

“The Geritoff’s House”

By Glenn James
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Of course, it was known that there is something valuable hidden somewhere within the building, but it's not a place that anyone with common sense would set foot lightly. Too many stories circulate in the oddest kind of way to really be ignored, and everyone knew that there was a grain of truth hidden in the ancient foundations of those tales. Since the foundations of this particular house are equally ancient, one would have thought that the curious would take heed.

But no.

There is usually someone who thinks they are so much cleverer than their forebears, and who are willing to march with a scoffing smile down a dragon's throat. Then of course, once the beast swallows, those who reluctantly waved them off shake their heads in sorrow, and add a new tale to the saga. The course navigated by Idris Pike is no exception, and brings this tale right up to date, having happened only last week.

As far as our story is concerned, this is an old house. The style is hard to pinpoint but there is something unsettlingly Elizabethan about the look of the place. Tucked into a shadowy court where few people venture it takes the unwary by surprise, like the ghost of Sir Walter Raleigh suddenly walking across the room. The grimy mullioned windows look out onto the unloved rear wall of an old factory, and sunlight never kisses the stricken rooms within, which are left to their solitary thoughts as the centuries pass. Few ever bother to look in at these windows, and those who know of the house certainly avoid doing so, treasure or not, for fear of what they might see. They are scared to see the odd tracks which are known to cross the dusty floor in a well worn path, or worse still to come eye to eye with an enquiring face on the other side of the glass, as this is known to be the home of a Geritoff.

In fact it was home to an old Geritoff who had lived here since it was built. He had made it his business, so taken was he with the house, to drive out any human occupants when the paint was new and the plaster was still damp. The sensible did not linger, and those who did not believe were not seen again by anyone human. Few would wish to see a Geritoff, and those who have then dearly wish they had not, as the experience is closely knitted with the imminent cessation of mortality. They are possessive intelligent beings, things that walk up as quiet as a whisper behind those who seek after their treasure and drop as light as a feather onto their shoulders, with long spindly fingers creeping around the interloper's throat. After this little is known, but those who experience this fond embrace are seldom seen again, and are often last glimpsed as their feet disappear as they are dragged limply around a corner. The Geritoff walk lightly in the shadow of those they follow, and never miss when they strike.

Far and few are those that are seen, but opinions concur as to the look of the things. Scholars do not contradict the oldest mother's tales that they are built with a body like a bald upright kitten and skin like a potato, with a human face and hands, and eyes and feelers like a cricket, with a flea's tendency to leap. They are solitary and driven by terrible desire, mostly living behind old wardrobes, and stealthily collecting the things they love like a Magpie and building up a hoard. Jealous is the heart of the Geritoff, and unbearable the thought to them that any other may even touch the things they love, but many will foolishly try due to their reputation of undreamed of wealth. It would be safer to bathe with piranha fish.

The richer ones commandeer old abandoned houses, and many is the tumbledown ruin left to fall into the earth for fear of upsetting its resident Geritoff. Most people have the sense to leave them alone, but the road to hell is pathed with good intentions. There was a painful case where this particular house is concerned, as in the 30's Professor Oswald Bulb came with his note book and his measuring tools, blithely ignoring the tales and warnings of those who knew better, to study the tenant of this old Henrican fossil. Never was he seen of again once the door closed behind him. Whether he had chance to make any useful notes will never be known, as no-one has had the nerve to go and see, but afterwards his mournful screams were heard for many a week, as the Geritoff is a polite creature and does not suffer to hurry at his table.

It is not known exactly how they actually eat, but it is said to involve toothpicks and drinking straws, and the Geritoff has an heroic appetite when he sits down to dinner. The good Professor had an unrivalled opportunity to study its culinary habits at first hand, but alas no chance to write a paper on the subject.

Instances like this are not isolated across the years, and they were well known, so the house stood empty as Kings and Queens came and went, outlasting Cromwell and the Blitz, with it's impartial tenant all the time building his hoard and uncaring of events in the world outside. The Geritoff's name goes before him, and he and his kin crept by reputation into mother's bedtime stories, and wise children with saucer eyes grew to sensible adults who avoided houses of this kind, and taught their children the same. But someone always scoffs and takes no notice of the good sense, which comes from knowing experience.

Most lately, Idris Pike.

Well was the man named, as Pike was a cold fish who would not have ornamented any position he chose to occupy in life, and it was a local misfortune that he had chosen to become a Special Constable and was transferred to the area. His primary means of propulsion through the world was a deep seated search for money, ideally to be gained by the least work on his part, and so a small but significant part of the community began to have their collar felt on a regular basis, only to have the said pressure relived by the donation of money to a charity of Officer Pike's choice: The Idris Pike Benevolent fund.

He was a bad apple, and he was being watched knowingly by superiors who knew the signs, and were quietly giving him enough rope to hang himself...

The course of his financial betterment caused him one night to pursue an unfortunate young dealer called Skunk down a misbegotten back street. Skunk is a local lad and only took the turning from fear, Pike having given chase after seeing him purchasing a small supply of something he needed, and in his rush he took a wrong turn. As Pike ran down the street he quite clearly saw Skunk come up short, almost to a standstill on realising where he was, and visibly balk at the prospect of entering the house. In amazement he saw Skunk turn to face him with the look of a man who would clearly rather face a scorpion than a shark, and hold out his wrists to be cuffed in defeat.

Pike was astounded, as it seemed to him that the dubious mausoleum before them was an ideal hiding place, and he could not believe Skunk's surrender at the door. The boy was all too obviously afraid of the house, and wouldn't even turn to look at the building. Pike had made it his business to ensure that a fear of himself was well ingrained in the area, and he could not believe that something had overmastered his own reputation. With the tenderness of his breed he tried to shove the boy through the door to test his observations, and the black eye he received for his pains was confirmation enough to prove that he was indeed more scared of the house than the officer before him.

Or rather, he was scared stiff of whatever was inside the house.

Skunk had fought like a wild thing to get away from the door, kicking and spitting like a scalded cat to avoid an obvious escape route. And the door had been open when Pike had gently pushed it.

Pike was so surprised by this turn of events that he forgot to demand his customary back hander in return for letting the lad go, and for once in his career made a genuine arrest. This was largely due to shock and he absently considered the boys behaviour a great deal, as he carted the unfortunate Skunk back to the station. The boy was tight lipped about the whole thing. No amount of threats or gentle thumps in concealed places would loosen his tongue, and so Pike had let it go for the time being. The officer was uncharacteristically thoughtful as he booked the lad in, and after he had been dispatched to the cells Pike filed his report on the affair very distractedly. Other officers noticed this, but he was not very well liked at the station and no one really asked him if anything was wrong.

Nothing was really said about it in fact until the report came to the general attention of his colleagues, when Skunk's case came up for mention at the Magistrates court. Almost all of his brother officers were local men and women, and Pike came in for a great deal of ribbing by those raised in the area about the Geritoff's House, when he returned to the office.

Pike knew nothing about local superstitions, and cared even less. They could have told him that the Kraken had been seen in the Reservoir or that the Yeti caught the number 11 bus after midnight, and he would have responded with equal indifference. In truth, Pike had little sense of humour and even less imagination, so their jokes were wasted and their stories ignored... apart from those concerning a hoard of treasure, and especially old Brian Stafford's remarks that his mother used to say that Geritoff's like to hide their gold in the chimney, above open fireplaces. Idris Pike knew that the Geritoff's House had a great number of chimneys, and he smelt money.

There was quite a conversation amongst his colleagues about the creature, and it's a pity that Pike took no notice of their remarks that each Geritoff has a passion for different things, like a race of highly discerning Jackdaws. One might prize gold, another emeralds, or yet another silver, but a Geritoff's lust is undiscerning and his obsessional love might be centred on something totally worthless. His hoard could be entirely made up of mouldy Christmas Pudding, or missing odd socks rather than diamonds or silver plate. No one in the room considered that searching for treasure which could be completely valueless to anyone but the Geritoff who owned it would be worth risking a very gruesome death, and everyone kept well away. They all told stories which they had heard from years ago, or on their Grandfather's knee, about violent deaths at the hands of the Geritoff, and for a while the room was filled with grisly hearsay. But although no one admitted to believing in the creature, a small child inside each local officer feared to hear a soft rustle from behind them, and the impact of a cold kitten sized body landing on their shoulders. They knew better, and would stay away from its house.

Listening to this, Pike's reaction was very typical of the man's soul. Although he utterly refused to believe that such a creature existed, he also believed utterly that there was gold hidden in one of the chimneys which no-one had retrieved. He believed that just as Highway Men had once encouraged ghost stories to frighten the curious away from their activities, so someone here had obviously long ago hidden treasure in this house and then invented the Geritoff.

Pike never mentioned the matter again, but from the moment he heard these stories his mind was firmly made up over what he should do.

Rather inadvisably for someone stepping into a building with a satanic reputation, Pike chose a night when there was a huge full moon, reasoning that this would mean as much light as possible for his expedition in complement to his torch. Although he was going to search a notorious haunted house, Pike would do so from the approach of a burglar, and never stopped to think that this behaviour never goes down well with the householder.

The door was still unlatched, and Pike prowled the dusty rooms, ignoring anything except the fireplaces. Most yawned hugely into the apartments with a broad Tudor confidence, and Pike was able to step inside and look right up the chimney. The bright moon aided in his task, illuminating the dusty bricks from above, and with his own torch from below he was able to see quite easily. He did not believe in the Geritoff, and moved normally from room to room without troubling himself to proceed quietly, and actually sang under his breath to songs on his headphones.

I have to say that he was nothing if not thorough, and moved through the desolate rooms calmly and methodically, his mind centred firmly on material gain. But as the various chimneys proved to be singularly lacking in anything save their colonies of resident spiders, the suspicion that he was on the receiving end of an elaborate practical joke began to enter his mind.

The second floor proved to be every bit as unpromising, and a nasty campaign of revenge began to build quietly in Pike's mind, as he stared again and again at the mocking face of the moon at the far end of yet another brick tunnel.

He was just about to leave when he noticed a small dark staircase in a little alcove just off the main gallery. Pike had walked past this a couple of times and thought it was nothing but a cupboard, but a streak of stubbornness made him pause for one final look before he left. It was a tight winding little staircase, which coiled back on itself around a painful little bend, and at the top there seemed to be light. Moonlight, he thought.

He didn't even pause, but immediately went straight up, and pushed open the door he encountered without thinking.

It was now that he had a bit of a shock, or so he swore to me later. Although convinced the house was as empty as it was derelict, Pike found himself in a windowless attic room, which was clearly inhabited. It had the feel of an early monastic library, being heavily panelled and lit with candles, which lined the walls in elaborately worked iron brackets. Every inch of wall space was lined with bookshelves, with books of every size and shape, but the one thing they have in common was that they were all bound in old black leather and kept very clean. As any of Pike's colleagues could have told him, the Geritoff is said to be a compulsive diarist, but Pike had been too busy thinking about gold to notice anything they said about its private life. There was a very small antique writing desk and stool, both with very long candy-curl legs, and a Victorian dip pen laid on top of one of the books with a fresh bottle of ink, but Pike hardly noticed... All he saw was that on the other side of the room he was faced with an enormous open fireplace, a huge magisterial structure, which was big enough for eight or ten standing Father Christmases, and which was far too big for the tiny room.

Ignoring everything Pike marched straight across, stood right in the middle of the fireplace, and craned his head upwards. And then the gods seemed to smile on Idris Pike, for above him and haloed in the moonlight like a saint, was a small casket. It was tucked neatly onto a little stone shelf, and was just within his reach if he stretched. He gave a yell of triumph, and feeling that he had finally won the lottery; Pike put out his hands and touched it.

He actually touched it. Not only touched it, but he fondled it, and removed it, took it sacrilegiously from its place and stood in the chimney with greedy hands fiddling with the lid. He did not trouble to examine its rather elegant workmanship, constructed at some pains over many years by the fine hands of its owner, but tugged and forced at the exquisitely carved lid until he had broken the pressure catch and thrust his hand inside.

And then, the scream he gave was heard for streets around in the still of the night.

And he screamed for good reason. Pike felt like he had snatched a handful of freezing worms.

Hurling the box as hard as he could, he threw himself away across the room, knocking the tiny desk and stool aside, to stand crawling with disgust with his back to the shelves.

Swearing revenge in a low and deadly voice he tried to pull himself together, and telling himself that worms had been placed in the box either as a joke, or to raise the alarm that a thief was trying to steal the valuables inside by making them scream, Pike walked across and picked the casket up.

Very carefully he opened the lid, and raised his torch. There were no worms, but there was a fresh tangy smell of salt and fat in the air, something he had noticed unconsciously when he first opened the lid but had ignored as being ridiculous. But the light of his torch left no possible room for doubt, and as he moved the contents around in increasingly furious rage, he realised that there was no gold in the box whatsoever. No antique jewellery hidden beneath the grey coils before him, no precious stones or pearls. In disbelief he saw that the box was filled with nothing but the rind from freshly grilled bacon.

It lay in a box made of hand carved mahogany, inlaid with ivory and silver, on a lining of beaten gold, but what he saw was a fresh, regularly renewed, tangled heap of bacon rind.

He raged, but Pike did not realise how valuable this might be to the Geritoff, because he had not taken heed. Pike did not listen that a Geritoff's treasure may be something which was not of the remotest value to anyone else. Focused on petty gold, he could never appreciate the delicate latex elasticity of the rind from freshly grilled bacon, or its uniquely sensual, intoxicating perfume when it is freshly cured and delicately cooked. Nothing so subtle would occur to him. His heart was crass and ripe for the pot, his soul fattened with greed like a plump little partridge, and it was too late for him to ask forgiveness, or to repent for his suicidal act of trespass. Then Pike was horribly frightened by a sudden shocked intake of breath behind him, at about a foot from the floor, and he didn't even have time to look around before something the size of a kitten landed like a snowflake on his shoulders, and a pair of cold little hands with impossibly long fingers encircled his neck.

He bellowed like a stricken bull, and thundered around the room, knocking books flying as the candle flames flared wildly, but I take a deep satisfaction in the struggle of a thief, and broke him like a horse. Pike was strong, but he had violated my casket and he wasn't going anywhere. Besides, I have to say that the pantry was nearly empty, and it is nice to stock up when the opportunity arises.

Soon the door closed quietly, and they say that Pike disappeared. I believe that screams were heard occasionally, from time to time, but he was not missed by anyone, and since he had not revealed what he had intended to do no-one made any connections. The sounds were jokingly put down to the haunting of the Geritoff, and although those who said this were absolutely right, no-one thought to come and investigate. They know my habits too well to disturb me, and these cries never take long to die down.

Pike came here to rob me, and he got a nasty shock instead. And he had the cheek to feel cheated when he didn't find gold, but there is no reason why something you or I value dear to our hearts has to be an opal or a diamond. Some may love a particular wine, or the perfume of Sandalwood, but for me, bacon rind is dear to my heart and always has been throughout my life. I have repaired my box and placed it back on its little shelf, and the contents are renewed regularly. I dearly love that salty aroma, and will always protect my treasure.