

A LANTERN FOR THE DEAD

A Short Christmas Ghost Story

*A chilling re-telling of the true story of the sinking
of the steamship, the Royal Charter.*



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The fire spat up a spray of red-hot embers as Arthur Williams poked at the logs, “If it’s a ghost story you’re looking for,” he said, sitting back and sipping his port. “I’ll tell you one that’ll make your blood run cold.”

The three men standing in the hotel hallway looked at each other, shrugged, and continued threading cables and positioning a digital camera at the base of the staircase. *They were like floaters in the corners of his eyes, Arthur thought, there, but not really there at all.*

“And watch out for that bloody Christmas tree,” he barked, leaning from the chair, his pot belly rolling over the waistband of his trousers. At seventy-eight years old, Arthur was ten kilos heavier than he was two years ago, and a damn sight less limber. “Took me forever to string the lights on that.”

One of the men, Mark, dark-haired, cocky, turned with a condescending smile, “We’ve heard all the stories about the hotel, Mr. Williams, that’s why we’re here.”

Arthur chuckled, “Got the heebie-jeebies already, have you?”

Not expecting an answer, he poured himself another port. “Shouldn’t you be out having a few pints? Doesn’t seem right, young men hanging round a dusty old place like this on Christmas Eve.”

“It’s our job,” Mark said. “And you told us that’s when most of the activity happens.”

Arthur looked into the cracking glow of the fire, lost for a moment in his thoughts. Yes, he’d told Mark that when he called the Halfway Hotel, some months back asking for permission to spend the night ‘investigating.’ Arthur was open to the idea. The shabby old hotel had housed no guests for several years, and since the passing of his wife, Arthur harbored scant goodwill towards

the Christmas season. The expectation of some fresh faces around the place had lifted his spirits. He always felt the worse of it around Christmastime. It was when bad things happened, or he imagined they happened; it was hard to distinguish these days. Another causality of getting old his doctor has warned him about. He shook the dark thoughts from his mind. Maybe everything was as it seemed, and with all the fuss and activity, the hotel would leave the men in peace tonight. But he was old enough to know there was no twisting the hand of fate in these matters.

He leaned down to light a brass lantern by the fireplace, “What do you call yourselves, ghost hunters or something?”

“Paranormal Investigators,” one of the other men, Dafydd, explained. He was the studious type; thick spectacles, mop of ginger hair and an intense, serious manner.

“Investigators? Right you are. You’ll be investigating all night then? Maybe you’ll catch old Saint Nick climbing down the chimney on all that fancy equipment of yours?” He laughed, spilling a splash of port on his cardigan.

“You don’t have to wait up,” Dafydd said, barely glancing at Arthur. “Less people around the better.”

The old leather chair creaked as Arthur shuffled into a position that eased his sciatica pain. “No, no. Grand entertainment, this is. Better than all that rubbish on the TV. So, what’s that then?” he asked, gesturing at a cigarette pack-sized device Mark was hooking up.

“High frequency audio recorder, captures anything outside our normal hearing range.”

“Like voices, you mean?”

“Any sounds inaudible to the human ear.”

“From the other side?” Arthur said, a glint in his eye.

“Really, we don’t want to keep you up,” Dafydd urged.

Mark set the recording device on a tripod and stood back, “All set. What time did you say the activity usually starts?”

Arthur took his time walking over to the drinks cabinet, “Expect it’ll be awhile.” He checked the grandfather clock nestled in the corner of the room and lit another lantern resting on the dresser. “Early hours the noise usually starts, then all hell breaks loose, kitchen doors banging open, staircase creaking, cold comes in like a blizzard blowing through the place. Then there’s the voices, ungodly they are.” He stamped his foot on the floor, matching the cadence of the ticking of the grandfather clock. The old hotel seemed to tremble, as if shivering from the cold. “Sounds like they’re coming from the cellar and up through the floorboards. Doesn’t bother me much anymore, I just pull the covers over my head let them get on with it.”

“Get on with it?”

“Aye, what they’re all so bloody angry about.”

The other young man, Aled, chubby, boyish face, his hair already thin and balding, walked in and set a monitor on the coffee table. “Video feed’s live,” he said, lounging back onto the sofa.

Arthur stole a sly glance at the window looking out onto the pebble beach fronting the hotel. As he reached over to light another lantern set on the mantelpiece, a flicker of dull light passed across the glass then vanished. “May as well make ourselves comfortable, long, dark night ahead,” he said, ignoring what was probably another trick of the moonlight. “I’ll get on with my story now, shall I?”

Dafydd paced the room, checking and re-checking the equipment, “We should stay quiet, the fewer distractions the better.”

“Oh, come on,” Aled said, downing his port. “I could do with a good laugh.”

“I don’t think—”

“I’m with him,” Mark interrupted, sitting next to Aled. “But let’s make this interesting. You tell us your story, then we’ll tell you one of ours.”

Arthur considered the proposition, “Aye, seem fair enough,” he said, though he doubted they’d have time for that, not the way the night was closing in, and the three men already looked blurry to him, as if they were pulling in and out of focus. “Get the lights, then” he said, gesturing at Dafydd. “Ghost stories are always best told in the dark.”

Dafydd muttered something under his breath and flicked the switch. The room fell into darkness. The soft glow from the lanterns flickered across the men’s faces as they sat, the ticking of the clock like a slow, steady heartbeat filling the silences.

“Here, we’ll keep this at arm’s length.” Arthur settled the port bottle on the table. “Just in case.”

“Works for me,” Aled said, and re-filled his glass.

“You probably read the foundations of the old hotel were set. back in 1852. Queen Victoria was twenty years into her reign by then. We were at war with Burma, for the second time, and Charles Dickens was still alive.”

“Met him then, did you?” Aled said, chuckling. “Old Charles?”

“He stayed at the inn, you know.” Arthur poked at the fire and sending a spittle of embers floating up the chimney. “Came here to write about the wreck. The story was in the papers for months, biggest maritime disaster in Britain had ever witnessed, but I’m getting ahead of myself.”

Arthur paused as another flicker of faint light passed from the door and into the hallway.

“Back then, the old place was called the Captain’s Lodge. More of an inn really, with a couple of rooms for travelers to rest for the night.” He gestured to a black and white sketch hanging over the fireplace. The image portrayed an old steam clipper listing in rough seas, its sails almost touching the waves, the sky rendered in thick dark pencil strokes, the rocks breaching like rotten

teeth from the seabed. “October 25th, 1859. The storm was the biggest to hit Anglesey for over a century.”

“Yeah,” Mark laughed, nudging Aled in the ribs. “’Twas a dark and stormy night...”

“And suddenly there was a loud knocking on the door,” Aled said, laughing and thumping the side of his fist on the table.

Undeterred, Arthur continued, “The hurricane was as force twelve, all salty breath and wild rage. Twisted trees from their roots, shattered glass from windows, by all accounts it ripped slate roofs clean off the houses like they were made of paper. Don’t reckon anyone got any sleep that night, or if they did, they were already dead.”

“It happened close to here?” Aled asked.

Arthur nodded. “Not half a mile away.” He turned towards the ocean-facing window beyond which he was certain more lights were gathering on the beach. “The Royal Charter was on her return journey from Australia to Liverpool, close to five hundred passengers and crew on board. The ship’s barometer dropped like a rock as they reached the Northwest of the island. By now, the sea was rising faster than her engines could pump steam to power her through the swell. Any Captain worth his salt would have sheltered at Holyhead port, waited out the storm, but instead the fool dropped anchor west of Moelfre, less than a mile offshore.”

Arthur leaned back in his chair, “Imagine it, lads,” he said, steepling his hands. “Five hundred men, women and children trapped in the cold iron belly of a steamship. The sea’s rising fast, tossing three thousand tons of steel like driftwood over the water, the captain knows he’s not in charge of a ship anymore; he’s the captain of an iron coffin left to God’s mercy. Every passenger and crewman knew it too.”

The room fell silent, the only sounds the heavy ticking of the clock and the bright cracking of the fire.

“Christ.” Aled took a large swig of port. “They must have been terrified.”

“More than terrified. Every last one of them, passengers and crew alike, dropped to their knees and prayed; not that it did them any good. At quarter past eleven that night the sea wrenched the port anchor from its mooring and snapped the chains like a twig. An hour later, the starboard anchor suffered the same fate. Whatever God they believed in had abandoned them, left them to die out there in the cold and dark.”

Dafydd, who had been half listening, half watching the video monitor, nudged Aled, “Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“I think a light just passed through the screen.”

Arthur checked the clock, “Bit early for that,” he said. “And anyway, if they want you to know they’re here, they’ll be a damn sight less subtle about it.” It was a lie. Arthur could already hear the murmurs seeping up from the cellar and lights were already gathering through the mist, waiting patiently like they always did.

Arthur continued, “Now, with both anchors taken and the winds battering her at ninety knots, here’s only one destination left for the Royal Charter; the rocks at Port Alreth. The captain hauls in the sails, cuts the masts, but it’s too late; the sea’s not bending to anyone’s will. He may as well have held up his hands to stop the wind blowing for all the good it did. The sea tossed her around for another hour before the tide lifted the ship high onto its haunches and hurled her to shore. Took less than half an hour to shatter all that iron and steel into pieces. The rocks split her belly open like a tin can, spilling out bodies in all directions. Some had the mercy of drowning; the unlucky ones met their fates hurled against the rocks. They say the wealthy passengers in the luxury cabins died with their gold still strapped around their waists; make of that what you will.”

Mark sat forward on the edge of the sofa, “How many people died?”

Arthur took a moment, “Forty were saved, four hundred and eighty souls perished,” he said. “But the passengers weren’t the only victims, mind you. The locals who helped drag the bodies from the sea the following morning saw things no mortal man should ever see. Men, women, children, laid out on the beach like they’d fallen in battle. Those they couldn’t identify were buried at the old church in Llanallgo.”

“Did they salvage the wreck?” Mark asked.

“Parts,” Arthur confirmed. “The iron bulkheads and ribs are still out there, five fathoms down. Nothing much else left there now. Well, nothing but ghosts I suppose.”

Dafydd shuffled impatiently. “We all know the story,” he said, checking his monitor. “It’s nothing new.”

From the corner of his eye, Arthur noticed more lights had gathered, like beacons across the beach. “That’s just part of the story,” he said. “Few know what happened in the hours after the ship met her fate.” He looked the men directly in the eyes. “Six hours between when the rocks ripped the Royal Charter to shreds and sunrise the following day. The darkest hours were still to come.”

Arthur turned and looked deep into the fire. “Four hundred and eighty souls searching for their resting place. Any man headstrong enough to venture down to the beach that night said they could see them from the cliffs; clothes torn, soaked to the skin, or whatever skin they had left, faces ripped to shreds, their bodies no more than air, all of them carrying lanterns like they were searching for something they’d lost. They were confused, see, didn’t know why they were here. Didn’t know they were dead, at least not yet.”

Aled let go of the breath he’d been holding onto, “And they came here, to the hotel?”

“No place else for them to go. They were refugees looking for shelter before passing to their final resting place.”

Dafydd huffed and tweaked the contrast on the video monitor, “Seems a bit far-fetched to me, superstition and folktales.”

Arthur nodded, “I’d have said the same if I hadn’t seen them with my own eyes. They make themselves known most nights, walk over the beachhead, lanterns glowing through the mist, voices barely raised above a whisper. Most have passed on now, accepted their fate. But the others? Well, they’re still here, stuck in the waiting room. Can’t accept their fate. Come Christmas Eve, they feel the pull of the living the most and their anger gets the better of them. I try to help them pass over, but they’re stubborn and I’m getting too old, so mostly I just let them be.” He shook his head. “I’ll tell you lads, it’s as close to hell as I can imagine any soul could bear.”

There was a moment of reverent silence, then Dafydd spoke, “Take a look at this.” He turned the video monitor to face the other two. The image had shifted from the inside of the hotel and now displayed the narrow, hedge trimmed road leading to the hotel entrance.

“Do you have any security cameras that might interfere with our signal?” Mark asked.

Arthur laughed, “Nothing worth stealing here anymore.”

Aled leaned in closer to the screen and pointed, “Isn’t that our car?”

The three of them watched, not quite believing what they saw, as a red Toyota SUV sped along the rain-soaked road towards the hotel.

Dafydd turned to Arthur, “What the hell’s going on? Is this a joke or something?”

Arthur rose from his chair but said nothing. *They’d figure it out soon enough*, he thought.

The three men couldn’t bring themselves to turn from the screen as the car swerved to avoid the figure of a woman in a long, ruffled dress, golden ornaments hanging from her waist, a lantern held high in her hands. The car ploughed through the woman as if she were made of air, flipped over, then rolled several times, its roof scraping along the road, before coming to a violent stop at the base of an oak tree. The video flickered, as if changing channels, and sped forward to sometime

later. The anxious twitch of blue and red lights from the emergency vehicles cut through the darkness, a flurry of activity around the tangle of metal, three bloodied bodies carried from the wreck and into the ambulance.

As the men watched and took in the information, Arthur collected the three brass lanterns from around the room and handed one to each of them. “There’s no fighting it,” he said. “God knows I’ve tried often enough.” He could barely make out the men’s features now; they were like white paint smears on canvas.

“I... I don’t remember,” Aled said, a tremble in his voice.

“Aye, best you don’t,” Arthur said, softly. “Won’t make this any easier.”

Dafydd stood and pushed the video monitor to the floor, “No, no. It’s a mistake, it can’t be. You set this up somehow, you must have.”

Mark remained silent, he was staring at the lights out on the beach, memorized by the incandescent glow beckoning him to join them.

Arthur walked solemnly into the hallway and opened the door. A gust of wind swept through the hotel, damped the fire and howled up through the chimney. “Come, lads,” he said. “Best to not keep them waiting any longer.”

The men stood, as if in a trance, and joined Arthur at the doorway. Across the beach a line of figures, their outlines barely visible, stood waiting, the glow from the lanterns illuminating their faded faces.

“They’ll help you on your way,” Arthur said. “They’ll help me too, when it’s my time.”

“On our way to where?” Aled asked, turning to look at Arthur.

Arthur gave a sympathetic smile. *It was always worse with the young ones*, he thought, *those with their whole lives still ahead of them*. But he’d learned by now there was no arguing with death, no negotiations to be brokered, no bargains to be struck.

“To where, Arthur?” Aled pleaded, recognizing in himself now how the skin on his hands was transparent, revealing the sinew and bones beneath. “On our way to where?”

“This was just your stopping off place, halfway between where you were and where you’re meant to be.” The men were mere outlines to Arthur now, their earthy forms smeared around the edges as if they’d been colored outside the lines.

On the beachhead, the rain and wind swept across the bedraggled figures, the tide washing over their feet. As some peeled away, returning to the dark roll of the ocean, Arthur addressed the men one last time. “It’s time to go now, they won’t wait around forever, and there’s no place for you here. No room at the inn.”

The three men seemed to understand now and held their heads low as they shuffled past Arthur into the cold. Aled was the first to walk through the door, followed by Mark. Dafydd hesitated the most, turned to Arthur as if to say something, then changed his mind.

Arthur watched the three lanterns cross the beach, the figures falling in line behind them. Light by light, the lantern’s soft glow flickered and faded, swallowed into the ocean’s inky darkness.

He closed the hotel door, his heart a little heavier than when the evening had started. But he wouldn’t be alone, not for long. The voices were already whispering at him through the walls and floorboards. As he climbed the stairs and the thought of the long, dark hours ahead. Maybe tonight they’d leave him be, leave him in peace, but he knew better. At the Halfway Hotel there was no rest for the wicked nor the tortured souls that chose to stay.