The Room in the Tower

E. F. Benson · 1912

For fifteen years the same dream: a red-brick house, tea on the lawn in silence, and Mrs. Stone saying, “Jack will show you your room: I have given you the room in the tower.” Then, one August in Sussex, a friend’s motor stops at the door of the house, and his mother says the sentence. Benson’s most famous story, complete, with the portrait, the dog, the blood that will not wash off, and the thing that waits upstairs in the storm.

The story is performed exactly as Benson published it, every word. Nothing is cut or modernised.

LISTEN FOR

— The dream is told four times before it comes true. Listen for what changes each time: the hair, the chairs, the gravestone, the smell.

— One sentence is spoken by three people. Who says it, and in what voice, each time?

— Count what the dreamer sees in the real house that he has already seen asleep, and the one thing he has not.

— The dog, the cat and the three bloodied hands all happen before dark. Notice how much of the horror is in daylight.

THE PEOPLE, AS THE BOOK NAMES THEM

The Dreamer	a habitual dreamer · Benson’s “I”
Mrs. Stone	in the dream · Jack’s mother
Mrs. Clinton	the hostess at Forest Row
John Clinton	the host · a cheerful friend
Julia Stone	the thing in the tower

CHAPTERS, WITH THEIR TIMES IN THE VIDEO

0:00	The dreamer
3:29	The first dream
6:00	Fifteen years
10:08	The gravestone
12:49	Forest Row
14:17	The house
15:54	The room in the tower
18:32	The portrait
20:42	Blood
23:07	The dog and the cat
25:59	Night
26:40	The storm
28:44	The thing
30:58	John’s room
31:22	The sequel

WORDS AND THINGS, FROM THE MARGIN

Dreams fulfilled The Society for Psychical Research had been collecting reports of dreams that came true since 1882. Benson's brothers A. C. and R. H. Benson also wrote ghost stories; he opens with the sceptic's version of the case.

The tower room Victorian and Edwardian country houses often ran a square tower up one corner, with a water tank in the roof and a spare bedroom at the top: the loneliest room in the house, given to a bachelor guest.

The baize door The padded, cloth-covered door that divided the family's rooms from the servants' side of an English house; green baize deadened sound, so nothing was heard through it.

In evil memory The inversion of the headstone formula 'In loving memory of'. The grave stands outside the garden wall, not in a churchyard, which the sequel will explain.

Ashdown Forest A heath and woodland of the Sussex Weald about forty miles south of London, a royal hunting ground in the Middle Ages. Forest Row, on its northern edge, had a railway station from 1866.

The painted self The haunted portrait is a Victorian fixture, from Melmoth to Dorian Gray (1890). Benson's turn is that the sitter is also the painter: Julia Stone made the thing that hangs by the bed.

Irish terrier A wiry red-coated breed much kept in Edwardian houses and nicknamed the 'daredevil' for its fearlessness; which is the point of Toby's terror at the gate.

Walpurgis night The eve of May Day, 30 April, when German legend had the witches gather on the Brocken in the Harz mountains. The dreamer's joke about a yowling cat.

The vampire Benson is writing fifteen years after Dracula (1897), and the marks are all here: the grave-cloth stained with mould, the hunger that waits, the body that will not stay buried.

Burying a suicide Suicides were long refused burial in consecrated ground. An Act of 1823 ended burial at the crossroads; one of 1882 allowed a churchyard grave, though the Church still withheld its full service. West Fawley is Benson's invention.

PASSAGES TO HEAR AGAIN

"Jack will show you your room: I have given you the room in the tower."
Mrs. Stone, in the dream; then Mrs. Clinton, at tea.

"I could read the lettering on the grave nearest me, and it was, "In evil memory of Julia Stone."
The lawn in the dream, after the household goes into black.

"Evil beamed from the narrow, leering eyes; it laughed in the demon-like mouth."
The portrait beside the bed.

"It was dressed in some close-clinging white garment, spotted and stained with mould, and the face was that of the portrait."
The room in the tower, in the flash.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Set out the first dream in order, in the text's words: the door, the hall, the lawn, the sentence, the stair, the room.
2. What does the dreamer say changes in the dream over fifteen years? List the changes to the people and the house.
3. What happens in the dream the night the household is in black, and what does the dreamer read on the grave?
4. Describe the real house and lawn as the text gives them. Which details match the dream exactly?
5. What is in the tower room, and what two things does the dreamer say he has never seen there before?
6. Describe the portrait in the text's words, and say how it is signed.
7. What happens to the three men's hands, and what does John find out from the footman?
8. What do the dog and the cat each do at the gate, and where exactly does the cat walk?

9. Tell the night in order: the waking, the hand on the wall, the flash, the figure, the voice, the escape.
10. What does John see when he opens the door, and what does the text say about his face when he comes out?
11. Set out the sequel: the churchyard, the three burials, the unconsecrated ground, the last line.

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