

The Spirit of Stonehenge by Jasper John

'So you have moved from your old home; I was rather surprised to hear,' I said to Ronald Dalton. He nodded his head. 'We were very sorry to go, but nothing would have made us stay after what had happened. I know I did not tell you but then we have not spoken of it more than is necessary, even to old friends.'

We were sitting in the twilight of a June evening. Outside the rain dripped from the trees, from the roof, from the windows for there had been a dreadful thunderstorm.

'I would like to tell you what happened, if you care to listen' Ronald said abruptly.

I had been rather hoping he would, for he was a matter-of-fact man, and my curiosity had been stirred by the papers' accounts of the strange way one of their guests had committed suicide. So he started in his earnest way, which lent conviction to the story.

My brother made great friends with Gavin Thomson in London. The first time I saw him was when he came to stay with us for a week. His great hobby was to dabble about in excavations, and, as his father had left him enough to live comfortably, he was able to indulge his taste.

He was a good-looking boy, about twenty-nine, dark and manly. Though only young, he had made quite a name for himself already, even with the professors. There were tales of his living among the Bedouins, an unheard-of thing for a white man to do. But it was difficult to make him talk of his exploits.

I took to him, as my brother had done he had such a magnetic personality. He told us he had been reading up all the old books on Stonehenge which he could get hold of. The Druid theory fascinated him, and he was anxious to study some facts first-hand.

He asked us if we had ever heard of elementals then laughed, and said we were not to be afraid that he was possessed by them. We asked him what the things were, for beneath his light manner I saw that he was really serious about them. He told us that they were a sort of ugly evil spirits, which had never had a form. Their one object was to find a human body in which to reside. They were supposed to have a certain power over human beings in places where great evil had prevailed.

Quite abruptly he stopped, and began talking about the moon's rays on the dolmen at Stonehenge, and a peculiar theory he held, of which we understood nothing. I think he meant to puzzle us and make us forget.

Now and then he descended to our level when he explained that the Druids were fond of conducting their ceremonies at certain times of the moon. 'That is why I have to do so much of my work at night,' he said. We had given him a latchkey so that he could come in when he liked. He told us that he was on the verge of a great discovery which would make history.

After a fortnight's stay he left us to do some work in Brittany, but not before he had covered many sheets with writing. In three months he was back again. He looked gaunt and ill, and his eyes were sunken and bright with fever. We begged him to rest that night, but he would not hear of it, and when he spoke of Stonehenge his eyes gleamed in a strange manner.

When he had gone out into the night I went up to his room to see if there was everything that he could want. There were books everywhere one lay on the table, the place was marked with something. I opened it at the place and a knife lay snugly between the pages. It was curved, and of pure gold. I knew enough to know that it was a copy of a sacrificial knife ; the edge was so sharp that I cut my finger rather badly.

Curiosity aroused, I looked at the page, and this is what I read:

'Though the day of the Druids is now long passed and the cries of their victims no longer haunt the night and the altar stone has ceased to drip blood, yet it is dangerous to go there when the sacrificial moon is full. For the Druids, by the blood they shed, their vile sacrifices and fellowship with the devil, attracted forces of evil to the place. So it is said that shapeless invisible horrors

haunt the vicinity and at certain times crave a resting place in a human body. If once they enter in, it is only with difficulty that they are evicted.'

The book was many centuries old. I looked at the other books they were all on the same subject. Gavin seemed to be quite crazy about it. I told my brother, and he said that he thought poor Gavin was overstrung. 'Perhaps he is possessed by an elemental,' he said, and we both laughed. Next night we resolved to follow him. When he went out as usual, the dog, to our surprise, jumped into the car. Gavin threw him out with a force that surprised us, and bade us call him back. We endeavoured to do so, but the animal seemed demented he ran after the car like a mad thing, and both were soon lost in the distance.

After half an hour we followed on the same road. It was a lovely night, warm, with the sky full of scudding clouds which every now and then hid the face of the moon and dimmed its light. Some little way off we left the car and started to walk across the grass. Tall and gaunt the dolmen stood out where the moon-light touched them. Somehow to me they looked unaccountably sinister, as if they longed to fall and crush one. "We were still some way off when we saw a figure steal out from one of the great stones. In the dim light it looked like a misty wraith. I heard my brother draw in his breath sharply. "It stopped before the altar stone, which was deeply in the shadow. Something flashed in the light—a knife; then it seemed from the stone itself came the most ear-splitting howl of agony. "The moon went behind a cloud; we fled, stumbling over the wet grass, and in our haste missed the car. At last we found it, and, tumbling in, drove off at a great pace. When we got back again Gavin was already in bed and had to come down to open the door. He was too tired to notice anything wrong, and we just said that we had been for a drive. "Next day, after rather a sleepless night, we were heartily ashamed of our weakness, and firmly resolved to follow Gavin again that night. All day he seemed very absorbed and dreamy, and talked only about the discovery that he was going to make. "An hour after he had left we were on his track. This time there was no moon, but we had an electric torch. I soon caught sight of Gavin; he was kneeling by the altar stone. It was reassuring to see his tweed-clad figure. We came up right behind, but he did not turn his head. Then I put my hand on his shoulder, but he did not move. He was unconscious. I raised his head and the light fell on glazed eyes, for he was dead. We laid him on the altar stone seeking for a spark of life, but all in vain. There was blood on his shirt and the hilt of a little knife stuck out. There he lay on the sacrificial stone with hair dishevelled, white upturned face and glassy eyes, while above towered the great stones, seeming to rejoice that once again homage had been paid by a sacrifice of blood. Queer shadows danced in the light of the lamp which my brother held in shaking hands. We stood with bowed heads in the presence of those great monuments ; tombstones that would have done honour to a king. Then we gathered courage and took the body to the car. And

Stonehenge let us go, content that once again its stones were wet with blood. It was an unconsidered thing we did, in that, and it might have led us into trouble; but we found a letter written by Gavin and his will which he had made, so we were freed from all blame or share in the matter. He said that the first few nights of his excavations at Stone-henge he had been unassailed and in a perfectly normal state of mind. Then a strange change came over him, so that at times he almost seemed to have lived there years before and to know all manner of secrets. Then it was that the desire to do the most dreadful things came over him. He questioned if he were mad or if it was the spirit of Stonehenge demanding a victim. The idea of elementals occurred to him, for he had been reading much about them of late. At last he tore himself away and went to Brittany to bury himself in work. Wit-Stonehenge called him back, and he seemed to lose all power over himself. At last, after many sleepless nights, he came back, as he had known that he must. Then, one night he had seen a dog lying on the altar stone, and an irresistible desire to kill overpowered him. After the blood was shed he felt a strange joy and deep contentment, but some-thing told him that he was being watched, so he took the body and ran to the car. He had discovered a short cut across the grass which cut off many miles, so that was how he got home before us. Next morning he awoke with the blood lust strong within him; he felt that if anything would come upon him at the Stones he must kill. All day he fought it. At times he would be filled with disgust at his thoughts, then fall to devising a plot to lure us to our fate. When we had mentioned our coming, a cold fear had seized him, but his words died in his throat when he tried to warn us. Then all the good that was in him seemed to make one last stand. He knew there was one way out—to offer a sacrifice of

blood, and the victim to be himself. So that night he had offered his life as an unsound mind,' was brought in. Suspicion was lifted from us, but afterwards Bob and I went away from the horrible place. No one spoke. We sat in dead silence when he had finished. Then the gong rang, and we arose and knocked the ashes from our pipes.