitions. Anyway let's get inside, out of this drizzle. I need something to warm my belly.'

We passed along two corridors and at the end of each was a sturdy door to be unlocked. Moving even a short distance across the prison took some time because of all those locks; no wonder each jailer carried a big heavy bunch of keys.

At last we emerged into a large room with a small fire in the grate, three big wooden tables and lots of chairs.

'This is the quarters for the night shift,' Colne said.

I'd never visited the room because it was always locked during the day. But there was little evidence now to suggest that it was ever occupied. There were no cups, cutlery or plates on the table tops. The room was tidy - too tidy. Something about that made me feel very uneasy.

'Of course,' Colne said, 'we don't use it much. Not a nice place this.'

'Is it haunted as well?' I asked.

'By night the whole castle is haunted, boy, but a lot depends on what's doing the haunting. There are some really nasty things that rap and bang in here so most guards prefer to take their rest in other places.'

I didn't speak. I just waited in silence. I knew he had more to say.

'About twenty years ago, when I first started on the job, I was braver, much braver, and I sat in here one night eating bread and ham that my wife Martha had packed for me. She's dead now, poor soul. It's funny, isn't it? All these

castle ghosts but never once did the spirit I most wished to see come back to say farewell.' He shook his head sadly. 'Anyway I was sitting in that chair over there chewing my food . . .'

He pointed to a wooden chair. It looked just like all the others but it was the one nearest the door.

'At last my stomach was full and I started to doze. Then something woke me. A strange noise from behind that raised the hairs on the back of my neck and sent chills running down my spine. It sounded like something was gnashing its teeth together hard, at the same time as growling deep in its throat. Whatever it was shot past my chair. It was small and dark and it scuttled across the flags quicker than I could blink.

'It scared me, boy. I tried to tell myself that it was just a rat but it had passed straight through a closed door so I knew that it was something else. And there was a smell too – a stench of fire and brimstone. So it was something evil. Something it's better not to think about. Something straight from hell. I rarely eat in here now – at least not when I'm by myself. One funny thing about ghosts is that they're most likely to put in an appearance when you're alone.'

He sighed then shook his head. 'But there are worse places in this castle, and the worst place of all is the one that I have to visit every night. And I have to visit it alone. It's a place we call the "Witch Well". There's a prisoner down there that it's best to keep away from. He's tethered to a ring in the dungeon floor by a long chain. He sleeps all day but is wide-awake after dark and has to be fed at midnight, or things could get really awkward for everybody who works here. Someone has to do that dangerous job and as the most experienced guard on the night shift it falls to me. As well as the special prisoner, the well has something else to make it a fearsome place. It's haunted by foul things – the ghosts of those confined there long ago. I only wish I

didn't have to go there, but duty is duty. I'll show you where the well is later, but first I'll make us both that hot drink to ward off the chills of the night.'

Ten minutes later we set off again and Colne led me through another series of corridors with occupied cells on either side. By now it was after lights out and you could hear prisoners moaning in their sleep or sometimes crying out as if in the grip of a terrifying nightmare. Colne opened then locked each door behind us after slamming it with a clang.

'Never leave your keys in the lock, even for a moment, boy,' he warned. 'Always fasten them back onto your belt. It's the safest way, so nobody else can ever get their hands on them.'

At last we ended up in the open again, the drizzle falling straight down on our heads, the castle walls rising sheer on all four sides. It was a small claustrophobic area, about twenty paces by twenty paces, and most of it was filled by a large wooden structure that I recognised as a gallows. This was another place I hadn't seen during my training. It was Execution Square – the place haunted by Netty!

'Yes, boy, this is where the condemned get their necks stretched! But over there is what we've come to see.' Colne pointed to the furthest corner of the square. We passed the gallows and halted about four paces away from an iron door with a massive lock. I could hear water trickling in the near distance.

'This is the entrance to the Witch Well, and behind that door you'd face your worst nightmare. So just be glad you're not in my shoes!'

After a week or so I began to feel a lot better about being on the night watch. The duties were much easier because it wasn't necessary to feed the prisoners. Only the prisoner in the Witch Well got fed at night and that was Adam Colne's

job. The other inmates were mostly sleeping or groaning or crying. I just had to patrol the corridors.

I never saw the ghost of Netty but I suspect that she came close at times. Once I was sure someone touched the back of my neck. It felt like the tip of an ice-cold finger. But when I turned to look there was nobody there – or at least nothing that needed to draw breath. There were whispers too but very faint, and I never could quite make out the words. I would have been all right and probably still doing that job but then the ‘Purple Pestilence’ came along and changed everything for a while.

The disease swept straight through the nearby villages and towns. Some people got sore throats so severe that they couldn’t breathe. Then, just before they died, they turned a deep purple colour. It was mostly the very young and the very old who died but the survivors had a very hard time of it too, and were confined to their sick beds for weeks.

One night I went to the castle and Adam Colne wasn’t there. Three other guards were also sick. That left just me and the gate guard.

‘You’ll have to do it, boy!’ he told me. ‘The prisoner in the Witch Well has to be fed at midnight and there’s only you available to do it tonight. I can’t afford to leave the gate.’

I knew that anyone could guard the gate but, although he was older and more experienced than I was, he was scared to feed the prisoner and was using the gate as an excuse.

‘Where’s the food?’ I asked, my knees knocking just at the very thought of entering the Witch Well.

‘There are two buckets waiting for you in Execution Square – directly underneath the gallows. Give the prisoner the first at midnight then the second course about ten minutes later. Just tip each bucket down the steps. Don’t linger. Get out of there just as quickly as you can. So off

you go on your rounds but when you hear the church bell sound at quarter to the hour make your way to the Witch Well.'

So, carrying my big bunch of keys, I set off on my patrol of the corridors. I was really scared but just wanted to get it over with and I was glad when I heard the church bell in the distance telling me that it was time to go and feed the prisoner.

Between the main gate and Execution Square there were seven corridors to walk and eight stout doors to unlock and lock. At last I reached the square. It was raining even harder than usual. I picked my way between the puddles towards the gallows where the two large wooden buckets of food were waiting.

Each was covered with a piece of wood to stop the rain getting in, and there was a stone on top to keep it in place. Why the stone was necessary I hadn't a clue. The four sheer walls that enclosed the gallows meant there could be no wind.

In the distance the church bell began to ring again. At the twelfth peal I picked up the nearest bucket and carried it towards the gate of the Witch Well. It was heavy. What on earth could be inside? I lowered it to one side of the gate and fumbled for the right key. The lock seemed stiff but at last it yielded, and very nervously I pulled open the door.

There was a torch flickering on the wall just to the side of the door. It lit the entrance adequately but the steps descended into absolute darkness. With one hand on the door jamb, I listened. For a moment I could hear nothing at all but then from far below came the faint sound of breathing.

I lifted the stone from the wooden cover of the bucket and placed it on the floor. Next I removed the cover. I was instantly assailed by a strong metallic coppery smell. The bucket was full of blood! Surely this wasn't food intended

for a human being? What kind of creature could be imprisoned below?

I didn't intend to linger long enough to find out so I did as the gatekeeper had instructed. I lifted the heavy bucket and I tipped it, allowing the contents to cascade down the stone steps. The blood flowed like a waterfall carrying big chunks of raw meat along with it.

Wasting no time, I carried the empty bucket outside, closed the door behind me and locked it. As instructed I waited ten minutes before getting ready to feed the creature what the gatekeeper had called its 'second course'. At one point I thought I could hear faint noises from behind the door so I leaned against it and put my ear to the wood. I could definitely hear chewing, snuffling noises, but after a while it became quiet and I judged it time to unlock the door and feed the prisoner again. I was more nervous than ever. What if he was lying in wait for me behind the door? I eased it open.

To my relief it was exactly as before, the steps leading down into absolute darkness. The only difference was that the stones were now red with blood. Then a thought struck me. They had been clean before I'd tipped the first bucket. Who had done it? Was that part of Adam Colne's job too?

This second bucket was also filled almost to the brim with blood so, wasting no time at all, I tipped it down the steps. It proved to be different from the first course; this had bones in it rather than pieces of raw meat. I turned, intending to get out of there fast. It was then that disaster struck. I heard the door creak on its hinges, and then it started to close!

I took two quick steps towards it, but the door slammed shut before I could reach it. Then I remembered with a sickening jolt that I'd left my key in the lock! In my nervousness to tip the second bucket down the steps and get the job over with, I'd broken an important rule.

And there had been no wind, so why had it closed? It was almost as if someone had shut it from the outside. When I tried to push the door open it didn't yield and I began to panic. But there was worse to come.

To my horror and dismay, I heard the sound of the key being turned in the lock. I tried to push the door open again but it wouldn't budge. Someone had locked it. But who could have done it and why?

And now I was trapped in the Witch Well with the prisoner. I could hear him somewhere below starting to eat his second course.

First there came the lapping and slurping of a big tongue drinking the blood that I'd poured down the stone steps.

How big was the tongue? No human tongue could make so much noise!

Next there came the crunching and grinding of large teeth chewing the bones that had been carried down to him by the red tide.

How big and sharp were the teeth? No human teeth could chew through bones like that!

I tried the door for the third time, again without success. Then I sat down resting my back against it, thinking desperately about what I could do. It was no good shouting for help because the gatekeeper was too far away. And if I did call out, the prisoner would certainly hear me, and might come up the steps to investigate.

The gatekeeper wouldn't expect me back until the end of my shift. It was only then, when the day shift arrived, that someone might discover my disappearance and come to release me from the Witch Well. But that was still many hours away.

Maybe if I stayed at the top of the steps, quiet as a little mouse, the prisoner would stay down there.

No sooner had that thought entered my head than the chewing below ceased. The prisoner must have eaten all

the bones. Perhaps he would now be full to bursting and fall asleep?

That hope was quickly shattered. There was a new sound, like a broad-toothed file rasping on wood. What could it be?

The sound went on for a long time and seemed to be getting gradually nearer and nearer. There was also the occasional clank of a chain. Something deep inside my brain must have figured out what the noises meant because the answer popped into my head very suddenly and I started to tremble.

The creature was slowly climbing the steps and dragging its chain behind it. The rasping sound was being made by its large tongue. Nobody needed to clean the steps of blood because the prisoner did it himself. He was climbing upwards, licking each step in turn, not wanting to waste even a drop of blood.

I had one hope left. A lot depended on the length of the chain that tethered him to the ring in the dungeon below. It seemed sensible to me for the prison authorities to have made it long enough so he could reach the top step with his tongue – that would save on the need to send someone in to do the cleaning – but not long enough to allow him to reach the door. That way anyone feeding him would be safe as long as he stood very close to it.

But if that was the case why had the gatekeeper told me to get out as quickly as possible? Was there some other danger that I hadn't foreseen?

The sound of that tongue licking the step was getting nearer and nearer, I stood and pressed my back against the door to get as far as possible from the top step. Next I braced myself ready for my first view of the creature. I didn't have long to wait. The first thing to emerge into the light, cast by the flickering torch, was the tongue itself. It was huge and swollen and purple, like the faces of those who died from the pestilence.

Next came the huge head and I shuddered at the sight of it. Rather than hair it was covered in green scales, and its ears were long and pointy with a sharp piece of bone protruding from the tip of each. What was it?

As more of the prisoner came into view, I gradually became aware of its size. It was far bigger than a man, perhaps nine feet tall, with strong muscular shoulders and a naked hairy back. Instead of fingernails it had long, sharp talons, each one more lethal than a dagger.

Its tongue was licking the top step now and so absorbed was the creature in slurping up every last drop of blood that, so far, it hadn't noticed me. My heart was in my mouth and I pressed myself even harder back against the door.

But the moment it finished it looked up, and its big, green, cruel eyes looked directly into mine. For the first time, I saw its teeth. It had two long yellow fangs that curled down over its bottom lip. With a snarl it leaped towards me. The chain brought it up with a jerk, and it thrashed against it, straining to reach me, its claws just inches from my shoes, saliva dribbling from its open mouth in anticipation of eating my flesh.

Would the chain hold it? For a moment I waited, trembling in dread, expecting one of the big links to break. But they remained intact and the creature's attempts to reach me slowly became less frantic. I tried to remain calm. The only risk to my life was if I grew tired and fell forward away from the door. But I was hardly likely to fall asleep with the hungry, open, fanged mouth of that monstrosity a few feet away and its claws mere inches from my shoes.

Slowly my fear began to ebb. I told myself that I could survive here until daybreak. But then, just as I was becoming calmer and more hopeful, there was a sudden draught and the torch began to flicker. The draught became a gust, the gust became a howling wind, and the torch went out. I was plunged into darkness.

For a moment I could see nothing and then there was a faint glow from the side of the steps. The glow became a tall column of light that lit the walls and steps better than a candle, and a human form started to materialise.

My heart began to beat faster. This was one of the castle ghosts, and it only took a few moments for me to realise which one. At first glance the body looked solid and the red lips, brown eyes and green dress could have fooled you into thinking that this was a living flesh-and-blood woman. But she was standing in front of the creature from the dungeon and you could see through her to his glaring eyes and twitching talons.

She was a tall woman who once had been beautiful but the high cheek bones and glossy black hair were ruined by two things: her bulging eyes and her stretched and twisted neck with its knotted veins. I shuddered with fear. It was the ghost of Long-Neck Netty, the woman who'd been hanged in the castle's Execution Square.

Netty smiled without warmth and then she spoke; her voice was as cold as the north wind. 'What do you think of my son?' she asked.

I didn't answer, and she turned and gestured towards the taloned creature on the steps which was still straining against the chain, making fresh efforts to reach me. 'He's a good lad and deserves the best,' she said. 'He didn't ask to be born in that shape and he's always hungry. It was my fault, you see. I met a young man, the most handsome that any woman had ever seen. He had blue eyes, curly blonde hair and a dazzling smile that melted my heart. I'd have done anything for him.

'But I was young and foolish and never questioned the fact that he only ever wanted to meet me after dark and alone. I was a witch but I was self-taught and belonged to no coven, so I had nobody to advise me and point out the great danger that I was in. I bore a child to that handsome young man and it was only afterwards that I learned the

truth. He was the devil! And some offspring of a witch and the devil are born as abhumans. My poor child, he never asked to be brought into this world so ugly and misshapen so I try to make it up to him whenever I can. I feed him a choice morsel: some tender flesh and sweet young blood. That's why you are here, boy. That's why I asked for you to be transferred to the night shift! You aren't the first young lad that Adam Colne has put my way. He daren't refuse me or *he'd* be given to my son instead!

From the moment that she had demanded I be moved to the night shift, her intention had been to feed me to her son.

'Why don't you make it easy for yourself?' Netty cried. 'Just walk down the steps and get it over with. The pain won't last long!'

I was too terrified to reply. But I still had hope. She was just a ghost and although she could scare me, Netty couldn't actually make me do anything. I could still wait at the top of the steps until someone from the day shift came to unlock the door and set me free.

'Do we have to do it the hard way? Do I have to drag you down the steps?'

'You're just a ghost!' I shouted, my knees trembling. 'You have no substance. You can't drag me anywhere!'

'Oh! Can't I, boy? You don't know very much about ghosts, do you? Who do you think turned the key and locked you in here?'

Netty moved closer and stretched out her left hand towards me until her ghostly fingers were touching my neck. I could actually feel her cold fingertips! Then there was a sudden tug at the collar of my shirt and for a moment I lost my balance. I tottered at the top of the steps and almost pitched forward into the waiting talons of the abhuman. It was straining against the chain again, slaverling in anticipation of eating my flesh and drinking my blood.

But somehow I managed to remain upright and, once more, pressed myself back against the door.

‘You’re stronger than you look, boy!’ Netty said. ‘Not to worry. It’s easy enough to summon up a little help. There are plenty here that owe me big favours. Either that or they’re scared of displeasing me. Even a fellow ghost can be hurt by someone like me! The ghost of a witch is very rare but also very powerful!’

Long-Neck Netty began to mutter under her breath and the air instantly became very cold. Suddenly there were other presences moving up out of the darkness of the Witch Well, each surrounded by a nimbus of baleful yellow light.

Some crawled up the steps towards me with heavy ponderous intent; others soared up into the air above the abhuman and circled at great speed making me dizzy just to look at them. They were hideous and misshapen, with teeth like needles and long matted hair trailing behind as they flew. Round and round they whirled, shrieking loud enough to burst my eardrums. Then they began to tug at my clothes and pinch my skin with their sharp fingernails.

I fought to keep my balance but the castle ghosts were relentless, and their attempts to tug me down the stone steps went on and on whilst Netty grinned at me and her son drooled in anticipation of the feast to come.

But I was determined to survive. I just had to hang on for a few hours. Help would eventually arrive. I could do it!

Never give up! I told myself. *Never give up!*

All that happened a long time ago and my memories of that terrible experience have now faded somewhat. I’ve walked the corridors of the castle for many years and I’ve got used to the ghosts, so most of them don’t scare me that much any more. But I always stay away from the Witch Well; it still doesn’t do to get too close to Long-Neck Netty and her abhuman son.

Guards come and go. Adam Colne has now retired and his son has taken his place. It seems to be a family tradition. Four generations of Colnes have guarded the Witch Well. No doubt I'll still be around when Adam's grandson takes over. I'll be here as long as the walls of the castle still stand. I know my place in the scheme of things.

Because now I'm one of the castle ghosts.