

## Hugh Curwen – Elizabethan occultist and exorcist

**A story used as part of a larger work (Glade Hall), though Hugh will eventually get his own book. Word count 3,000 or so..... Enjoy.**

**The perfect piece of wickedness for the spooky season.**

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Eloise was as shocked as the living, by the huge changes to England, during the reign of the Tudor monarchs. She and her sisters, Maude in the middle and Rose the youngest, had been born into an England with a far smaller population. Their village had consisted of a dozen dwelling at most, probably no more than sixty people.

There was no regular or reliable census, but the population had grown from about two million in fifteen hundred, to four million in sixteen hundred. Already a good proportion of those crowded themselves into London and the south east. Not that dates really meant anything to Eloise, she just knew that her world seemed much more crowded. Queen Elizabeth 1st was just plain Queen Elizabeth then and still on the throne. The manor house near The Glade had no particular name, it was just known as The Manor, home to Edward, Earl of Oxford and his family. Edward was wealthy enough to afford books, a hundred or more of them, a library by Elizabethan standards. Most of the books seemed to be about his favourite topic, botany. Eloise loved the books, with their neatly printed words and occasional etching of herbs and plants. It had occurred to Eloise that her love of Edward's books, might have caused the current problems.

At first she'd been content to read what he had open on his desk, standing behind him for hours. The earl was no sensitive, but he began to look nervously over his shoulder as he read.

"He's no fool, that one." Maude had told her. "He feels you there and no good will come of it."

Rose was going through one of her quiet phases then, they could last for years. She'd just nodded in agreement. Eloise could move objects, it just made her feel tired and drained. She began to move books around on the shelves, opening and reading the ones at the end of rows. Eventually that too wasn't good enough for her and at midnight one night, she'd attempted to move a book onto his desk. Disaster ! It had fallen from her tenuous ethereal grasp and hit the floor with a loud crashing sound. The noise brought one of the house guards and events began to escalate towards the current problems. It was a religious age, when the supernatural was not only believed in, but considered a constant threat. The next day, Edward had sat in his library, surrounded by his best advisors and the leader of his guard.

"I have felt some evil presence in here before." He'd said. "An exorcism of some kind seems essential."

His advisors agreed, that was their job, to agree with his ideas. Besides, it was the logical way to remove the evil presence from the manor house. His oldest and most trusted servant, was given the task of arranging the exorcism.

"Get someone from Oxford, not some local fool."

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There was no Bishop of Oxford; the post had been vacant since the death of John Underhill. Edward had one of his friends visit John Bridges, the famous Dean of Salisbury. The Dean thought that a minor exorcism in a rural part of Oxfordshire wasn't fitting to his rank. He must have looked back on that as one of the best decisions in his life. He did recommend someone though, a famous dispeller

of demons and evil spirits. Expensive, he charged a fee equivalent to a year's wages for most. Not that Edward, Earl of Oxford was short of money. On a cold October night in the year sixteen hundred, a carriage came to a halt outside Edward's manor house. Hugh Curwen, the famous exorcist, had arrived to rid the house of anything unholy. Heavy leather bag in his right hand, he thumped on the door with his left.

"Your master is expecting me."

"Yes sir, come in. I'll tell the master that you've arrived."

Hugh strode in, swirling his cape slightly. A little theatricality was expected, his was a business with a lot of competition. A maid took his cape and gloves, blushing as he smiled at her. He enjoyed the fame and riches that being a good exorcist gained him. With reading came knowledge and that knowledge led to questions. If the clergy could speak directly to God, then maybe something else could use that same conduit? Maybe your neighbour wasn't sick, maybe he was possessed? Women were being burnt as witches and everyone thought the odd smell in their kitchen, might be brimstone from hell. Hugh was in demand and already had a considerable personal fortune. He was a little cynical about some of the nonsense he was called in for, but not every haunting or possession. He'd seen enough to know that about one in every hundred or so, was very real indeed. His current client approached him, hand out to be shaken.

"I'm so glad that you could come. Hopefully you can restore peace and tranquillity to my home."

No money changed hands, the fee was always paid after the event. Hugh felt a need to impress the client, convince them the fee was worth paying. He wasn't above using a little trickery if it was needed and his bag contained one or two such tricks. It only needed one client refusing to pay him, for his almost legendary fame to disappear like morning mist.

"The Dean said your need was great." He said. "Perhaps you could show me where the unholy occurrences have been at their worst?"

"It's all been in the library, though the kitchen staff have complained about seeing strange shadows."

Four servants formed a supportive cloud around them as they went upstairs to the library. One opened doors for them, while another two seemed to be a personal guard. The maid who'd taken his cape, hovered about, probably in case her master needed refreshments. Hugh had visited quite a few homes of the rich and powerful and most great men had their foibles. Edward led them into his library, upstairs at the rear of the house.

"In here, this is where it seems to be the worst."

"If you could point out the places please?" Asked Hugh. "And tell me exactly what happened?"

The earl put his hands on the back of a comfortable looking chair in front of a desk.

"I sit here and have definitely felt as though I was being watched. It has been going on for months and sometimes I feel a cold draught on my neck, with no windows open."

Hugh listened and nodded, already putting the visit into the category needing a little trick to gain his pay. Maybe a small amount of evil smelling smoke, as he read the final line of the exorcism ritual? His client was moving towards the bookshelves.

"I've noticed books moved and they're not light." Said the Earl. "Usually the ones at the end of rows. I know how I've left things, they were definitely moved."

More nodding, as he decided that his client was one of the great mass or worried but un-haunted.

The earl was now pointing at a spot on the tiled floor.

"There was no one in here and I'd retired for the night. One of my guards heard a crash and found a book here, on the floor."

"Which book?"

"This one, The Changing Flora of England."

Hugh picked up the book, heavy, a good six pounds in weight. Far too heavy for a domestic animal to have knocked off the shelf, or even a careless servant. For the first time, the story began to interest him.

"Did it happen again?" He asked.

"No, but when I read in here, I still feel that I'm being watched."

"Then here is where I shall carry out the exorcism."

Hugh Curwen placed his large leather bag on his client's reading desk and opened the two brass clasps that held it closed. It always gave him a thrill, watching the awed look on his client's face, as he brought out the paraphernalia for the exorcism. Silver plates and goblets, a gold crucifix, a dagger with a Latin phrase etched along its blade. A huge old hand written bible of course, one written in Arabia, it had cost him a small fortune. He had jars and bottles full of nails from the cross, pieces of bone from the saints and a shrivelled eyeball of John of Patmos. It was all junk of course, to convince the gullible and the earl wasn't gullible or uneducated. He left the jars and bottles in his bag.

"There may be some risk to those who remain in this room." He said.

No one left, they rarely did. Someone's wife had decided to leave the room once. The clients wanted to see if they were getting value for money and the servants had no real option. Hugh opened his ancient bible to a section with hand drawn pictures of demons. The writing was in a version of Arabic that few still spoke but he'd learned the ritual by heart.

"A ritual written by King Solomon himself." He said. "It has never failed me."

The book wasn't junk, it was the genuine article. He had never believed the seller, that it was the famous Clavicule of Solomon, but several of the rituals had real power. The ritual he was about to read had worked well on a few of the cases that had turned out not to be the result of too much anxiety and not enough common sense. Hugh had a wound on his upper leg, far too close to his manhood. It had been put there as a parting gift, by a particularly unpleasant demon. Hugh spoke the first line of the ritual.

"I exorcise thee, every unclean spirit, in the name of God the Father Almighty."

A cold breeze hit his neck and the others felt it too. The earl crossed himself and began to quietly mumble the Lord's Prayer. Hugh removed two silver candle sticks from his bag and lit the candles. They'd been blessed by Saint Judith herself, or so the merchant from Rome had told him. Hugh had used them before and just lighting them gave him courage.

".....and in the power of the Holy Spirit, that thou depart from this creature of God, Edward, Earl of Oxford which our Lord hath designed to call unto His holy temple."

One of the large heavy and freestanding bookcases appeared to be thrown against a nearby wall. It and the books it contained must have weighed as much as three or four grown men, yet it had been sent hurtling across the room. The maid gave the beginning of a scream and clasped her hand to her mouth. Edward, Earl of Oxford, looked startled, but not terrified. His guards simply stood there, trying to give the impression that they'd been through far worse.

"We should continue." Said Hugh. "Or the unholy ones will only grow in their evil and contempt for our Lord God."

"Carry on." Said Edward.

Hugh had forgotten the next line, that happened sometimes. Not that the client would realise. He turned to the front of the bible, where he'd inserted the Christian version of the exorcism ritual. It was probably the banned catholic version, but Hugh just needed something to say.

“.....that it may be made the temple of the living God, and that the Holy Spirit may dwell therein. Through the same Christ our Lord, who shall come to judge the living and the dead, and the world by fire !”

He put emphasis on the word fire and something reacted to his words. The earl drew his sword, as did his guards. The three figures with hideously burned faces, had appeared to walk through the solid stone outer wall of the house. In truth, Hugh had faced very few genuine demons, just one actually. There had been one or two wailing noises after his exorcisms had been completed and a rather foul smell once. The only real demon he'd ever beaten, had nearly removed his manhood. That tussle with evil had lasted for over twelve hours and had left him broken and bloody. Now he was up against three truly hideous creatures.

“In odorem suavitatis. Tu autem effugare, diabole; appropinquabit enim iudicium Dei.” He yelled. He saw the tallest of the figures wince at his words, but that seemed to be the total effect of his words. She spoke to him, the first time he'd ever heard English from something unholy. It was a woman, of that he was certain. Flames had left little of her face, but her body beneath the burned rags she wore, was that of a woman.

“You like fire man of God ?” She asked. “I can give you fire !”

The maid was now fingering her rosary and mumbling, while Edward looked ready to battle the phantoms with sword and shield. Hugh had always promised himself and his wife that he'd know when he was outmatched.

“If I ever meet an entity with real power.” He'd told her. “I'll withdraw from the exorcism. I give you my oath.”

Hugh was strangely calm as he put his bible back in his bag and reached for the candles. He was going to run away, it was the only way to survive. No more Latin verses, they would just annoy the witches. He was certain that was what he faced, three genuine and extremely powerful witches. The taller one had a growing ball of flame in her right hand and he didn't want to be around when it had finished building.

“What do we do now ?” Asked Edward, Earl of Oxford.

Hugh ignored him while he patted out the candles and put them in his bag. When he'd finished and had the brass clasps closed, he picked up his heavy bag of precious objects.

“Run you fools !” He shouted. “You can't fight them with steel swords.”

For some reason he grabbed the maid's hand, dragging her with him. He ran out of the library, just as the witch released her fireball.

“Don't look back.” He told her. “Run ! We must run for our lives.”

Hugh had seen the earl, covered from head to foot in fire, which seemed to hug his body like a living thing. That image stung his mind, as he dragged the maid along the corridor. She seemed unwilling to move, holding him back.

“Move !” He shouted. “Or I'll leave you for the witches and their flames.”

The threat made her run. The unnatural fire appeared to be chasing them, scorching their backs and singeing their hair. Hugh didn't hesitate or falter, as he dragged the girl down two flights of stairs and towards the front door. It had been bolted, three different night time bolts.

“Damn ! Help me girl or neither of us will see another morning !”

“No ! You'll jam it doing that.” She replied.

It was a house she knew far better than him. Hugh stood back and let her deal with the bolts and a lever lock that he hadn't even noticed. There was no hurrying what she had to do, yet the fire was

gradually catching up with them. Flames were moving along the ceiling, like tongues of fire, eager to taste their flesh.

“That’s it !” She said.

He pulled at the handles and the heavy door moved towards them. As soon as the gap was big enough, he grabbed the maid and pushed her through.

“Run ! Keep going until you reach my carriage.”

Hugh needed a bit more space than her and the flames seemed intent on having at least one of them to engulf. She was now walking through the flames, her, the tallest witch.

“I thought you liked flames !?” She shouted.

He had no reply for her, he was terrified ! Hugh pulled the door so hard, that he felt something twist in his shoulder. He winced with the pain, but didn’t stop pulling. The flames were upon him and her voice, cackling and taunting.

“Your God seems to have forgotten you.”

Pain as fire took the skin off the back of his hands and arms, burning his hair and igniting his jacket. The gap in the door was big enough, he ran through, by now a human candle, lighting his own path. He ran, not wanting to give up and die near that cursed place. He didn’t die though, his jacket dropped away from his back and his hair stopped burning.

“Blessed rain !” He said.

Maybe his God hadn’t deserted him ? The torrential rain fell out of what had been a clear sky. It extinguished his burning clothes and soothed the agony in his hands and arms. By some miracle his hand still held his leather bag, which smouldered but still seemed intact. Of his carriage there was no trace and he found the girl waiting by the main road to Oxford. She jumped up as he approached and seemed ready to run from him.

“It’s me.” He called. “Though I barely escaped with my life. The rain saved me.”

“You poor man, I barely recognised you.”

She fussed over him, prodding at burns that he’d rather were left alone. It was her turn to encourage him to keep moving.

“There’s nothing left for me here.” She said. “My village isn’t far and someone will have balm for your burns.”

Hugh Curwen followed her, knowing that his career as an infallible exorcist, was well and truly over. Behind them, the fire had already turned the manor house into a pile of burning timbers and blackened stones.

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