

The Phantom Rider

by John Herbert Marr

A sprinkling of frost, which a low wintry sun had been unable to lift, still lay on the earth. The ground was hard, and the men would have found it difficult to do their work; but they had finished now and were standing round in small groups, stamping their feet and blowing snowy breath on their chapped fingers. They seemed genuinely pleased to see me, probably knowing that their vigil was almost over, and glad no doubt as I should be to go home to their families; for it was Christmas Eve, and I remembered with joy the anticipation of my own children at this time, and how they had begged me to return quickly.

A uniformed Inspector detached himself from one group and strolled over as I climbed from my car. I recognised him from several previous occasions we had worked together, and after preliminary introductions he quickly sketched in the details of my call. “The bones are over here, doc.” He pointed and led me across. “These workmen found them when they were excavating for the new extension to Quires Lane here; and not before time – a real accident black spot this. Just a formality really,” he continued, “to confirm they’re human. They look pretty old to me.”

I could see his point. Often bones were found when road works or building sites were excavated and often they turned out to be simple animal remains; but always the police were called if there was any doubt. The assorted collection of bones before me now left no doubt, for they were clearly of human origin, and I could discern the skull peering through the mud, though the mandible had become detached and was not visible. The remains were also quite old, though I would not confirm that immediately: often seemingly ancient bones would clean up remarkably using simple tap water to remove the mud. The sun had gone now, and there was a fresh chill to the air as it grew darker. “I’ve informed the Coroner, doc; let me know as soon as you’re done,” the Inspector continued, and I nodded half attentively, for something strange about the skeleton had caught my eye.

“How much disturbance was there to the site?” I asked.

“Difficult to say really,” he replied. “We were called as soon as the first bones were found, then they used hand tools for the rest.” I noted the hand tools and sighed. They were

heavy clay spades and pick-axes, used by inexperienced navvies who still stood in a disinterested group, making the most of the unexpected break in their labours. Not for the first time on these cases, I remembered fondly an old friend and archaeologist with whom I once worked, and the care with which he would lovingly remove earth from his digs, using first a small hand trowel, then managing the final stages with tiny forceps. But the police had a job to do, and if the remains were genuinely ancient they would be satisfied to strike it from their file, without caring for historical detail.

“I’d appreciate a look at the photos when they’re through,” I requested. They would be better than nothing, and at least the forensic photographer could be sure to have recorded each stage of the excavation.

The Inspector agreed readily, and his men proceeded to collect the remains in polythene carriers, then with final permission the foreman chivvied his reluctant team back to work, with his full Irish brogue singing out imprecations that would put lesser souls in perdition.

The pathology department was deserted when I arrived, though it was still only four o’clock. The technicians had joined one of the ward parties, I surmised, and they would not be back for another three days now, unless called for some emergency. I laid out the remains on one of the marble topped mortuary slabs, and began sluicing off the encrustations. One of the hands was remarkably complete, I noted. A ring still encircled an adherent phalanx, and this alone was sufficient to verify the age of the skeleton. It was of bronze, remarkably well preserved in our local clays, with a faint embellishment of verdigris. There were some markings on its flat surface which I could not distinguish, but I was certain it was Mediaeval if not Saxon in origin.

I phoned the Inspector’s office with my findings, adding that I would take it to the local museum for official verification and dating after the holiday; then without thought I wrapped it in tissue and pocketed it as a curiosity to show my family. I looked again at the remains, my professional interest aroused now by how this man might have died.

The mandible was still missing, (but it was common enough for some bones to disappear through earth movements during the centuries they had lain there); otherwise the remains were remarkably complete, and I judged the deceased to have been a healthy male,

and probably in his early twenties. But the long bones of the lower limbs drew my attention as I laid them out. Both tibiae and fibulae were divided obliquely, and crushed as though the legs had fractured. The breaks were too precise to be post-mortem changes, and that they had occurred shortly before death was also certain, for they showed no evidence of that bony over-growth which characterises healing in the living tissue. I gave up thinking of it and acknowledged my ignorance, realising afresh how rarely we could see more than a glimpse into that closed world of time past. I had no chance for further examinations as I remembered my waiting family, and I recollect locking the door to the Pathology Department and starting for home.

It is said that some people can sense a premonition of disaster: yet I remember no such foreboding as I set off. It had grown fully dark now with a scattering of brighter stars visible as I drove out, even against the lights of the hospital. The road snaked at first, and I turned thankfully onto the straight stretch, cruising steadily at about fifty. The red lights of a slower vehicle were before me, and as I drew up I recognised one of the tankers from the local refinery, returning no doubt to its base, and I pulled out to pass. The road was completely clear, though some way in the distance I noted the lights of another car approaching. I glanced over my shoulder to affirm I was clear of the tanker, and at that moment my fear began. Even now as I recollect those events so long after, I remember the sweat which came to my brow, and I felt a deep aching cold such as I have never experienced in any other place.

The tanker driver had accelerated as I passed him, and was now matching my own speed. I tried to accelerate more, and then thought to brake and pull in behind him, but he matched my speed exactly; and I shall never forget the malicious almost evil grin of the driver – his face framed in the headlights of the oncoming car – as he turned and leered down at me.

The whole incident must have been over within five seconds. My lane was blocked, and the car ahead was almost upon me and blaring its horn. My only escape was to turn off the road – onto the very ditch where I had stood so short a time before; and after that I remember nothing.

When finally I did recover consciousness, it was in the orthopaedic ward of my own hospital, and a full three days after the accident. I had missed Christmas completely, but my wife, bless her, had sat with me throughout, and was there now: the first person I saw. I tried to speak, but could not then, though I heard her voice, and felt rather than saw her tears, as she brushed my face with her hair.

Only later did the facts begin to emerge, as the police questioned me. My car had spun and turned on its back before rolling across the road works onto the edge of the field. But strangely, the driver of the other car swore he had only seen my lights coming towards him: and when the police tried to trace the tanker driver to verify my account, they discovered that none of the refinery vehicles had left the depot on Christmas Eve. I was left perplexed, wondering if the whole scene had been some wicked product of my concussion and damaged brain; yet why had I been on that side of the road? I knew I had not been drinking, and though the police were civil enough not to harangue me about this, I could forego their minds on it.

The Inspector I knew visited me out of courtesy some days later, but could not resist the facile comment that it had always been a dangerous stretch, and tempted people to go too fast: not that he thought I had, he amended himself, adding “There’s always some accident there over Christmas. I remember one particularly nasty case of hit and run some years ago- I’d just joined the force then, and was still raw and impressionable. A lad was knocked off his bike and left unconscious. He wasn’t found for two days, and we never discovered the driver involved. Come to think of it,” he mused, “there was a tanker like you described in a fatal there about four years ago – jack-knifed into an oncoming lorry, it did, and the driver was killed outright.”

He stopped talking then and left, for I was tired and he must have seen the spasm of pain on my face. “See you around, doc,” he called from the door. “Don’t let them get you down!”

It was some months before I was fully back to work. The skeletal remains which had been my last case were reburied now, on the assumption that they were post-Roman and hence Christian, and worthy of proper rites. Roman remains were considered pagan, and could be dealt with accordingly without ceremony, usually ending buried in the vaults of a

local museum. I stopped short in my thoughts, for I was becoming cynical, and did not trust this new mood. Indeed, my wife was the first to notice the change that had befallen me since my accident; or perhaps she was the only one with courage to tell me. I had become sullen and short tempered, and quite intolerant of my laboratory staff. I threw myself with renewed energy into my work, but it was not sufficient to suppress the image of that heinous face in the cab, which haunted me constantly, and filled my nights with terror until I could no longer sleep without sedation – a thing I had never done before. I found myself studying every tanker I passed, and I even became obsessive enough to visit the refinery on one occasion to wait at the gate, though thankfully this phase passed, and I began to repress the disturbed images in my mind until I returned to some semblance of normality.

I was visited at about this time by an elderly man whom I had once helped professionally some years before. He had had a suspicious tumour biopsied, and I had examined the slides and been able to tell him there was no malignancy. He had a memorable name, having been christened Baden Powell Wilson from a time when that hero was fashionable; also he had an artificial limb with which he managed quite well, and I recognised him at once as he came into my office, though usually my ability to match names to faces is atrocious.

He told me now that he had always remembered me with gratitude (though indeed I had done little enough) and he had read of my accident with concern as it had been reported in the local press, and was pleased to learn of my recovery. He then began to tell me a tale which seemed incredible as he described it. He pointed to his stiff right leg, and I could see the shape of the knee brace through his trousers as he sat before me. “I lost my leg right where you went and ‘ad your accident,” he told me, and as he explained I felt again that dreadful icy desolation, and the hair on my neck began to prickle until I was trembling. “Yes,” he continued, “the very same spot. I were a young ‘un then, no’but a lad of fifteen; I helped my dad on the land there, and we turned back to cut across the track.” I knew the path to which he referred: it had always been a right of way, and there had been a considerable rumpus by the Rambling Association when the footpath was ploughed over. “Anyway, we was hurrying like, there being a nip in the air, when a coach and pair swerved right across us. Them horses was wild – the coachman swore they must have seen summat to scare ‘em like

that – but they sent me skedaddling, and the coach wheel took off my leg like it were butter to the knife.”

His vivid recollection, and quiet manner of recounting his story impressed me, and I began to take in the significance of his discourse, though I could not pretend to comprehend it. But he had more to relate; for after his own accident, his father told him of a great uncle who had died in similar circumstances, save that he had been riding a hunter which had taken fright and bolted, throwing him from his mount and cracking his skull. From that time, this old man had collected cuttings and stories linking this spot of highway, and these he now produced in the manner of an attorney laying out his case. I sent for refreshment and began to peruse the yellowing papers he laid before me. It was uncanny, and I had a vague sense of *deja-vu* as I saw story after story of injury, death, or near-miss at that otherwise featureless stretch of road.

Finally, the cuttings he showed me were more recent, the photographs less dated; until suddenly I gasped with astonishment at one face that lay before me. The paper was dated just four years previously, and showed a young man with not unpleasant features; but in my mind’s eye, they changed and twisted and hung in the very air before me as I had seen him in that cab, until I cried out and reached to touch him – or ward him off: for I saw the face in my unrest like some odious mask to hide the demonic soul within.

My companion saw my distress, and touched my arm to steady me. “That’s him, innit?” he stated, his voice still quiet and flat-toned, calming the coils of my agitation. “Aye, Jo Skelton that one were – the last to die on Quires Lane: and it were nearly your turn next-but now he’ll have to look for another.”

Despite the freshness of my experience, and the uncanny resemblance between the images captured on the photograph and in my brain, I could take no more from this ancient. My whole life had been trained to ratiocination, and I could deduce nothing from this cripple’s nonsense. “That tanker was real!” I breathed the words with quiet conviction, but already the insidious suggestions began their work as I started to question my own sanity, and to doubt the evidence of my senses. If that was but imagery, wherein does reality lie? “You’d better go now,” I said, and he rose and moved to the door, unperturbed by my dismissal.

“You’ll see,” he answered in parting, “It’ll go on until there’s another dead – then it’ll be their turn. There’s another thing.” He paused until he had drawn my full attention. “I checked an old map of that place in the museum: the main track then were what’s now the footpath – there never used to be no main road there at all. And that old track were called Quietus Way in them days.”

He left me then to a tumult of thoughts which threatened to overwhelm me; for here was uncovered a new world and I shrank from the implications with dread, as a man might step back from the rim of some volcano, knowing the unheralded power awaiting to erupt from the unseen deep. I simply could not believe the connections the old man had shown me, and cursed myself for my irrational foolishness. I turned absently to the cabinet in the corner, resolving to occupy my mind with work. Then – led by some inner compulsion and almost without thought – I withdrew the file on the remains which had been the prime mover behind my accident. I had not retrieved it since coming back, and its only entry was the case number, and the hastily penciled jottings which I had left in the mortuary, and which an assistant must have tidily docketed. A packet was also in the file, addressed to me, and as I puzzled over its contents I recollected the photographs I had requested, and which had been duly filed in my absence.

I laid them out before me, and my clouded memory of that time began to clear as I saw again the strange fractures to the limbs and the odd posture of the original skeleton, with its arms outstretched and its legs drawn under. I realised then what I had seen that afternoon: an unknown man had crawled away to die following some terrible accident, and had never been found by his family, and I reflected how my visitor had lost his limb, and his warnings of further deaths. Suddenly one feature on the plates before me tugged a distant image into consciousness, and for the first time I remembered the ring I had so carefully wrapped.

I rushed home, hoping for reassurance, yet already fearing the answer I was to hear. “But darling,” my wife explained, sensing my distress, “Your old suit was terribly damaged and muddy. I gave it to some gypsies who came begging.”

So there it was. I conjecture now whether that malevolent power resides in the ring, to travel round the countryside until bringing a fateful vengeance to its owner; or perhaps it is the scene itself which is the locus of so much violent destruction as the old man had

enumerated to me – and God knows how much before Mr. Wilson had kept his tariff. I can do nothing now, except wait. But I have already resolved that nothing will take me on that road again at Christmas – for next time it might be the image of my face which tortures others to the brink of death.