The Haunted Fireplace - A Halloween tale by James R. Latham

Forward

I have added a time line and a listing of characters in this short story. This is for the reader's reference.

Time line:

1865 – End of the Civil War.
1869 – First meeting of “The Club.”
1879 – Thomas Samuels died.
1880 – The Club was disbanded.
1882 -- Robert Blackwell died.
1899 – My visit to the house.
1920 – Current writing of this tale.

Characters:

Me – The writer of this tale.
Captain Blackwell – The current owner of the country house.
Robert Blackwell – The Grandfather of Captain Blackwell.
Roger Barsteed – the keeper of the lodge where the club met.
Thomas Samuels – The President of the Club.
Mr. Heathroid – Unknown source of a quotation.
Claude Peterson – One of my cousins.

Prolog

Anyone who knows the neighborhoods of the deep South will remember the good-sized country-houses which abound there. Most of them date from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when plantation owners and slave traders were prosperous and labor was cheap. Some of them incorporated bits of older buildings which may have begun life as simple farmhouses or churches of the time. Most of them are now destroyed or in a state of dilapidation which is not unpicturesque, though they would be out of place in the modern South.

Perhaps I ought to have used the past tense even though, at the time of this

writing, it is currently October, 1920 and Woodrow Wilson is in power. After embroiling the nation in the horror of World War I in which 15 million souls lost their life he has now come to the end of his reign. So much for the Progressives. The American military casualties were 325,000 Soldiers, Sailors and Marines. I do not know how many of the country houses have survived the establishment of the “New South” – or whatever that part of the country chooses to call itself now-a-days – and I do not feel tempted to go and see.

The Haunted Fireplace

I am writing of things as they were during almost forty years since the abolition of slavery. This postbellum period brought many changes to the South and some were not entirely happy.

It was during a visit to one of those country houses in the autumn of the year 1899 that the experience which I am about to relate befell me. I can hardly dignify it by the name of adventure but it was still very disquieting.

Having been built prior to the civil war, the house belonged to a family named Blackwell who had inhabited it for several generations. The present owner was a young man, unmarried and in the union army. Naturally he could not spend much of his time there and was glad to rent it out it when he could. It had been taken, along with servants, for one summer by some cousins of mine who lived in Charleston, and it was on their invitation that I was there.

I need not try your patience by attempting to describe it in detail. There was nothing very noteworthy about it except an almost ruinous former church tower at the north-west angle. This was obviously much older than the rest of the house, and we young people thought it ought to contain a ghost. We could not, however, hear of any story to that effect. We explored the tower pretty thoroughly, but found nothing more exciting than a very large quantity of dust and a few bats. We went there once late on a moonlight evening, but even then could not pretend that we saw or heard anything unusual.

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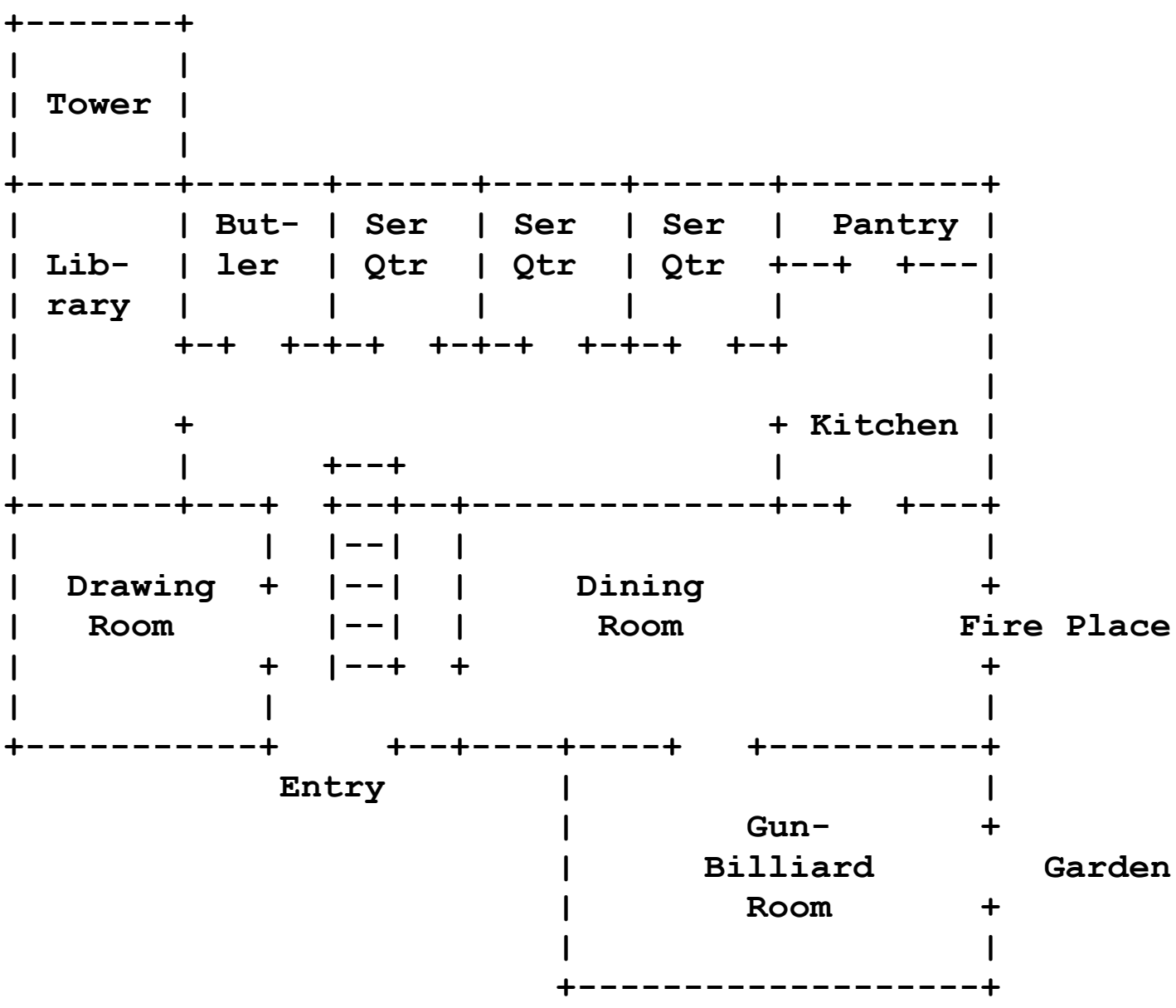
The south side of the house consisted of three large rooms: a drawing-room at the western end, then a dining-room opening out of it and lastly a billiard-room which was also used as a gun-room. Probably, in fact, it had been built as a gun-room and the billiard-table had been added afterwards. It had a door leading into the garden, but there was no access to it from the house except from the dining-room. Here a sketch map that I made of the first floor of the old house.



I have tried to sketch the floor plan of the house with as much accuracy as

possible although I probably have failed. The second floor which I have omitted is exclusively devoted to Bedrooms, baths, closets and a sitting room.

The dining-room had a large table in the center of it which could easily have accommodated twelve people comfortably and more if called upon to do so. It was hung with portraits of bygone Blackwells, who had no doubt played their several parts adequately in their generation. But none of them had reached fame and the pictures were of no outstanding artistic merit. The collection as a whole looked well enough, but was not likely to be of much interest, except to members of the family.

One picture there above the mantle-piece was, however, which did arouse our curiosity. It represented a man of about forty. There was no name or date upon the frame, but the dress was that of the opening years of the eighteenth century. The most remarkable thing about it was the attitude which the sitter had chosen to adopt. He was seated astride of a chair with his arms folded and resting on the top rail of the chair back. His back was towards the spectator, so that his features would have been invisible if he had not been looking over his right shoulder. His face, so far as it could be seen, did not resemble a Blackwell. The upper part suggested considerable intellectual power and the lower part was decidedly not pleasant. He affected a sardonic smile that was the epitome of evil. The whole effect was formidable and bespoke a man who would be a very dangerous enemy.

The execution was not particularly good; in fact the technique suggested an amateur. But it was impossible not to feel that the artist had caught the likeness of his original well, and difficult not to regret that he had done so. We wondered why such a curious picture, which did not look like a family portrait, should be displayed so conspicuously. It looked as if there must be a story of some sort about it.

There was a lodge at the edge of the estate that was the residence of a caretaker and his daughter.

A few days later Captain Blackwell called upon us. He was stationed at Fort Sumter, and having some business to transact in Charlotte very civilly looked in to ask after his tenants' comfort. We ventured to put a question about the curious portrait.

"Yes," he replied at length and said, "it's a fantastic thing, isn't it? Clever in a way though, and I should think a good likeness. But I don't know who it is any more than you do. It isn't one of the family -- you'd guess that, I hope, by looking at it. All I know about it is that my grandfather -- the old boy over there whereupon he pointed to a portrait of the same period which hung exactly opposite on the other side of the room, stuck it up about the time of the union or should I say re-union of the country. I rather think he painted it himself. Anyhow he was so keen about it that he left directions in his will that it was never to be moved. So there it's been ever since. I expect there is a story, if I knew what it was. I believe my grandfather had been pretty wild in his young days. A lot of his generation were dazzled by the French Revolution, y'know. I dare say it looked better at a distance than at close quarters. But while he was still pretty young -- about the turn of the century, I think -- he turned over a new leaf, Model Country Gentleman, Magistrate, Churchwarden, all that sort of thing, y'know, and I believe a really good man into the bargain. Very charitable and so on. Not very hospitable though, by all accounts. In fact during the last years of his life when he was a widower he would hardly see anybody, and I believe was nicknamed The Hermit.“

My cousin Claude Peterson then asked, “So Captain Blackwell you lived in this house during the tenure of this painting?”

“Yes, I remember once when I was a little fellow, about six, I think, I was playing in the dining-room on a winter afternoon. I think the nursery chimney was being swept; anyhow I had been sent downstairs for some reason. It was getting dark -- and something gave me a terrible fright. The funny thing was that I couldn't say what it was and I don't know now. But I think it was something to do with that picture. I ran screaming into the drawing-room where my mother was and though I couldn't tell her what was the matter, I am sure

that she thought it was that. When I had been comforted, my father came in from shooting in the woodland, I think, she began to talk to him very earnestly. I wasn't meant to hear and don't suppose I should have understood much if I had, but I do recollect that she said something to the effect that it couldn't go on and that it wasn't as if this were the first time. And he said that he couldn't do -- whatever it was she wanted him to do. I suppose now she was asking him to have the picture moved, or perhaps to get rid of it outright and he was reminding her of the clause in his grandfather's will. Of course ninety-nine women out of a hundred would see no reason why the wishes of someone who had been dead for more than fifty years should be allowed to interfere with their own. Anyhow, that was the nearest approach to a quarrel which my father and mother ever had, that I can remember. And the picture stayed in its place, as you see."

“I remember that I once asked him about it. He looked very grave and was silent for a minute or two, as if he were making up his mind about something. Then he said, "I'll tell you what I know about it some day, but not just now. You must wait until you are older," and I had to be content with that.”

“Please continue Captain Blackwell,” extorted all my cousins.

“Well both he and my mother died soon afterwards, and I went to live with an uncle on her side because my father had been an only son. The house was shut up for several years. So I never heard the story, whatever it may be. I expect old Barsteed at the lodge knows something about it. He's been on the place all his life, and his father and grandfather before him. But I'm pretty sure he probably wouldn't tell anybody if he did know.”

It was then I marked Roger Barsteed as a possible source of information.

After Captain Blackwell had gone I went and examined the picture more closely than I had ever done before. I came to the conclusion that it was a cleverer thing, and a more repulsive subject, than I had thought at first. One thing perplexed me very much. I tried to put myself into the position of the sitter and

found that I could not twist my head round as far as his. His chin was almost on his right shoulder. Why had he chosen to be painted in such an unnatural and indeed, as it seemed, impossible attitude? And how had he contrived to sit for it?

I don't think the expression Rubber-neck (which I believe to be slang for Sightseer) had been coined then. Or if it had I had only just heard of it. But I can think of no one to whom it would be more appropriate.

One evening I couldn't sleep and lit a candle and went exploring. I found myself in the dining room. I noticed that there a draft in my face. I then went on to the billiard-room where I just looked around. On my way back I was surprised to find the draft I had encountered earlier to be equally strong in the opposite direction. It was now sucking inwards towards the fireplace. I held my candle high, shielding it with the other hand, and looked round to see if there were an open window. But the windows were all securely shuttered, and the doors at each end of the room were shut. I could not account for any draft, much less for one which apparently changed its direction, almost as if it were due to the slow breathing of some gigantic creature crouching in the fireplace. Whilst I stood there the inward draft suddenly ceased. Then after a moment's stillness there came an outward puff -- really strong enough to be called a gust -- which blew my candle out. This was too much. I groped my way to the end of the room as quickly as I could without stopping to light a match.

Once out of the room I felt rather ashamed of myself for having been so easily scared. I suppose that was why I did not feel inclined to say anything about what had happened. Probably I said to myself there was really more wind outside than I had imagined, and of course a rambling old house was likely to be full of unaccountable drafts. Most likely this one depended upon the wind being exactly in one quarter, which was why we had not noticed it before, and more to the same effect, But I did not find this cogent reasoning convincing.

When I went to bed I looked out and everything seemed to be perfectly still. This, I was bound to admit, was as I had expected. Three nights later I had a

curious dream. I dreamed that I was in the dining-room, and that the figure over the mantelpiece had come down from his frame. He was seated astride of a chair as he was painted, almost in the fireplace. His back was turned to the room, but instead of having his head upon his shoulder, it was turned away so that nothing could be seen of his features. He appeared to be speaking with great earnestness to an invisible personage who must have been stationed a few feet up the chimney. I could not catch what he was saying, for he spoke very rapidly. But his tones were those of a person in deep distress.

When he had finished speaking there came a rumbling, moaning noise in the chimney, such as is made by the wind on stormy nights. This presently began to shape itself into words. At first they were not at all distinct, but gradually they became clearer, though they seemed to be in a language unknown to me. I wondered whether it could be French which, thanks to the Creoles of New Orleans, was still spoken in the South. The voice spoke very deliberately with a cold malignity of tone which made me feel very thankful that I could not follow what it was saying. There was something indescribably evil about it. It was the most unpleasant sound to which I have ever listened, asleep or awake. If fear can make the hair stand on end I must have resembled a clothes-brush.

At this point I woke, and it was more in obedience to some automatic instinct than to any reasoned courage that I decided to visit the dining-room. I do not know what, if anything, I expected to see. As I opened the door there was a grating sound, as if a chair were being hastily dragged across the uncarpeted part of the floor. But I told myself that that was caused by rats. The house abounded in them and everyone knows that they can make extraordinary noises. I suspect that they are at the bottom of a great many ghost stories.

I advanced to the fireplace, but beyond the fact that the hearthrug was curiously bundled up into a heap -- a circumstance which did not, for some reason, strike me at the moment, though I wondered about it afterwards -- there was nothing in the least unusual to be seen. My candle burned quite steadily as I held it high and looked round the silent empty room. I stared up at the odd, forbidding portrait above the mantelpiece, but there did not seem to be

anything to be got out of him. Upon the whole I was glad of that, for he did not look like the sort of person I should have chosen for a midnight tête-à-tête.

"Well," I said aloud, addressing the portrait, "I wish I knew rather more about you. But as you aren't in a position to explain yourself, I shall go back to bed."

I did so; and slept soundly for the rest of the night.

Next morning I did not mention my dream to anyone else. Perhaps I was a little ashamed of it. Also the walls of these houses have even acuter ears than those elsewhere and I did not wish to be responsible for an outbreak of hysteria among the servants.

It so happened that I had no occasion to be in the dining-room alone after dark during the next day or two. Perhaps I was at pains not to be. No one commented upon the curious draft which I had noticed. Indeed, I do not think it was perceptible in the daytime. My dreams, when I had any, were, as usual, entirely commonplace.

A day or two afterwards I happened to see Roger Barsteed in his garden at the lodge and thought I would see whether there was anything to be got out of him. Like all his kind his conversational powers were remarkable and he was never unwilling to exercise them. Eventually, I got him on to the pictures in the house, he seemed uneasy and I thought that he felt that he was being drawn towards thin ice.

He responded with, “How would the likes of him know anything about them, or photographs either? Sure and you must ask the young master about them, and wasn't he in the house only last week?”

I said, “Come now Mister Barsteed, you certainly could not have lived with Thomas Samuels in the lodge all these years without knowing something. It is most certainly his portrait that hangs in the dining room of the house.”

He said, “The only thing I know for sure about Colonel Samuels is that he was a Regimental Commander in the Confederate Army.”

Then I responded, “And you know nothing else?”

Barsteen looked all around and then slowly said, “There are some rumors that I have heard but I do not take stock in them.”

“Tell me what you have heard.”

“Well they say that Colonel Samuels was an outstanding tactician and he had many successes on the battlefield but that he had a flaw in his character. He never took prisoners, said that they limited his mobility. It was said that he put to death anyone who had the misfortune of being captured by his Regiment. A lot of commanders did that but the manner in which he did it was bizarre. He would attend to the killings himself and some say that he used to enjoy it. Colonel Samuels was a large man and many of his men called him 'The Bear'.”

I recognized then that Captain Blackwell's estimate of him as a source of information on this point had been accurate. A few nights afterwards when we were all in the drawing-room after dinner I had occasion to go to the billiard-room to fetch a book which I had left there. Dinner had been cleared away, so I took a candle to light me through the deserted dining-room. Just as I was passing the fireplace I was conscious of so strong a draft that my candle guttered and was nearly blown out. I supposed it was a down-draft, due to the large size of the chimney and to the fact that there was no fire in the grate, and rather wondered that we had never noticed it before. It was not a windy night, so that if there were a strong draft now one would suppose that it was a permanent feature of the room, and that whoever sat on that side of the table would want a screen behind his chair. But up to now, no one had made any complaint.

One evening, when my visit was nearly at an end, one of my cousins and I were sitting talking in the billiard-room after the rest of the family had gone to

bed. Our conversation turned on ghosts and apparitions of various kinds; a subject in which we both took a keen if skeptical interest. In these days before psychoanalysis, dreams and their value and the possibility of their coming true were also discussed. It was past midnight when we got up to go to bed. We then found that there were no candles in the Billiard-room for us and we had brought none with us. Presumably they had been left in the dining-room or in the hall beyond it. The oil lamp by which we were sitting was too big and heavy to take with us. As it was past the middle of September and the day had been wet we had had fires in the sitting-rooms. The dining-room fire had been burning brightly when we finished dinner, so that it was probable that there would still be enough of it left to permit our passage through the room from offering any insurmountable obstacles. Also we knew that there was a goodly supply of candles in the drawing-room so we put the lamp out and prepared to go.

As soon as we opened the door we saw that our surmise had been correct. There was a sufficient glow in the fireplace to light us down the room. But we had hardly taken a step before we were startled by a rapid thudding sound, such as might be produced by a big dog beating his tail upon the floor. There was a dog about the place, but at night he had his own quarters in the stable-yard. Even if he had not been put to bed then properly -- as might very well be the case in a household of servants -- he had certainly not been in the dining-room during dinner and could hardly have got there since.

The thudding ceased as suddenly as it had begun. But in the next moment we were even more startled by seeing the fire beginning to disappear. I remembered a story which I had once read -- by H. G. Wells, I think. In it the lights in a haunted room go out one by one and as the occupant rushes to the fire to rekindle them that too dies away into absolute blackness.

But we soon saw that our fire was not going out like that. It was being obscured by some large dark object which was rising from the ground between ourselves and it. It was as if the hearthrug were slowly morphing itself into the form of an animal of some kind. It rose and rose without a sound. Soon it was

larger than any dog and its movement had somehow an uncanny suggestion of deliberate and malign purpose. Perhaps it was Barsteen's description of Colonel Samuels that colored my reasoning but its bulk and outline, so far as I could make them out, suggested a bear more than anything else. But the head was not shaped like that of a bear. There was something more than half-human about the outline which made it peculiarly horrible. There seemed to be a nose not in the least like the snout of any animal. Presently no vestige of the fire was to be seen. Then it suddenly disappeared. The creature, whatever it was, had gone up the chimney.

We felt that the longer we waited there the less we should like it, so as soon as the coast was clear we ran down the room as hard as we could go, keeping as close as possible to the side away from the fireplace.

There was plenty of firelight in the drawing-room and we soon laid hands on our candles and made our way upstairs. Our bedrooms opened into each other and we left the door standing wide. I do not think either of us slept well, but there was nothing to disturb us except the owls, who, we both thought, were noisier than usual.

Next day we told our story to the rest of the family and I added what I had to say about the mysterious draft and my dream. Of course there was only one thing to be done. The whole thing must be laid before Captain Blackwell as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the doors of the dining-room were kept locked and meals served in another room, which a realtor would probably have called The Breakfast parlor. I was obliged to return to the North on the following day, so it was some weeks before I heard the sequel.

In response to an urgent if guarded letter Captain Blackwell came over from the Fort Sumter as soon as he could get a few days' leave. He soon knew all that there was to tell. His first step was to pay a visit to the lodge, but unfortunately the day before his arrival Barsteed had had a stroke from which

he never recovered. He seemed to recognize his master and to be glad to see him. But he was in no state to be questioned. He died that night. Next day his daughter, who lived with him, told us that after Captain Blackwell's visit her father seemed to have something on his mind. Just after midnight he sat up and made an effort to say something. The only words she could make out sounded like "trouble" and "back of the picture." Immediately afterwards he fell back on his pillow and expired.

This was something to go upon. The queer portrait must be what was meant by Barsteen's comment. A step-ladder was procured and Captain Blackwell and my cousins set to work. It took them longer than they had expected, as the picture was not hung in the usual way. A number of long screws had been driven through the frame, which was very solid, into the paneling of the wall behind. At last they were all got out, not without difficulty, although they did not seem to be particularly rusty. The immediate result was disappointing. There was nothing to be seen either on the back of the picture or the surface of the wall.

Then somebody noticed what looked like a fine crack running across the top of one panel just below the raised frame containing it. Closer examination showed that the wood had been cut through on all four sides with a very sharp knife. A little picking at the top and out it came, disclosing a cavity, obviously the work of an amateur mason, in the thickness of the wall. In it reposed a small book, about nine inches long by five broad. At the top of the title-page were the two words

“THE CLUB”

Underneath them was a list of twelve names; presumably those of the members. Several of them belonged to families still represented in the neighborhood. The last was Robert Blackwell, Captain Blackwell's grandfather.

By this time lunch was ready, so further research was postponed. When the party returned reinvigorated to their task they discovered, as was not

unexpected, that what they had found was an informal minute-book.

It was apparently the custom of the Club to dine once each month with one of the members and discuss topics of general interest. The first dinner was held on 14 July 1869. There were notes as to the amount of wine consumed, which need not be recorded here. One would imagine that the members of the Club must have acted on the principle which was adopted subsequently by a Mr. Heathroid -- "Whence I dines, I sleeps and whence I sleeps, I breakfasts."

There were also notes of the discussions. These were more interesting. At first they were principally political. The recent revolt of the American southern states appeared more than once, and though no formal vote was ever taken, it was obvious that opinion was divided as to the character of Abraham Lincoln. Some members regarded him as a high-minded patriot; others as a sordid country bumpkin who did not want to make any contribution to the cost of the campaigns to which he and his like owed their security and prosperity.

The revolution in France also aroused much interest. General opinion seemed to have been more favorable to it than most people -- at any rate those in England -- would have approved. But the members of the Club were probably all young enough to feel it their duty as well as their pleasure to ventilate opinions which would have shocked their elders could they have heard them.

As time went on the tone of the meetings became less innocent. A certain amount of profanity began to appear, and once or twice some rather vague entries suggested some dabbling in black magic. At one dinner, held in the year 1797, there was a note – The Club President's Health was drunk in bumpers probably with acclamation, but the fact that the writer had changed his mind more than once as to the proper spelling of the word, added to two considerable blots, had made it indecipherable. On the next page was a plan of the table with the name of each member against his place. There were six on each side and noone at the top or bottom. The top was, however, marked with an X. From this time onwards there were frequent references to “The President,” but curiously his name was never given. The minutes were usually

initialed T.S. Thomas Samuels was the first name in the original list, so was presumably that of the senior member. It was not, however, clear whether he was to be identified with the President. Near the end of the book was an entry in a different hand. It ran: "The Club is dissolved. Lord have mercy upon us."

It was signed Robert Blackwell and dated 23 September 1880. My odd experiences had culminated on 23 September 1899. There was nothing else in the cavity in the wall except two small scraps of paper. They had obviously been part of a larger sheet which had been torn up. What had become of the rest it was impossible to say. On one appeared the words “comme un ours” which one of my cousins who spoke French said was “like a bear,” on the other “clean broke.” That was all.

Despite his ancestor's wishes Captain Blackwell felt justified in destroying the portrait. It was soon hacked to pieces and the bonfire which it made in the garden consumed the minute-book of the Club as well. The panel was replaced and another picture hung over it. As far as I know there were no further disturbances. Perhaps a century is a kind of statute of limitations in such matters. We do not understand them sufficiently to be able to speak positively about them.

It seems pretty clear that at its last meeting the Club somehow got more than it had bargained for. But it is impossible to reconstruct exactly what had happened. Who was the President, and was the last meeting the first at which he was actually present? Was the queer portrait, which was presumably Robert Blackwell's work, intended to operate as a warning, like the public executions which were then in vogue?

Some years afterwards I happened to find myself sitting next to a clergyman at a public dinner near the house. He was incumbent of a parish nearby, he told me. As the evening wore on, and the tide of speech-making flowed strongly, our talk, in the intervals, turned on superstitions.

"It's queer," he said, "the way they lay hold of people for no reason that anyone

can see. Now there is one grave in my churchyard that the people won't go near. And when we turn in sheep to keep the grass down the farmer always sends a boy to see that they don't graze by it. It's a nuisance, because we always have to scythe that bit -- and the pastor doesn't like doing it either. It's an ugly, pompous thing to a member of a family that used to be well known there, I believe, though there's not been any of them about these fifty years. But why there should be anything unlucky or wrong about it I don't know. I'm not sure that the people do. Anyhow, if they do you won't get it out of them."

"I wonder," I said, "whether the occupant is named Thomas Samuels and whether he died on 23 September 1879?"

"Why, yes," he said. "But how in the world do you know anything about it?"

"Oh, I used to have cousins with whom I sometimes stayed in that neighborhood and they knew him."

I thought that was as much as I need tell him.

The end.