The RED LAMP

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

SYNOPSIS

Events of the story, from June to September, as set forth in the journal of William A. Porter, professor of English literature:

JUNE—The professor's uncle, Horace Porter, died under somewhat mysterious circumstances at his home, Twin Hollows, which is now Professor Porter's property. Jane, the professor's wife, has psychic qualities. She insists Uncle Horace, then dead for a year, was at his class reunion, and a snapshot she takes seems to prove her right. Cameron, a fellow professor of Porter's and president of the Society for Psychical Research, inclines to the idea of psychic photography. Mrs. Porter shows a pronounced disinclination to spend the summer vacation at Twin Hollows. A letter Horace Porter had been writing at the time of his sudden death, reveals he had been interested in spiritualism and makes mention of some implied "danger," and of the "enormity of an idea." A "small red lamp" is also mentioned. Mrs. Porter's reluctance to live at Twin Hollows cannot be overcome, and, with Edith, Porter's niece, they take up their residence in the Lodge house of the estate. Warren Halliday, in love with Edith, comes to live in a boathouse near the Lodge. A reference Professor Porter had once made to a certain cabalistic design returns to plague him. He finds in the village a superstition that there is something mysterious about the red lamp. There are mysterious happenings, and Mrs. Porter is sure Uncle Horace's spirit is hovering about them. A number of sheep are killed in the vicinity, by some unknown person.

Irritated at Hayward as I was, and annoyed at myself, I saw him to his car, and asked him the question which has been in the back of my mind ever since I found the letter in the library desk.

"By the way," I said, "you knew my Uncle Horace pretty well. Better than I did, in recent years. Did he have many friends—I mean, locally?"

He straightened his tie with a jerk.

"He had no intimates at all, so far as I know. I knew him as well as anybody. He rather liked Mrs. Livingstone, but he had no use for Livingstone himself."

"Well, I'll change the question. Do you know of any quarrel he had had, shortly before he died?"

"That's easier. He quarreled with a good many people. I imagine you know that as well as I do."

"He never mentioned to you that he had had a definite difference of opinion with anyone?"

Looking back tonight over that conversation, I am inclined to think that he had an answer for that question, and that he almost gave it. But he changed his mind.

"I'd like to know why you ask me that," he said.

"He had never talked to you about calling on the police, in some emergency?"

"Never. I see what you're driving at, Porter," he added. "I admit, I had some thought of that myself at the time. But the autopsy showed the cause of death all right. He wasn't murdered."

"The blow on the head had nothing to do with it, then?"

He glanced at me quickly.

"If it was a blow," he said, "it didn't help matters any, of course. But I prefer to think that the head injury was received as he fell." He hesitated. "Don't you?"

"Naturally," I agreed.

But there was a significance in that pause of his, followed by "don't you" which has stayed with me ever since. It was almost as though, in view of Greenough's visit to him and my own questions, I had been somehow responsible for the poor old boy's death, and was seeking reassurance. . .

One a. m. I am not able to sleep, and so, recipient of all my repressions, I come to you. I have repeated my little formula over and over, as some people count sheep. "Milton and Dryden and Pope." "Milton and Dryden and Pope," but without result. Yet I have seen whole classrooms succumb to the soporific effect of that or some similar phrase in the early hours of a bright morning.

I have even been out, in dressing gown and slippers, and wandered a way down the main road, where I was surprised by a countryman with a truckload of produce and probably recognized. If any more sheep are killed tonight!

What am I to think about this red lamp business?

Into every situation it insistently intrudes itself. It was burning when old Horace died; I had turned it on in the closed and shuttered den the day I received that curious message about the letter; Jane lights it to develop the pictures of the house for Larkin, and Nylie's sheep are killed. What is more, Jane sees a face, either outside the window or behind her in the pantry. From the moment of its entrance into the house, after eighteen years of quiet, the old stories of haunting are revived, raps are heard, footsteps wander about, and furniture appears to move.

Is Greenough right, and am I ready for the psychopathic ward of some hospital? Is this accumulation of evidence actual, or have I imagined it? And yet I am sane enough, apparently. . . .

Yet Mrs. Livingstone was most explicit this afternoon. She clearly has no nerves, being complacent with the complacence of fat rapidly gained in middle age, and no imagination. But she sat there, ignoring little Livingstone's attempts to change the subject, and soberly warned me against renting the house.

Jane's face was a study. So far I had been able to keep from her much of the local gossip about the house, and all of the talk about the red lamp. But now she heard it all, garnished and embellished, and I caught her eyes fixed on me piteously.

"Is it too late, William?" she asked. "Must we rent it now?"

"It's all signed, sealed and delivered, my dear," I said. "But all is not lost. Tomorrow morning I shall take my little hatchet and smash that lamp to kingdom come."

Mrs. Livingstone took a slice of cake.

"I'm sure you have my permission," she said, "and as I gave it to your Uncle Horace, I dare say I have a right to say so."

"Perhaps you would like to have it back?"

"God forbid!" she said quickly.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Livingstone put in irritably, "let's talk about something else. Mrs. Porter, will you show me your garden?"

I had a feeling that his wife had wanted just this, perhaps had given him some secret signal, for she settled back the moment they had gone and, so to speak, opened fire.

"I have often wondered," she said slowly, "whether you have ever considered your uncle's death as—unusual."

"You mean that you do?"

"Personally," she said, looking directly at me, "I think he was frightened to death." She hesitated. She gave me the impression of venturing on ground which was unpleasant to her. "Either that or—" She abandoned that, and began again, hurriedly.

"My husband dislikes the subject," she said. "But I will tell you why I believe what I do, and you can see what you can make of it. You remember that Mrs. Porter was not well when you both came out, the day he was found dead, and toward evening you took her home? Well, Annie Cochran would not stay alone that night, and I stayed with her. It was very—curious."

"Just what do you mean by curious?"

"That there was somebody in the house that night, or something."

"And you don't believe it was somebody?"

"I don't know what I believe," she said, rather breathlessly. "I suppose you will laugh, but I have to tell you just the same."

Stripping her narrative to the skeleton, she had been skeptical before, but that night the house had been strangely uncanny. They had sat in the kitchen with all the lights on, and at two o'clock in the morning she distinctly heard somebody walking in the hall overhead, on the second floor. Doors seemed to open and shut, and finally, on a crash from somewhere in the dining room, "like a double fist striking the table," Annie Cochran had bolted outside and stayed there. At dawn she came back, and said she had distinctly seen a ball of light floating in the room over the den, shortly after she went out.

"And was the red lamp lighted, while all this was going on?"

"That's one of the most curious things about it. It was not, when I made a round of that floor early in the evening. But it was going at dawn."

There is, of course, one thing I can do. I can meet Mr. Bethel when he arrives and lay my cards on the table. It will take all my courage; I know how I should feel if I had taken a house, and at the moment of my arrival a wild-eyed owner came to turn me away, on the ground that his house is haunted. Or, we will say, subject to inexplicable nocturnal visits. . . .

Shall I take Halliday into my confidence? I need a fresh brain on the matter, certainly. Some one who will see that the local connection of the murdered sheep with the red lamp, and so with old Horace's death, is the absurdity it must be.

July 4.

A quiet Fourth, but in spite of all precautions, more sheep were killed last night, and in fear of my life I have been expecting a visit from Greenough this morning. But perhaps old Morrison—it looked like the Morrison truck—did not recognize me last night.

But to make things more unpleasant all around, the fellow this time did not leave his infernal chalk mark! One can imagine Greenough straightening from his investigation and deciding that his recent talk with me has put me on my guard. Heigh ho!

The neighborhood is in a wild state of alarm. Public opinion appears to be divided between a demon and a dangerous lunatic at large. . .

Otherwise, I have recovered from last night's hysteria. The cleaning of the house for Mr. Bethel beings today and I have decided to let it go on. If on hearing my story he decides not to stay no harm will be done; if he remains, it is in order for him.

Jane said at breakfast: "Are you letting him come, William?"

"I shall tell him all I know, my dear. After that it is up to him."

"But is it? Suppose something happens to him?"

"What on earth could happen?" I inquired irritably. "He doesn't need to light that silly lamp. Anyhow, I'm going to destroy it. And as for the other matter, the sheep, the fellow is sticking to sheep, thank God."

But I am not so certain, just now, as to destroying the lamp. This is the result of a conversation with Annie Cochran, as I admitted her, armed with broom and pail, to the house this morning.

She represents, I imagine, the lowest grade of local intelligence, and I daresay she is responsible for much of the superstitious fear of the lamp. But after all, her attitude represents that of a part of the community, and if I destroy the lamp I shall undoubtedly be held responsible for any local tragedies for the next lifetime or two.

In a word, Annie Cochran not only believes that the lamp houses a demon; she believes that to smash the lamp will liberate that demon in perpetuity.

Incredible? Yet who am I to laugh at this, who have, in deference to Annie Cochran and her kind, most carefully locked away the red lamp in an attic closet of the other house, there to contain its devil unreleased. Or who am, at this moment, somewhat oppressed by a so-called spirit message I have just received, forwarded to me by Cameron's secretary.

This is my first letter from the spirit world, and it comes via Salem, Ohio! It has, in Mr. Cameron's absence, been forwarded to me by his secretary.

"My dear Mr. Porter:

"In Mr. Cameron's absence on his vacation I am forwarding the enclosed message at the request of the writer, who appears to have considerable faith in our ability to locate the person for whom it is intended!

"We have had no previous correspondence with the young lady. At least I can find none in our files. But I know you will not mind my saying, in Mr. Cameron's absence, that he has always regarded these ouija board communications as purely subconscious in origin; in other words, as unconscious fraud."

The inclosed note is very long, and fully detailed. Even the arrangement of the furniture in the room is described, and the lighting of it. How she came to omit a red lamp I cannot tell; I have somehow grown to expect one! But no amount of light handling of the matter on my part can alter the fact that I am not as comfortable about the thing as I might be. The damnable accuracy of it is in itself disconcerting. The name is right, even to my initial; I am living in a lodge, which even my own subconscious mind could hardly have anticipated a few days ago. And I am warned of danger, on a morning when I feel that danger is, as Edith would say, my middle name.

According to the writer, she and the other sitter, who she naively explains was her fiance, received twice the name, William A. Potter. Assured then that they had it accurately, the "control" spelled out as follows:

"Advise you and Jane to go elsewhere. Lodge dangerous."

"It sounds, I admit, like a telegraphic message, with one word to spare. One rather looks for the word "love," so often added to get full value for one's money. But it is a definite warning for all that.

So the Lodge is dangerous, and Jane and I advised to go elsewhere. Heaven knows I'd like nothing better.

Our love story goes on, and I am as helpless there as in other directions; Edith proffering herself simply and sweetly, in a thousand small coquetries and as many unstudied allurements, and young Halliday gravely adoring her, and holding back.

Today, along with the rest of the summer colony, they made a pilgrimage in the car to the scenes of the various meadow tragedies, ending up with the stone altar, and I suspect matters came very nearly to a head between them, for Edith was very talkative on their return, and Halliday very quiet and a trifle pale.

And tonight, sitting on the veranda of the boat-house, while the boy set off Roman candles and sky-rockets over the water, Edith asked me how I thought she could earn some money.

"Earn money?" I said. "What on earth for? I've never known you to think about money before."

"Well, I'm thinking about it now," she said briefly, and relapsed into silence, from which she roused in a moment or so to state that money was a pest, and if she were making a world she'd have none in it.

I found my position slightly delicate, but I ventured to suggest that no man worth his salt would care to have his wife support him. She ignored that completely, however, and said she was thinking of writing a book. A book, she said, would bring in a great deal of money, and "nobody would need to worry about anything."

"And you could get it published, Father William," she said. "Everybody knows who you are. And you could correct the spelling, couldn't you? That's the only thing that's really worrying me."

And I honestly believe the child is trying it. Her light is still going tonight as I can see under her door.

(Continued Next Week)

Friend—What are you doing up here at Niagara Falls?

MacSkimp—I'm on my honeymoon!

Friend—Where is your wife?

MacSkimp—Oh, I left her home—she's been up here before.—The Pathfinder.

Old Lady (vsiting prison)—Poor man, I wish I could do something to get you out of here.

Prisoner—Well, lady, if you want to change clothes with me when the guard isn't looking, I could do the rest.

WHAT IT COSTS TO GOVERN US

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The Cost of Governmental Protection

NINETY-EIGHT per cent of federal expenditures for protection! This was the percentage reached during the World war, but of course it is not always so great. The federal government has always assumed the role of providing protection against enemies from without. This is accomplished through the maintenance of the army and navy. The item for protection occurs in the budgets of both states and cities, although it is relatively unimportant among state expenditures.

In the federal estimates for 1928, more than $700,000,000 are allowed for the War and Navy departments. Not only must the actual expenditure for the army and navy be considered as costs of defense, but such expenditures as those for interest, pensions, and the veterans' bureau. The sum of these items makes about 85 per cent of the federal budget.

Even in our most peaceful years expenditures for protection have claimed a large share of the total. In 1870 they were over 80 per cent of the total; in 1890 more than 72 per cent. In 1890, when war was farthest from our thoughts, out of a total per capita expenditure by the federal government of $4.75 only $1.79 was for civil purposes.

The item of protection is much less in the expenditures of states than in those of cities, being less than 6 per cent of the total in states and about 25 per cent of the total in cities. The large expenditures in cities goes for the maintenance of fire and police departments. The other items, such as food inspection, weight inspection and regulation of markets are of relatively little importance. The protective services of the states are rendered in the regulation of such institutions as banks, insurance companies, public service, corporations and of the sale of such commodities as seeds, trees, and fertilizers.

The expenditures of the different states for protection vary greatly in different parts of the United States. In the New England group the per capita expenditure is about 70 cents; in the east south central group about 15 cents. In Nevada the per capita expenditure is about $1.20 while in Georgia it is but a little more than 10 cents.

City expenditures for protection also vary greatly, although it is generally true that the per capita expenditures are larger as the population increases