

The perils of thinking out loud

An 'homage' to the ghost stories of MR James

Some time ago I had the pleasure of recounting a mysterious adventure which happened to a friend of mine by the name of Roberts. I wrote of it under the title of 'The House in Jubilee Wood'*. Roberts was reluctant to speak widely of his experiences, but inevitably over a pipe and a glass of something in front of the fire, several of his intimates were acquainted with the strange and unaccountable happenings that had taken place that Christmas in the village of Brandeston.

One of them, whom I shall call Chesterton, was of a lively disposition and, being a natural sceptic, he was eager to test out these tales of Roberts for himself. So one December, finding himself with a period of days with no calls upon his time, he made arrangements to visit the village. Roberts you may recall took a small cottage on the edge of Brandeston, where some of his more alarming experiences took place. Chesterton was bound to enquire after the property himself but was out of luck. It was no longer available. So instead, he arranged to spend several days at the local inn, the Queen's Head.

Now, I remarked that our friend had an enquiring mind. Being a modern man of a decidedly rational mien, he liked to make the world around him into a form which pleased him and satisfied his desire for order. He was never satisfied with those events which he could not explain. Yet we know, if we are true to ourselves, that there must always exist those matters on the edge of our lives which must lie in shadow. Usually the reason is simple enough. We do not have a light strong enough to shine upon those dark corners.

Still, there are some dark corners which perhaps are best left to their shadows, and the shadows too deep for us as yet to explore wisely. Truth can be a strange and sometimes alarming bedfellow, as Chesterton was to discover for himself.

Our man arrived in the village on a blustery afternoon, the wind seemingly having driven all the colour out of the landscape. A bouncer met the train at the small halt on the edge of the village and its driver conveyed him without a word up to the inn. It was a red brick building set back from the road, clearly much rebuilt over the years. There were three windows on the first floor and signs of additions along the ground floor. Nothing remarkable then, but the interior was warm and welcoming, as was the landlord.

The man took Chesterton's bags and showed him upstairs to his room. Like so many such old hostelries the upper floor showed more markedly the changes which successive landlords had wrought over the years to bring the place more to their and their guests' liking. The corridors were narrow, and where one would expect to find a door there was instead a sharp turn in the corridor, then another back again.

'A bit of a maze,' Chesterton remarked to the fellow as he was ushered into his room, tucked away behind one of these sudden turns.

'We're used to it, sir,' the landlord replied. 'I hope it won't inconvenience you.'

'Not at all, my dear chap, it all adds to the interest of such places as yours. It will fit nicely with my work.'

'What work is that then, sir, if you don't mind my asking?'

‘Oh, I’m studying the early growth of newspapers in the 17th and 18th century. One of particular interest is the *Ipswich Gazette* which often featured tales of smuggling hereabouts.’

The landlord chuckled as he set up Chesterton’s luggage.

‘Times was, perhaps sir, but there’s not much to smuggle these days.’

‘Perhaps you’re right. But there was also an earlier publication called *The Moderate Intelligencer*, which wrote of this village during the witch trials, in which I believe it featured prominently. So while I’m here I thought I’d see what I can find about your man Matthew Hopkins, the so-called Witchfinder General.’

The landlord had stopped and now stood perfectly still, almost as though listening. Eventually he went on with his task.

‘I don’t know why you call him ‘our man’, sir.’

‘Oh just that he hailed from around here, as I understand it, and surely he committed several poor wretches locally to be hanged as witches. Including your vicar, I believe.’

The landlord seemed reluctant to meet Chesterton’s gaze.

‘I believe I’ve heard something of it, sir, though it doesn’t do to put too much store by these old tales.’

He walked a little gingerly to the door, as though trying to avoid having the floor boards squeak, no doubt concerned that his guest may object and demand another room. He paused.

‘Well as long as you have everything you need, sir.’

‘Everything, thank you. You’ve been most kind.’

The landlord gazed briefly around the room, ducked his head to Chesterton and went about his duties. Chesterton commenced unpacking and arranged his books as suited him on the table, and after having spent the afternoon in the train he decided on a little exercise before supper.

There was little to see in the darkness, though he appreciated the fresh air. The wind however seemed to be rising, causing Chesterton to turn up his collar. He strode down the road until the houses began to peter out, then marched back. The inn looked welcoming as he made his way back, its windows glowing and here and there a figure moving against the candlelight within. One thing though puzzled him. He could pick out the window of his own room above, yet it too seemed to show a dull glimmer whereas Chesterton knew full well he had not left a candle alight.

It may have been a trick of the darkness, and indeed he was reassured when he calculated the position of his room again. Perhaps it was not his after all. Yes, that was it. He was sure of it now. Though it was a puzzle that when he arrived he thought he distinctly remembered there being three upstairs windows. Now there were four.

It was a subject he brought up with the landlord as he was served his supper.

‘Tell me,’ said he, ‘How many windows run along your first floor here? When I arrived this afternoon I particularly paused to take in an assessment of this place and I’m sure I counted three. But on my return from my stroll just now I thought I could see four.’

The landlord paused in serving him, having apparently made the urgent discovery that another log should be placed on the fire at that very instant. He took his time in positioning the log and poked at the fire for some time until it achieved his satisfaction. He turned back and found Chesterton’s eyes still upon him.

‘There are only three, sir,’ he told him, apparently reluctantly. ‘You’ll find it’s trick of the light I daresay, it’s been remarked upon before.’

‘Yes, that may be so. I thought I saw a candle in what should have been my room, but I was clearly mistaken. It must have been a reflection of some kind.’

The landlord gazed at him for some moments.

‘A light? Yes, it must have been, sir, as you say,’ he agreed. ‘Strange tricks the senses can play in an old building, as you may know being an educated gentleman. If you’re not used to staying in such a place it’s possible that your eyes and your ears too might tempt you into thinking...’

He paused and seemed to believe he had said enough.

‘Thinking what?’ Chesterton asked pleasantly. He was always interested in these strange tales.

‘... Thinking you see things or hear things that aren’t there, I was going to say. If you was to hear things when you retire to bed, for instance, it would most probably be the wind or the old timbers creaking. They will creak so, you know.’

‘Yes, I realize. But you may be sure that it will take more than creaking timbers or wind in the chimney to keep me from my sleep.’

‘Yes indeed, I hope so, sir. You’ll be going straight to bed when you retire then?’

‘Quickly afterwards, I expect. But I’ll probably run through a little of my work before I close my eyes.’

‘And your work, sir, that will be concerning the history of these parts you were telling me about?’

‘Indeed. Strange reading at bed time for many, I’ll grant you! But I’m determined to press on with it and make serious inroads before my return.’

‘Then I wish you well of it I’m sure, sir.’ The landlord paused and looked uncomfortable. ‘Only I hope as you’re not given to reading out aloud, as it were. Begging your pardon, I mean no offence, but the walls can be very thin and I have on occasion had complaints from guests concerning noise and talking from neighbouring rooms. I’m sure you’re not given to such things, sir!’

‘Reading aloud? Certainly not!’ Chesterton retorted, laughing. ‘I haven’t reached that stage of my dotage yet where I need to talk to myself!’

‘To yourself. No indeed not, sir, not if it were only to yourself. Not even in a whisper. Only I hope you won’t mind my having mentioned it.’

‘Not at all.’

‘Only some history can be awfully dusty, I find. I’m sure you know your work much better than I do, but it seems to me that some things are best saved till daylight. Will that be all, sir, or can I bring you some cheese?’

If Chesterton thought anything odd of this conversation, he did not admit it. He finished his supper and took his candle to bed.

Now in spite of his reassurances to the landlord, it was Chesterton’s habit, like many such gentlemen wrapped up in their books and so engrossed that they hardly know the world outside from what lies within their pages, occasionally to mutter to himself as he worked. This was particularly true where he found some item of controversy with which he singularly failed to agree, or as on this occasion something that occasioned his mirth. It must be said that such

as would amuse those of Chesterton's disposition and inclinations may not be the same as would bring forth merriment in many, including you, dear reader. So I will omit the detail of what so amused him on this evening, sitting up in bed as was his wont, squinting at the pages as the candle melted in waxy fingers into its dish.

It was clear however that Chesterton was not the only guest to have forgotten the landlord's entreaties not to talk to himself. His neighbour in the next room could be heard muttering, and from the tone he sounded displeased at something. In fact, as Chesterton listened, it seemed that the language was not English. For a fanciful moment, he even thought perhaps it was not human.

A dog then? Surely a dog kennel would not be placed upstairs among the bedrooms? In any case, the sound seemed to come from the side where Chesterton could swear there was no room. It was from that space which the corridor had been at such pains apparently to avoid.

But as the landlord had pointed out, these old places were given to creaking and making strange noises at night. The noise from his neighbour was not so loud as to disturb his deliberations, so he thought nothing more of it.

The wind which had sent Chesterton back to the warm welcome of the inn now rose further and its moaning and rattling at the casement soon drowned out whatever ill temper or bad dreams were preoccupying his neighbour. One particularly loud shriek from the gale was enough to distract even the contemplative Chesterton from his deliberations. He tried to regain his concentration, but another cry of such desolation finally made him put down his book. Were there any guests more fanciful than himself in the inn that night, then he could quite see how they might be feeling a little uncomfortable. It was quite clear that he would be unable to apply himself to any further work that night, so he put aside the volume and blew out his candle. But as he settled down and waited for sleep, even he began to feel that he might feel happier without that noise.

These distractions persisted in the darkness, where as so often once the mind is disturbed, all manner of peculiar and fanciful notions presented themselves to his unsettled mind. His thoughts kept returning to the Witchfinder General, Matthew Hopkins. For some reason the persistent idea which nagged at him was of a particular trial, of a woman called Annie Bedwell. It seemed the accusations against Mother Bedwell had made her something of a *cause celebre* at the time.

On other occasions he would have been pleased to deliberate upon his investigations into the brutal doings of Hopkins, but Chesterton was a man of regular habits and what he wanted now was sleep. Instead, thoughts of Hopkins continued to keep thrusting themselves into his mind, almost as though they were being fervently whispered in his ear.

Dear me! Once the thought came to him he really did wonder whether that had been a wondering of his own on which he had unhappily cogitated or had indeed been the whisper of another.

He had lain there for almost a full hour without sleep as the gale raged outside before he sat up in exasperation and lit his candle. He remained so for some time, listening to the wind and recalling the confusion of his mind's wanderings. Something had struck him at the time but was now forgotten, and it was some minutes before he realized what was bothering him. To his knowledge, he had never previously heard of the trial of somebody called Annie Bedwell.

Eventually the wind abated and sleep came to him. It was over breakfast the next morning that he accosted the landlord once more.

‘Yesterday we were talking about the witch trials hereabouts. So tell me, what do you know of the trial of a woman called Annie Bedwell?’

The landlord went on setting out plates and coffee with some deliberation before he replied.

‘Where did you get that name from, sir, if I may ask?’

‘It came to me in the night.’

The man started and with a clatter upset the coffee pot all over the table. There was then a flurry of activity whilst servants came to mop up the spilt beverage and a profusion of apologies from them. The landlord himself however seemed struck dumb. He looked suddenly haggard, as though taken in a fit. At last he leaned closer.

‘You say it came to you in the night, sir?’ he whispered. ‘In what form, may I ask?’

‘In what form?’ Chesterton was puzzled. ‘I don’t understand the question. In the form of a thought, of course, or perhaps it was a dream. I can’t really tell.’

A servant brought fresh coffee, and glanced at his master strangely.

‘Oh I see! Yes, that would be it.’ The man began to recover his composure. ‘I am most sorry, sir, I misunderstood you.’

‘What could you have thought I meant? I said only that it came to me in the night.’

‘Nothing at all, sir, I apologize for my foolishness.’

Flustered, he scurried off, leaving Chesterton baffled. He completed his breakfast slowly, his mind deep in thought.

Afterwards, he sought out the landlord again. The man was reluctant to discuss what was on Chesterton’s mind, but his guest was adamant.

‘Now look here, my dear fellow. It’s clear you know something about this Annie Bedwell business, and you also seem unhappy that I should take any interest in Matthew Hopkins. Is it because of some old folk tale in the village?’

The landlord looked miserable.

‘It’s not for talking about, sir, and that’s all I can say. You’re a learned gentleman, so no doubt you may see these things differently, I see that. Annie Bedwell was taken for a witch by Hopkins and hanged it’s true, like so many for what were considered her sins.’

‘Witchcraft, you mean?’

‘So it’s alleged. I wouldn’t like to say.’ The man had chosen not to look at Chesterton while he was speaking, and now he glanced around the room as though expecting to find something hidden among the rafters of the ceiling.

‘You mean she was innocent.’

‘Well it’s best to think that, yes sir, whatever happened at the gallows. Annie didn’t go quiet, so it’s said. And I believe I’ve already said enough. I mean no disrespect, but we have to live here when you’re gone.’

His manner had become almost truculent and he marched away and began berating the pot boy for some minor oversight. Chesterton was reluctant to press him further.

Whatever he had already planned, he now put it aside in the quest for answers to his host’s strange behaviour. It seemed to him that the place to begin his enquiries might be the village church, which he had passed on his way into the village on his arrival. But first Chesterton went about his exercise, trudging across country to find lunch at an inn in a neighbouring

village, and on his return made it his business to look in upon the church. It was but a short stroll down the lane opposite the Queen's Head.

The church like so many in this part of the country had a pleasant aspect, set against the rolling parkland of the hall which stood just behind it. Chesterton strolled down the path between yew hedges to the handsome porch, and let himself into the chill interior of the church. At first he interested himself in the font and its decorative cover, before the creak of the door heralded the arrival of the vicar. He was a slightly stooped and ascetic-looking man in his later years, one of those gentlemen brought up it seemed to wear the cloth.

The two men exchanged the usual pleasantries and the vicar was naturally grateful to receive the compliments which Chesterton was pleased to bestow upon the church and its condition. They fell into conversation about its history and, naturally enough, soon their talk broached the subject of the unfortunate vicar who had fallen victim to the purges of the Witchfinder General.

'Ah yes, poor John Lowes, a most godly man it seems. Hanged for some nonsense about causing ships to sink off the coast at Aldeburgh, so it's said. But then there was such hysteria abroad then, and nobody it seems was safe.'

'Quite so. I believe several other villagers met the same fate as Lowes.'

'Indeed, mostly good god-fearing women against whom Hopkins had a particular vehemence. Almost all of them innocent of any sin.'

'Almost all of them? Is that merely a figure of speech?'

'No, I did not mean it so. But we know so little about their lives of course, except some of the trumped up charges against them.'

'What of Annie Bedwell?'

The vicar paused in his perambulation up the nave and rubbed his chin.

'Ah yes, Annie. Yes, we know a little more about her, of course, but mostly because of the manner of her death.'

'Surely she was hanged, like the others.'

'Oh yes, but whereas the other poor wretches went to their deaths in terror and pleading their innocence before God, Annie it seems was of a more feisty disposition. As she waited to meet her maker she had much to say about Matthew Hopkins. He stayed at the inn during the witch trials, did you know? She took against the place for that reason, though it was hardly the fault of the poor fellow who kept it, of course.'

'Since you will take in such as this murderer, so be it,' she cried according to the tales. 'You may have cause to take more care in future, landlord. There will be unlooked-for guests at the inn!'

'What did she mean by it?'

'Nobody knows. The poor woman was instantly despatched, and shortly afterwards Hopkins and his ghastly entourage moved on. Over the years there has been gossip, as you can imagine, and at some point one of the inn keepers saw fit to board up the room which Hopkins had used. I assume that was just to stop the stories, but one can never be quite sure. Country people can sometimes believe in such strange things, it's difficult to know what is real and what is imagination.'

'What stories were these?'

The vicar looked uncomfortable, and motioned for them to sit in a pew.

‘There is rarely anything to these tales, but even so... On one occasion a guest at the inn – Oh, more than a hundred years ago now – took exception to something in his accommodation and fell out rather badly with his host, I understand. He cut short his visit and left to return home, but sadly did not get far. His body was found down by the river, just off the road, and there was no sign of his horse. It seems he had died rather horribly, torn apart by beasts of some kind. No light could be shed on the death, though it was always assumed the squire’s hounds had got out. They were an unruly pack and had been accused previously of mauling livestock in the parish. But of course, he was the squire and so nothing came of it. Anyway, the coroner was unwilling to blame the squire’s hounds for the death of this poor fellow, though nobody could think of any other cause of such a gruesome death.’

‘Strange indeed. But what had this to do with Annie Bedwell?’

‘Well, apparently this fellow had been staying in the room once used by Matthew Hopkins, and the reason for his complaint was some nonsense about being kept awake by God knows what. People remembered what Annie had threatened from the scaffold, and drew their own conclusions. But nonsense or not, the landlord of the time felt it prudent to get rid of that room, and I believe it’s been walled up ever since.’

‘But I’m still mystified at the precise connection between this man’s death and what the unfortunate Annie Bedwell threatened.’

The vicar took care to avoid Chesterton’s eyes, instead studying his hands which Cuthbertson noticed were shaking.

‘Well you see, it was thought that the woman had sent something – one would not wish to dwell on quite what – to the inn, to await the return of Hopkins. But Hopkins had since moved on, of course. So whatever it is lay in wait there over the years...’

‘But surely you can’t mean...’

The vicar waved away Chesterton’s incredulity.

‘My dear chap, I am a man of belief. I have spent all my life wrestling with the complexities and frailties that make us human, and I can hardly believe in heaven if I don’t also subscribe to hell. If I believe in angels, then surely I must also countenance the existence of demons. Certainly I have seen evil in my life, so I ask myself why I should deny it when it is described by others.’

He sighed and stood up.

‘That’s enough of such things for now, I think. The afternoon is wearing on and it’s as well to put such thoughts out of our heads until we have broad daylight about us.’

They said goodbye at the church door and Chesterton walked up the lane to the inn, making quite sure that there were indeed only three windows along the first floor. Relieved, he made his way along the narrow corridor to his room. But when he opened the door he found all was disorder. His books and papers were scattered about and torn, and some seemed almost to have been chewed, as though by a dog.

He naturally called the landlord, who was ashen when shown the carnage. He hurried Chesterton downstairs to the bar while his servants cleared up the mess and put it in as much order as they could. The poor man was mortified and at pains to point out that he kept a respectable house and had never experienced such trouble before. Chesterton was wont to believe him. The notes had no intrinsic value and, in spite of the chaos, no great harm had been done. He could merely scoop them all up and rearrange them later.

He was however perplexed at why any miscreant should want to break into his room in that way. He had nothing of value, but then perhaps the intruder had not known that, and had thrown about the papers in frustration. Still, it preyed on his mind. As a rational man, he took what he knew of the witch trials, added what the vicar had told him and then his own experience to date, and was reluctant to accept the conclusions as they presented themselves. The vicar's tale had been compelling, but Chesterton would not willingly subscribe to such fancies. He took a glass of punch at the landlord's insistence and yet, when he was told his room was once again in order, he found himself curiously reluctant to go upstairs. He dallied in the bar and expressed the view that an early supper might be in order.

While the landlord set about preparing it, Chesterton sat with his glass and his pipe by the fire, and reviewed once more what the vicar had told him, then the landlord's reluctant explanations. Eventually he tossed back his glass and strode purposefully to the door, thinking himself a fool all the while. Nevertheless, he had to be sure.

He made his way across the yard towards the road and, once he was some way from the inn, he turned to look at it once more. In particular, he looked at the windows. The four windows. Where less than an hour beforehand there had unquestionably been three windows, now there were four.

And at the new window, the window which had not existed earlier, a candle was moving. It may of course have been one of the servants still clearing up after the intrusion. But something about the movement, something about the way the candle swayed, paused and then rushed about the room, persuaded him otherwise. It might also have been possible to try to put a shape to whatever held the candle, but at that moment Chesterton had no wish whatever to attempt to do so.

I must tell you, he did not put a foot in the inn again. He called for his coat, there in the yard, ordered up the bouncer and had himself delivered with all speed to the station, where he fervently hoped to be in time for the last train of the day. He waited it must be said in some anxiety and not without many glances over his shoulder, until the glimmer of the approaching train brought him relief. He leapt in and slammed the door, and he confessed to me afterwards that he did not begin to breathe easily until the train had pulled away and had put some distance between it and the village of Brandeston.

He ordered his luggage to be sent on, and though he admitted to feeling foolish at his escape, when he dwelt on the circumstances of his visit he was grateful at having taken the course that he did. Chesterton still occupies himself with the early publication of newspapers, though I am told he has lost all interest in the witch trials and has completely cured himself of the habit of talking to himself.

* See *'The House in Jubilee Wood'* on the *Brandeston website*