

The Bremley Ritual by Frank Hibberd

'I'm going to help my mother,' said Bernard.

'Oh, dear!' said Tom. 'Has she got problems?'

'She's bewitched!'

Tom raised his eyebrows.

'Some handsome, middle-aged Lothario?'

Bernard shook his head impatiently.

'No, no! She's had a spell put on her by a witch.'

'Ah!' said Tom. He felt he needed time to think this over.

'Do you fancy some trifle?'

Bernard's brow cleared.

'Oo yes, that'd be nice.'

It was too early for most of the usual lunch crowd in the café, so Tom was able to beckon a waitress and place the order.

'Sooooo.....,' said Tom eventually. 'What's the effect of this spell?'

Bernard looked worried again.

'My mother's wasting away. She says she's lost a stone. And she's feeling anxious all the time'

'Has she seen a doctor?'

'Of course.'

'Did she tell him about the spell?'

'That was before she realised. He just gave her some tranquillisers. Anyway, he wouldn't have believed her, would he?'

Tom was relieved to note a touch of realism in his friend.

'How *did* she come to realise it?'

'She has felt this "presence" from time to time, kind of weighing down on her.'

'Who's doing it?'

Bernard shrugged.

'That's one of the problems. She doesn't know. I'm taking some unpaid leave, so I can go down there to try and sort things out.'

Tom nodded. They sat in silence for a time.

'Look,' said Tom, 'I've still got some leave days left. I'll come with you. Bremchester, isn't it.'

'No, they've recently moved back to Bremley, where I was born. That's very good of you. Can we go tomorrow?'

The village was a mixture of thatched cottages and mature red-brick houses, mostly, like the Hollis's, with large bay windows. Mrs. Hollis led them into a sitting room, whose furnishings were comfortably old-fashioned. 'This is a very ordinary house,' the room said. Mr. Hollis sat in a chair by the fireplace – though on this warm August day there was no need for a fire. After greeting them he returned to his newspaper. Mrs. Hollis sat down on a sofa and waved to the two friends to join her. Tom thought that if Bernard's mum *had* lost weight,, she was still far from skeletal.

Bernard looked at her anxiously.

'How are you, mum? You poor thing! You don't look well.'

His mother nodded.

'No, I'm not. I'm very troubled, Bernie. Every time I go out, I feel this burden, as though someone is sitting on my shoulders. Someone evil, who wants to hurt me. I look around, but no-one seems to be taking any notice of me. And my appetite has gone. And I can't enjoy the telly, or anything. It's terrible. My life seems hardly worth living.'

She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

Bernard put his arm around her.

'Oh dear, mum. I'm so sorry. We must do something about it. What does dad think?'

Mrs Hollis leant forward and lowered her voice.

'Jim's getting a bit past it. He's not much use for anything these days.'

To Tom's surprise, Mr. Hollis, hidden from his wife by the newspaper, gave the two friends an expressive wink, and returned to his reading.

Tom turned to Bernard's mum.

'Try not to worry, Mrs. Hollis. I'm sure Bernard and I can get to the bottom of this.'

He smiled at her.

'You're being very brave.'

'Oh, thank you, thank you, Tom!'

Mrs. Hollis grabbed him and gave him a smacking kiss on the lips, then coyly withdrew. Tom felt he was getting a number of surprises that day.

The sign outside the Grinning Donkey was suitably cartoonish, though there might have been a touch of devilment in the donkey's expression. Bernard had suggested that they should follow Sherlock Holmes's example, and try to pick up on local gossip in a hostelry. The obvious regulars in the saloon bar briefly noted the presence of strangers, then returned to their conversations. The well-polished bar counter displayed a selection of beer pumps, which appeared to be genuine. The landlord was friendly but not obsequious, and they accepted his recommendation of Bremchester's Best Bitter.

Bernard had agreed to leave Tom to lead any conversation. Tom was afraid that Bernard's idea of a discreet enquiry would be to shout out, 'Anyone here involved in witchcraft?' They wandered amongst the crowd, sipping their beers, listening for any possible helpful snippet of conversation, without success. Everything seemed quite normal. Then Tom noticed a well-dressed, elegant middle-aged lady sitting alone in a window seat, sipping from a wine glass and reading a book. He moved towards her.

'Ah, Reg Barnacle I see. I do enjoy his gardening tips. My onion crop has really improved.'

She smiled.

'I'm more of an orchid person myself – but I do grow the occasional onion.'

'May we join you?'

She nodded assent. Tom sat down beside her, and gestured to Bernard to sit opposite her. He didn't want him to sit on her other side, possibly making her feel hedged in.

'I'm Tom, and this is Bernard.'

He raised his eyebrows.

'Marguerite.'

'Nice to meet you, Marguerite. Have you lived in the village long?'

'Over thirty years.'

'Since you were a child, then.'

Marguerite wagged a finger at him.

'Don't overdo it, young man, or I shall think you're making advances.'

Tom laughed.

'I apologise. No advances intended. Let me get you a drink. Dry sherry, is it?'

'So, now you're trying to break down my inhibitions.' She smiled. 'But yes, thank you. That's kind of you.'

Tom got the drink from the bar and returned to his seat. He was relieved that Bernard had apparently not tried to take the initiative. But he was giving him a get-on-with-it kind of look.

Tom took up the conversation.

'After thirty years, you must know a lot about what goes on in the village. What clubs and societies there are, for example.'

'A little,' Marguerite replied. 'I am beginning to be accepted.' She thought for a moment. 'Well, there is the Women's Institute, of course. There's the bridge club. The cricket club and a croquet club – they share the same field. And a local history society –'

'Ah!' Tom interrupted. 'That sounds interesting. Are you a member?'

'I am the secretary.'

'What kind of topics have arisen? That peculiar hill just off the Bremchester Road, for example?'

Marguerite nodded.

'Well spotted! Yes, that's the remains of a motte and bailey. Probably eleventh century, ordered by William the Conqueror.'

'How interesting! And didn't the Witchfinder General operate in these parts?'

Marguerite shuddered.

'Yes, and one innocent girl in the village was sent to the gallows by that black-hearted man.'

'No witches here in those days, then,' said Tom. He took a chance. 'What about today?'

She smiled.

'Have you seen any?'

'No. Everything seems very – ordinary.'

'In that case, perhaps we need a witch to wake us up. Perhaps she could get the villagers dancing naked on the village green, by the light of a blazing bonfire. Would that make you happy?'

Marguerite asked, laughing.

Tom and Bernard laughed with her.

'Now, that *would* be interesting,' said Tom.

Marguerite finished her drink and stood up.

'I'm afraid I have to leave now. I'm glad to have met you. Are you staying here?'

'We're staying with my mother, Mrs. Hollis,' said Bernard.

'Ah, Mrs. Hollis.'

Marguerite hesitated for a moment.

'Well, I wish you both good night. I'm sure we shall meet again.'

They stood up to say good night as she left.

Bernard rubbed his hands together, grinning.

'I reckon she was dropping a few hints, you know.'

Tom shrugged.

'I don't know *what* to think. But everything is so damned normal, I get the feeling that something *is* brewing up. Anyway, let's get back.'

Bernard claimed that he knew that witches were always aware of being watched, and would fix their gaze on the watcher. He had noticed a box tree with low-hanging branches on the edge of the village green, and suggested that they could use it to covertly watch passersby. Tom had no great hopes, but agreed to indulge his friend for an hour or two in the morning.

After three-quarters of an hour of watching villagers who appeared to be blithely unaware of their presence, Tom had had enough.

'Come on, Bernard, we're wasting our time. We'll have to try some other approach.'

Bernard shrugged.

'OK, I give up. Just a minute!'

A beautiful blonde-haired woman in a short sleeveless dress was walking past the few village shops. She had her eyes fixed on their hiding place. They both involuntarily drew back.

'That must be the witch,' said Bernard excitedly. 'Now we can get our revenge!'

'Stop looking,' said Tom.

He glanced up from time to time, until he saw her go into one of the thatched cottages.

'Perhaps we can find out more about her,' he said. 'But don't mention her to your parents yet.'

'So what do we do now?' asked Bernard.

'Look, why don't we try asking at the police station. Someone might have reported something funny going on.'

Neither of them could remember seeing an official-looking building. They walked through the village, where they exchanged good mornings with several villagers. Suspiciously normal, Tom thought.

They found that one of the smaller red-brick houses had a sign 'POLICE' in the front garden. The man who answered the door was in shirtsleeves, wearing uniform trousers.

'Morning, gents. Constable Lakin, at your service.' He looked at Bernard. 'You must be young Bernard Hollis.'

'That's me,' said Bernard. 'How did you know?'

'It's part of my job to know what's going on in the village.'

He led them into a utilitarian room with a table and a few hard chairs. Another uniformed policeman appeared, and followed them in.

'This is Sergeant Wilkins, gentlemen,' said Constable Lakin. The sergeant nodded. 'He's visiting for the day. Now, what can I do for you? Not much crime around here, you know.'

'I'm not sure it's crime we're asking about,' said Tom. 'We're wondering if you've had any reports of witchcraft or any such funny business in the area.'

The policemen looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

'Well,' said the sergeant, 'there's Maggie Brindle, getting hitched to young Arthur. She must have put a spell on him!'

'And Fred Gardner, with his giant prize-winning marrows,' said the constable. 'He must be using magic.'

'And joking apart?' said Tom.

'Well, I've heard no complaints of that nature in the last thirty years,' said Sergeant Wilkins. 'If you want to go further back, we'd have to check at the main station in Bremchester. I can do that tomorrow, if you want.'

Tom saw that Bernard was about to speak, and quickly forestalled him.

'That's very kind, but there's no need to trouble yourselves. It's just idle curiosity on our part.'

He rose to his feet.

'We mustn't take up any more of your time. Good day to you, gents.'

As they walked away, Bernard asked, 'Why didn't you press them a bit harder?'

'Well,' said Tom, 'the fact that the sergeant is here is the first unusual event today. I more and more have the feeling that something's going to happen. And those coppers are going to be involved.'

Acting on a hunch, in the late afternoon Tom walked out of the village along the Bremchester road. As he went around a bend he saw Constable Lakin setting up a roadblock. He quickly retreated out of sight.

Back at the Hollis's house, he took Bernard to one side.

'Something's definitely on. It's the box tree again for us.'

As dusk was falling they walked as unobtrusively as possible to the village green, and took up their positions. They soon became aware of activity on the green. Many people seemed to be building some kind of structure. Eventually there was a lick of flame which grew slowly into a huge bonfire. 'Good God, look at that!' whispered Bernard.

People were dancing around the fire. And they were naked. Tom was sure he could see Marguerite among them. Some were rolling on the grass. Tom mentally classified their antics as 'gambolling'. Suddenly the two friends were surrounded by naked bodies. They were dragged, struggling, from their hiding place. Tom recognised the landlord and some regulars from the pub, Sergeant Wilkins, some of the villagers they had seen that day, and – Mr. and Mrs. Hollis.

Jim Hollis had a well-shaped muscular body, and was noticeably well-endowed. When combined with his neatly pointed black beard, the impression he gave – Tom thought – was of a satyr.

Mrs. Hollis, though presumably well into her forties, had retained her youthful figure. Tom felt a flush of desire, before his thoughts returned to his plight.

'You said, no funny business,' Tom said to Sergeant Wilkins.

'I said no complaints,' he replied. 'Do you hear any?'

Tom turned to Jim Hollis.

'What do you think you're doing,' he demanded.

Jim spoke in a commanding voice.

'We had to get Bernard to come here and to stay here, for the Bremley Ritual. It is for the welfare of us all.'

'Except for us, I suppose. I warn you, if you propose to carry out some kind of sacrificial ceremony, our colleagues know where we are ...'

Jim threw back his head and gave a loud, booming laugh.

'The Bremley Ritual, in full, is the Bremley Mating Ritual. It requires a man born in Bremley of a Bremley mother, and a girl with the same qualifications.'

He clapped Bernard on the shoulder, and pointed.

Near the fire stood the girl they had seen that morning. Her golden hair flowed down to her shoulders, and the fire's glow was echoed in her naked body. She held out her arms towards Bernard.

'Wow!' shouted Bernard, and he ran towards her, throwing off his clothes as he went. Their bodies intertwined.

'Well,' Tom said to himself. 'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em'.

He picked up Mrs. Hollis and carried her towards the fire.