

Supernatural
Short Stories

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Charles Dickens



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*The Bagman's Story**

ONE WINTER'S EVENING, about five o'clock, just as it began to grow dusk, a man in a gig might have been seen urging his tired horse along the road which leads across Marlborough Downs, in the direction of Bristol. I say he might have been seen, and I have no doubt he would have been, if anybody but a blind man had happened to pass that way; but the weather was so bad, and the night so cold and wet, that nothing was out but the water, and so the traveller jogged along in the middle of the road, lonesome and dreary enough. If any bagman of that day could have caught sight of the little neck-or-nothing sort of gig, with a clay-coloured body and red wheels, and the vixenish ill-tempered, fast-going bay mare, that looked like a cross between a butcher's horse and a two-penny post-office pony, he would have known at once that this traveller could have been no other than Tom Smart, of the great house of Bilson and Slum, Cateaton Street, City. However, as there was no bagman to look on, nobody knew anything at all about the matter; and so Tom Smart and his clay-coloured gig with the red wheels, and the vixenish mare with the fast pace, went on together, keeping the secret among them – and nobody was a bit the wiser.

There are many pleasanter places even in this dreary world than Marlborough Downs when it blows hard; and if you throw in beside, a gloomy winter's evening, a miry and sloppy road and a pelting fall of heavy rain, and try the effect, by way of experiment, in your own proper person, you will experience the full force of this observation.

The wind blew – not up the road or down it, though that's bad enough, but sheer across it, sending the rain slanting down like the lines they used to rule in the copy books at school, to make the boys slope well. For a moment it would die away, and the traveller

would begin to delude himself into the belief that, exhausted with its previous fury, it had quietly lain itself down to rest, when – whoo! – he would hear it growling and whistling in the distance, and on it would come rushing over the hilltops and sweeping along the plain, gathering sound and strength as it drew nearer, until it dashed with a heavy gust against horse and man, driving the sharp rain into their ears and its cold damp breath into their very bones – and past them it would scour, far, far away, with a stunning roar, as if in ridicule of their weakness, and triumphant in the consciousness of its own strength and power.

The bay mare splashed away, through the mud and water, with drooping ears, now and then tossing her head as if to express her disgust at this very ungentlemanly behaviour of the elements, but keeping a good pace notwithstanding, until a gust of wind, more furious than any that had yet assailed them, caused her to stop suddenly and plant her four feet firmly against the ground, to prevent her being blown over. It's a special mercy that she did this, for if she *had* been blown over, the vixenish mare was so light, and the gig was so light, and Tom Smart such a light weight into the bargain, that they must infallibly have all gone rolling over and over together, until they reached the confines of earth, or until the wind fell – and in either case the probability is that neither the vixenish mare, nor the clay-coloured gig with the red wheels, nor Tom Smart, would ever have been fit for service again.

“Well, damn my straps and whiskers,” says Tom Smart (Tom sometimes had an unpleasant knack of swearing). “Damn my straps and whiskers,” says Tom, “if this ain't pleasant, blow me!”

You'll very likely ask me why, as Tom Smart had been pretty well blown already, he expressed this wish to be submitted to the same process again. I can't say – all I know is that Tom Smart said so – or at least he always told my uncle he said so, and it's just the same thing.

“Blow me,” says Tom Smart, and the mare neighed as if she were precisely of the same opinion.

“Cheer up, old girl,” said Tom, patting the bay mare on the neck with the end of his whip. “It won't do pushing on, such a night as

this; the first house we come to we'll put up at, so the faster you go the sooner it's over. Soho, old girl – gently – gently.”

Whether the vixenish mare was sufficiently well acquainted with the tones of Tom's voice to comprehend his meaning, or whether she found it colder standing still than moving on, of course I can't say. But I can say that Tom had no sooner finished speaking than she pricked up her ears and started forward at a speed which made the clay-coloured gig rattle till you would have supposed every one of the red spokes were going to fly out on the turf of Marlborough Downs; and even Tom, whip as he was, couldn't stop or check her pace, until she drew up, of her own accord, before a roadside inn on the right-hand side of the way, about half a quarter of a mile from the end of the Downs.

Tom cast a hasty glance at the upper part of the house as he threw the reins to the hostler and stuck the whip in the box. It was a strange old place, built of a kind of shingle – inlaid, as it were, with cross-beams, with gabled-topped windows projecting completely over the pathway and a low door with a dark porch, and a couple of steep steps leading down into the house, instead of the modern fashion of a half a dozen ones leading up to it. It was a comfortable-looking place though, for there was a strong cheerful light in the bar window, which shed a bright ray across the road and even lighted up the hedges on the other side; and there was a red flickering light in the opposite window, one moment but faintly discernible, and the next gleaming strongly through the drawn curtains, which intimated that a rousing fire was blazing within. Marking these little evidences with the eye of an experienced traveller, Tom dismounted with as much agility as his half-frozen limbs would permit and entered the house.

In less than five minutes' time, Tom was ensconced in the room opposite the bar – the very room where he had imagined the fire blazing – before a substantial matter-of-fact roaring fire, composed of something short of a bushel of coals, and wood enough to make half a dozen decent gooseberry bushes, piled halfway up the chimney, and roaring and crackling with a sound that of itself would have warmed the heart of any reasonable man. This was

comfortable, but this was not all, for a smartly dressed girl, with a bright eye and a neat ankle, was laying a very clean white cloth on the table; and as Tom sat with his slippered feet on the fender and his back to the open door, he saw a charming prospect of the bar reflected in the glass over the chimney piece, with delightful rows of green bottles and gold labels, together with jars of pickles and preserves, and cheeses and boiled hams, and rounds of beef, arranged on shelves in the most tempting and delicious array. Well, this was comfortable too, but even this was not all – for in the bar, seated at tea at the nicest possible little table, drawn close up before the brightest possible little fire, was a buxom widow of somewhere about eight-and-forty or thereabouts, with a face as comfortable as the bar, who was evidently the landlady of the house and the supreme ruler over all these agreeable possessions. There was only one drawback to the beauty of the whole picture, and that was a tall man – a very tall man – in a brown coat and bright basket buttons, and black whiskers, and wavy black hair, who was seated at tea with the widow, and who it required no great penetration to discover was in a fair way of persuading her to be a widow no longer, but to confer upon him the privilege of sitting down in that bar for and during the whole remainder of the term of his natural life.

Tom Smart was by no means of an irritable or envious disposition, but somehow or other the tall man with the brown coat and the bright basket buttons did rouse what little gall he had in his composition, and did make him feel extremely indignant: the more especially as he could now and then observe, from his seat before the glass, certain little affectionate familiarities passing between the tall man and the widow, which sufficiently denoted that the tall man was as high in favour as he was in size. Tom was fond of hot punch – I may venture to say he was *very* fond of hot punch – and after he had seen the vixenish mare well fed and well littered down, and had eaten every bit of the nice little hot dinner which the widow tossed up for him with her own hands, he just ordered a tumbler of it, by way of experiment. Now, if there was one thing in the whole range of domestic art which the

widow could manufacture better than another, it was this identical article; and the first tumbler was adapted to Tom Smart's taste with such peculiar nicety that he ordered a second with the least possible delay. Hot punch is a pleasant thing, gentlemen – an extremely pleasant thing under any circumstances – but in that snug old parlour, before the roaring fire, with the wind blowing outside till every timber in the old house creaked again, Tom Smart found it perfectly delightful. He ordered another tumbler, and then another – I am not quite certain whether he didn't order another after that – but the more he drank of the hot punch, the more he thought of the tall man.

“Confound his impudence!” said Tom to himself. “What business has he in that snug bar? Such an ugly villain too!” said Tom. “If the widow had any taste, she might surely pick up some better fellow than that.” Here Tom's eye wandered from the glass on the chimney piece to the glass on the table; and as he felt himself becoming gradually sentimental, he emptied the fourth tumbler of punch and ordered a fifth.

Tom Smart, gentlemen, had always been very much attached to the public line. It had long been his ambition to stand in a bar of his own, in a green coat, knee-cords and tops. He had a great notion of taking the chair at convivial dinners, and he had often thought how well he could preside in a room of his own in the talking way, and what a capital example he could set to his customers in the drinking department. All these things passed rapidly through Tom's mind as he sat drinking the hot punch by the roaring fire, and he felt very justly and properly indignant that the tall man should be in a fair way of keeping such an excellent house, while he, Tom Smart, was as far off from it as ever. So, after deliberating over the two last tumblers, whether he hadn't a perfect right to pick a quarrel with the tall man for having contrived to get into the good graces of the buxom widow, Tom Smart at last arrived at the satisfactory conclusion that he was a very ill-used and persecuted individual, and had better go to bed.

Up a wide and ancient staircase the smart girl preceded Tom, shading the chamber candle with her hand, to protect it from the

currents of air which in such a rambling old place might have found plenty of room to disport themselves in, without blowing the candle out – but which did blow it out nevertheless, thus affording Tom’s enemies an opportunity of asserting that it was he, and not the wind, who extinguished the candle, and that while he pretended to be blowing it alight again, he was in fact kissing the girl. Be this as it may, another light was obtained, and Tom was conducted through a maze of rooms and a labyrinth of passages to the apartment which had been prepared for his reception, where the girl bade him good night and left him alone.

It was a good large room with big closets, and a bed which might have served for a whole boarding school, to say nothing of a couple of oaken presses that would have held the baggage of a small army; but what struck Tom’s fancy most was a strange, grim-looking high-backed chair, carved in the most fantastic manner, with a flowered damask cushion and the round knobs at the bottom of the legs carefully tied up in red cloth, as if it had got the gout in its toes. Of any other queer chair, Tom would only have thought it *was* a queer chair, and there would have been an end of the matter; but there was something about this particular chair, and yet he couldn’t tell what it was, so odd and so unlike any other piece of furniture he had ever seen, that it seemed to fascinate him. He sat down before the fire and stared at the old chair for half an hour – Deuce take the chair: it was such a strange old thing, he couldn’t take his eyes off it.

“Well,” said Tom, slowly undressing himself and staring at the old chair all the while, which stood with a mysterious aspect by the bedside, “I never saw such a rum concern as that in my days. Very odd,” said Tom, who had got rather sage with the hot punch. “Very odd.” Tom shook his head with an air of profound wisdom and looked at the chair again. He couldn’t make anything of it though, so he got into bed, covered himself up warm and fell asleep.

In about half an hour, Tom woke up with a start from a confused dream of tall men and tumblers of punch: and the first object that presented itself to his waking imagination was the queer chair.

"I won't look at it any more," said Tom to himself, and he squeezed his eyelids together and tried to persuade himself he was going to sleep again. No use: nothing but queer chairs danced before his eyes, kicking up their legs, jumping over each other's backs and playing all kinds of antics.

"I may as well see one real chair as two or three complete sets of false ones," said Tom, bringing out his head from under the bedclothes. There it was, plainly discernible by the light of the fire, looking as provoking as ever.

Tom gazed at the chair, and suddenly, as he looked at it, a most extraordinary change seemed to come over it. The carving of the back gradually assumed the lineaments and expression of an old shrivelled human face; the damask cushion became an antique, flapped waistcoat; the round knobs grew into a couple of feet, encased in red-cloth slippers; and the old chair looked like a very ugly old man of the previous century, with his arms akimbo. Tom sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes to dispel the illusion. No. The chair was an ugly old gentleman – and what was more, he was winking at Tom Smart.

Tom was naturally a headlong, careless sort of dog, and he had had five tumblers of hot punch into the bargain; so, although he was a little startled at first, he began to grow rather indignant when he saw the old gentleman winking and leering at him with such an impudent air. At length he resolved that he wouldn't stand it; and as the old face still kept winking away as fast as ever, Tom said, in a very angry tone:

"What the devil are you winking at me for?"

"Because I like it, Tom Smart," said the chair – or the old gentleman, whichever you like to call him. He stopped winking though, when Tom spoke, and began grinning like a superannuated monkey.

"How do you know my name, old nut-cracker face!" enquired Tom Smart, rather staggered – though he pretended to carry it off so well.

"Come, come, Tom," said the old gentleman, "that's not the way to address solid Spanish mahogany. Dam' me, you couldn't treat me with less respect if I was veneered." When the old

gentleman said this, he looked so fierce that Tom began to grow frightened.

"I didn't mean to treat you with any disrespect, sir," said Tom, in a much humbler tone than he had spoken in at first.

"Well, well," said the old fellow, "perhaps not – perhaps not. Tom..."

"Sir..."

"I know everything about you, Tom – everything. You're very poor, Tom."

"I certainly am," said Tom Smart. "But how came you to know that?"

"Never mind that," said the old gentleman. "You're much too fond of punch, Tom."

Tom Smart was just on the point of protesting that he hadn't tasted a drop since his last birthday, but when his eye encountered that of the old gentleman, he looked so knowing that Tom blushed and was silent.

"Tom," said the old gentleman, "the widow's a fine woman – remarkably fine woman – eh, Tom?" Here the old fellow screwed up his eyes, cocked up one of his wasted little legs, and looked altogether so unpleasantly amorous that Tom was quite disgusted with the levity of his behaviour – at his time of life, too!

"I am her guardian, Tom," said the old gentleman.

"Are you?" enquired Tom Smart.

"I knew her mother, Tom," said the old fellow, "and her grandmother. She was very fond of me – made me this waistcoat, Tom."

"Did she?" said Tom Smart.

"And these shoes," said the old fellow, lifting up one of the red-cloth mufflers. "But don't mention it, Tom. I shouldn't like to have it known that she was so much attached to me. It might occasion some unpleasantness in the family." When the old rascal said this, he looked so extremely impertinent that, as Tom Smart afterwards declared, he could have sat upon him without remorse.

"I have been a great favourite among the women in my time, Tom," said the profligate old debauchee. "Hundreds of fine women have sat in my lap for hours together. What do you think of that,

you dog, eh!" The old gentleman was proceeding to recount some other exploits of his youth, when he was seized with such a violent fit of creaking that he was unable to proceed.

"Just served you right, old boy," thought Tom Smart – but he didn't say anything.

"Ah!" said the old fellow, "I am a good deal troubled with this now. I am getting old, Tom, and have lost nearly all my rails. I have had an operation performed, too – a small piece let into my back – and I found it a severe trial, Tom."

"I dare say you did, sir," said Tom Smart.

"However," said the old gentleman, "that's not the point. Tom! I want you to marry the widow."

"Me, sir!" said Tom.

"You," said the old gentleman.

"Bless your reverend locks," said Tom – (he had a few scattered horse hairs left) – "bless your reverend locks, she wouldn't have me." And Tom sighed involuntarily, as he thought of the bar.

"Wouldn't she?" said the old gentleman, firmly.

"No, no," said Tom. "There's somebody else in the wind. A tall man – a confoundedly tall man – with black whiskers."

"Tom," said the old gentleman, "she will never have him."

"Won't she?" said Tom. "If you stood in the bar, old gentleman, you'd tell another story."

"Pooh, pooh," said the old gentleman. "I know all about that."

"About what?" said Tom.

"About kissing behind the door, and all that sort of thing, Tom," said the old gentleman. And here he gave another impudent look, which made Tom very wroth, because as you all know, gentlemen, to hear an old fellow, who ought to know better, talking about these things is very unpleasant – nothing more so.

"I know all about that, Tom," said the old gentleman. "I have seen it done very often in my time, Tom, between more people than I should like to mention to you – but it never came to anything after all."

"You must have seen some queer things," said Tom, with an inquisitive look.

“You may say that, Tom,” replied the old fellow, with a very complicated wink. “I am the last of my family, Tom,” said the old gentleman, with a melancholy sigh.

“Was it a large one?” enquired Tom Smart.

“There were twelve of us, Tom,” said the old gentleman, “fine straight-backed, handsome fellows as you’d wish to see. None of your modern abortions – all with arms, and with a degree of polish (though I say it that should not) which would have done your heart good to behold.”

“And what’s become of the others, sir?” asked Tom Smart.

The old gentleman applied his elbow to his eye as he replied: “Gone, Tom, gone. We had hard service, Tom, and they hadn’t all my constitution. They got rheumatic about the legs and arms, and went into kitchens and hospitals; and one of ’em, with long service and hard usage, positively lost his senses – he got so crazy that he was obliged to be burnt. Shocking thing that, Tom.”

“Dreadful!” said Tom Smart.

The old fellow paused for a few minutes, apparently struggling with his feelings of emotion, and then said:

“However, Tom, I am wandering from the point. This tall man, Tom, is a rascally adventurer. The moment he married the widow, he would sell off all the furniture and run away. What would be the consequence? She would be deserted and reduced to ruin, and I should catch my death of cold in some broker’s shop.”

“Yes, but...”

“Don’t interrupt me,” said the old gentleman. “Of you, Tom, I entertain a very different opinion, for I well know that if you once settled yourself in a public house, you would never leave it, as long as there was anything to drink within its walls.”

“I am very much obliged to you for your good opinion, sir,” said Tom Smart.

“Therefore,” resumed the old gentleman, in a dictatorial tone, “you shall have her, and he shall not.”

“What is to prevent it?” said Tom Smart, eagerly.

“This disclosure,” replied the old gentleman. “He is already married.”