

Download Me if You Dare

By Julian Scutts

Watkins was an odd sort of fellow. I say "was" assuming he is no longer alive, which brings me to the moot-point of this private (and recently concluded) investigation, for want of a better term: his apparent disappearance about seven months ago.

I can't really say that I knew the man. We chatted now again over a beer - or something stronger - at the local. To be perfectly honest, I enjoyed his company with mixed pleasure.

He used to come up to the bar, slap you on the back and say something like: "You're a better man. than I am Gunga Din" or crack an insipid joke.

I tried to laugh convincingly, though I now think I needn't have gone to the bother. He hardly needed confirmation that he was the wittiest man on earth. He called himself a 'City man', and offered insider tips on forthcoming issues. He said he wasn't averse to a spot of gambling, usually on the horses, but sometimes on the dogs, hence one of his common phrases: "Going to the dogs, you know."

One of his expressions didn't seem to fit his character: "Gambling is the Devil's parody of faith, " though he did once remark that he had been through a religious phase in his early adolescence. It had left him with a keen interest in the occult, witches and black magic. Oh, he did develop another interest: computers. "If you can't break 'em, join 'em" was something he said in connection with the effect computers were having on the stock markets after the 'Big Bang'. There was something about him I couldn't quite fathom. To put a phrase on it, he was something of a 'dark horse'. I wasn't the only one to sense it either. At some point or other he started going down hill. For one thing, his appearance became more dishevelled. There were awkward silences in the flow of conversation, and he started to mutter words under his breath. As he had previously spoken about his wife in civil terms, I was surprised when he started to use rather an odd word in apposition to references to her sounding something like "itch, " though I wouldn't swear to the absence of a preceding consonant. Then the word "damned" assumed a considerable magnitude in his current range of vocabulary, usually in connection with competitors on the stock exchange, politicians and financial obligations related to Ascot and Epsom. When the Internet came along, his visits to the pub became less frequent. The only time you could bet on his frequenting The Red Dragon was Saturday night.

"Damned intriguing the Internet. Spend hours at it. The perfect research tool."

He divulged that he had been "dabbling again" without actually referring to the object of his investigation, though I inferred it had to do with paranormal phenomena.

About a year ago he became strangely taciturn, his eyes sort of glassy. About half a year ago I suddenly realized that I had not seen Watkins for a whole month, not even of a Saturday night. So I asked Ted the barman whether Watkins had been around. To my question, Ted replied: "You didn't 'ear, guv? Big mystery. Done the bunk, or somefin'. The police came rarnd askin' when 'e was last in."

In my youth I had tried my hand as a reporter. I found out his address. Armed with a pocket recorder, I went to his house, a semi-detached on the Surrey-London border. There was a FOR SALE sign in the front garden. The woman who opened the door did not at first want to unfasten the safety chain. Through the open slit between door and doorpost I asked for information about her husband. The lady, his wife as it later transpired, said she was indisposed, but just as I was on the point of leaving she unexpectedly invited me in.

Here is a transcript from part of the ensuing interview.
"I can't figure it out, I don't have a clue what happened."

"Do you have any suspicions as to his present whereabouts" (my voice).

"Odd things had been happening before his final disappearance. In the three months leading up to that event, he became very funny. Just came in from work, gave me and little Debby a perfunctory kiss, went straight to his PC and locked himself in for hours. 'What about me? What about Debby?' I asked, but he didn't even react. On the night he disappeared, I went to bed early. I couldn't sleep properly, and just as I was about to drop off I felt a terrible presence in the bedroom attended by a kind of paralysis of all my limbs. I was kind of awake but could not even raise a little finger. Once this strange feeling had worn off, I mustered the strength to get up and call out 'Harry, Harry.'

As I approached the study, I felt goose pimples all over. I somehow knew something was wrong -- sobbing -- and there was a funny smell too - like bad eggs. When I finally did have the nerve to open the door, I discovered an empty room and a thin layer of some kind of bluish haze. When the police team came round, all they ascertained a small sooty smudge on the wall. Could have been anything."

Apparently the only other evidence was a note with some kind of formula on it with an message tagged on:

"Download me if you dare."

I noted the letters. Believe it or not, the following strange event took place.

In cavalier mood I intended to take up the challenge. I was only three letters away from typing in the letters I had written down. The room I was in turned horribly chill. I fancied I saw blue smoke issuing from my PC. There was a funny smell like - bad eggs. I saw a face on the screen for just a split second. What I think I saw was too hideous for words.

I left the room, burned the slip of paper on which those letters were written, and did not pursue my inquiries any further.