



PENGUIN
WEIRD
FICTION

THE HOUSE ON THE BORDERLAND

William Hope
Hodgson



PENGUIN WEIRD FICTION

The House on the Borderland

Sometime around the turn of the twentieth century, something happened, something . . . *weird*. In the dark halls of ivy-clad manors, in the ancient woodland escapes of New England, a generation of authors was inspired to radically reinterpret the horror and fantasy writing of the past. In place of vampires and werewolves were atmospheres of breathless dread, terrifying visions of long-forgotten gods and unexplainable, writhing monsters. The strange and extraordinary work from that time remains incredibly influential on all aspects of literature today. **Penguin Weird Fiction** is a celebration of the very best of this writing, a store of novels and tales that for generations have delighted and horrified.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Hope Hodgson was born in 1877 in an Essex village. His father was an Anglican clergyman. The family was a large one – there were twelve children, although three died in infancy – and was always poor. Apprenticed as a cabin boy at the age of fourteen, Hodgson remained at sea for eight years, experiencing the considerable privations of life aboard ship that prevailed at the time. By 1899 Hodgson had had enough of the sea. He turned to his other skills – photography, physical culture and writing – in search of a means of support. In the early 1900s he began to sell stories to the popular magazines of the time. Although he was a long way from the literary world of London, he corresponded with other writers, including H. G. Wells. He published his first novel, *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'*, in 1907. Hodgson married in 1913 and went to live for a while in southern France. When the First World War began he and his wife returned to England. He enlisted in 1915, receiving a commission in the Royal Field Artillery. While serving in France in 1916 he was thrown from a horse and badly injured. He returned to the front when he had recovered and was killed in action in April 1918, near Ypres.

WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

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the Borderland*



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*From the Manuscript, discovered in 1877
by Messrs Tonnison and Berreggnog,
in the Ruins that lie to the South of the Village
of Kraithen, in the West of Ireland.
Set out here, with Notes.*

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To
My Father
(Whose feet tread the lost aeons)

‘Open the door,
And listen!
Only the wind’s muffled roar,
And the glisten
Of tears round the moon.
And, in fancy, the tread
Of vanishing shoon –
Out in the night with the Dead.

‘Hush! and hark
To the sorrowful cry
Of the wind in the dark.
Hush and hark, without murmur or sigh,
To shoon that tread the lost aeons:
To the sound that bids you to die.
Hush and hark! Hush and hark!’

Shoon of the Dead

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INTRODUCTION

to the manuscript

Many are the hours in which I have pondered upon the story that is set forth in the following pages. Once and again, in my post as Editor, have I been tempted to (if I may coin so ungracious a word) 'literarise' it; but I trust that my instincts are not awry when they prompt me to leave the account, in simplicity, as it was handed to me.

And the MS. itself – You must picture me, when first it was given into my care, turning it over, curiously, and making a swift jerky examination. A small book it is; but thick, and all, save the last few pages, filled with a quaint but legible hand-writing, and writ very close. I have the queer, faint, pit-water smell of it in my nostrils now as I write, and my fingers have subconscious memories of the soft, 'cloggy' feel of the long-damp pages.

I recall, with just a slight effort, my first impression of the worded contents of the book – an impression of the fantastic, gathered from casual glances, and an unconcentrated attention.

Then, conceive of me comfortably a-seat for the evening, and the little, squat book and I, companions for some close, solitary hours. And the change that came upon my judgments! The emergence of a half-belief. From a *seeming* 'fantasia' there grew, to reward my unbiassed concentration, a cogent, coherent scheme of ideas that gripped my interest more securely than the mere bones of the *account* or *story*,

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whichever it be, and I confess to an inclination to use the first term. I found a greater story within the lesser – and the paradox is no paradox.

I read, and, in reading, lifted the Curtains of the Impossible, that blind the mind, and looked out into the unknown. Amid stiff, abrupt sentences I wandered; and, presently, I had no fault to charge against their abrupt tellings; for, better far than my own ambitious phrasing, is this mutilated story capable of bringing home all that the old Recluse, of the vanished house, has striven to tell.

Of the simple, stiffly given account of weird and extraordinary matters, I will say little. It lies before you. The inner story must be uncovered, personally, by each reader, according to ability and desire. And even should any fail to see, as now I see, the shadowed picture and conception of that, to which one may well give the accepted titles of Heaven and Hell; yet can I promise certain thrills, merely taking the story as a story.

One final impression, and I will cease from troubling. I cannot but look upon the account of the Celestial Globes as a striking illustration (how nearly had I said ‘proof’!) of the actuality of our thoughts and emotions among the Realities. For, without seeming to suggest the annihilation of the lasting reality of Matter, as the hub and framework of the Machine of Eternity, it enlightens one with conceptions of the existence of worlds of thought and emotion, working in conjunction with, and duly subject to, the scheme of material creation.

WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

*‘Glaneifion’,
Borth,
Cardiganshire,
December 17, 1907*

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GRIEF¹

'FIERCE hunger reigns within my breast,
I had not dreamt that this whole world,
Crushed in the hand of God, could yield
Such bitter essence of unrest,
Such pain as Sorrow now hath hurled
Out of its dreadful heart, unsealed!

'Each sobbing breath is but a cry,
My heart-strokes knells of agony,
And my whole brain has but one thought
That nevermore through life shall I
(Save in the ache of memory)
Touch hands with thee, who now art naught!

'Through the whole void of night I search,
So dumbly crying out to thee;
But thou art *not*; and night's vast throne
Becomes an all stupendous church
With star-bells knelling unto me
Who in all space am most alone!

'An hungered, to the shore I creep,
Perchance some comfort waits on me
From the old Sea's eternal heart;
But lo! from all the solemn deep,
Far voices out of mystery
Seem questioning why we are apart!

'Where'er I go I am alone
Who once, through thee, had all the world.
My breast is one whole raging pain
For that which *was*, and now is flown
Into the Blank where life is hurled
Where all is not, nor is again!'

¹These stanzas I found, in pencil, upon a piece of fools-cap, gummed in behind the fly-leaf of the MS. They have all the appearance of having been written at an earlier date than the Manuscript. — Ed.

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I

The Finding of the Manuscript

Right away in the west of Ireland lies a tiny hamlet called Kraithe. It is situated, alone, at the base of a low hill. Far around there spreads a waste of bleak and totally inhospitable country; where, here and there at great intervals, one may come upon the ruins of some long desolate cottage – unthatched and stark. The whole land is bare and unpeopled, the very earth scarcely covering the rock that lies beneath it, and with which the country abounds, in places rising out of the soil in wave-shaped ridges.

Yet, in spite of its desolation, my friend Tonnison and I had elected to spend our vacation there. He had stumbled on the place, by mere chance, the year previously, during the course of a long walking tour, and discovered the possibilities for the angler, in a small and unnamed river that runs past the outskirts of the little village.

I have said that the river is without name; I may add that no map that I have hitherto consulted has shown either village or stream. They seem to have entirely escaped observation: indeed, they might never exist for all that the average guide tells one. Possibly, this can be partly accounted for by the fact that the nearest railway-station (Ardahan) is some forty miles distant.

It was early one warm evening when my friend and I

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arrived in Kraithen. We had reached Ardrahan the previous night, sleeping there in rooms hired at the village post-office, and leaving in good time on the following morning, clinging insecurely to one of the typical jaunting cars.

It had taken us all day to accomplish our journey over some of the roughest tracks imaginable, with the result that we were thoroughly tired and somewhat bad tempered. However, the tent had to be erected, and our goods stowed away, before we could think of food or rest. And so we set to work, with the aid of our driver, and soon had the tent up, upon a small patch of ground just outside the little village, and quite near to the river.

Then, having stored all our belongings, we dismissed the driver, as he had to make his way back as speedily as possible, and told him to come across to us at the end of a fortnight. We had brought sufficient provisions to last us for that space of time, and water we could get from the stream. Fuel we did not need, as we had included a small oil-stove among our outfit, and the weather was fine and warm.

It was Tonnison's idea to camp out instead of getting lodgings in one of the cottages. As he put it, there was no joke in sleeping in a room with a numerous family of healthy Irish in one corner, and the pig-sty in the other, while overhead a ragged colony of roosting fowls distributed their blessings impartially, and the whole place so full of peat smoke that it made a fellow sneeze his head off just to put it inside the doorway.

Tonnison had got the stove lit now, and was busy cutting slices of bacon into the frying-pan; so I took the kettle and walked down to the river for water. On

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the way, I had to pass close to a little group of the village people, who eyed me curiously, but not in any unfriendly manner, though none of them ventured a word.

As I returned with my kettle filled, I went up to them and, after a friendly nod, to which they replied in like manner, I asked them casually about the fishing; but, instead of answering, they just shook their heads silently, and stared at me. I repeated the question, addressing more particularly a great, gaunt fellow at my elbow; yet again I received no answer. Then the man turned to a comrade and said something rapidly in a language that I did not understand; and, at once, the whole crowd of them fell to jabbering in what, after a few moments, I guessed to be pure Irish. At the same time they cast many glances in my direction. For a minute, perhaps, they spoke among themselves thus; then the man I had addressed, faced round at me, and said something. By the expression of his face I guessed that he, in turn, was questioning me; but now I had to shake my head, and indicate that I did not comprehend what it was they wanted to know: and so we stood looking at one another, until I heard Tonnison calling me to hurry up with the kettle. Then, with a smile and a nod, I left them, and all in the little crowd smiled and nodded in return, though their faces still betrayed their puzzlement.

It was evident, I reflected as I went towards the tent, that the inhabitants of these few huts in the wilderness did not know a word of English; and when I told Tonnison, he remarked that he was aware of the fact, and, more, that it was not at all uncommon in that part of the country, where the people often lived and

died in their isolated hamlets without ever coming in contact with the outside world.

‘I wish we had got the driver to interpret for us before he left,’ I remarked, as we sat down to our meal. ‘It seems so strange for the people of this place not even to know what we’ve come for.’

Tonnison grunted an assent, and thereafter was silent for awhile.

Later, having satisfied our appetites somewhat, we began to talk, laying our plans for the morrow; then, after a smoke, we closed the flap of the tent, and prepared to turn-in.

‘I suppose there’s no chance of those fellows outside taking anything?’ I asked, as we rolled ourselves in our blankets.

Tonnison said that he did not think so, at least while we were about; and, as he went on to explain, we could lock up everything, except the tent, in the big chest that we had brought to hold our provisions. I agreed to this, and soon we were both asleep.

Next morning, early, we rose and went for a swim in the river; after which we dressed, and had breakfast. Then we roused out our fishing tackle, and overhauled it, by which time, our breakfasts having settled somewhat, we made all secure within the tent, and strode off in the direction my friend had explored on his previous visit.

During the day we fished happily, working steadily up-stream, and by evening we had one of the prettiest creels of fish that I had seen for a long while. Returning to the village, we made a good feed off our day’s spoil, after which, having selected a few of the finer fish for our breakfast, we presented the remainder to the group

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of villagers who had assembled at a respectful distance to watch our doings. They seemed wonderfully grateful, and heaped mountains of, what I presumed to be, Irish blessings upon our heads.

Thus we spent several days, having splendid sport, and first-rate appetites to do justice upon our prey. We were pleased to find how friendly the villagers were inclined to be, and that there was no evidence of their having ventured to meddle with our belongings during our absences.

It was on a Tuesday that we arrived in Kraighten, and it would be on the Sunday following that we made a great discovery. Hitherto we had always gone up-stream; on that day, however, we laid aside our rods, and, taking some provisions, set off for a long ramble in the opposite direction. The day was warm, and we trudged along leisurely enough, stopping about midday to eat our lunch upon a great flat rock near the river bank. Afterwards, we sat and smoked awhile, resuming our walk, only when we were tired of inaction.

For, perhaps, another hour we wandered onwards, chatting quietly and comfortably on this and that matter, and on several occasions stopping while my companion – who is something of an artist – made rough sketches of striking bits of the wild scenery.

And then, without any warning whatsoever, the river we had followed so confidently, came to an abrupt end – vanishing into the earth.

‘Good Lord!’ I said, ‘who ever would have thought of this?’

And I stared in amazement; then I turned to Tonnison. He was looking, with a blank expression upon his face, at the place where the river disappeared.

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In a moment he spoke.

‘Let us go on a bit; it may reappear again – anyhow, it is worth investigating.’

I agreed, and we went forward once more, though rather aimlessly; for we were not at all certain in which direction to prosecute our search. For perhaps a mile we moved onwards; then Tonnison, who had been gazing about curiously, stopped and shaded his eyes.

‘See!’ he said, after a moment, ‘isn’t that mist, or something, over there to the right – away in a line with that great piece of rock?’ And he indicated with his hand.

I stared, and, after a minute, seemed to see something, but could not be certain, and said so.

‘Anyway,’ my friend replied, ‘we’ll just go across and have a glance.’ And he started off in the direction he had suggested, I following. Presently, we came among bushes, and, after a time, out upon the top of a high, boulder-strewn bank, from which we looked down into a wilderness of bushes and trees.

‘Seems as though we had come upon an oasis in this desert of stone,’ muttered Tonnison, as he gazed interestedly. Then he was silent, his eyes fixed; and I looked also; for up from somewhere about the centre of the wooded lowland there rose high into the quiet air a great column of haze-like spray, upon which the sun shone, causing innumerable rainbows.

‘How beautiful!’ I exclaimed.

‘Yes,’ answered Tonnison, thoughtfully. ‘There must be a waterfall, or something, over there. Perhaps it’s our river come to light again. Let’s go and see.’

Down the sloping bank we made our way, and entered among the trees and shrubberies. The bushes were

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