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THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TOM PILE

IAN BECK

Classified Information

Cpl. Comedy Bellows Hill

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**THE
DISAPPEARANCE
OF TOM PILE
IAN BECK**

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About the Book

'I'm from this village. I've lived here all my life . . .' His voice trailed off.

'All your life, you say. But,' I pointed out, 'the warden here doesn't know you at all, and he knows everyone in this village and hereabouts.'

'Well, I don't know him,' the boy said, shaking his head wildly. 'I don't know anything or anyone any more.'

On a bitterly cold night in 1900, a young boy disappears from the forest near the quiet village of Litton Cheney. He is never found, but the man he was with claims he was snatched by angels.

Forty years later, mysterious lights are spotted above Litton Cheney, and Corporal Jack Carmody is sent to investigate. The villagers suspect German bombers overhead, but Carmody works for a secret government department that delves into the strange, the supernatural and the unexplained, and knows there's something far more intriguing going on. And when a terrified boy appears in the graveyard, convinced it's the year 1900, it's up to Carmody and his boss - the charismatic Captain Holloway - to uncover the truth.

For Michael and Iris Holloway

PROLOGUE

'Tell us your story,' the voices said. 'We want to hear your story - all of it . . .'

That was when I started speaking out loud to the night stars all around me, and to the music, the voices in my head. They said, 'That's it. Go on . . . go on . . . tell us, tell us all . . .'

My mother died when I was seven. I remember so clearly the simple coffin box in our little cottage parlour. It lay there closed and screwed down, resting on trestles, and even then I knew that she was inside it. My father sat beside it with his head bowed, his mug of tea resting on the lid. The parlour was almost dark, with just a single lit tallow candle on the mantel, and still he sat there quietly all night.

She was buried in February - on St Valentine's Day, to be exact. The dark earth was tamped down hard and wet. The grave was dressed with greenery and one or two hothouse blooms from the Rectory. Mr Woolard had cut the grave and Mr Woolard's son had made the coffin. There was no stone or marker as yet, only the few pale flowers under the sleet and the ivy.

I stood at the grave while the Woolards lowered the coffin down on wide hessian straps. My father was standing at the graveside in his black Sunday best, one hand on my shoulder. He was the first to throw in some of the wet earth and flowers from the heap by the open grave. I looked around at the expectant faces: the Reverend Stone, Miss Gladwyn, my uncle and aunt, and then my father, who was hatless in the cold. His beard and side whiskers were grey,

and his teeth were clamped together, making his cheeks look hollow. His hair was whipped by the wind that blew across Gallows Hill, where we would see the lights together for the first time, years from that night . . .

The Dorchester Weekly Courier & Advertiser

Friday 25th July 1890

Reports of shooting stars, falling meteors and unusual lights in the sky have been made from various towns and villages in the west of the county during the last week. The director of the County Historical and Archaeological Museum at Dorchester, Hector Brewer Esq., announced that he would be happy to receive and examine any pieces of fallen meteorite material that may be found at or near the area of the sightings. Falling stars were observed near the villages of Swyre, Puncknowle, Burton Bradstock, and on Gallows Hill at Litton Cheney. The sightings were reported over three nights, and alarm was caused when some residents reported sightings of what were described by some as 'angels' on Gallows Hill itself and in the surrounding landscape. However, no evidence of any such manifestation has been forthcoming.

Several of the witnesses have been interviewed by a representative of the London Scientific, Philosophical and Spiritual Society, a Dr Frobisher, who has been able to draw no firm conclusion from his findings.

He stated that, 'In such cases there can sometimes be in effect a kind of mass delusion or hysteria which can lead perfectly sane, level-headed and practical country people to conclude that they have seen supernatural apparitions such as ghosts, will-o-the-wisps and even serious religious manifestations such as sacred saints and angels and the like. In my own mind I am satisfied that what the witnesses observed was no more than a series of optical illusions brought on by the effects of the apparently unusually bright lights arising from the local meteor activity. In rural areas such events have throughout history been interpreted as signs and omens, and ideally we should not allow ourselves to be too troubled by them in our more scientific and rational age.'

Cover Note

I don't want to waste too much of your valuable time by telling you all about myself. I am not very important. You don't need to know much about me personally. I will simply say that I did something very secret during the Second World War. All that was, of course, some twenty-four years ago now, although the results of our work are still very much with us.

What I did was rightly categorized as secret, for I was dealing with the mysterious and the unexplained – it would perhaps be better described as the inexplicable. I was always viewed with suspicion. Some thought I was wasting valuable war resources by looking, as I did almost daily, into reports of odd and unexpected things: sightings and events that were, in the majority of cases, the ravings of the deluded, the drunk and the insane. I was there to thoroughly investigate the five per cent or so of those reports which were not so easily explained away; those strange and deeply troubling events that happen all the time, whether there is a war on or not.

The idea of investigating such things made some of the high-up folk in the War Office very nervous indeed. Some of them found it almost laughable, and said so endlessly in circulated memos. In the end, of course, we were proved right, but our stories have remained secret and classified. The secrecy embargo has finally been lifted; I would suggest this is because the astonishing events of last July have finally made it unnecessary, hence this volume – the first, I hope, of a good few.

I am all too aware, however, that the licence to publish could be revoked at any point, so my concluding dateline below could, in fact, be out of date by the time these words reach the public.

I had actually been conducting these investigations since I graduated from university many years before the war. But when the conflict began, and the threat to our democratic freedom and our very way of life became ever more real, I gained the strong support of the highest authority, in the form of Winston Churchill himself. He was only too aware that in the 1930s the Germans had founded a secret department: the Office of the *Unerklärliche & Übernatürliche*, which roughly translated as the 'Unexplained and the Supernatural'. It was a subject the Nazis and Hitler took very seriously indeed, and Churchill knew that; he was of course unwilling to take the risk that the Axis powers might stumble on an advantage of any kind, however bizarre and remote, that might be denied to us, the Allies.

I was thus allowed to recruit my own small unit, with a very similar aim to our German counterparts. We were known as Department 116 - which was simply the number on our annexe door. We comprised a handful of technicians and research scientists, and one very bright young man from the East End of London. As a child he had shown a kind of genius for recognizing the mathematical patterns behind the seemingly random and disordered. He also had a strong - indeed, an almost uncanny - sense of intuition, which proved very helpful in certain circumstances. His name was Jack Carmody, and he was to become my man in the field, my special investigator; my 'go to' man, if you like. We were given offices close to Churchill in his Citadel and the Admiralty buildings, and more or less left to get on with it.

This, the first of our cases to be published, will be told partly in Jack Carmody's words, because he kept a detailed

journal of our adventures, and partly in my own, because I did too - although of course it was not encouraged by the authorities. Now, in retrospect, I am glad that we did keep such detailed journals. With the help of these, and the other evidence, the whole story of Tom Pile can be told.

I have added in certain previously classified documents: direct transcripts of wire recordings, various intercepted messages and more, which all add their own layers of truth to the narrative. Some of the documents date back to long before the war; before the twentieth century, in fact. Each entry adds another little piece to the strange jigsaw puzzle of past, present and future which makes up Tom Pile's story. These events were so mysterious, and revealed something so huge and potentially dangerous, that they had an effect which went way beyond what might have been expected at the time.

So the roots of this story were laid down long before the war - and not just in these islands, but on the mainland of Europe too, as you will discover. I have tried not to interfere with the original testimonies, some of which I intend to present here in facsimile form. It will be up to the reader to read them carefully in order to see the big picture, which I hope will be revealed as each piece finally falls into place.

M. D. Holloway
(Captain, retired)
Glynde, Sussex

CHAPTER ONE

'Down to darkest Dorset today, then,' Captain Holloway said to me with a friendly wink. I was about to set off and was, you can bet, excited enough about what I might finally find there. Still, a tiny part of me wished I wasn't going away and leaving poor old London. There were too many things I had to leave behind - and who knew for how long? And it was not just that. I would miss the terror and drama of the Blitz. I was worried that, what with the bombs falling, and the destruction of dear old London, which seemed certain in those early days, I might never see the place the same way again. I couldn't let that stop me, though. Fear was a curse, and I wasn't about to give in to it. I could trust my aunt Dolly to look after herself, and she would look out for my own place too. Anyway, there I was, all ready to go. I was kitted out in my very stiff and uncomfortable new uniform, and I felt not only self-conscious, but a bit of a twerp too, to be honest.

'That's right, sir,' I said, looking down the length of my new and very itchy khaki strides (that, by the way, is slang for trousers in these parts).

'You might remember to return a salute to an officer, by the way, Carmody. You may be a pretend soldier and I might be one too, but we must at least play the part for our lords and masters.'

'Yes, sir, sorry, sir,' I said, and brought my hand up beside my forehead in what I hoped was a correct salute, as fast and as smartly as I could without laughing.

'Better,' he said, and he smiled his smile, and I could see that he wasn't taking it all that seriously after all. The

bluster and noise was for the sake of the others who might be listening in the outer office of the Citadel annexe.

‘Now, you’ve got the camera, plenty of special film and everything else?’

‘All packed, sir.’

‘Then good luck. Remember, anything you can get of these lights – the more the better. Of course, you know what else to look out for?’

‘Yes, sir,’ I said, grinning again. ‘An actual live person, if I can manage it.’ Another smart raising of the hand.

‘That’s right, Jack. The real thing, and remember to get into the saluting habit and stay in it. You’re supposed to know how to salute. You’re meant to have gone through all that in basic training.’

‘Right, sir.’

Viktor Prejm, a tame Polish airman who is said to be ‘walking out’ with our general office assistant and copy typist, Miss Greville, was perched, as casually as ever, on the edge of her desk while she tried to work. She was giggling when I reached the office.

‘What’s funny, then, Ruth?’ I said.

‘Nothing funny about you, Jack,’ she said. ‘Mr Prejm here just said he wanted to whisk me away to a romantic hideaway like one of these.’ She gestured to the frosted glass panel to one side of her work area, over which she had taped dozens of picture postcards. There were sunny seaside and cottage scenes and the like, making it her own personal blackout area, shielding her from the worst of the bustle in the big office. ‘Fat chance, I told him,’ she added. ‘I was laughing at his ruddy cheek, that was all.’

‘I was only asking Ruth to file a translation document for me.’

‘Dear Viktor,’ Ruth said. ‘Look, it’s already done. I do know how to file – and I don’t mean my nails. I used to be

an archivist, don't forget. I know my way around all kinds of files.' She smiled.

Viktor raised his hands in mock surrender and shrugged, as if to say, *English girls*, and then gave me an ironically appraising look as I turned to struggle up the stairs and out of our inner sanctum, all crouched over (we have a low ceiling) and weighed down with the army kit bag over my shoulder and an overstuffed army-issue suitcase in each hand.

'Take care now, young man,' he said, helping me up the steps and along the corridor. 'Where are you off to? Somewhere more exotic than I was proposing to take your Miss Greville, I trust?'

'Can't really tell you that, now, can I, Viktor?'

'No, of course not, er, Corporal,' he said, his eyes widening a little as he took in my smart uniform. 'Well, now, look at you. Whatever else you do, just mind out for the girls, looking like that, eh? What would your girlfriend say if she were to find out?' And then he laughed.

I laughed too, but the joke was on me. Unlike Viktor, I didn't have a girlfriend.

It wasn't until I had struggled off the dingy train at Dorchester South and had been standing for a while in the poorly lit, bone-damp, cold station forecourt, waiting for the army truck from Burton Bradstock to come and collect me, that it properly hit home.

I was in the army, and I was in 'darkest Dorset' all right, just as Captain Holloway had said.

Standing there shivering on that late afternoon made me feel homesick for life in the good old smoke. I had no idea how long I was likely to be stuck down here on what might be just another wild-goose chase. We'd had plenty of those to contend with in our time.

There was one tiny saving grace, though, at that moment. The station was near a brewery, and that telltale warm,

malty smell drifted over occasionally on the wind. It was almost as good as standing near Truman's in Brick Lane.

CHAPTER TWO

I have to admit something. There's no getting away from it. I'm a London boy through and through. There were times during those first few quiet days down in the country when the thought of a nice warm picture house - like the Sphere on Tottenham Court Road, or the Rialto on Coventry Street - showing a good old horror picture or a Marx Brothers comedy, and sharing it with a crowd of jumpy, laughing Londoners, was like a vision of heaven itself. After all, the deep dark countryside wasn't meant for everyone, but in the end that wasn't the point. I should at least have brought my travelling telescope with me for those rare clear nights. My army-issue binoculars had to stand in for my stargazing (and by that I don't, of course, mean looking at Miss Greta Garbo), but they just weren't as good.

It's hard to say exactly when everything started for me; hard to date when my path in life was suddenly clear. It was long before I first met up with Captain Holloway, in any case.

I was born in August, so I was always the youngest in my class at the local school. School didn't last long. Not that being the youngest held me back at all, as it is meant to - far from it, in fact. I was always a bit of a whizz. I could read almost anything before I ever went to school. I surprised the teachers with my abilities right away, especially for my age, and with my background. I was part of the dirt-poor but very respectable London working class, and I still am in a way. I'm not saying I was especially proud of it, but I certainly 'wasn't ashamed neither', as my

aunt Dolly would have said, and did say, over and over, to anyone who would listen.

She brought me up on her own, Dolly did. She was my father's sister. Salt of the earth, and a bit more besides. She was fierce in her determination to look after me. I was, after all, her brother's only son. She was fierce too in her ambition to get me properly educated. Dolly had enough drive, pride and loyalty for about ten people. She was a force to be reckoned with.

I never knew my parents. To me, growing up in the streets of Hackney, Aunt Dolly had to be both mother and father. She saw my promise early. She moved heaven and earth and worked the system sideways, backwards and upside down for me. She applied for scholarships. When my abilities really started to show, I was tested and probed and questioned so often it felt normal to me. I suppose it must have been some of the strange things I did when I was very young that alerted her. First there was the thunder, and then there was the lady in grey.



She never tired of talking about the incident with the thunder. Aunt Dolly didn't like thunder. I noticed it once in a storm. There was one of those particularly loud claps of thunder overhead, the kind that almost shake the room, and she went all to pieces. I suppose I was about four years old, and her fear must have made a big impression on me. A year or so later, I was sitting in the back garden with her on a warm afternoon when I suddenly went and stood right in front of her and pressed my hands very tightly over her ears.

'Whatever are you playing at, Jack?' she said.

A moment or two later there was a huge and terrifying clap of thunder overhead. I saved her from hearing it: I just knew it was coming. Even at that age I could read the seemingly random patterns in the sky and the atmosphere.