

Bloodbath at the Haunted Manor

Imogen, Lady of the Manor, let out a bloodcurdling scream as she opened her bedroom door and saw a hulking, cowled figure standing over the dead body of her husband. The knife it wielded, which had undoubtedly done for poor Lord Stephen, was now pointed at her and there was an unmistakable malevolent intent in the apparition's eyes as it beheld her, its next victim. Lady Imogen noticed, with an odd sense of distraction, that her husband's murderer was dripping his blood on her newly-acquired Persian rug. Getting the stains out would be a devil of a task.

Quickly setting aside thoughts of her likely cleaning bill, Lady Imogen slammed the door and turned the key in the lock. She felt safer as soon as she did this for the door was made of good solid English oak and Genghis Khan himself together with all his hordes could not break it down if they tried. Leaning against the door for support she stood there panting for several seconds as she tried to work out an escape plan. Her bedroom – which she had of course shared with Lord Stephen as well, at least until his untimely demise – was on the third floor of the Manor and there was no exit other than the one which was currently blocked by the killer. That left the windows as her only means of escape.

She rushed to the opposite end of the chamber and opened the window to look outside, judging the distance of the drop as she did so. Could she make it if she jumped? Lady Imogen thought. Could she afford not to?

Looking back at the door behind which the monster stood, Lady Imogen began to formulate a plan. She went to the bed, a mahogany four-poster imported from Italy which she could never fail to admire, even at such a time as this, and quickly removed the sheets. Tying the ends together, Lady Imogen began to fashion a rope. It took longer than she would have liked and she begrudged every lost second as one that gave her husband's killer more time to get to her. However, she had little choice if she was to make good her getaway. Her seafaring father, an Admiral in the Royal Navy, had taught her that a good knot took time to tie and that was what she needed if she was to avoid falling to her death while making her escape.

Her work complete, Lady Imogen went to the window and prepared to throw down her makeshift rope. However, before she could do this she heard a voice coming, impossibly, from right behind her.

“I would rather you did not do that, milady.”

In horror, Lady Imogen turned around and saw that the cowled figure, which had been standing outside the door moments earlier, was now in her bedroom. She shook her head in a futile gesture of disbelief. It simply could not be – the door behind the creature (for how could it be human?) was unmarred and the key still in the lock. Somehow this *thing* had simply walked through it as if it was not there.

Sensing that her end was nigh, Lady Imogen threw back her head and screamed again, this time even more loudly.

At that point another voice suddenly piped up from out of nowhere.

“Cut!” it said and the lights went out.

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James was stifling another yawn just as the director, Jez, shouted “Cut!” and he cringed at the thought that he would have to sit through yet another run through of this scene, which seemed to get progressively worse each time he saw it. This was not what he had signed up for when he had joined the Oxford University Film Society,

which was, supposedly, a proving ground for the hottest young talent both in front of and behind the camera anywhere in the UK. If this hackneyed horror movie was the best that they could come up with, however, the British film industry truly was in dire straits.

Not that he had much say in the matter. As the film's producer, all that James was responsible for was the boring practical stuff, like scouting for locations and raising money. The more exciting elements of film-making, like hiring a cast, coming up with a screenplay and actually shooting the movie, were the purview of the writers and director. In truth, most people did not really have any idea what a film producer actually did and they were, in James's opinion, the unsung heroes of the movie business. On this one occasion, however, James was more than happy not to have to own up to playing any part in this disaster of a movie.

It had all started off so well. Back in Oxford, at the first meeting of the Society at the start of the new term, they had for once managed to get the better of the more pretentious elements that somehow always convinced (or bullied) the rest of them into making an Austen or Shakespeare adaptation for film. The idea of an original screenplay, and a genre one at that, had never caught on before because of the inherent risks of doing something that lacked the familiarity of an established work. What had changed everything had been Jez, with his bold ideas and his obvious dedication to his screenplay, 'The Haunted Manor'. Even James, never a fan of horror movies, had been impressed when he had read the script, which avoided the usual genre clichés in favour of developing character and atmosphere. At least the first draft had anyway.

Things had seemed to quickly fall into place after that. Lenora Wicklow, a young lady regarded as the finest young actress in the making in the University, who had won rave reviews for a brief stint in the West End during the summer vacation, had joined the cast. In something of a coup for the OUDS, James, as the movie's producer, had also managed to secure the use of the magnificent stately home of Blenheim Palace in nearby Woodstock at a vastly discounted rate. Word of mouth had spread quickly throughout Oxford swiftly after that and the script became the most closely guarded secret in the city. Even James did not see the final draft of the script until the first day of filming.

When James had arrived at Blenheim Palace on the first day of filming he had been full of eagerness and expectation. The first misgivings had started when he spotted an extra drenched in blood with a rubber axe embedded in his skull. Then he had watched the first full scene being filmed – an orgy of cartoon violence and blood-letting which would not have looked out of place in a Hammer horror movie. James had been appalled, as the clever script and emphasis on mood and tension which had drawn him to the project in the first place appeared to have been ditched entirely in favour of cheap shocks and gory special effects.

He had tried to voice his concerns to Jez early on but the director seemed to have become obsessed with making his project as loud and garish as possible, saying that he had come to realise that the first draft of the script had been far too tame. A feverish light had appeared in Jez's eyes when he spoke and James had quickly realised that he was beyond reason. As the film's producer there was not a lot that James could do about the director, other than bring his misgivings to the attention of their financiers and the thought of doing that brought him out in cold sweats. James had been the one who had marketed 'The Haunted Manor' to their financial backers, who included local businesses as well as a couple of well known donors to the arts, as an innovative and thoughtful piece of cinema. If they ever found out about the kitsch

parody that the film had become James had no doubt that they, and their money, would quickly disappear. His only hope was that Jez would come back to his senses and return to his original vision; either that or pray that he was mistaken about how dreadful the enterprise had turned out to be and that it was actually a work of unappreciated genius.

The worst thing for James was the inescapable feeling that somehow what they were doing there was offending the very spirit of the ancient manor house itself. Blenheim Palace was a large and venerable estate – the only non-royal residence in the country grand enough to bear the name ‘palace’ – but the manor house which now stood on it was a relatively recent addition, having only been built in the 1700s by John Churchill, the first Duke of Marlborough. In fact, Blenheim Palace stood within a former hunting park in the Forest of Wychwood and had royal associations going back to the time of the Saxon kings – there had been a residence of some sort here for over a thousand years. This was not the place for a tawdry exhibition of amateur film making and increasingly of late James felt that the house itself and the grounds on which it stood were making their displeasure plain.