



TALES OF THE WONDER CLUB

(VOL. 1-3) (ANNOTATED)

M. Y. HALIDOM

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Tales of the Wonder Club (Vol. 1-3) (Annotated)

Enriched Edition. Occult, Horror & Supernatural
Stories

Illustrator: John Jellicoe, Val Prince

*This **enriched edition** has been carefully crafted to add
value to your reading experience.*

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Ada Ravelby

Edited and published by e-artnow, 2021

EAN: 4066338128416

Table of Contents

[Tales of the Wonder Club \(Vol. 1-3\).](#)

[Memorable Quotes](#)

Tales of the Wonder Club (Vol. 1-3) (Annotated)

[Main Table of Contents](#)

[Volume 1](#)

[Volume 2](#)

[Volume 3](#)

Volume 1

[Table of Contents](#)

[Introduction.](#)

[Chapter I.](#)

[Chapter II.](#)

[Chapter III.](#)

[Chapter IV.](#)

[Chapter V.](#)

[Chapter VI.](#)

[Chapter VII.](#)

[Chapter VIII.](#)

[Chapter IX.](#)

[Chapter X.](#)

[Chapter XI.](#)

INTRODUCTION.

[Table of Contents](#)

A Peep at the Wonder Club.

Towards the close of the last century there stood in one of the Midland counties of England, in the centre of two cross-roads, a venerable hostelry, built in the reign of Elizabeth, and known by the sign of "Ye Headless Lady." Its ancient gables were shaded by luxuriant elms and beech trees. The woodwork of the building and its weather-stained walls of brick were partially overgrown with thick ivy, while its high, dingy-red roof was tinted with every variety of lichen. The windows were narrow, and the framework heavy, as is usual in houses of that period.

The host of this establishment, one Jack Hearty, was one of the old school of landlords—robust, jovial, and never above his business. His fathers had owned the inn before him, and "he never wished to be a better man than his father, nor a worse either, for the matter of that," as he would say. All day long, when not engaged with his customers indoors, he was to be seen at the door of his inn, with his apron girt around him, and a "yard of clay" at his lips, straining his eyes down the long cross-roads for the first glimpse of a customer.

Often after gazing long and intently into the distance he would turn back with a sigh, knock the ashes from his pipe, refill it, take a deep draught of his own home-brewed ale, then, if none of his customers required anything, and the affairs of his household permitted it, he would sally out again. This time, perhaps, his eyes would be greeted by the sight of a solitary wayfarer, or, better still, the stage-coach.

Then it was that the honest landlord's face would brighten up, as it was certain to bring him some of the "big-wigs" from town. He would rub his hands and chuckle, while Dame Hearty would begin to bustle about to welcome the fresh arrivals. It was not often, however, that the "Headless Lady" was entirely deserted.

A small clique or brotherhood, known as "The Wonder Club," had been nightly in the habit of assembling here for years, and this served to bring grist to the mill. Some of the eminent men from the neighbouring village, among whom were the doctor, the lawyer, an antiquary, an analytical chemist, and others, had formed among themselves a club, which was to consist only of very choice spirits, like themselves, and if any guest were introduced among them, it was only to be with a letter of introduction and the full consent of all parties. By these strict rules they hoped to keep the club select. A room at the inn was set apart for them, into which no one not belonging to the club ever presumed to enter, unless it was the landlord, who would be called every now and then to replenish the bowl, and whom sometimes the guests of the club would "draw out," as it was whispered in the village that the landlord of the "Headless Lady" knew a rare lot of stories, he did; also how to tell 'em, too, my word! but these he generally reserved for his more intimate customers. One strict law of the club that we have not yet mentioned was that no guest invited was to be a "business man." Should a commercial traveller ever have the hardihood to enter the sacred precincts of the club, he was assailed with a battery of glances from the members that must have completely cowed him, unless he were a man of more than usual strength of nerve; but as this rarely happened, all such outward manifestations of contempt were kept within due bounds. Business was, of course, tabooed; even politics were only admitted on sufferance and by a special permission of the chairman.

There was one evening in the year, however, when the chairman never granted any such permission, and that was on the anniversary of the founding of the club. On this evening such subjects as business and politics would have been cried down, and the daring introducer of the obnoxious themes would have been condemned to drink a cup of cold water on his bended knees by way of expiating his offence. No subjects of public or private interest were tolerated on this evening, or, indeed, on any other. The chief delight of this club was to tell or to listen to stories which were all more or less of the marvellous class, and which each took it by turn to relate to the rest, the strictest silence and order being preserved during the recital. The evening that we are about to describe to the reader was the tenth anniversary of the founding of the club. This was a very grand event. For any one of its members or guests, whether married or single, to have been absent, on this occasion would have been little less than an insult to the rest. Let us try to give our readers a glimpse of the club room and its guests on this memorable evening.

Imagine, then, a large room with low ceiling and walls of dark oak panel, a large old-fashioned fireplace with dogs, and a Yule log blazing on the hearth. The curtains are old and embroidered, and closely drawn. The room is well lighted, and in the middle is a long table, at which, through a cloud of tobacco smoke, a party of nine—all lords of the creation—may be discovered. A bowl of punch is in the centre of the table, at which every now and then each guest replenishes his glass. Mr. Oldstone, the antiquary, has been elected chairman. Watch with what dignity he fills his post of honour. Look! he rises and thumps the table. He is going to make a speech. The strictest silence reigns; you might hear a pin drop.

"Gentlemen," began the worthy chairman, after one or two preliminary "hems," "it is with feelings of mixed pride and pleasure that I feel myself called upon to-night to preside at this most honourable meeting." (Hear, hear!) The chairman resumed, "This is the tenth anniversary of our club of choice spirits (cheers), and so shamefully nicknamed by our enemies 'The Morbid Club.' (Groans.) Irritated at our exclusiveness, and envious at the reports of the superior talent that circulates nightly at our table, and which bursts into a halo of genius on our great saturnalias, what wonder, gentlemen, if the worthy members of our select club should make enemies out of their own circle? Only 'birds of a feather flock together,' and perhaps the contempt of our enemies is the best compliment they can pay us." (Hear, hear! and various shouts and yells of delight, amid clapping of hands, stamping, and rattling of glasses.) Here the chairman paused to take breath, and then, after a preliminary sip at his glass of punch, proceeded.

"Gentlemen, I feel duly sensible of the honour conferred upon me this evening in being selected to preside at our meeting on this very important occasion, an honour which I feel unable to support, and for which I feel my abilities so inadequate. (No, no!) Gentlemen, we are a company of nine this evening, the number of the muses—the omen is auspicious. I see around me faces that were present at the inauguration of our club, ten years ago, though others, alas! have gone to their long rest." Here the speaker was visibly moved, and passed his hand over his eyes to wipe away an incipient tear. Then, recovering himself, "Need I proceed, gentlemen? Need I trespass longer upon the time and patience of guests so illustrious? (Yes, yes!) Then, gentlemen," continued the speaker, "I would but detain you one moment longer, to propose the following toast, to be drunk with three times three. (Hear, hear!) 'Long live the "Wonder Club," and all its choice members.'" Here the

president, at the conclusion of his speech, held a bumper above his head, and repeated the toast with the rest of the company, with a "Hip, hip, hip, hurrah!" "May their brains be as fertile as the plains of Elysium, and may the fame of the 'Wonder Club' spread to the ends of the earth." This sentiment was followed by a burst of applause.

In the midst of the stamping, cheering, and rattling of glasses that ensued a knock was heard at the door. Who could it be? The landlord? It was not his wont to disturb the club for a trifle. He only made his appearance when called for. What was it? Was the inn on fire? Who could venture to disturb the solemn meeting of the "Wonder Club" on their tenth anniversary? One of the members rose from his seat and opened the door ajar, still holding the handle in his hand.

"Who is it? What do you want at this hour?" he asked.

"I beg pardon, gentlemen," said the voice of the honest landlord without, "for disturbing the company; but a gentleman has just brought a letter for the chairman, and I thought it *might* be important. Leastways, I thought it wouldn't be much harm to deliver it at once. The gentleman has sent in his card. Excuse the interruption, sirs; I hope no offence."

The letter was delivered to Mr. Oldstone. He glanced at the card.

"What, a visitor!" he said; "and at this time of night. Let me tell you, landlord—ahem—that this is a most unwarrantable infringement of—er—er—of the rules laid down by—er—eh? Stay, what have we here? Excuse me, gentlemen, while I break the seal. Ha! from my old friend Rustcoin. You

remember him, gentlemen—my brother antiquary, formerly a member of our club. He writes from Rome:

"My dear Friend—I dare say you are surprised to hear from me again, after my long silence. The fact is that I had put off writing to you, having some time ago formed a resolution of returning to England, when I hoped to surprise you by suddenly appearing unexpectedly in time for the tenth anniversary of the inauguration of our club. Certain affairs, however, have prevented me from being present myself in the flesh, but I beg to introduce to your notice my young friend, Mr. Vandyke McGuilp, an artist who has for some time past been prosecuting his studies here in Rome. He is a young man of talent and genius, possessing a great fund of stories of the marvellous and supernatural order, such as your club particularly prides itself on. He is quite one of our sort, and you would be doing me a great favour to introduce him to the rest of the members. If he could arrive in time for your grand saturnalia, I should be doubly pleased.—Your old friend,

"Charles Rustcoin."

"Well, gentlemen," said the president, "what do you say to that? Shall the neophyte be admitted? You see, he is not a commercial traveller, nor a business man, but an artist; one of those restless strivers after the ideal. A traveller, too—a man full of stories, like one of us. What do you say—shall he be admitted?"

The guests gave an unanimous consent, and the next moment our host ushered the stranger into the club-room. All eyes were directed towards the stranger. He was a young man, bordering on thirty, about the middle height, who, contrary to the custom of the period, wore his own hair, which at that time was considered extremely vulgar. He

wore a slouch hat instead of the usual three-cornered shape, and an Italian cloak thrown over the left shoulder.

He doffed his hat with dignity and courtesy as he entered the apartment, and after shaking the snow from his cloak (for it had been snowing hard without that night, being in December), he handed cloak and hat to the landlord and accepted the offer of a chair that Mr. Oldstone had placed for him near the fire.

"Here! mine host," shouted Mr. Oldstone, "bring another log, and see that you make this gentleman comfortable to-night, for I see without asking him any questions that he is one of our set."

"Ay, ay, sir," said the landlord, who was just leaving the room. "Never fear, sir, I'll see to the gentleman's wants, and my old woman will warm the bed, for it's a nasty night to be out in. My blessed eyes, how it snows! The gentleman must have had pressing business with you, sir, to bring him out here such a night as this."

"No, my good host," replied the artist; "nothing more than a desire to be present at the tenth anniversary of the club that I have heard so much about."

The host looked astonished, and the guests felt flattered. The landlord's respect for the members of the club was augmented considerably.

"Well, well; to think of that, now," he muttered to himself. "To think that this gentleman should trouble himself to come from who knows how far off, just to be present at the tenth anniversary of *our* club, and on such a night as this, too."

"By the by, Mr. Hearty," said the new comer to the landlord: "I believe that's your name, is it not?"

"The same, sir; Jack Hearty, at your service, sir."

"Well, then, Jack Hearty, I have just come from foreign parts, where I have left an old customer of yours; one Mr. Rustcoin, a great friend of Mr. Oldstone's. Do you recollect him?"

"*Recollect* him!" exclaimed the landlord. "Ay, indeed, sir, do I; a pleasanter gentleman over his bottle of port or over his bowl of punch hasn't crossed my threshold since he left it. Many's the good yarn we would have together. I hope you left him very well, sir?"

"In excellent health, thank you, Jack," said the stranger. "He desired to be remembered to you."

"Thank you, sir," said the host.

"Yes; those slippers will do," said the new guest.

"Draw near to the table, my friend," said Mr. Oldstone, "for I must introduce you to the other members and guests here to-night."

"My friends," said the chairman, "this gentleman is Mr. Vandyke McGuilp, an artist from Rome, great friend of my old chum Rustcoin, whom most of you knew. Mr. McGuilp, this gentleman on my right is Mr. Hardcase, the lawyer, who will be the first to relate a story to-night. On his right is Dr. Bleedem, one of our celebrated physicians; next to him is Mr. Cyanite, professor of geology, and then comes Mr. Blackdeed, one of our eminent tragedians; next to him is Mr. Parnassus, a young poet of great promise; after him is Mr. Crucible, analytical chemist, one of the oldest members of our club; next to him, as guest to-night, is Captain Toughyarn, commander of Her Majesty's good ship the *Dreadnought*; then, next door neighbour to yourself is Mr. Jollytoast, celebrated low comedian."

The new visitor bowed to each guest at the table with urbanity, and the guests returned the salute cordially.

"Well, gentlemen," began the president, "what do you say to a bumper to the health of our new guest?"

"Hear, hear!" cried the guests, unanimously.

Each filled up his glass from the punch-bowl, and our artist's health was drunk with cheers, to which he responded in a short and modest speech. (Applause.)

"And now, Mr. Hardcase," said the chairman, after the formalities were gone through, "I think it was arranged that you should tell the first story. I hope you have one ready. I am anxious for my young friend to hear a specimen of our far-famed recitals. In this club," said Mr. Oldstone, addressing the artist, "we always esteem those stories the highest that are true, and especially if they are facts coming under the experience of the relater. What sort of story may we expect from you to-night, Mr. Hardcase?"

"The story I intended to start the club with to-night is one that I myself took part in in my younger days, and which, although I never related to any of the club before, I have been upon the point of relating a hundred times, when I have been invariably interrupted by someone else who had some other tale to relate. The story I have in store for you this evening, gentlemen, I propose to entitle 'The Phantom Flea.'"

"Ha, Bravo!" laughed the guests. "The Phantom Flea! Ha! ha! ha!"

"I assure you, gentlemen," said the lawyer, gravely, "that the narrative I am about to relate is not one to provoke mirth. It is of a solemn character, I can promise you. No one

felt less inclined to laugh than I did when I was reluctantly compelled to take part in this tragedy. Though by no means a timid man, I, nevertheless, experienced a sort of cold shiver all down my back when——"

"Exactly so," said the doctor.

"And each particular hair to stand on end like quills upon the fretful porcupine," quoted Mr. Blackdeed, the tragedian.

"Belay that," roared Captain Toughyarn, from the depths of his stentorian lungs, "and make room on board for the 'Phantom Flea.'"

"Bedad, and sure I feel myself itching all over alriddy," broke in Mr. Jollytoast, assuming an Irish brogue, and scratching himself.

"Order, order! Chair, chair!" called out other guests.

"Silence! gentlemen," said Mr. Oldstone, with authority, thumping on the table; "the story is just about to commence."

"The performance is just a-goin' to begin," broke in the incorrigible little comedian, assuming the air of a showman. "Valk up, valk up, ladies and gentlemen."

"Hush! Mr. Jollytoast," said the antiquary. "Hush! gentlemen, for the 'Phantom Flea.'"

"Tremulous music, lights half down," muttered the tragedian; but he was instantly silenced by the chairman.

Mr. Oldstone gave one final authoritative thump on the table, and glanced severely at all the guests. The silence that ensued was awful, while Mr. Hardcase, after a sip at his

glass and a puff at his long churchwarden, began his story in the following manner:



CHAPTER I.

[Table of Contents](#)

The Phantom Flea.—The Lawyer's Story.[1](#)

One morning, many years ago, whilst sitting idly in my chambers in town, I received a letter from Baron—— to come down for a few days to his country seat in——shire. It was on business he wanted me; he had got involved in some quarrel. The case was about to be brought before the court, and the Baron wanted a legal adviser.

Having heard much of my abilities, as he said, he thought he could not do better than write to me at once. He regretted that business would prevent him from being at the Hall on my arrival, but he hoped to return home some time the next day. In the meantime he had told his housekeeper to make up a bed for me at the Hall, and had left open his bookcase, lest the time might hang heavy on my hands.

Glad of an excuse to leave town, as it was getting very hot and I had nothing to do, I took the stage, and towards the middle of the next day found myself in front of the Baron's country seat.

It was a fine, stately mansion, surrounded by a moat. I crossed the drawbridge, and inquired whether the Baron was at home. A respectable matron answered the door. She replied in the negative to my question.

Then, asking if I were Mr. Hardcase, the lawyer, and learning that I was, she said "The Baron left word that he would be at home some time to-morrow, or the day after for certain;

that in the meantime you were to make yourself quite at home, sir."

"Oh, very well," said I; "I am rather tired just at present. Leave me here among the Baron's books. When I have sufficiently rested I should like to look over the house. It seems a curious old place."

"Yes, sir, it is a *very* old place," said the housekeeper. "But wouldn't you like to take a little refreshment first?"

Being then past one o'clock, and having had but a hurried breakfast, I thanked her and said I thought I could manage a little light refreshment. She then left me alone, but soon returned with a tray containing what seemed to be the fag end of a sumptuous banquet. There was venison pasty, a boiled leg of turkey, some ham, vegetables, bread and cheese, salad, raspberry and currant tart, a bottle of good old crusted port, some sherry, Burgundy, etc.

Having done justice to this light repast, I rang the bell for the things to be cleared away; after which I took down a great number of volumes from the bookcase, and throwing myself into an easy-chair, I deposited the books in a heap upon the floor, and began examining their titles, and occasionally reading a passage here and there when it interested me.

The first book I laid hands on was "Fox's Book of Martyrs," with plates showing the various modes of torture by which the early Christians were put to death. I passed on to the next. This was a book of Chinese punishments, with Chinese illustrations. I opened the book at a plate of a man being skinned alive.

Having little taste for these sort of horrors, I closed the book and passed on to the next. The third book was a description

of celebrated executions, with a plate as frontispiece of a man being hanged, drawn, and quartered. "The Baron seems fond of the horrible," I thought, and I took up another. This was on bull-baiting, cock-fighting, and other cruel sports. Another was a book on poisons. A sixth, on the various modes of self-defence. A seventh, a book on field sports. I put down the book for a moment and sat musing, trying to imagine to myself what manner of man the Baron might be. I gazed round the room, and noticed that it was hung round by trophies of the chase—stags' antlers, foxes' brushes, intermingled with guns, powder-flasks, etc. Here and there were hung half suits of armour, belonging, no doubt, to the Baron's ancestors.

Then, from musing I fell into a dose, and dreamed of the wild hunter and all sorts of curious and horrible things.

On awaking I reflected that I had not been over the house, so I went in search of the housekeeper, who asked me if I would like to see the picture gallery. Nothing loth, I followed my guide, who pointed me out the portraits of the present Baron's ancestors for I know not how many generations back.

The portrait of the present Baron was not amongst them. I noticed a strong family likeness running through all of the portraits, and I wondered if the Baron inherited the likeness. I asked the housekeeper, and she assured me that he did in a very striking degree. On leaving the gallery, I passed through long oaken corridors, through immense chambers hung with tapestry, on which were depicted either battles or scenes of the chase.

"The Baron inherits the tastes of his ancestors, it would appear," I said to the matron.

"Ah! sir," said she, with a sigh, and tried to force a smile, but it was a bitter one.

I took little notice of her expression at the time, and soon after left her, to stroll about in the garden. It was a spacious one, laid out in good taste. There were terraces, broad velvet lawns, cedars of Lebanon, avenues of yew trees, glimpses of distant hills, flower beds, luxuriant with every variety of the choicest flowers. There were broad walks and serpentine paths, oaks, beeches, elms; a lake with an island in the middle, which was reached by a rustic bridge; weeping-willows, summer-houses, and everything that could be desired. I strolled about the garden, struck with admiration every step I took at the exquisite taste with which everything was carried out, and wondered how it was that the same mind which took such delight in the horrible should possess such exquisite refinement of taste in the planning of his garden.

I doubted the garden being the result of the Baron's own taste, nor was I mistaken, as I afterwards ascertained from the housekeeper. I strolled back towards the house, which I examined carefully over for the second time, then strolled out again into the garden, and so on till supper, which I took about nine o'clock.

Feeling rather lonely, I invited Mrs. Wharton, the housekeeper, to keep me company during my solitary meal. She sat down opposite to me as I commenced devouring my cold fowl and tongue, and helped myself to a glass of the Baron's ale. She was an agreeable old lady, and seemed to have known better days.

"This is a curious old place," I began. "Have you any rats here?"

"No, sir, none now," answered the matron.

"Nor bugs?"

"No."

"Nor fleas?"

"No, sir—that is to say, only one," and her face assumed a solemn expression.

"Only *one*!" I exclaimed, laughing.

"Yes, sir," said she, gravely—"only the *Phantom*; only the *Baron*."

"*Phantom! Baron!*" I exclaimed, bewildered. "Ah, you have a ghost story in the family, I see; but I don't think you quite understood my question," I said. "I did not inquire about phantoms, or barons; my question referred simply to fleas."

"Yes, yes; I perfectly understand, sir," replied the matron; "and I repeat that the *phantom flea* is the only flea that inhabits this mansion."

"*The Phantom Flea!*" Here I exploded. "Well, of all the odd superstitions I ever heard of, that beats them all. Really, my good woman, you should *not*—you should not, indeed, believe in such trash."

"Ah, sir," replied the matron, "it is plain to see that you are a stranger in these parts. Is it possible you have never heard of the 'Baron's flea?'"

"Never in all my life before, I assure you, my good woman," I replied; "but, as it is a thing apparently well known, I should like to hear the particulars of the case."

"Well, sir," began the housekeeper, "you must know that some two hundred years or so back one of the Baron's ancestors, one Sir Ralph—— inhabited this mansion. The room that you will sleep in to-night was his room; the self same bed and furniture that you saw this morning were there in his time. He was not a man generally liked by those around him; in fact, it would not be too much to say that he was universally hated. No one could remember any good act or kind word of the Baron's. He was cruel, bloodthirsty, tyrannical, avaricious, ambitious, and sensual. From early youth he was always allowed to have his own way, and when he came into power he was the scourge of the neighbourhood.

"There was no restraining his cruelty and malignity. Anyone who dared oppose himself to his will was put to death. He thought no more of taking the life of a peasant than one would in wringing the neck of a fowl. Maidens were carried off with impunity, and sometimes murdered; men were found stabbed or mangled to death by the Baron's hounds; cottages were set fire to, and their inhabitants driven out to seek refuge where they could; robberies were committed, churches pillaged, convents sacked, monks driven out and occasionally burnt alive for pastime; nuns carried off by ruffians to the Baron's hall; in short, every species of outrage and plunder conceivable. Such a state of affairs could not endure for ever. It gave rise to a rebellion. The long-oppressed people would suffer it no longer, and rose to a man. They would fain have broken into the Baron's hall, and have torn him limb from limb; but the Baron's myrmidons were powerful and well armed; and, cutting their way through the crowd with the Baron at their head, spared neither man, woman, nor child.

"The mob, driven back, were subdued for a time; but the law interfered, though with little better success; for the first

time that constables were sent to arrest the Baron, he sent them back again to those who sent them with their noses and ears slit. Such an insult as this against the servants of the law could not be stood any longer. Grand preparations were made for the immediate arrest of the Baron and his ruffians, with an order to raze his castle to the ground, which would most assuredly have been carried into effect, had not the sudden death of the Baron rendered such measures unnecessary.

"The Baron's death was mysterious. Some say he made away with himself, rather than fall into the hands of justice. Others assert that he was struck by lightning as a punishment for his many crimes. Others, that he was killed in a fray. But the story most current is, that a man introduced himself into the Baron's household as servant, whose bride the Baron had dishonoured, and avenged himself by putting an end to the Baron's life by poison.

"However this was, testimony goes much to prove that the Baron was found dead in his bed. How long he took dying is uncertain, but tradition tells that his last moments were horrible. He refused to see a father confessor, and died in his sins.

"He was succeeded by his son, a peaceful and studious youth, much beloved by the people, who did not seem to inherit a drop of the old Baron's blood. In some of his later descendants, however, the spirit of the old Baron seemed to reign again. When the death of the Baron was made known, great rejoicings manifested themselves in the neighbourhood. Everyone wanted to know the particulars of the Baron's mysterious end. Strange stories were set afloat, many of which are believed to this day. But one thing universally believed is, that, as a punishment for his sins, the Baron's spirit is condemned to inhabit the form of a flea

of uncommon size, which sucks the blood of all strangers who sleep in that bed. His power, however, is confined to that chamber. Other rooms are left unmolested. The marks left on the body by the bite of this fell insect are extremely large, being about the size of a wen, and the pain endures for a considerable time. I can speak from experience, for I have been bitten myself. The flea may be seen by anyone who chooses to sleep in that room. One night spent in that chamber will be enough to convince any unbeliever of the truth of my assertion.

"Many and futile have been the attempts to catch this obnoxious insect. It eludes all chase[19]. It was not for many years after the Baron's death, and until many of the occupants of that chamber had been repeatedly bitten, and all attempts to capture the offensive creature had been abandoned in despair, that the belief that the Baron's spirit inhabited its fell body grew firmly rooted in the minds of the surrounding gentry.

"If, after what I have related to you, sir, you feel inclined to change your room, I shall have much pleasure in making you up a bed in another chamber, although it is against the Baron's orders; for, knowing what a wretched night you *must* spend within that haunted chamber, I feel a compassion for you, sir, and all strangers that the Baron cruelly hands over to the spirit of his wicked ancestor."

"On the contrary, Mrs. Wharton," I said, "I have the greatest curiosity to encounter this wonderful flea. Your conversation has been most interesting, and as it is now past ten o'clock, I don't care how soon I make his aristocratic acquaintance."

"Do as you please, sir," said Mrs. Wharton, "but if you should feel uncomfortable in the night, you've but to knock

at my door, the next room to yours, and I will gladly make you up a bed in No. 12."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Wharton; I am much obliged to you all the same. I have no doubt that the Baron and I will be capital friends."

"Well, sir, I wish you a pleasant night of it, I am sure," said the housekeeper, as she handed me a candle. "Good-night, sir."

"Good-night, Mrs. Wharton."

I walked up stairs to the haunted chamber. Having reached the landing, I entered my room and locked myself in for the night. In spite of my forced levity, I must admit that I felt a certain feeling of awe come over me upon entering the chamber once occupied by the author of so many crimes. I could not but think that Mrs. Wharton herself thoroughly believed in what seemed to me a popular superstition, but the more I reflected on what she had told me of the Baron's crimes, the less ludicrous did the idea of the Baron's metempsychosis appear to me.

What, after all, was there ridiculous in a flea more than in any other hideous creature? The feeling of the ludicrous in my mind was supplanted by one of horror. "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy," I muttered. I could not make up my mind to go to rest immediately. In fact, I did not feel in the least sleepy. I busied myself in examining the room minutely to see if there were any trap-door or sliding panel; and, tapping all the walls, expected every moment to touch some spring and for some panel to fly back, discovering a secret staircase. I examined the bed and under the bed, but could discover nothing. The Baron's portrait hung over the mantelpiece. I

of Friends," a genuine quaker of the true old fashioned stamp, long since extinct. He was in earnest discourse with the porter, and as I passed him I caught these words, uttered in tones deliberate and slow, as one who has the whole day before him, and sees no necessity for hurry, and which contrasted strangely with the bustle and confusion going on around him.

"Prithee, friend, canst thou direct me to the ancient hostel of the 'Headless Lady'?"

"The *what?* The 'Eadless Lady.' No, sir. There ain't no public 'ouse about 'ere of that name," was the porter's curt reply. "But if it's a glass of *hale* you want, sir, there's the '*Hangel* and the *Heagle*,' the '*Helephant* and *Castle*,' and the——"

"Doubtless, friend," interrupted the reverend individual, "there are enough and to spare of those abominations, those dens of iniquity that the lost sheep of the house of Israel denominate public houses; but know, friend, that it is not ale I seek, seeing that I am a follower of one Rechab, who, as doubtless thou wilt have read in Holy Writ, indulged neither in wine nor strong drink."

The porter's face throughout this sententious speech was a study. His eyes and mouth gradually opened till they reached their utmost limit. Then suddenly recollecting that his manner might appear rude, he broke in with:

"Well, sir, if you should prefer a good rump steak and a cup of tea, I could recommend——"

"Verily, friend," again interrupted the quaker, "thou comprehendest me not, for neither doth my soul hanker after the fleshpots of Egypt, but having a taste for antiquarian lore, I would fain revisit that spot of historic

interest once seen in my youth, but of which I have now no clear recollection, namely the hostel of the 'Headless Lady.'"

""Eadless Lady"! "*Eadless Lady*! Why, God bless my soul, sir, where *hever* do you 'ail from? Why, now I come to think of it, I remember to have 'eerd my grandfather speak of it. Lor, sir, it's been burnt down this 'alf a century ago."

"Burnt down!" exclaimed the antiquary, in extreme vexation.

"Yessir," replied the porter, briskly, "burnt down by the landlord hisself, when in his cups, as I've heered say—down to the wery ground. There, sir, is the spot, where I'm p'inting. Yessir, that's where it stood. This here line runs right bang over the wery site of it."

"Bless me!" cried the disappointed quaker in dismay, "and have I left my peaceful home, that I havn't stirred out of for years to hear this? Verily, all is vanity."

Here he would have begun a homily on the evils of intemperance, had not the guard interrupted him with:

"Yessir, I remember to have 'eerd my grandfather say, when I was a kid, on'y so high" (here he lowered the palm of his hand to within a couple of feet of the platform), "as 'ow the 'ouse was 'aunted by the ghost of a nun, as valked about vith 'er 'ead *hunder* 'er *harm*, but that's a long while ago, that is. No, sir, you may depend upon it, there *hain't* no 'eadless ladies valking about now, sir. *Ve* don't believe in 'em nowadays."

With this, he took up a rasping iron bell, which he rang so vigorously that the peaceful quaker was fain to stop his ears and hurry from the spot as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Poor old gent," muttered the porter, to himself, as he looked after him, "'e *hain't hup* to date, no 'ow."

Finis.

Memorable Quotes

[Table of Contents](#)

[1q](#) "It eludes all chase"

[2q](#) "I exist but in such dreams, and my waking life is to me but a nightmare"

[3q](#) "Could it be fancy?"

[4q](#) "we had nothing to try our tempers"

[5q](#) "Whatever hardships she might have to encounter she made up her mind were for her good"

[6q](#) "nature will have her own way"

[7q](#) "Are we free agents, or are we not?"

[8q](#) "It had been the dream of my youth to visit the eternal city"

[9q](#) "there is nothing like a good story to beguile the time in weather like this"

[10q](#) "a malignant spirit, whose chief delight seems to be to strike terror into the house"

[11q](#) "To breathe into it the breath of life, Helen"

[12q](#) "the love of the marvellous"

[13q](#) "reason at length admitted into some share of man's being"