

# *Introduction*

## *The Hand of Glory*



When I was thirteen years old, my greatest wish was to see a Hand of Glory. I must have been a pragmatic boy, for here was a wish that could come true.

For those who don't know, let me explain what a Hand of Glory is: an occult item – the mummified left hand of a hanged man, specifically a murderer, severed below the wrist at midnight by the light of a full moon. One wonders how easy it would be to fulfil these criteria, but fulfilled they must be for the object to acquire the powers accorded to it. And those powers are impressive. Any candle made from the fat of the dead criminal (combined with virgin wax and sesame oil), placed in the Hand and lit, will render all those in its presence, save the bearer, totally unconscious. Nothing will wake them until the flame is doused with milk (dousing it with water will have no effect). The Hand

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can also unlock any door it comes upon, thus making it of great value to thieves. Those who possess such a potent charm could surely help themselves to the contents of whichever property they fancy. (There is another, more alarming, piece of folklore connected with the fate of the Hand's victims: if they are not woken by the second cock-crow of morning, they will die, and not only that, their souls will be taken to hell, whether deserving of that fate or not.)

I say I must have been pragmatic, but there was an otherworldly drive behind the desire to track down this ghoulish item. It was not purely a matter of having a taste for the macabre. Since the age of five or six I have been fascinated by the supernatural. How this enthusiasm began I find it difficult to remember – as difficult to remember as my entry into the world itself – but it is core to my earliest conscious memories. My parents, and indeed my friends' parents, were aware of this, to judge by the presents I received on birthdays.

More often than not these gifts were anthologies of supernatural stories, mostly fictional but occasionally collections of supposedly factual accounts, too. The titles are still vivid in my mind, as are their covers: *Ghosts and Hauntings*, *Great Ghosts of the World*, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Magic*. One of these, perhaps my favourite, was a volume called *Haunted Britain* by the delightfully named Anthony D. Hippisley Coxe. This took the form of a travel guide, with a map at the front replete with different symbols and accompanied by a complex key: a star for wishing wells, sacred, magic and mysterious places; a skull for hauntings, ghosts and poltergeists; a little sea-monster for a location identified with the appearance of spectral and mythical beasts, and so on. I would spend hours, my head bent over the map, cross-referencing it with the entries, identifying possible destinations, studying it as if it

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were some kind of escape route, although at that age I had no idea from what I might be trying to escape.

Some of the destinations were tantalisingly close: Burton Agnes Hall, wherein resided the skull of Aud Nance, separated from her remains in order to quell her unquiet spirit (which screamed in the night until her dying wish to be interred in the house itself was carried out). Bramham Park, where a phantom coach and hounds were said to charge through the gardens by the light of a February moon. Brimham Rocks, with its mysterious tipping stone, a huge boulder carved by ancient watercourses, which was balanced precariously on an angular base. Supposedly it could be tilted by a truly honest man. (I knew this would be beyond me. I was a habitual liar, often concealing my culpability for various accidents around the house beneath a convincing blanket of denial.) All these places were geographically close, but there was no destination more tantalising than Whitby. The famous harbour town sported three symbols. One of them – a black cauldron (‘witchcraft, sorcery and curses’, according to the key) – referred to the Hand of Glory itself. According to Mr Hippisley Coxe, this item was no mere figment of imagination or legend. Not only did it exist, it was on display at the Whitby Museum. Well, here was an achievable goal. A trip to Whitby was entirely practical.

Often – during the school holidays at least – my parents would arrange trips to Yorkshire locations. It wouldn’t be difficult to suggest a day out in Whitby. It was a seaside town, it had an abbey, and doubtless its share of craft and antique shops, too, which would be a lure to my mother. Indeed, I cannily led with this, saying I’d seen a piece on TV about teapots from the east coast and maybe we could go there? Robin Hood’s Bay was apparently very nice – or Whitby? I mentioned that there was supposed to be a good museum, too, as if this fact were only of the merest

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passing interest to me. And so the excursion was arranged and my excitement grew as the day approached.

The skies were fine as we set off down Wigton Lane towards the ring road and the A64 beyond. What would the thing look like? What colour would its desiccated skin be? Would it have a candle fixed between its bony digits? Had it ever been used?

‘This is typical of you.’

‘What?’

‘How are we supposed to walk up hills like this with your father’s back?’

‘I didn’t know it was up a hill.’

‘Yes, well. That’s the point. It’s not up a hill. For God’s sake, where is this place?’

My mother turned to my more stoic father, her face drenched with the salt-smelling freezing drizzle being driven by a cruel wind relentlessly into all our exposed areas.

‘We’re not walking another step. Melvyn – !’

My father was expected to be the enforcer of this decision. My sister was crying from tiredness. The steep Whitby side streets seemed to hold nothing but blank-faced houses. The shops had trailed off some way back. The vague directions in *Haunted Britain* had suggested that the Whitby Museum would be the simplest of institutions to find, yet there was not a hint of anything intended for tourists or travellers on this road. Just rows of ordinary properties, their quotidian paths and blank front doors no different from those I saw every day.

‘I don’t know what’s the matter with you. How difficult would it have been to find a map? I don’t think this place even exists. Have you made it up? Is it another of your stories? You’ve got so you can’t tell the difference between what’s actual and what you invent. Did you make this whole thing up to scare Jayne?’

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My sister cried even harder. I could feel disappointment swelling within me. The promise of the excitement and mystery I had yearned for, yearned to see with my own eyes, was about to fade into a fog of banality and disappointment. Of course the Hand of Glory, or its accommodating museum, didn't exist. Of course there was nothing to see. There was nothing there at all. There never had been. Or if there was, it might as well not be since it was not, nor ever would be, for my eyes.

But the yearning didn't fade. Still there was this need to experience directly the supernatural. Perhaps 'need' is wrong; it was closer to desire. I could function without it, but I craved it nonetheless. It was an ache, a wish, a hankering for something more mysterious, something larger than that which I could perceive around me with my five unsatisfying senses. The failure to locate the Hand of Glory and gaze upon it became emblematic of the encroaching cementation into a material life that seemed to be happening, year on year, as childhood fled and adulthood approached, ready to ensnare me in its hard, plain, boring arms.

But the books remained on the shelf, round the little corner of my cramped bedroom, which was increasingly becoming a shrine to this yearned-for world I couldn't touch.

There were some nights still, if I'm honest, when they frightened me. Maybe this fear was the next best thing to the sense of wonder that was at the centre of my longing. Fear and awe are in close relationship, particularly the kind of fear associated with the supernatural. The Germans call it *ehrfurcht*, a semi-religious word meaning 'reverence for that which we cannot understand'. But it's odd to be frightened of a book. Or maybe not. Books are powerful things. Perhaps it was an inversion of my Jewish upbringing, where ecclesiastical volumes are hallowed objects. If one drops a prayer

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book, one has to kiss it after retrieving it from the floor. And at the end of their span of use, such books are buried in Jewish cemeteries since religious law prohibits them from being destroyed. It's not much of a jump for a child to think of this power spilling over into non-religious books, too. One collection I owned, *Stranger than Fiction: 50 True Tales of Terror*, filled me with an irrational fear. It might have been the cowled skeleton embossed into the front (the book had long since lost its dustjacket). Or it might have been to do with the contents themselves. Either way, on a dark, windy night, or when I was alone in the house – even in my early teens – I would place that book in another room before I went to sleep.

Written by a number of different authors, *Stranger than Fiction* took a variety of dark and terrifying legends from around the world and fictionalised them as short stories. Imagined interior monologues and motivations for their protagonists lent them an immediacy and vividness that the bare summaries in other books of this type simply didn't possess. It was a kind of magic trick, I suppose: the author, by creating characters on the page – fictional versions derived from actual individuals – enabled the reader to enter into their original experience, feel what it might be like to have faced the terrifying (and impossible) phenomena they apparently encountered. Favourites included: 'The Gytrash of Goathland', a yarn about a werewolf-like creature that haunted the North Yorkshire moors; 'The Campden Wonder', a chilling story of witchcraft in a Cotswolds village; and 'Tapu', a tale of a young man tormented by Maori demons.

In recent years, as a sceptical adult, I still find myself drawn to the memory of *Stranger than Fiction: 50 True Tales of Terror*, even though the book is long gone. What pleasure there might be in writing such a book myself, I thought – in returning to that expansive world I used to inhabit, even if that pleasure is essentially

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nostalgic. The thought was always idle, however, because the supposedly true stories of this nature I was aware of were already overly familiar. And I did not have the inclination to go and search out new ones.

Then, in defiance of my own scepticism perhaps, synchronicity stepped in. My agent forwarded me an email from a journalist called Aiden Fox. He wasn't known to me. At that time he worked on the *Bath Chronicle*, but he'd been employed by various local newspapers and radio stations in the south-west for more than thirty years. He had an interest in myths and legends of the British Isles and for many years had run a column, interestingly enough also called *Stranger than Fiction*, which briefly summarised a different eerie story or supernatural tale. Over the years he had amassed a number of these accounts and was keen on compiling them into a book. The email explained that he was looking for a writer of fiction to collaborate with, someone who might be able to articulate the stories more fully than he himself felt able to. Typically, his column ran to no more than two thousand words and was written in a bright and breezy style. But now he was interested in fleshing out these 'real life' pieces into something fuller and more literary. What he was actually talking about was a modern-day version of *Stranger than Fiction: 50 True Tales of Terror*. I don't know if he was aware of the earlier book. If he was, he never mentioned it. Ordinarily I'm wary of such enquiries (not that I'm inundated with them, but they come occasionally, as I'm sure they do to many writers), and often they are speculative. One is aware of the fact that the importuner has perhaps made blanket approaches. In Mr Fox's case, I didn't get that impression. It felt like, for whatever reason, I had been selected as his writer of choice. Attached to the email was a document containing a number of the original stories as they'd been sent to him. If I was already predisposed to his idea, it was the accounts that clinched

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the matter. Within a few minutes, I was ensnared. Mr Fox clearly had an eye for the uncanny. There was such a strange particularity to the letters and clippings he had sent me that my imagination couldn't help but respond.

Aiden was jolly and friendly. At first glance he was physically nondescript. You might take him for someone who works in IT rather than journalism, in his neat grey suit and unbuttoned white shirt. But he was possessed of an immediate and ebullient charm, and an intriguing sense of purpose, as if his mission to disseminate stories of the unexplained had some hidden, higher motivation. He wrong-footed my offhand and slightly self-regarding suspicion with his own intelligence and affable wit. He wasn't an idiot and he wasn't a weirdo. And I was relieved. Relieved because I was already intrigued, in spite of my lofty instinct to dismiss his initial approach. There was something about the clutch of supposedly real-life stories he'd sent me that had me hooked. The truth was that some of them frightened me. I took this is a good sign. That frisson is always what one hopes to find in a tale of this type.

Unlike me, Aiden was a believer – but that only added to the appeal. I was coming at these accounts from a writer's perspective, captivated by the metaphorical possibilities of their impossibility. Aiden was closer to my junior self: desirous of touching something that he felt was just out of reach.

I've always been bewitched by an eerie location. Some of this may go back to *Haunted Britain*, where the dustjacket proclaimed that the book's photographer 'was overcome by such a sense of evil at Saddell Abbey near Campbeltown that he could not bear to stay longer than a few minutes'. It was remembering that bit of jacket blurb that sealed the decision and my subsequent *modus operandi*. A number of the stories had filled me with a weird sense of dread, a sense that lingered after first reading them. That strong response



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felt like it was worth more exploration. Unlike the child who hid the book that frightened him in the next room, I am now drawn to explore things that engender fear, to look more deeply into them. Here was a golden opportunity to do some actual fieldwork. I decided that I would visit as many of the places that appeared in the stories from Aiden Fox's collection as I could, in emulation of Hippisley Coxe (particularly given that a good number of them were in my beloved Yorkshire). And I suppose that decision put the seal on the format I've adopted, too.

In many ways, this is a record of a voyage – the journey of discovery undertaken by a rational adult into the child's fascination and compulsion to lose himself in the irrational. In youth I yearned for the mystery itself, I wanted to enter it, experience it. As an adult I want to know what that mystery is, what lies behind it, what it really means, and as a consequence, perhaps discover what is truly real. So this is also a guidebook. It's intended to take you, the reader, on a journey literally as well as figuratively. And there is something seductive about the possibility that a number of readers, however small, might be impelled to set off on an expedition themselves; that, somewhere out there, other captivated children might be standing next to their own shrieking mothers as they go in search of a mystery, tantalisingly just behind the veil. Maybe they'll tear through to the other side as I was never able to. Sceptic I may be, but who am I to deny another an encounter with the ineffable?

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