



The Wicklow Ghoul
By
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The Wicklow Ghoul: Case Files of Department Zed #6

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December 18, the newly minted Commander, Magnus Guthrie, and I had been dispatched to Wicklow, Ireland, on the report of zombie activity. A man had been brutally murdered in a fashion that befit a zombie's actions. This we were told by Mycroft Holmes. We knew it meant that the victim had not been merely beaten, shot, stabbed, or strangled: rather he had been torn apart and partially consumed. The murder had only just occurred the day before, and the Irish constabulary were out of their element and had a minor panic on their hands. The residents of that tiny hamlet were certain that The Ripper had crossed the waves to plague them. Yet the Dublin papers had yet to report the matter with any thoroughness, and Mycroft was certain that it should be dealt with before it gained interest. One of his ubiquitous agents wired him the report, and we found ourselves steaming into the walled bay of Wicklow's port by late the next afternoon, after a rough crossing of the Irish Sea. We were not to make contact with the local police force but were to 'sort it out' in Department Zed fashion, which meant we had one or more zombies to identify and kill, post haste. Thus, I had brought my sword, Mustard Seed, beneath my long coat. Guthrie had his sidearm, as usual, but I was all too familiar with the need of a sharp edge when dealing with the undead.

The Department Zed contact in that area was one Kevin West, who owned a small farm out in Bollarney. He met us at the quay and dropped us in Wicklow where we could get a room. He had stabled two horses for us nearby and showed us where we could get to them quickly, should our investigations require them.

West directed us to the old hotel on the High Street. We settled in and enquired from the landlord about the location of Byrne's Inn, the pub where the murdered man had been employed.

"There'll be no craic there this night, though," the Landlord informed us, "what with young Davin Byrne still a'lyin' on a slab in the cellar o' the gaol."

“Was this Davin the landlord there, sir?” Guthrie asked.

“No, no, the landlord’s nephew, a handsome young rake. All the girls o’ Wicklow are in mournin’ for him. But, I wonder, are you two police officers?”

“No sir. We are from the offices of Wiggins, Brewer, and Limeberry, Solicitors. We are from London, but we have business with the owner of that inn from our clients in Liverpool,” I said. We hope to be here no more than a day, and we hope to conclude our business by mid-day tomorrow.”

“Oh, then, you’ll find Gerald there this evening, I imagine,” he said. I nodded, knowing that Gerald Byrne was, indeed, the owner of that establishment.

The landlord arranged a fine dinner for us before we left, and I settled on him the full price for two days lodging and meals, with a generous gratuity, in keeping with Mycroft’s orders. Strangers who are grasping and cheap will often be remembered with suspicion by locals, and we wished to not linger in anyone’s memory.

“Well, Commander Guthrie,” I asked as we walked the darkening High Street toward Byrne’s Inn, “what should we do first?”

“What’d’ya mean, Cap’n Jacks?” he asked, seemingly startled by my question.

“You are Commander Magnus Guthrie now, and your new rank and pay grade, though tasked to Department Zed, places you in an elevated position in our ranks, does it not? I assumed that you’d be taking the lead now, since you out rank me in every military sense of the word. You address me as Captain, but I am retired from service, you know. You must not think like a Sergeant any longer, surely.”

“Ah, but Cap’n, I’m still just a soldier, same as you, ‘cept I haven’t the head for command,” he replied. “Plus, rank or no, you are still my Captain in the field, unless...”

“Yes, unless Holmes is with us,” I said, “but his knee injury will keep him out of field work for some while now. And, outside of our usual East End hunting grounds, I don’t have any more capacity for finding zombies than you do.”

“Well, sir, I suppose we ought to just go to the pub and follow our noses. Look for suspicious folk at the scene of the crime. Plus, it’s been a long while since I had a fresh pint of the black stuff they sell for drink in this land, and, truthfully, that’s what was on me mind when you mentioned my new rank. Sorry.”

“Ever the old campaigner, eh Magnus? Looking forward to the next meal or drink between skirmishes?” I added with a laugh.

“And don’t forget the lasses, Cap’n. These Irish girls could do with a change, I’d warrant,” he added with a wink of his eye.

“That, you young rogue, I will leave to you,” I replied. “And I remind you that we are to be here only briefly. Our superiors certainly do not wish us to leave any broken hearts behind us. Right?”

“Well, sir, we are supposed to leave ’em with pleasant memories, right? And if the chance offers itself...?”

I said nothing, only smiled in return, but I must admit that without Guthrie’s soldierly ways, we might have been in Wicklow for long days more.

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We entered Byrne’s Inn separately, Guthrie going in first with a bit of noise and swagger, and a story which I’d given him on the way. I knew that Her Majesty’s Royal Marines are well known to be a riotous lot when off duty, so I counted on his ability to mix well with the locals, London man, though he is. The story I concocted as cover for our immediate activities would

elicit free discussion, I hoped, between drinking men and establish an innocent context for talk of a local murder. I went in with a quiet attitude, procured a dram of whisky at the bar, and took a high table in a dark corner to the right of the door. I overlooked the flagged floor where patrons could gather at tables that faced a long bench where musicians could gather ‘when the craic was on,’ as the locals say.

This night, there was a fiddler and a fellow with a tenor banjo playing quiet tunes, as though just to themselves. Guthrie was the loudest noise in the house. The bar dominated the wall far to my right, where Guthrie stood in the company with three fellows. Another trio, two older women and a wizened old man sat nearby, listening to and smiling at my handsome friend.

With those smiling folks, Guthrie shared our story, which he embellished as he saw fit, from the store house of his soldiering background. A dark-haired beauty stood behind the bar, drying pint mugs and whisky tumblers that the landlord washed in a sink. She cast blushing glances at Guthrie whenever she dared.

By our intent, Guthrie attracted attention to himself with stories of Irishmen he knew from service. I heard him regale his listeners with my tale of Private Fintan Mulvaney, whom Guthrie knew from duty in Bombay and was from Wicklow. The gist of the story was that they were sure to have known this fellow, Mulvaney, for he was, surely, a local boy, and he bore the scars of a wild animal attack.

Naturally, his listeners wanted to know about this animal attack, and Guthrie claimed that Mulvaney didn’t even know, “for he’d been too drunk on guard duty to know what the Hell had hit him. He put several rounds in the beast, or said he did, anyway, which put the creature off his appetite for Irish lamb!”

This won him a round of laughter, though the locals still claimed that they knew of no Mulvaney lads in service. Guthrie, not to be deterred, offered, “Only the Officer of the Watch wrote it up in a report, threatening to give Mulvaney the boot, for, and this is what he wrote, in truth, lads, ‘Mulvaney had no rank from which to break him, though the service needed no more from this Wicklow Lamb!’”

Even the landlord looked up and smiled at this story, and his pretty companion blushed even more, moving down the bar to ask if glasses needed refilling. Then talk in Guthrie’s corner went on from Mulvaney to some local Mulcahy lad who entered the service, though he had yet to come home from over the waters. This set the locals at the table nearby to enter the matter and demand from Guthrie more about this Mulvaney and why he claimed to be from Wicklow. Guthrie sat in their midst, listening, and adding bits here and there, but he seemed to get nowhere. Thus far, our plan had failed to bring up mention of Davin Byrne’s demise.

I wandered over to the musicians and asked them could they play a few tunes I knew and offered to get them drinks to help their voices. They started to play, willingly enough, while I went to the bar and asked the landlord for refills of what they’d had, to which he agreed, wholeheartedly. Even a grieving landlord welcomes new custom into his house, and he asked after my purpose in the area as he pumped fresh pints from the kegs in his cellar. I said that I was traveling to Wexford to see some of my family there. In the midst of my lies, I noticed that the pretty bar maid had drawn Guthrie away from the table and into the farthest corner of the bar, where they spoke with their heads together. At least Guthrie’s plan was working. I decided to broach my subject more directly.

“I’m glad I didn’t change my plans to stop here,” I said.

“And why would you?” Gerald Byrne asked.

“Well, even in Dublin, they hear of this local murder. It near made me go the long way ‘round. Did you know the poor man? They say that it was a right ugly murder.”

“And is there any other kind?” Mr Byrne asked me.

“In truth, no, not where murder occurs. You’re right, there, especially for those who are left behind, not knowing why,” I replied.

“He was my sister’s youngest,” Byrne said with sincere sadness in his eyes and voice, seeing that I was a sympathetic fellow.

“Then, sir, I offer you my condolences and my apologies, for I didn’t mean to add to your pain. May I stand you a drink, sir?”

“Thank you, Mister, um, Mister...”

“Thornycroft, Albert, solicitor, from London,” I said, shaking his hand.

While the fiddle and banjo improvised on the tunes I suggested, I sat at a nearby table.

“Surely, your daughter could deal with customers,” I said, noticing that the girl had let her dark hair down. It fell over her shoulders and framed her heart-shaped face. She held Guthrie enthralled. If something didn’t break in the case, I would have to leave and seek out Mr. West, for Guthrie appeared to have forgotten me completely. I could forgive him that, for he’d had a rough a time as any of us in the Ripper business. Aside from a more than modest increase in pay and a more luxurious quarters shared with his one-time shipmate, William O’Hara, Guthrie had been doing hard duty for some time. The local zombie, I hoped, would keep for another day.

“That’uns no daughter o’ mine,” he said, sipping his whisky. “Rosie Magrath is the daughter o’ a gypsy, who camps out near Rathnew way twice a year. I give her work here to help out the old fellow and to keep her out o’ trouble while I can. Her Da is a fine old fellow,

can mend any copper, good as new. That London fellow, now, he's drawn her eye, so she'll be little use to me until he leaves, if she doesn't go with'im."

"She does that often?" I asked.

"Oh, aye, often enough. The local lads pay her enough court that she helps the business. She's that fair, isn't she? Usually, she'll take up with a man travelin' through and be gone with him, until next time. I was just after sayin' to young Davin, him that was killed, the other night, that he should give her a pass, for he wanted to spend every minute he could with her, and the lads she usually brought in were stayin' away. But he insisted on leavin' with her that night, and he insulted her, somehow, and back she came, not an hour later. Poor lad was found dead the next day, up Rathnew way, in a bog beyond the dairy farm. Done in horribly, like wild dogs got after him. Poor Rosie was cut up about rejectin'im."

"Ah, poor lad. Evidently, your warning did him no good," I said.

"Not to speak ill o' the dead, but Davin was a useless lad. Found early in life that his own reflection was too appealin' and knew that the lasses did too. It ruined him for work, not being blessed with a hard-lookin' mug like mine." Gerald Byrne's hands were not adorned with a ring of any sort. True, he wasn't anyone's idea of handsome, but his plain, clean-shaven face looked honest, if worn by the demands of the tavern business. He would seem to be fit material for some woman's husband. He was trim enough that I knew he worked hard and did not idle, so I asked him,

"Have you given no thought to having her as a wife?" I asked, holding up my own be-ringed left hand as evidence of marital bliss, in yet another lie. "Such a handsome face behind the bar all year long might be good for business, and your own bed would be warmer—livelier, too, perhaps!"

“Oh, I’ve thought of it, as many an older man in Wicklow has, when she’s around, with that spell her beauty casts. But Rosie would not be havin’ me. Too plain, too dull, she says. No, she usually finds a traveler to take up with, lookin’ for somethin’ new, maybe. She’s after a fancy man, I think, someone with a flair for adventure, per’aps, not the likes of broken down old inn keepers, and she’ll find ‘im, though I don’t pretend to know why she’d persist in lookin’ at the locals. We’re good folk right enough, but mostly farmers, laborers, drovers, and dairymen. Not much o’ the fast life in these parts.”

“That must be why I’ve taken such a liking to the place,” I said, honest for once. Somehow, I could not see pursuing more questions about young Davin’s murder. So, I sat in companionable silence with him, breaking out a pipe and sharing my ship’s flake with Gerald Byrne. We smoked, enjoyed our drinks, and listened to lads play and sing a fine set of tunes or two. I wondered if I could settle into a life like this, listening to plain, good music, in the company of plain, good folk. Byrne served more drinks, and it was only after the fiddler went into a slow, mournful tune that I turned and saw that Rose—and Magnus Guthrie—were gone.

I covered my startled state by rising and going to the water closet down a set of steps near the door. There, I sought to compose myself with the notion that even now, Guthrie was likely in our rooms with his beautiful dark-haired Rosie, but my suspicions were on edge. I went back to the bar and said my goodbyes to Gerald Byrne and the two musicians, promising to return when I could stay longer, which was truthful. My mind was uneasy about Guthrie, yet I had little reason for it. It was though warning claxon sounded in my head.

Rathnew, the site of young Byrne’s murder; Rathnew, the camp of the gypsy girl; her beauty a spell designed to catch a victim just passing through, like Guthrie, a traveler, to boot. It was too convenient, I knew, to be a good working theory. Holmes would chide me for having

too few facts. But I hurried back to find our rooms empty. In the next few minutes, I was on a horse, bound for Rathnew, which was but a couple miles north of Byrne's Inn.

The cold of the night, I didn't mind, for in getting on the horse and beginning my hunt, I grew more convinced that, somehow, I was right. Guthrie was in danger and Rosie Magrath was a danger to him, as she had been to Davin Byrne. True, my evidence was circumstantial, but my very heart told me to move faster.

I encountered no one on the road north, and the small houses back off the road were dark, as well they should have been, that late at night. The signs for Rathnew were clear enough, so I pushed on, urging West's horse into a faster gallop. The dairy farm stood on the slopes of a moonlit hill. The eerie light whitewashed the stone of the main house, the stock barns, and the dairy operation itself, though all was dark within each. Only the soft sounds of my horse's hooves striking the frosted turf came to my ears, so I pushed on up the hill, beyond the barns, up onto high pasture of clover where the dairy cows would come to graze. There, looming before me, stood a thicket, as big as a cottage, a full thirty feet wide and ten high and as dense as a privet hedge. My fatigue, perhaps, made me think that I saw small lights a twinkle in its depths, like looking down into a tiny town in a deep valley. The lights were gone when I rode by it and heard the cry of a man in a desperate struggle.

"Guthrie!" I cried. "Where are you, man?"

Only sounds of a fight, and someone's heavy breathing, came to me, so I rode as fast as I could take the horse down the other side of the hill, to a line of trees. The moonlight glinted off small pools of water beyond them, as though I looked upon a wandering stream or perhaps a bog, and then Guthrie's voice rose, crying, "Captain, No!"

Off my horse at a run, I passed through the trees, my sword drawn, branches and brambles whipping into my face. Mustard Seed glinted, too, in the moonlight, but the ground beneath my feet squelched with each step I took, and even as I saw Guthrie and the thing that held him, I knew that I had been caught too.

“Let him go, or I will relieve your shoulders of your head,” I growled, pointing my weapon at the creature that choked my friend. It was no zombie, for it might never have been human. Taller than Guthrie by almost a foot, this thing held him in hands big enough to each fill a pail. Its face, behind the tangle of its black, stringing hair, had eyes that glowed on their own, a ruin of a nose that curved down toward the point of its whiskered chin, and it wore the tattered remnants of the dress that had graced the lithe form of Rosie Magrath, now revealed in her true form. Her wide tusked maw bore no longer the tempting smile that beguiled traveling men. That horrible mouth was just about to close on Guthrie’s throat. He had passed out, either from his effort or the horror of having seen her change, but his own bloody knuckles bore evidence that he had fought hard.

“This one’s mine,” she said, “and so shall you be,” she snarled. She bent to make good her threat to Guthrie, and I saw at my left the root of a tree that ran into the bog. With this strong footing, I pulled my other foot from the muck and leaped into the air. My sword passed within a hair of Guthrie’s nose, as I struck her. My blade passed down through her far shoulder, through one hand that clutched at Guthrie and stuck in her middle. Her maw flew open wide in a silent scream, and she fell back onto the surface of the bog. I wrenched the sword from her gnarled body, and she lay gasping her last, looking up at me. I hauled Guthrie away from the ooze onto drier ground and turned back to her.

“What kind of thing are you that you murder men so?” I demanded, for I’d never seen anything like her.

Blood gurgling in her throat, she spat out a sour laugh, and said, “A dead thing, and not the first ‘r last by that blade. My kin will avenge me, for there ‘r powers set against you now. Dark things are risin’, warrior. Our time comes soon.” And with that she fell back into the dark waters of the bog that rose like a sudden tide from the dark ground and drew her under with great haste.

I hurried to drag Guthrie further from the bog, but after it had taken the grotesque body of Rosie Magrath, it subsided just as fast, leaving only its noxious stench behind. And its sinking waters, like a receding wave, made me remember what Holmes had said about a dark tide of occult trouble rising, once Moriarty had loosed the zombie plague on London. I hadn’t thought to see it so soon, and my thoughts as to the kinds of enemies we would face took me in the direction of nightmare, if that Rosie creature was right. Could her threat have been a lie? I thought not, but maybe it was more of a boast.

I retrieved Guthrie’s pistol and cartridge belt, which I imagined he’d taken off to embrace the once beautiful Rosie. I sat down on a dry tussock next to Guthrie, who was coming to, and placed a hand on his shoulder to hold him down when the memories of what Rosie had become came to him.

“Easy, soldier,” I said. “She’s dead and the bog took her back to itself. You’re safe, for now.”

“I swear, sir, that’s the last time I let romance get in my way while we’re on mission. She ‘ad me, sir, whatever she was.”

Could she have been a creature from old legends that still stalked this land? Did monsters of bog and fen still stalk my England? I thought I'd left all of that behind me in the Scotland of my youth, but if the dark tide was rising, it might well draw its foul waters from there.

“Well, stir yourself lad. We must be back in London with the morning,” I said.

It would be some time before the memory of her words left me.

“Dark things are risin’ warrior. Our time comes soon.”