

The Burning Rider

Short Horror Tale No.8

By
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The Burning Rider

"If the Burning Rider is just a dumb fairy tale," stated Jane tersely, "...why has no one lived in Lydchurch for over three hundred years?"

Five of us were crowded around the table in the roadside cafe. Two were heavily-biased against the idea of a legendary, ghostly figure of vengeance; one was a stalwart believer in all things supernatural; one didn't care and just wanted to make money. And then there was me. I've been called a debunker of the supernatural, because on numerous occasions I've revealed hoaxes or discovered non-supernatural causes. Really, I'm just an open-minded guy who seeks out the truth of a situation – I'd be happy if the truth was a ghost rather than a charlatan or some natural event.

The two sceptics were Nadia Palin and Tim Jordan.

Nadia was a Professor of History, dividing her time between lectures at a university and writing books on archaeology. She was a tall, wiry, hatchet-faced woman in her late fifties; her grey hair was as wild as her tongue was sarcastic. To the Professor, everything was black and white, proven or fake, and she accepted no middle ground. Nadia considered the subject of the supernatural to be an insult to her superior intellect, although this hadn't stopped her from being paid to visit Lydchurch. Just being in the presence of this tweed-suited egotist made me want to strangle her.

Tim Jordan was Nadia's opposite in demeanour. One of those really nice guys who would like to explain, in quite a jolly manner, that you were wrong and he was always right. Tim was much shorter than his co-sceptic, no more than five foot two, and his well-muscled bulk was testing the tensile strength of the casual denim clothing he wore – jeans and a jacket, and a cowboy-style shirt underneath. The baldness of his head was more than made up for by the bushiness of his heavy ginger beard. Gold rings on most of his fingers and a thick gold chain around his neck told of the man's considerable wealth. Tim had emigrated from Texas to the UK a few years ago, retiring in his sixtieth year from a career as a TV Presenter – he'd been famous for a series of historical documentaries. Whereas Nadia was here for the money and esteem, Tim was here to break the boredom of retirement.

Jane Wolfe, our solitary Believer, was the youngest member of the party. In her mid-twenties and a few years out of university, she bore the attitude of a downtrodden crusader. Almost as tall as Nadia, Jane possessed the slim, toned body of a gym regular. Her hair was cut to shoulder length and was of an odd, dyed red; her face could once have been beautiful, with intelligent green eyes, high cheekbones and lips which possessed a natural pout. Unfortunately, anger had twisted Jane's former beauty, and made her one of those people you quickly knew could be trouble. She was ready to argue at an instant's notice and was near-fanatical in her determination to be proven right. To Jane, you were either a supporter or an enemy.

Cavendish McFarley was the greedy member of our little group. Avarice seemed to glimmer from every detail of his being. Cav – I called him Cav, much to his horror – wore a three-piece, dark blue Savile Row suit that was ridiculous for the kind of journey we were making. He had a diamond-encrusted gold tie pin; a thick diamond-and-gold right earring; several gold teeth; and a gold pinky ring on his left hand. His shoes were of hand-sewn Italian leather. The sole useful item of clothing he had brought was a deerstalker hat, a la Sherlock Holmes – this covered his slicked-back silvery hair and would have kept his head warm. Cav possessed a gelatinous figure, grown by overindulgence. His soft, pudgy hands looked never to have worked except for shovelling food into his oversized maw. A triple-chinned neck was about to explode from Cav's shirt collar and snap his gaudy silk tie. Tiny, piggy eyes in his rounded face gleamed with desire.

Cav's desire was money. He was a land agent, and in a position to buy up the Lydchurch area for a song. At some stage, Cav had mentioned to us plans of building a series of sprawling homes. If things went right, he'd make more millions. The one obstacle in his way was the question of why no one wanted the land – and hadn't wanted it for three hundred years. Our visit to Lydchurch was to convince Cav that the legend of the Burning Rider was an old wives' tale, so he could go on to make his millions. The greedy businessman had, of course, stacked the deck in his favour: bringing just one Believer and three people he thought would be keen to disprove the legend.

I guess I was the joker in his pack. I neither believed nor disbelieved. I'd go and see for myself and decide. However, out of a sense of fairness to Jane, and a spiteful wish to annoy Cav, I chose to offer support to the Believing cause whenever I could.

At the time of our roadside meeting, I had three books out (two disproving a pair of hauntings; the third exposing the frauds behind a famous Haunted House TV show – which had killed the show). I'd also written sixty articles on the supernatural, science and history. I was thirty-four, in

reasonably good shape except for a slight chocolate-induced paunch, and was going through a scruffy phase. My hair was a little long; I'd needed a shave a day ago; my jacket, jeans and Hawaiian shirt had all seen better times. Plus, the phase included wearing a baseball cap all the time – don't ask me why, I can't recall.

Tim Jordan had just launched into a wonderfully kind explanation to Jane of how young, foolish, inexperienced and in need of mentoring she was. Jane was gripping her coffee cup almost tight enough to shatter it. I sipped my own coffee and weighed in.

"Sorry, Tim, but you're kinda full of shit."

His gentle eyes almost popped out of his head. Nadia bristled at his side, ready to erupt. I just continued.

"You see..." I tried to emulate his nice, condescending tone. "There are over six hundred recorded pieces of data supporting that 'something' is badly wrong in the Lydchurch area. Many describe a man on a horse, on fire, attacking and killing people at night. You can't dismiss all that with a ho-ho-ho and a smile."

I think Jane probably would have kissed me then. The look of joy in her eyes diminished all the bitchiness of her usual expression.

Nadia jumped in, words coming out like staccato gunfire. "There's been not one reported incident in the last thirty years!"

I countered: "Yeah, but since no one was living in the area during that time, there aren't gonna be any reports, are there? We haven't had many reports from the far side of the moon, either."

Sitting back from the table, Cav watched us. Dismay mixed with the glimmers of greed in his little eyes.

Nadia gave a very unladylike snort. "All beside the point. The bulk of the reports come from far more superstitious times. People nowadays don't believe in ghosts and goblins."

Jane got a nice strike in: "Similarly, people never used to believe in gravity, evolution, electricity and so on. What is required is open minds exploring Lydchurch scientifically, looking for answers rather than making conclusions before we even arrive!"

The statement could have been my own – it fitted my own feelings – however, I knew Jane was as guilty of prejudging as Nadia and Tim.

"Perhaps," Cav interjected in his soft, weary tones, "that's how we should conduct ourselves."

Nadia turned on Cav and opened her mouth to argue. Then she remembered who was paying our fees. Her lips closed.

"Good for you, Cav," I said. I savoured his wince at me calling him 'Cav' again. "We should call a truce, drink up, finish our sandwiches, and head off to get things started."

Cav actually applauded me. It looked ludicrous.

"Excellent, Jimmy! Let's be a great team and enjoy ourselves."

"Yes," I agreed. Next, I faked a laugh. "And everyone remember. If there really is a Burning Rider and he appears and starts to hunt us down... We don't have to outrun *him*, we just have to outrun one other member of the team!"

Cav's jaw dropped at the idea. "How very droll."

* * *

A real scientific expedition would have set up in Lydchurch and stayed for at least a week. Cav's interests, of course, weren't scientific. He just wanted the team to sign off on having seen nothing, so he could buy the property and show his business partners that the dumb ghost legend was nothing to worry about. So we were going to visit Lydchurch for a single night, arriving at nine o'clock, after the summer sun had gone down, and probably quitting by midnight. If the clear weather changed to rain, we might leave sooner. Poor Jane really wasn't going to get a fair chance.

At five past eight, we left the cafe and all got aboard the university minibus which Nadia had borrowed. It was a twelve-seater, and the passenger compartment had sliding doors on both sides and a pair of back doors behind the rear four seats. Nadia took the driving seat and no one else dared to join her up front. We all buckled-up: Tim and Jane each choosing one of the two double-seats behind Nadia; me taking the single seat located left of Jane; and Cav keeping the four back seats to himself. I was a little concerned about Nadia driving, as her temperament was so volatile that another argument could have her veering off the road.

Looking back, if Nadia had crashed us on the way to Lydchurch, things could have turned out a lot better. Certainly, more of us might have lived to see the next sunrise.

* * *

Cav broke the awkward silence after five minutes of travel. He addressed Jane, who was sitting in front of him and to the right.

“So, Jane, can you fill me in on the meat-and-potatoes of this legend? All I’ve heard was a spooky tale from the local real estate people. Sounded like something from an old movie.”

Jane frowned for a few seconds. It was hard to believe that Cav would set up this expedition without doing any research himself. I reckon we both concluded he was just making conversation.

“Well, proven history shows there was a thriving smuggling community in Lydchurch in the 1820’s. On certain nights, villagers would light bonfires on the beach a mile away across the marshes. Ships would come in and drop off all kinds of contraband by boat. The goods were hidden all over the area, in caves in the cliffs, in cellars, in barns, and even buried in coffins in the churchyard.

“The customs and excise men tried to crack the smugglers’ ring for years. They ran around in circles and were made to look like bloody fools. Occasionally things got nasty. Smugglers and soldiers would clash, and the fights were brutal and merciless. When a bunch of villagers were killed on a beach one night in 1826, other villagers took revenge in a series of ambushes.” She paused and offered an explanation. “You see, these village folk weren’t simply criminals. They were poor people, taxed to the point of starvation – smuggling was a way of feeding their families and striking back against the rich. The customs and excise men were ruthless thugs who enjoyed their work.

“After the ambushes, a Captain Hargreaves was brought in to crush the smugglers. He was a murderous son-of-a-bitch. His first act was to take three villagers at random and hang them outside the village church. Then he arrested a bunch of suspects and took them away for torture. Everyone in the village knew it was the end for them. They all decided to leave one night – but not without a final act of defiance. Hargreaves was kidnapped and taken to Lydchurch... His soldiers found him the next day, in the centre of the silent, empty village: he’d been tied to a stake, surrounded by kindling and burned alive.”

Cav gave a murmured “Oh... my... God.”

“Now we drift into legend,” Jane went on. “Stories say Hargreaves’ spirit could not find peace and went insane. A week after his death came the first reports of a Burning Rider – a glowing spectre which killed anything in the vicinity of Lydchurch. He first slew his own men, maybe because they failed to protect him. Soldiers were found, butchered or beheaded, their corpses scorched. Travellers crossing the area at night were attacked and massacred. Nothing was ever stolen, so suspicions that the killings were made by some remaining villagers or robbers were soon dismissed. The area was abandoned...”

If Cav expected the story to end there, he was wrong.

“Twenty years later, people who had lost their homes elsewhere tried to move into Lydchurch. They were slaughtered on the first night. Investigations were made and a number of soldiers posted in the area were slain at night. Once more, the region was abandoned... Over the next decades, distant glimpses were made of a blazing figure on horseback at night. People continued to shun the area... And the cycle would repeat. The legend would be forgotten or dismissed after a while and people would venture into Lydchurch again. Those intruders would die and the area was soon vacated. No killers were ever caught. Investigations were soon shelved.”

“Even in more modern times?” Cav asked.

“Oh, yes. There were similar incidents before and after World War One. During the Second World War, the authorities briefly tried to make Lydchurch a location for evacuees from London – because of the Blitz: after a dozen deaths, they gave up. Holidaymakers wandered near Lydchurch in the fifties, sixties and seventies, and were found butchered and scorched. You can look up all of these unsolved murders. During the eighties, the government made the Lydchurch area off-limits due to a so-called biological contamination. During the nineties, the area became a nature reserve, which no one was allowed to enter. These were just excuses to save lives...

“Unfortunately, in the Twenty-First Century, we’re back around to the disbelieving part of the cycle. Greedy people are wondering why they can’t make money from the land.” Jane paused awkwardly, remembering she was speaking to one of those people. “So I’m afraid we may be due for more deaths.”

A nasty, bitter laugh came from the front of the minibus.

“I take it you disagree, Nadia?” said Cavendish.

“Unfortunately for Miss Wolfe, reality is not some gothic Hammer Horror movie. The fact is, Lydchurch has been abandoned for a long time. Unsavoury characters have used the ridiculous legend to cover their crimes. Successive Police forces have been too lazy to properly investigate an

isolated location, or have suffered at the hands of criminals when they made small efforts. Lydchurch is about as supernatural as my arse!”

“I doubt anything would want to haunt your scrawny arse,” Jane snapped back.

I had to choke down laughter. *Score another one to the Believers.*

The vehicle zigzagged sharply and I recalled my worries about Nadia driving. I was relieved when the course straightened.

Before Nadia could vent her rising anger, Tim offered his own brand of wisdom.

“What I can’t understand, Jane,” he drawled, “is this: if you believe a murderous spirit is on the rampage, why are you coming with us tonight? Don’t you believe we’ll all be killed?”

Jane smiled quite maliciously. “I believe many of you might. You won’t believe in the Rider until it’s too late... I intend to collect photographic evidence of him and get the fuck out of Lydchurch before he slices me to pieces.”

Tim was taken aback. “Oh. I see. Well, it’s good that you have a plan.”

Cav looked like he might be sick.

End Of Sample

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