

*This short story by Charles Dickens was published in his newspaper "All the year round" in May 1869. The illustrations are my addition.*

"EASY all! ship!" cried the coxswain, and as we laid in our oars, well pleased at the prospect of a rest, our boat ran alongside the landing-place on the island at the end of Henley Reach.



*Regatta Island, now called Temple Island, 1863*

We were rowing down from Oxford by easy stages in a four-oared gig. We had come out for pleasure, and not to perform aquatic feats. We rested whenever we felt disposed, and hailed the sight of a lock with invariable satisfaction.

Our boat presented, as I looked down upon her from the bank, an appearance of comfortable untidiness. Carpet bags were stowed away under the seats, a hamper was lashed aft within easy reach of the coxswain, and upon the coxswain's seat reclined a suspicious tankard. Two or three unbusinesslike pipes were on the floor, the usual miserable little sheepskin sitting mats were replaced by thick, comfortable cushions, and our boat herself, a roomy inrigged gig, evidently meant pleasure.

We landed our hamper, unpacked the good things we had that morning brought from Wargrave, and devoted ourselves to our lunch, or rather dinner, with as good an appetite as if we really had been working hard. It was not long before this business was satisfactorily despatched, and we were all reclining on the grass lazily smoking, or feeding to dangerous repletion a brood of yellow ducklings which had gathered about us.

All of us, that is to say, except Will Darton, who had quietly disappeared. Will had been the life and soul of our party hitherto; his laugh had been the gayest, his temper the sweetest, his work, on the rare occasions when we tried a little real rowing, the hardest. But all day, from the moment we decided on taking our lunch with us and on enjoying it in the pure June air on

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Regatta Island, rather than in a close inn-room, his manner had changed. He had been strangely silent and preoccupied, something seemed to weigh heavily on his thoughts, and when any allusion to our coming resting-place was made, it seemed, in some odd way, to disturb him. I was more intimate with Will than our companions were, and this change of mood, so unusual with him, struck me very much.

Accordingly, when I missed him now, I strolled away across the little island in search of him. He was leaning against a tree by the water's edge, with folded arms, and was gazing at the water as it flowed between him and the Buckinghamshire shore, with a curious eagerness. He was in deep thought, and evidently in thought of no pleasant kind; his face was white, his brows were contracted. Thinking he must be ill, I hurriedly approached him, and laying my hand on his shoulder, cried:

"Why, Will, old boy, what's the matter?"

He made me no answer for a moment, and I had to repeat my question before he seemed to hear me. Then he started, and, with a strange abruptness of manner, replied:

"Nothing is the matter. What do you suppose is the matter?"

"You look pale," I said, "and you've not been yourself all day. I'm sure there's something wrong."

"I tell you there is nothing wrong. I wish you would leave me alone for a minute or two. It's hard I can't be allowed to be quiet in my own way," he answered, with a roughness that surprised me.

I kept my astonishment to myself, and turned away, saying:

"Very well. Have your own way. But recollect we must start in half an hour, or it will be getting late."

Our companions appeared to have no curiosity as to anybody's movements, nor did they seem to have missed either me or Will. I found them reclining, oblivious of all earthly things, with their pipes in their mouths, and their straw hats tilted on to their noses, and so evidently indisposed for conversation that I felt it was of no use to endeavour to arouse any interest in their minds as to Will and his eccentricities. Making the best of the situation, I joined them, and was presently gazing dreamily up at the bright blue sky through a grateful screen of overhanging leaves, and watching the smoke of my pipe as it floated off in the calm air. By-and-by the sky became dimmer, my pipe gradually dropped from my lips, and I fell insensibly into a heavy sleep.

I awoke presently with a start, and disposed, as is the custom with most mid-day sleepers, to declare I hadn't closed an eye. The assertion was unnecessary. My companions, who were lively enough now, were busily engaged in a violent metaphysical discussion, of the discursive nature suitable to such an occasion, and were not even disposed for bad jokes at my expense. The subject immediately under treatment was the engrossing one of ghosts and apparitions, and the argument was warm. As I rose, I saw Will Darton coming toward us

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along the path, more like himself than when I had left him by the river, but still with a disturbed look upon his face. Knowing it was time to start, I interrupted the eager talkers.

"Now, you fellows, if you mean to get to Marlow to-night, you must drop the subject and take to your oars instead. You can finish what you've got to say when you get in."

"Very well," said little Jack Long, the smallest and the most obstinate of the crew; "I've no objection. But I must say that of all the nonsense I ever heard, these two men have been talking the worst. Fred says he firmly believes in ghosts, although he knows nothing about them except from books; and the other lunatic knows a fellow who knows another fellow whose grandmother saw one, or something of that sort. I don't believe in ghosts myself. I never saw one, and I never saw anybody else who had ever seen one; and what's more, I don't believe that any man ever was told of a ghost by the man who had seen it. They're always at second hand."

Will Darton had stopped short as he heard the beginning of this speech. His face, pale before, became paler now; some strange fear seemed to be looking from, his eyes, and it was evident he was much disturbed. When the speaker ceased, Will flushed, and, with an irritable excitement very unlike his usual self, interrupted the laughing protests of Jack's antagonists by crying, as he hastily advanced:

"*You! You* don't believe in ghosts. You've never been told of a ghost by a man who saw it. Good Heavens! Why I - " He hastily checked himself, the flush faded from his cheek; once more he became deadly pale.

"Holloa! holloa !" said Jack. "What's the matter now? Are you the particular friend of the spectral world? or is that your polite way of intimating your belief in ghosts? Here, you two, here's an ally for you! But I shall be ready to tackle you all three when we get to Marlow."

"And if you are going to stop talking here much longer," I said, "we shall never get to Marlow. Come along, let's be off! Come, Will!"

He seemed to wake out of the same curious abstracted state as he had been in by the river side, and, taking my arm, went mechanically with me towards the boat.

"You'd better steer, Will," said little Jack Long. "Don't look well, you see" —to me—" and you, Charley, row stroke; I'll go up to bow, and then I can see that nobody shirks."

I took the stroke oar, and we started. As we passed the end of the island, Will looked nervously across the river; and as we left Greenlands behind and neared Hambleton Lock, he was evidently under the influence of strong mental excitement. As we waited for the lock to open, he shuddered, as if with cold, and, when we were in the lock, he looked back more than once towards the way we had come.

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*Hambleden Lock*

As we passed out, he gave a great sigh as of relief, and as we made for Medmenham, at a good pace—for it was getting dark—he seemed to revive. By the time we reached Marlow he was, but for his unaccustomed silence, apparently at ease, and, as the evening advanced, seemed to recover himself completely.

It was very warm in our room, and as I did not feel inclined for supper, I wandered for some time about the pretty garden of the inn, and leaning presently on the wall overlooking the weir, filled my pipe and began to smoke. It was a beautiful clear moonlight night. The water at my feet dashed in a mimic torrent over the weir with a cool and pleasant sound; in the shade beside me the river was dark enough, but further on and past the lock it ran, a stream of glittering silver, to the darkling hills beyond. On my right a broad meadow stretched away in the moonlight to the glorious Bisham woods, and the smell of its new-mown hay mingling with the pleasant garden scents, loaded the warm air with perfume. No sound but the rush of the water, and now and then the distant barking of a dog, broke the calm silence of the night. I looked long upon the beautiful scene, forgetting all but the sight before me, until I was aroused from my reverie by a man who came and leant upon the wall by my side. It was Will Darton. He was calm enough now, as he gazed out into the soft summer night, but for some time he was still silent. At last he spoke.

"Charley, old fellow, I beg your pardon for my rudeness and ill manners to-day. I had my reasons, believe me."

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"Don't say another word on the subject," I said. "I saw you were ill, and thought no more of it."

"I was well enough; as well as I am now," he replied; "but I could not, hard as I tried, shake it off."

"It?" I asked, curiously.

"The thought that - " He broke off for a moment, and looked intently over the landscape; then resuming with a touch of the irritability I had noticed in him in the morning, said: "You heard Jack Long's profession of faith in the matter of apparitions?"

"Which you didn't seem to like? Yes."

"He said that he had never heard of a ghost from the man who had seen it. Have you ever heard of a ghost from the man who had seen it?" I shook my head with a smile. "Then you shall hear the story now. I should not like to tell it to those others; but I can tell it to you."

I was considerably startled. "Why, you don't mean to tell me that you ever saw a ghost?" I cried.

"That you shall judge of for yourself. Listen."

You recollect my being engaged to make those sketches of Thames scenery for that boating-book, three years ago? — well, that was the time. I had been idling down the river for a couple of months, working hard now and then, and taking spells of rest as the fit took me, and at last had worked my way down as far as Henley. I had a fancy for being independent of railways and of all sorts of locomotion not at my own control, and I had bought a boat for my cruise, roomy enough to hold all the materials I wanted and to accommodate a friend or so now and then. Often, during the earlier part of my voyage I had had companions: Jack Long was with me for two or three days, and you joined us, if you remember, for a week, idling about Streatley and Pangbourne. I had a companion, too, on my way from Mapledurham to Henley; I forget, who it was, no matter now, but he left me at Henley, and I was alone. It was fine, hot, June weather, very favourable for my purpose, and I spent a week about the reaches we passed to-day, hard at work. I filled many sketch-books, and might have filled many more, but my time was growing short, and it was necessary that I should make a move. All the time I had been at Henley, some curious fascination seemed to take me down to Regatta Island. Often when I had planned a long day's work at the picturesque bits about Marsh Mills and the woods of Park-place, I felt an irresistible impulse to turn back and to row down the reach. I suppose I must have painted that horrible old temple, and that graceful clump of trees on Regatta Island a dozen times more than there was any occasion for me to do. I used to feel disgusted with myself at the repetition of the same views over and over again in my portfolio, but somehow or another, I could not get away from that part of the river.

At last my time at Henley was so nearly up that I had made all my arrangements for starting next day, when I received a note from Dalrymple, an old friend and water-colour painter like myself, to say that he had taken a little cottage opposite Hambleden Lock, and that he was down for a month's sketching. He would be at home to-morrow night, he said,

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and would I give him a call before I left. Well, I had not seen Dalrymple for some time and, although I felt a secret presentiment that it would be well for me to refuse the invitation, I wrote to say I would dine with him next day. The day after that, I intended dropping down the river to Cookham, where I had plenty of work before me.

I slept but ill that night, harassed by I know not what fears and vague sense of trouble. When I awoke in the early morning there were heavy clouds about the sky, threatening thunder. I started in the afternoon; I had intended to take all my traps and paddle on, after I had left Dalrymple, to Marlow, but was obliged to abandon that intention and to arrange to return to Henley that night.

The thunder-clouds hung heavily about the hills when I started, and the river had that dull, lead-coloured hue, so ominous of bad weather. As I rowed past the Poplars, a few heavy drops fell spattering about me, and I almost decided on turning back. But it was my only chance for some time of seeing Dalrymple, whom I wanted much to see (you know he married my sister afterwards), and I went on. As I rowed on, the air cleared, and by the time I reached the island it was a fine bright day, though oppressively hot. I hung about all the afternoon sketching, and feeling it impossible to get away from the strange fascinations of the place, until it was absolutely necessary to lay down the sketch-book, and to row on to my destination.



*Greenlands, Henry Taunt, 1882* [@ Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive](#)

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How well I remember Greenlands that afternoon! The house was empty, and the old-fashioned green jalousies were closed. But for the beauty of the gardens it might have seemed deserted. The colours of the flowers were too bright to be dimmed, even by the formal arrangement of the beds in which they were set; the standard roses along the river terrace were just bursting into their wealth of blossom, the river's bank was fringed with clusters of blue forget-me-nots. On the other side of the river the meadows spread far away, the mowers were at work, the scent of new-mown hay came to me from them as it comes to me from those meadows there now.

As I passed down the river towards the weir, leaving, as you know, the lock on my left, I felt a strange shudder creeping over me that I could not account for. It is true that a black, lurid cloud was just then sweeping over the sun, but the air was warm enough, and it was no external chill I felt. I hadn't far to go. Dalrymple's cottage was just above the weir; I found him waiting for me, and in his welcome forgot the momentary sense of something wrong that had troubled me.

We had much to talk of, and, after dinner, paced up and down the little garden in front of his lodging until late. The moon was up, but a heavy bank of clouds was rising slowly beneath her, and it promised a bad night. More than once I tried to make a start, but something always prevented me, and it was fully eleven o'clock before I got into my boat. By that time the bank of clouds had broken, and was driving, under the force of an upper current of wind, across the sky. There was no wind below, but an ominous murmur among the rushes, and strange, sudden ripples on the water warned me that I must make the best of my way if I would escape a wetting.

I pushed off from the little stairs, and, as I started, a heavy thunder-cloud veiled the moon, and I was in darkness. I knew my way too well to be troubled by that, and sculled out into the stream, intending to make for the island on which the lock-house stands, and so across to the towpath side of the river.

As I got into the deeper shadow of the trees on the island I felt the shuddering feeling I had experienced in the morning. I almost persuaded myself to turn back, and to ask Dalrymple for shelter for the night; but, although the muttering thunder was by this time filling the air, and heavy drops of rain were beginning to fall, something I can't tell what, kept me on my course.

As I passed the head of the island, the darkness was intense, but there was light enough for me to see that I had reached the proper course, and I lay down to my work vigorously. At that moment, from under the very shadow, as it were, of the lock-gates, a punt silently emerged. Again I felt that nameless, objectless shudder. It was, as far as I could see, a common fisherman's punt, and there was one man in it. I wondered for a moment how he came to be there, the lock-gates being, as I could see, even in that dim light, shut. But I paid but little attention to him, and went on my own way. Presently I found the punt close to me, going, as it seemed to me, exactly my pace, and the man in it, I could not help thinking, watching me. This feeling made me uneasy, and I quickened my pace. The punt shot after me, and was presently alongside. I eased, and paddled quietly. The punt dropped back, and was again alongside my skiff. And now I noticed that it passed over the water noiselessly, that the man's punt-pole made no sound as it was dropped into the water, no sound as he recovered it and dragged it through the water for a fresh purchase.

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Its occupant now kept his head towards the shore away from me, and sometimes seemed to stop and listen, as if he expected to hear someone in pursuit. But whether he stopped or whether he worked, his punt, black against the black water, kept on her noiseless way, and kept with me.

As we passed Greenlands the clock struck half-past eleven, and aroused by the sound, I called to my unwelcome companion “What o’clock’s that?” more, I fancy, for the sake of breaking the stillness that was oppressing me than for any other reason, for I felt I should get no answer. As I expected, there was no reply.

The punt went on its way, stopping when I stopped, keeping pace with me when I rowed fast, its mysterious occupant always apparently ignorant of my very existence, continually pausing to listen for something he appeared to expect.

I tried to persuade myself there was nothing in all this, but I began to feel a sense of terror creeping over me that I found impossible to resist. By this time we were nearing Regatta Island, and while I was watching with absorbed interest the silent progress of the punt by my side, it suddenly, apparently without any increased exertion on the part of its occupant, shot ahead of me, and crossing my bows, made over towards the Bucks shore.



*Temple Island, Henry Taunt, 1870* [© Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive](#)

At this moment, a bright flash of lightning lit up the country with surprising distinctness, and left everything so dark afterwards, that, although I felt the punt was again alongside, but this time on my left instead of my right hand, I could hardly make it out. The man’s face was toward me now, I knew, and I peered curiously through the darkness to see what manner of man this strange companion of mine might be. It had grown very dark. The moon was quite concealed by heavy storm-clouds. I could not see the man’s features, but could make out that he was looking earnestly and eagerly in the direction from which we had come.



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So - for a few strokes the punt, although its occupant stood motionless, and watching, still keeping its way, until we were close on the bushes on the tail of the island.



Another vivid flash of lightning showed the punt and man to me, within a few yards, as clear as daylight could have done. And, O Heaven! What a face that brief moment's light showed me! An old man, with short grizzled hair, that seemed to stand on end under the influence of some frightful horror; his face was ghastly pale, except where a livid scar that seamed his cheek showed red across the ashy skin; his throat was bare, and he seemed to have been in a struggle, for his shirt and loose velveteen jacket were torn about his neck, and the shaggy whiskers under his chin were in great disorder. I fancied, too, that there was blood upon his breast and face. I was sure there was upon his hands.

His eyes, with the light of a mad horror in them, awful in its intensity, were staring through the darkness towards the lock-house, and he seemed to be straining every nerve to catch some sound from that quarter. I saw, at the same time, hardly knowing how I saw it in that short moment, a gun leaning against the well of the punt.

While I was fascinated by the horror of the sight, he disappeared behind the bushes, and as the black darkness settled again upon the scene, a rattling peal of thunder awoke the echoes of the hills. I was too startled for a moment to row, and lay upon the sculls vainly trying to explain to myself what I had seen; but, finding my boat drifting down with the stream, started once more.

Hardly had I done so before I was alarmed by the report of a gun, close at hand, as it seemed, followed by a loud splash in the water. Connecting this at once with the man I had seen, I rowed round to the other side of the island as fast as I could and hailed him loudly. There was no answer, and I could see nothing. I rowed up and down the length of the island half a dozen times, but without result. The man and the punt were gone. I could not understand it. The man's wild, strange appearance, his evident terror, and the disorder of his dress alarmed me. And then the gun and the splash! What was it? What could have happened? I rowed

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uneasily about the spot for some time, until a horror of it and of what I had seen completely mastered me, and I made the best of my way to Henley. The storm was now at its height, and raging with great fury.

I tied my boat up to the stairs, and went at once to my lodgings. There was no one about, and even if there had been I think the strange sensation I felt would have prevented my saying anything about the events of the night. All night I tossed and turned uneasily in my bed. Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw again the livid scar-marked face, the straining wild eyes, the bloody hands. The recollection of that one brief moment terrified me more than I can express. I felt as if it would be impossible to forget it; and indeed I feel so still. Towards morning I fell into an uneasy sleep, in which the occurrences of my night row repeated themselves over and over again, and when I awoke I was feverish and unrefreshed.

It was a bright, clear, fresh morning after the storm, and although I felt by no means well, I thought the row to Cookham would do me good. So I held to my purpose (which I had when I first awoke for a moment thought of abandoning) and started. As I neared the island I felt a strange inexplicable dread of meeting the man I had seen last night, but although I felt as if my doing so would increase the chance of a meeting, I rowed along the Bucks shore where I had missed the punt. There was nothing to be seen near the island, nothing all the way to the lock, but as I rowed along that piece of water I felt creeping over me the cold shuddering feeling that I had felt as I left Dalrymple the previous evening.

Nothing appeared to have occurred in the neighbourhood out of the usual course. The lock-keeper returned my "good morning" without entering into conversation, as I felt sure he would have done if any strange occurrence had happened during the night. Once through the lock the chill feeling of terror which had oppressed me, disappeared gradually, and I began to persuade myself that I had exaggerated what I had seen; but I could not shake off the memory of the face.

By the time I reached Marlow I felt so tired and ill, that I gave up the idea of going any further that day. Not to lose time, however, I determined to take some sketches of Bisham, and as I felt indisposed for any more rowing, I took old Tom Peacock, the fisherman, with me to scull. Tom was, as you know, a garrulous old fellow, and he soon began to talk. He rambled on for some time with his fishing stories and his poaching adventures, all of which I had heard before, and to which, consequently, I paid but little attention. Presently, when the stream of his loquacity had run a little dry, I asked him, more for the sake of saying something than because I felt any interest in the question, whether the storm had been bad last night at Marlow.

"Bad?" said old Tom; "ay, that it were. I dunno as ever I see a badder, excep' one, three year ago, and just about this time that were, too. Why, what day of the month were yesterday?"

"The twenty-first."

"The twenty-first of June," said the old man, lowering his voice; "why, that were the very day it was done, three year ago."

"It was done? What was done? What do you mean?" The cold chill came over me again, and I almost fancied I could see the face again. "Didn't ye hear of it afore?" asked Tom. "Ah, no, I remember, you haven't been this way for some time, and p'raps you missed it in Lunnon papers. Well, you see, sir, this was the way of it.



You didn't know old Kit Garth, the fisherman, up Hambleton way, maybe? No? Ah, it wasn't over much he was on the river! He lived best part of his time drinking at the public, and I don't think he was over-particular as to how he got his money. However, that's no business of mine, you know. Old Kit was a terrible old rascal, surely, and a pretty life he and his son, who was a'most as big a blackguard as his father, led poor old Mrs. Garth.



*Hambleton, Henry Taunt, 1870* [© Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive](#)

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She was a decent sort of body enough, too good for the likes of Kit; and although he used to beat her, and well nigh starve her sometimes, she never complained. I believe she was fond of 'em both somehow, and certainly the young 'un used to be a bit kind to her by times, and protected her against the old man now and then; but you see, sir, it wasn't often as he could do that, for in general, as sure as old Kit was drunk, young Kit was drunk too.

Well, they went on at this sort o' life for some time, sometimes in prison for assaults, sometimes for poaching and that (though there ain't much in that, I think), until one day it came to a regular blow up. The two men had been drinking hard, and the old 'un, so soon as ever he got home, begun a bullyragging and a punching the missus. Well, the young 'un he interfered, and the upshot of it was as there was a reg'lar fight. What happened exactly nobody never rightly knowed; except one thing, and that was, that in the morning old Kit had got a awful cut right across the check, and that young Kit was off. We never saw no more of him. Folks said he'd gone for a sodger and got shot in the Crimea, but I don't know nothing about that.

After he'd gone things went on worse and worse with the Garths, and old Kit, whose beauty wasn't improved by the scar left by his son's parting present, seemed to go right off his head like, when he'd got his drink aboard, and ill-used his wife worse than ever.

Well, sir, to make a long story short, one night, it was the twenty-first of June three year ago, old Kit went home from the public at a little afore eleven o'clock, not quite drunk, although he'd been drinking hard. It was a tremendous bad night, thundering and lightening fearful, and a deal of rain a falling, but old Kit didn't mind that, and set off for his cottage, which was about a mile, from the river. Nobody seed him on the road home; there wasn't many people about such a night as that, as you may suppose, sir, and nobody seed him go into his house. A little after eleven the neighbours was aroused by frightful screams and cries of murder from old Kit's cottage; and although they was used to strange noises from there now and then, some of 'em thought it sounded more serious this time, and turned out to see what was up.

They found the garden-gate and cottage door both open, and between 'em, as if she'd run out with her last strength, they found the poor old woman. Her head and face had been all battered in with some heavy instrument, and I was told by them as picked her up that it was a most dreadful sight to see. She was stone dead, o' course.

There wasn't much doubt about who'd done it. The poor old creetur had got hold of a handful of grey whiskers and a piece of old Kit's neckercher, and old Kit himself, and his gun, was not to be found. The alarm was raised, and the constables came, and they hunted about for old Kit all that night, but managed of course to go every way but the right, until it was too late. At last they goes down to the lock, and they says to the keeper, who hadn't heard nothing o' what had been going on, 'Ha' ye seen anything o' old Garth?' 'Yes,' says the lock-keeper. He'd come down there about two hours ago, had jumped into his punt which was a lying just outside the lock-gates, and gone off up the river.

The keeper told 'em he didn't half like the old man's looks. He just see him by the light of a flash of lightning, and he said his face looked like death, and as if there was somethin'

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horrible after him. He'd got his gun with him, the keeper said, and his shirt was all tore about his throat as if he'd ha' been having a fight.

The constables they went off to Henley, hotfoot, but they didn't find no Kit, and for a good reason too. The next morning his punt, with nothing in it but the gun, was found among the piles of the weir, and when they got the gun they got the thing as the murder was done with, for the poor old woman's grey hair was a sticking to the butt. As for Kit, he turned up about three days after, washed up against the lock gates, and it was pretty clear how he came there, for he had a shot-hole in his breast big enough to put your hand in. That was just such another night as last night was—I mind it well."

That was the story old Tom told me; I remember every word he said as distinctly as possible. I knew when he began, by the feeling of horror that possessed me, that I was going to hear the explanation of my last night's mystery. I felt then that what I had seen was not of this world. I don't think it had so presented itself to me before, except by the unreasoning terror with which the thought of it filled my mind.

I suffered greatly for some time afterwards. I have never yet completely got over the remembrance of that awful face; at first it was terrible, I had not been to Henley since then until to-day, and if I had known when we first started that you would have stopped at the Island, I should have made some excuse to come on by road. As it was, it was not until we had actually started that I remembered it was the twenty-first of June. The old fear came over me as we neared the place, and, against my will, I felt compelled to watch for the figure I saw that night. Now I have seen the place again without it, I hope the impression will fade from my mind.

Hush! there is Jack Long; not a word of this to him.