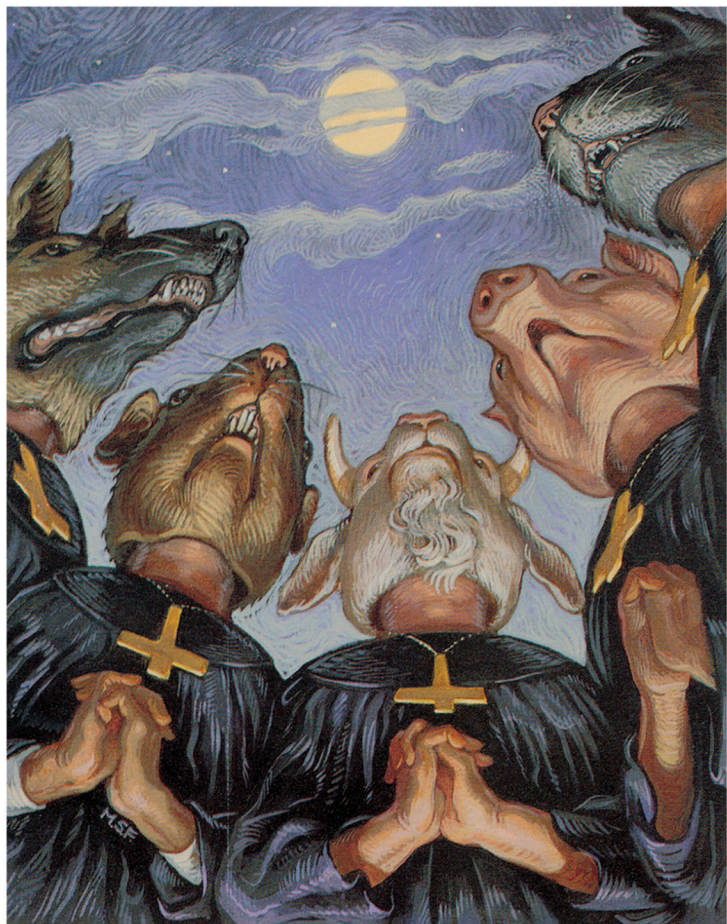


LEO BRUCE

Death on Allhallowe'en



A CAROLUS DEENE MYSTERY

DEATH ON ALLHALLOWE'EN

Carolus Deene, the amateur detective with his own style of solving riddles of violent death, has to bide his time in the small Kentish village of Clibburn, where he is early given to understand he is a 'foreigner'. However, despite a trick to have him elsewhere, he is present when a popular local figure is shot dead on the stroke of midnight, and before his work is completed he has the answers to two other deaths, one of which was not even suspected. While he is not sure how seriously to take the local witchcraft stories, he perceives how a past event can have provided a blackmailer with a rare opportunity—and from that moment his own life is in danger.

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DEATH ON ALLHALLOWE'EN

by
LEO BRUCE



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One

'I tell you candidly—I'm frightened.'

Carolus Deene looked at the speaker incredulously. He had known him for almost thirty years, since they had shared certain experiences at Arnhem, and the recollection of these made him smile at John Stainer's confession.

'You?'

'Yes. I. Me. Whichever it is.'

'Scared by an old woman playing at witchcraft? I don't believe it.'

'It's not just that. I was as sceptical as you are at first. You had better let me tell you the whole story and then see whether you want to laugh it off.'

'Go ahead,' said Carolus. 'I'll keep an open mind. Perhaps I had better tell you first that I do believe in the devil. Yes, Satan, the Prince of Darkness. I believe he is at work in the world of today, seeking whom he may devour. And I don't think that calling him Old Nick or Old Harry and talking about his cloven hooves and generally being joky about him makes him any less credible. But I *don't* believe he comes in person to the call of some old fortune-telling crone who does things with wax and hot needles.'

'Nor do I. It was foolish of me to tell you that first.'

John Stainer was the rector of a country parish and although he did not wear a clerical collar or talk sermonese or behave as a painfully hearty good mixer, it was not difficult to guess his calling. Thick white hair and a young face gave him a

frank and easy expression and one could see why he had always been a popular man.

He nodded to Carolus who was offering him a whisky and soda, and went on, 'I should have started with the village and broken down your disbelief by telling you something about that. It's called Clibburn . . .'

'Oh, is it?' interrupted Carolus. 'Then you have your hoof-mark right away. You need look no farther than the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. *Klioban*, Old High German for "cloven". But I'm no etymologist and that may be nonsense.'

'Do you know anything about the Isle of Guys?'

'Only as a geographical fact. It's in the Thames Estuary, isn't it?'

'Yes. Or thereabouts. Like the Isle of Sheppey and the Isle of Grain. They're peninsulas really. Guys consists of about ten square miles of grazing country, one large village, two groups of cottages, one church, two pubs and a population of about a thousand people. It has not yet been discovered.'

'You mean exploited, surely?'

'I mean discovered. Guys is one of those tracts of country, of which there are more in Great Britain than you imagine, which almost nobody visits and in which absolutely nobody would choose to live. It is flat and dreary with rain and mists coming in from the estuary and mudflats instead of a beach. Obviously it has the usual amenities—television, radio, electricity, mains water—but only one road connects it with the Kentish mainland and that is sometimes flooded. The inhabitants—and this is perhaps the point—call themselves Guysmen, and are mostly the sons of Guysmen for a good many generations. The names on the gravestones show that.'

'A perfect setting for the goings-on you describe. Too perfect. I find it hard to believe in the Isle of Guys.'

'So did I, at first. In fact, when I was given the living nearly three years ago and went to live in the very comfortable modernised rectory. I thought the whole place was almost cosy. You don't see anything odd at first. Young people With

It, swinging, whatever the term is at the moment. Older people bridge-playing, viewing television, having a drink at the pub, all like any other village. Perhaps rather more church-going than most.'

'Of course. People who believe in the devil must surely believe in God.'

John Stainer ignored this.

'All quite normal, in fact. Then you begin to notice things.'

'What sort of things?'

'I can't just reel them off. I can't even distinguish between what may be significant and what I imagine to be. But for one thing the extraordinary attention paid to the woman I told you about, Alice Murrain.'

'Tell me more about her, for a start.'

'She's about fifty. A Guyswoman, the daughter of a farmer who committed suicide thirty years ago.'

'How?'

'Hanged himself, I believe. Alice's mother died in giving birth to her. People still talk of the surprise that was felt when Alice went away after her father's death and returned with a husband, a complete stranger to Guys who has never succeeded in integrating himself in the life of the place. I find him very difficult to get on with, a lean, shifty sort of fellow who smiles a lot but says very little. He seems to have a life of his own and goes up to London quite often without his wife. But he is a mere consort. Alice Murrain is a sort of queen.'

'Of spades?'

'Carolus, I don't like listening to gossip, and what I have heard comes chiefly from people who don't live in Clibburn. She is said to have the Evil Eye, with all the powers that go with it. She is also supposed to have Second Sight.'

'Quite an oculist.'

'I know it must all seem rather absurd to you. But you haven't lived in the place.'

'It doesn't sound absurd. I know what superstition can do to people. Haven't you anything more cogent?'

'Yes. I have. Xavier Matchlow.'

'A Catholic, presumably?'

'RC? Certainly not now, though he may have been christened one. He was for many years a disciple of Aleister Crowley.'

Carolus laughed aloud.

'That old bogymán!'

'I quite agree. In himself. But there is no doubt of the effect he had on others. He was a fraud and a charlatan but people believed in him. The lives he ruined are a matter of history.'

'And Matchlow's was one of them?'

'It is hard to say. He is a rich recluse.'

'Noctambule?' asked Carolus mischievously.

'Well, yes. He walks at night.'

'Moonlight?'

'All right, Carolus. You can send me up. But wait till I have told you everything.'

'Your friend Xavier is presumably a bachelor?'

'No. Mrs Matchlow is one of the few friends I've got in Clibburn. Very down-to-earth—a thoroughly nice woman. I once gently approached the subject of her husband's former friendship with Aleister Crowley and she dismissed it at once. "I've no patience with that sort of thing," she said.'

'You say her husband is a rich recluse. What do you mean by that?'

'He is a very rich man—owns a lot of land round Clibburn. He goes shooting, his only sport. Otherwise he never goes anywhere, so far as I can tell. Judith his wife has a car but he's never seen in it. His only acquaintance seems to be a farmer named William Garries who lives about a mile out of the village.'

'What do you know about him?'

'Rather a nineteenth-century figure. Big fellow, sixtyish, hard-working and hard-drinking. Has one son, George, who seems a very ordinary, quite pleasant young man. The farm has been in the Garries family for centuries, I believe. Father

and son come to church, but there are stories about them.'

'Stories?'

'The usual thing. Witchcraft. Black magic.'

'Do you believe them?'

'Not really. I certainly shouldn't have done so three years ago. It may well be that the place is getting on my nerves. But there was one small incident some months back which made me wonder. I was passing the church rather late one night and saw a light on. I was going to investigate when it was extinguished. As I reached the wych-gate I met William Garries leaving the churchyard. He was not drunk, but I fancied he had been drinking. He smiled and said good night quite cheerily and was going to pass when I stopped him and said, "Did you see a light in the church, Mr Garries?" "Light? No," he said, and walked on. I found the church locked, but everyone knows where the key is kept under a stone near the porch. Next morning, when I went over as usual at seven-thirty, I noticed something very disturbing and unpleasant. There is a crucifix hanging behind the pulpit, a recent gift to the church from a parishioner. It had been hung upside down.'

'I don't like that,' said Carolus. 'Nothing else was touched?'

'Nothing.'

'Who was the parishioner who gave you the crucifix?'

'A man named Connor Horseman. He came to live in the village a little before I did.'

'What significance do you attach to the inverted crucifix? Old-fashioned Anti-Christ?'

'Yes, but a rather special form of it, I should think, else why was nothing done to the crucifix on the high altar? Or anything else in the church? No, I think this was aimed at me. No one else occupies the pulpit—unless on very rare occasions some visiting preacher. I stand beneath that crucifix every Sunday and hold forth.'

'Couldn't it have something to do with the man who gave the crucifix, though?'

'I suppose it could. The whole thing is so twisted. Sometimes I think these people are up to something really fiendish, devil-worship, the cult of Satan; sometimes I see nothing but antiquated and ignorant notions of witchcraft.'

'Tell me about the donor of the crucifix.'

'Certainly. He's a writer. He is not popular with the older people, I believe, but then strangers seldom are. I'm not myself. But I rather like him. He is about our age. Lost a leg in the war.'

'You're giving me a very concise who's who, John. Haven't you a village idiot to produce?'

John Stainer smiled.

'Not far from it. Charlie Sloman. He's a young man of twenty or so whose mental age is about fourteen. Perfectly well behaved and a rather engaging character, but very irresponsible. A practical-joke mentality.'

'All you lack is a Devil's Punchbowl.'

John smiled.

'We can manage that too. Or, at least, a disused well, reputed to be bottomless but probably only deep. It's on the road out to Garries'. It's known as the Bottomless Pit—that's the sort of exaggerated term we go in for round Clibburn.'

'Any other anomalies?'

'Among my parishioners? Not more than usual. And no one I have any reason to connect with what you call goings-on. Connor Horseman's wife Mavis is another nice sensible person. There are some friendly high-spirited youngsters. An amiable publican and a few sinners. But, as I've told you, you might think it a very ordinary village at first sight.'

'Then I simply don't understand what you mean by saying you're frightened.'

'I haven't told you the most disturbing thing. You simply won't be able to laugh at this, Carolus, because it involves the death of a little boy. You may think I'm a credulous ass to connect it in any way with the things I have suggested, though I can't see how it can be otherwise. I'll tell you the story.'

'Let me fill your glass. Go ahead.'

'As you can imagine, in a village like this a good deal happens on Allhallowe'en.'

Carolus smiled.

'I imagine you can scarcely hear yourself speak for the whoosh of broomsticks overhead.'

'I meant that it is celebrated by everyone,' said John Stainer reproachfully. 'Children's parties. Dance in the village hall.'

'So it is in thousands of other villages. It has become quite a thing lately.'

'Well, yes. But in Clibburn it's more than that.'

'You've let this get on your nerves, John. You can't take this phony tradition seriously? Allhallowe'en, as we know it, is an American thing. Steeple hats, broomsticks and that.'

'It was something more than that last year in Clibburn. On the day following, which as you know is All Saints' Day, one of my parishioners came to see me in a very excited state. His name is Albert Gunning. He was born in the village and owns the petrol station. It was a blacksmith's forge in his father's time, but Albert made it a garage just before the war. He still keeps the old forge and amuses himself with metalwork. He's a man in his fifties with a wife much younger than himself. Quite intelligent. The last man you'd have thought to be upset by the so-called supernatural. He did not seem able to tell me what he wanted at first, then he told me that his wife had told him to come for me. His wife is a Guyswoman. It was for their little boy. He was in a bad way. I told him I'd come at once, but there was something else he wanted to say. There was devil's work in it, he said. Young Cyril had been all right yesterday. Eventually I got out of him what he was trying to tell me. They wanted me to exorcise the boy. They believed he was possessed of the devil.'

Carolus took this quite seriously.

'And did you?' he asked.

'I went back with Albert. He has a neat little modern bungalow behind the petrol station. I remember thinking what a

strange world we live in when from surroundings like this one can get a call for exorcism. I found Cicely Gunning, the wife, fairly calm but very anxious that I should do what she asked. "Cyril's asleep now because the doctor has given him something. But it's what I say, Mr Stainer. The devil's in him, and he won't live long unless you can do what we ask you. He's been saying terrible things all day."'

John Stainer had asked how it started.

'"He went out yesterday evening," she said. "He was as right as rain then. Fooling about with the other boys. I thought they were up to some lark—it was Allhallowe'en—and didn't worry when he didn't come back before dark. But when it came to nine o'clock I began to think something was wrong and sent Albert out to have a look for him. You read such things in the papers about children. But there was no sign of him anywhere about here, and when Albert asked at one or two houses it seemed that all the other children had come home hours ago.

'"Well, then we raised the alarm. We went to Rutters." Rutters is our local policeman. He comes from the mainland and is not much liked in Clibburn. "Lot of good he was. Some of the men started out in different directions. One thing was, nobody had seen any strangers about or cars in the village that didn't belong here. But I was worried out of my mind.

'"Towards morning Albert came back with nothing to report. All of a sudden something came to me and I told him to look out towards the Beacon."'

John Stainer paused. 'The Beacon's a bit of a rise about two miles from Clibburn. I did not think to ask Cicely Gunning why she had chosen that, but I wish I had. She certainly did not say.'

'Something came to her,' said Carolus thoughtfully. 'She told you so.'

'Typical,' said John. 'They're all full of this nonsense. Guys people don't talk about their local traditions, and when I

asked someone else about the Beacon all I heard was that it had a bad name. Cicely looked very strained when she talked about it, then said a rather dramatic thing. "He found him there, *of course*." It appeared that Albert found young Cyril lying beside a footpath that led towards Clibburn. He was very cold and frightened, but did not say much at first except to whisper to his father, "I ran away, Dad."

'Albert got him home as quickly as he could and he was wrapped up in bed with hot-water bottles. In the morning he became delirious and said the terrible things that Cicely Gunning had mentioned. The doctor was sent for, diagnosed pneumonia, and gave him a sleeping pill. It was at this stage that I was called in.'

'What did you do?'

'To be truthful, I could only prevaricate. I know there is a form of exorcism which is occasionally used in extreme cases, but I had no idea where it could be found, and in any case I decided I couldn't do anything without the bishop's authority, and he was abroad attending a conference. It was a very difficult matter for me to decide. I told Albert and Cicely that I would try to get authority and would come back next day. I put it off as long as I could and then decided that I would act on my own responsibility. I blessed some water as I do for the stoup in the church and set out for the house. But it was too late. Cyril had died that morning.'

'Of pneumonia?'

'That was the officially given cause.'

'But you think it was something else?'

'I have only the boy's words spoken in delirium to go on. I think he had been present at some sort of Black Mass.'

'Really, John!'

'There was something else. Cicely Gunning said that when Albert brought him in he had blood on his face. No wound, but dried blood.'

'She washed it off, of course?'

'Oh, yes. She was horrified.'

'So it was never examined or analysed?'

'No. A mother doesn't leave bloodstains on her son to be analysed.'

'I suppose not.'

Two

'Why didn't you come to me at the time?' Carolus asked. Then without waiting for an answer he said, 'I suppose there was an investigation?'

'I suppose so. Two plain-clothes men were in the village, but they had nothing to go on but Cicely's story of bloodstains and some words uttered in delirium by an eight-year-old boy. Guys people become mute on such occasions. At all events Cyril was buried, and things went on much as before.'

'Till next Allhallowe'en presumably?'

John Stainer looked serious.

'That's on Saturday week,' he said.

'I see what you mean by saying you're frightened. You think there may be another incident?'

'Listen, Carolus. I'm not a fool and I'm not superstitious. Obviously I don't believe in black magic or witchcraft or anything of the sort. That's to say I don't believe in what they represent. But I do believe that there are people who practise these rites, and I think such people are dangerous. I want you to come and stay with me for a fortnight or so. You're not teaching this term.'

'No. The headmaster calls it a sabbatical. He didn't suppose it would be a witches' sabbath.'

'But you're free.'

'Yes.'

'Then come over. I've told you I have a comfortable rectory. The last incumbent was a rich man and installed central heat-

ing and made a lot of changes. You'd find the place interesting even if you don't believe a word of what I've told you.'

'I find most places interesting. Particularly isolated villages.'

'And if you do think there's any sort of danger I imagine you'll like it all the better.'

'Yes. Up to a point. I value my life.'

'Oh, I don't mean that sort of danger.'

'I do, oddly enough.'

'You mean for you or me? No. Whatever is going on affects these people only. It's among themselves. I'm sure of that.'

'I dare say you're right. How will you account for me?'

'Old Service friend.'

'But you say they resent all strangers?'

'They don't show it. You would be treated in an outwardly friendly way.'

'Unless they thought I was snooping? Anyway, thank you, John. I'd like to come.'

'Good. Then I'll tell you something else. It may be my imagination, but I have thought, in these last weeks, that there is a new tension in the air. I get my congregation on Sunday just the same, but very few of my parishioners seem to come my way or talk to me privately. There's a good deal of whispering. . . .'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Heads close together. Little solemn groups. I can't explain. There's an *atmosphere*, Carolus. Can't you understand that?'

'It's a good thing I've known you for a long time, John. If anyone else gave me all this I should send him to a psychiatrist.'

'You may be right. All the more reason why you should come. But let us suppose for a moment that there are people in my parish who practise diabolism. The fact that the thing itself is nonsense does not make those that have faith in it any less liable to do evil and dangerous things, as you yourself have said.'

'You think they may have been responsible for the little boy's death?'

'Cyril died of pneumonia. But how did he get it?'

'I see what you mean. I should like to know what these terrible things were that he said.'

'Shouted.'

'Or shouted in delirium.'

'You must wait till you see Cicely Gunning. She will remember most of them, and I don't want to confuse you with the bits that have stuck in my mind. They're not pleasant to hear in the circumstances. But whatever happened to him that night was not the work of a single person. He perpetually spoke of "them". I think they as good as murdered the child.'

'Oh, come! You don't as good as murder, surely. You either murder or you don't, and Cyril died of pneumonia.'

'Well, caused his death.'

'That's better.'

'I wish I had exorcised him. You're an RC, Carolus, and probably don't believe in our Orders.'

'On the contrary. But go on.'

'According to the teaching of your own Church, exorcism like baptism can be undertaken by anyone in an emergency.'

'You really believe the boy was "possessed"?''

'I don't know what to believe. But I'm very glad you're coming to Clibburn.'

'I am almost as interested in the story of the crucifix hung upside down,' said Carolus thoughtfully.

'Yes. It was an ugly sight.'

'Did you ever mention it to the man who gave you the crucifix?'

'Connor? Yes. But he was not much impressed, I'm afraid. He seemed to think it had no more importance than a childish anonymous letter. I couldn't agree with that, as you may guess.'

'Nor I. It seems to me that at this stage it is the only positive proof that something is seriously wrong. I certainly want to come.'

'Good. And I hope you can make it soon.'

'Tomorrow,' promised Carolus.