

Blue Spectre's Treasure

By W. A. Sweeney

No doubt, because McCosson was a Scotsman, the strange business of the cadaverous stranger in the village inn happened to him and would not, perhaps, happen to anybody; for though a man who knew the exact commercial value of anything down to a sneeze, he had the strange gift of his race for fraternizing with witches and warlocks and "things that go bump in the night." Years in the far-flung outposts, among niggers and niggers, had done nothing to lessen his faith in kelpies, and to such men it is given, sometimes, to look at things denied to other men.

His gifts, however, could be at times a trifle disconcerting. McCosson, though a hard-headed man in business, as has been said, was a Celtic trick of reading omens and signs and portents into the most ordinary happenings, so that when spending a week-end with him, for example, you would find him regarding you with a shake of the head when he caught you buttoning up your shirt on a Sunday with your left hand instead of your right. It is on record, even, that he turned as white as a sheet once when a friend of his whistled while passing a cross-eyed woman on a wet Friday afternoon.

He was on leave from his task of creating and elephants, once, and round about Christmas, he found himself, like many outposts' workers, rather lonely. For this reason he decided to pass the season by visiting a few historic country spots in his native land, for he was a man interested in ancient architecture and its history, and the gloomier and more tragic the history the more impassioned was McCosson. Thus it was Christmas Eve found him in the lonely village in which Whither Heather Castle was situated.

He was sitting in a corner of the parlour of The Castle Arms, pondering over his task when Whither Heather Castle, which he had just visited, when a stranger approached and stood beside him.

Now, McCosson was sure that a moment or two before there had been nobody in the parlour but him and the landlord, having got tired of yawning in the opening through which he pushed the drinks from the main bar, had retired to some squalid room for a more complete repose. Yet, without hearing a sound McCosson looked up, and there was the stranger standing



looking down on him. He was a long, cadaverous, clean-shaven man of about sixty, dressed in a faded frock-coat, black trousers innocuous as those in the photographs of our great-grandfathers, and wore an old-fashioned, low-crowned top-hat. At his neck appeared a white cravat.

"Yes," said Mac, "I am interested in old houses and castles. Particularly if they have a reputation for being haunted. You are from these parts no doubt, and you probably know a lot about it."

"I do," he replied. "Were you looking for the treasure, too?"

"I didn't know there was a treasure," said Mac, interested. "Sit down, will you and tell me about it."

He sat down and Mac clapped his hands for the landlord. He looked at the stranger inquiringly. "A pint of ale," said the latter with decision.

"Yes," he said, after he had refreshed himself. "Whither Heather Castle has a treasure as well as a ghost. It has always had both—for centuries now. You know it was inhabited up till a few years ago?"

"That I know. Lord Stivinhugh's family lived there."

"Precisely. You never heard of any crime connected with it in more or less recent times, I daresay?" he went on. "No story of smothering, or any such thing?"

"No," said Mac, all interest now. He noticed the other had already finished the pint of ale and he called for another.

"For years—centuries," began the stranger, "the castle was haunted by the ghost of Sir Lancelot Stivinhugh, who perished in 1342 with a dagger in his diaphragm. He haunted the castle dressed in blue and was known as the Blue Spectre. The circumstances surrounding his being condemned to haunt the castle are worthy of your attention. In his lifetime he was incurably avaricious. Very fond of money, he was. He murdered his wife's father for his money, and afterwards smothered his wife, with a pillow, to get at a legacy due to her from an aunt."

Hints On Etiquette

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the Countess Anne of Swigen, a place in the border country. Afterwards he pillaged a few rich landowners round about and then, having amassed a tidy pile, as you can imagine, buried the lot in a secret hiding place within the castle grounds. Yes, I shall have another pint."

Mac waited until he had refreshed himself and saw him light an old-fashioned clay pipe.

"The trouble began after centuries," he continued, thoughtfully. "When you don't know a thing exists you don't miss it—and that was the way with Sir Lancelot. He became discontented when they installed central heating in some of the other castles and haunted houses in the region. I forgot to explain that he was condemned to haunt the castle because of his avarice and could have no rest until he had disclosed the hiding place of his buried gold. The system is quite common."

"I beg your pardon?" said McCosson in amazement.

"I said the system is quite common," he repeated, raising his voice.

"Well, by some means or other he found out about central heating for the winter and cooling devices for the summer, and, as he was stified in the family vault during the hot weather and shivered like a jelly all during the winter, he wondered, irritably, why the deuce his descendants didn't do like everybody else and install these things. It didn't seem to occur to him that he himself was to blame for, as his miserliness even after he was a ghost had prevented him from disclosing the buried treasure, his descendants had hardly enough money to buy matches, not to speak of heating a castle."

"Will you have another pint?" asked Mac, faintly, as he noticed his companion's pot was empty again, and he was regarding it with a fixed stare.

"I will," he said. "Well, as time went on—no doubt the passing of the years had done something to do with it—it grew more and more peculiar and he was full of tricks. For he was always full of cunning. If there was ice-cream in the kitchen it was always missing and the cook never understood why. Sir Lancelot had a mind to speak to the occupant of the place—the late Lord Stivinhugh—but that gentleman always passed him by without the slightest notice. No wonder, when he couldn't see him."

"Things were coming to a crisis with the old man—I mean the Blue Spectre—when one night he stood angrily by the bedside of the late Lord Stivinhugh and sighed.

"The wind's rising," said Lord Stivinhugh. "I only hope it doesn't get bad enough to blow anything down. We can't afford to have a bit of a storm."

"The Blue Spectre ground his teeth in annoyance at being mistaken for wind, and Lady Stivinhugh said:

"The cracking of this rotten old hole is getting on my nerves. Herbert. Can't you have it all oiled or something?"

"I would if I had the money for the oil," said Lord Stivinhugh, with a bitter laugh.

"You don't mean to say we're as bad as all that?" gasped her ladyship.

"Worse," replied her husband. "The fact is, Madam, we haven't a cent. The only thing I can think of to do is to try and sell this damned old barracks and I'm going to start tomorrow."

"Quivering with rage at being taken for a creaking noise Sir Lancelot stood there (invisible to them, of course, for it was only on certain nights of the year—Christmas Eve, for instance)—that they could see him) and hissed at them like a serpent.

"The draughts are enough to blow your nose out through the back of your head," grunted Lord Stivinhugh, rising from his bed, with curses, to see to the windows.

"Choking with anger Sir Lancelot went back to the family vault and, looking around his dimly lit and dismal dwelling place with deep disgust, decided he would have to take some steps. From scraps of conversation he had overheard it seemed decidedly improbable that Lord Stivinhugh would ever find a buyer for Whither Heather Castle.

"In which case," said Sir Lancelot, wrapping his shroud round him, preparatory to getting down for the night. "I shall have to haunt a ruin and I'll be worse off than ever."

The simple solution was, of course, to show Lord Stivinhugh where the buried treasure was, but as I said, Sir Lancelot's avarice had kept him there haunting in acute discomfort for over four hundred years, and it was unlikely he would disclose his gold now without a wrench.

Again Mac's strange friend paused and again he noticed he had consumed another pint. He waved silently to the landlord.

"As the winter progressed, however," the narrator continued presently, "he decided that his present conditions were intolerable, and that the cold would kill him if he had to pass the entire season there, and, seeing Lord Stivinhugh wandering disconsolately through the castle grounds one afternoon he walked the edge of one of the coffers he had buried about four hundred years before. It lay right in Lord Stivinhugh's path,

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and a little later he was tugging at it like an elephant uprooting a tree, and shouting hysterically for his wife. Sir Lancelot watched them with a certain amount of anguish but, anyway, it meant for him, goodbye to a miserable existence.

"Because I am Lord Stivinhugh's ghost," he stalked majestically from the bar parlour.

Well, McCosson sat pondering in a profound Celtic amazement over all this for a while, and then looked up to find that the landlord was regarding him from behind his little opening.

"Had a good nap?" he inquired cheerfully.

"Nap?" repeated McCosson. "What do you mean—nap?"

"Thought I saw you dozing," said the landlord.

Mac stared at him and then stared at the other pin-point opposite his. So did the landlord, incidentally, and, somewhat puzzled, came over, lifted it and carried it away.

"Didn't see that empty pot there," he murmured.

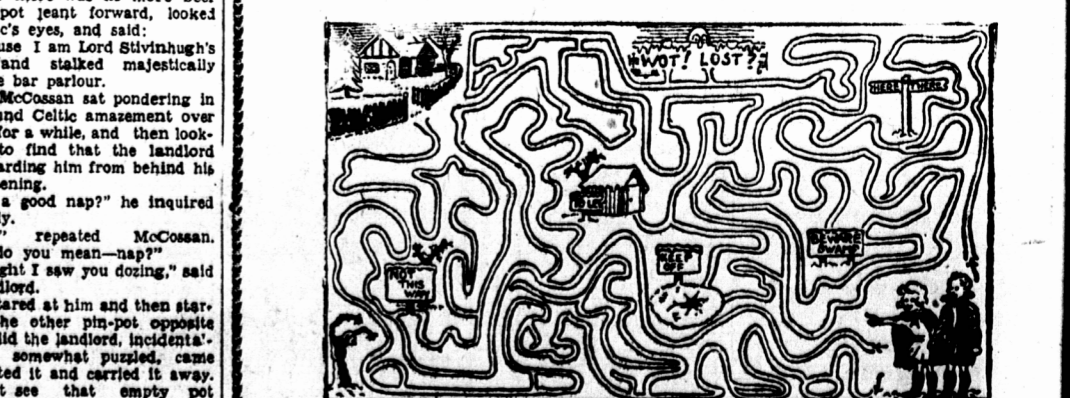
Now, reflected the bewildered McCosson, comes the invincible test.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked aloud.

"You had only the one pint," replied the landlord, nodding towards his pot.

THE END

Can You Solve This Maze Puzzle?



Jack and Jean were invited to a Christmas Party. They set off by different paths through the wood to see which of them would arrive first. But only one of the children arrived. Can you trace the way he, or she, went?