

## *A Night at the 'Ram's Horn'*

On a cold afternoon in 2002, high in the mountains of County Derry, a group of men finally demolished the remnants of an old stone wall – all that remained of an ancient house known locally as 'Ram's Horn'. Although it was a private property, some of the original stonework was said to have been part of an ancient coaching inn, giving the place a strong link with former times. It had stood on the site for about 200 years and, in its heyday, had been a stop for travellers on the Belfast–Derry route. Yet in its latter days as a hostelry, there was nothing restful or welcoming about the Ram's Horn. Around the beginning of the nineteenth century, it became a spot where highwaymen and cutthroats gathered, and its name had become a local byword for murder and robbery.

There were also whispers about an even older, darker past. Some claimed that the Ram's Horn had been built on one of the pagan forts that dominated the region – and that some of that antique evil had seeped into its very stones. At some point, someone had incised a rough crucifix into the lintel above the door – perhaps to contain spirits within the place, thus protecting the countryside

round about. In any case, despite its being the only hostelry for miles around on a bleak and arduous route, the inn was widely avoided and considered to be a site of both actual and supernatural dread.

Until the mid-1800s, the only ways to travel any distance across Ireland were on foot, on horseback or by coach. Roads were extremely poor and were badly maintained and journeys tended to be long, arduous and uncomfortable. Facilities along the road varied widely, from well-appointed inns to low taverns and squalid 'shebeens' (or illegal drinking houses that sometimes provided lodgings). Passengers crammed into a stuffy, smelly vehicle, however, were usually glad of a break from their travels, no matter how unprepossessing their stop might be.

The proprietors of such taverns were sometimes just as unsavoury as the establishments they ran. Many were in league with the rogues and robbers along the road, and it was not unknown for a passenger to be robbed and murdered somewhere in the wilderness – sometimes with the collusion of the coachman himself. In remote areas, there was little law enforcement, and a great number of crimes went unsolved. Small wonder then that most people didn't venture too far from home unless they really had to.

The main coaching road between Coleraine and Derry – which, today, still bears the sinister name of the 'Murderhole Road' – led across the remote and dangerous Limavady Mountain. Once a coach pulled away from the busy market town of Coleraine, it faced bleak and mountainous territory, where thick forests impinged upon deep and desolate bogs as the route started to climb up the mountain itself. There were no real towns on the uplands, only a few isolated hamlets and scattered houses where the people were wary of

travellers. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, at least six separate highwaymen and two outlaw gangs operated along the Murderhole Road, robbing and killing travellers at will. It was a brave person who would 'chance the mountain', especially in the short days of winter when bad weather made the roads difficult. Nevertheless, there were a number of inns and hostelries along the mountain road. Most of these were little more than thatched hovels but there was the occasionally fairly large two-storey building where coach passengers might stay the night. The Ram's Horn was one such building.

Built out of dark local stone and with a brick chimney, the inn stood on a particularly lonely stretch of road where the bare and boggy slopes met the forest. On the very edge of the road that straggled over the mountain, it provided a grim resting place before the final push to the top. Through the dark and rain of a winter's night, a light would shine in the small window of the Ram's Horn, guiding coaches and their passengers – to what? Robbery? Death? Something worse? Whatever secrets the sinister inn held have been swept away with the last stone that the workmen discarded, yet its reputation lives on in local tradition. Even today with the last of its stones gone, some local people won't go near the site for fear of what still lurks there ...

**T**he traveller looked distastefully at the dilapidated building. At the end of a short, rough lane, close to a stand of gloomy trees, it was not quite what he'd expected – in fact, in the evening light, he wasn't even sure if it was an inn. His sway-backed old horse actually seemed to

slow as it approached the place and he wondered if he should turn around and continue his journey over the mountain without halting for the night. He decided against it.

It was 1807 and the times were still unsettled. Although the rebellions of the United Irishmen had failed, remnants of old militias and former sympathisers still roamed the roads. Outlawry and violence still prevailed in remote areas, and this northerly section of the Limavady Mountain was said to have more than its share of them. Besides, night was falling across the bleak countryside, the rising wind was hinting at rain and there was no other shelter.

Once there had been many more living along this road, but famine and poverty had driven the people to an early grave or across the sea to another life. Only the ruins of houses with fallen-in roofs marked their passing. Nowadays the nearest inhabited place was the hamlet of Ringsend, a scattering of small houses tucked away across the neighbouring hills. But on this road there was nothing, just forest and mountain – and the Ram's Horn.

A lantern swung over the doorway of the inn. Its feeble light gave the place a jaundiced aspect that was far from inviting. The traveller felt his horse grow skittish and again he toyed with the notion of turning the animal round and heading on up the mountain. The first flecks of rain, however, made up his mind for him. There was a downpour coming, and it wouldn't be wise to be caught in the open. Better to take his chances at the dirty-looking inn ahead.

The traveller had already heard about the Ram's Horn and its poor reputation in Coleraine. He knew it was a former hangout for poteen-makers, thieves, highwaymen – and even murderers. But that had all been a long time ago and those days were surely past. After a vicious footpad, known as Cushy Glen, had been killed along this road some years before, things had gone very quiet. The inn was surely as peaceful as the countryside around it and safe enough to lodge in for the night.

And yet as he approached the place, the mountain night seemed to grow perceptibly colder. It was as if the building itself drew all the heat from the air around it and he found himself shivering slightly. The curious mixture of lights – the fading daylight and the glow from the lantern in the wall bracket – concentrated odd shadows about the place whilst the dark of the trees coupled with the blank greyness of the walls gave it an eerie appearance. Swallowing nervously, the traveller dismounted and made his way over to the drab wooden door set deep into the stonework beneath the hanging lantern. He tried the latch. It lifted but the door remained closed. It was probably held in place by a bar on the other side. Raising his fist, the traveller struck loudly on the weathered wood.

'Hello in there!' he called. 'Will anybody open this door to a poor traveller?'

A faint blur of rain was carried down on the mountain wind, catching the edge of his coat, but from inside the building there was no answer. The traveller banged on the door again.

'Open up! The night and the weather are both closing in and I've a mind to sit in the comfort beside a blazing fire. Open up!'

Still there was no answer except for a crow, which flew from the brick chimney, disturbed by the noise. He looked upward to follow it but saw only the lowering sky overhead and the grim, grey stonework of the building. And crudely incised into the lintel above, he saw a rough cross. The sight of it gave him no comfort. Then, from beyond the door came a sound – like somebody approaching with a slow footsteps.

'Hello?' the traveller called. This time there was a reply.

'Wait a moment,' a voice answered. 'The door's bolted!'

It was an old voice, creaky and full of catches – the traveller couldn't even make out whether it belonged to a man or a woman. There was a rattling noise and he thought that he heard chains being unlocked. The door swung inward.

The face that looked out on the evening was that of a very old man. Grey-yellow hair was hung about the lined and weather-beaten face in matted tresses. His nose was hooked like the beak of a predatory bird and the eyes that regarded the stranger in the doorway were dark and suspicious. The rest of the figure in the shadows of the doorpost was small and thin. He wore a heavy, coarse shirt and a pair of formerly white breeches that were now stained and marked with grime and mud and goodness knew what else. A scrawny hand held a small lamp aloft whilst the eyes darted from side to side around the doorway, as if making sure the traveller was alone.

'Who's there?' The question was asked in a sharp, peevish tone as if the enquirer was angry at being disturbed. 'Who is it?'

'A traveller seeking shelter. This is the Ram's Horn, is it not?' The other looked at the traveller long and hard before replying.

'It is. But it's late and there are no rooms ready.' And with that, the old man made as if to close the door in the traveller's face.

The traveller stared in astonishment. He'd been told that mountainy people could appear unfriendly but he'd never expected a welcome like this! He put his foot out to wedge open the door.

'Wait a minute!' he said, 'What do you expect me to do?'

'There's a place further on in the mountain, near Ringsend, where you might get lodgings for the night,' creaked the figure on the other side of the lamp, grudgingly opening the door again. 'You'd be better off going there. There's nothing here!'

'But Ringsend is miles away,' said the traveller looking upwards towards the brooding sky. 'And there's a storm coming. I'll be caught in a downpour before I get there. The Ram's Horn is an inn, isn't it – giving shelter for the night?'

The old man's eyes regarded him coldly.

'It *used* to be an inn,' the odd voice replied slowly. 'But the road over the mountain is far less travelled than it was in the old days and few people stop here'.

The traveller sighed, his patience finally exhausted by the other's lack of basic hospitality.

'Look,' he snapped. 'I'll pay you double what you usually charge for a room, and all I ask for is a seat beside the fire.' The other's eyes shone greedily. The traveller's strategy had worked.

'Then you'd better come in, sir. Just remember that it's upon your own head.'

Wondering what on earth the man could mean, the traveller stepped through and into a large stone hallway that took up the entire length of the building. It was dark, gloomy and incredibly cold – as cold as the bare mountain outside – but a fire burned in the stone fireplace set into the wall. Smoke billowed around the lip of the grate, making the air harsh and acrid. Firelight mingled with the wan glow from candles that were set in niches around the bare stone walls.

Set in front of the fire was an old-fashioned, stiff-backed wooden bench with high sides. Beyond that was a plain oak table with an ordinary low chair pushed in against it, and still further back, several wooden kegs and barrels, draped in all manner of rubbish, rose out of the poor light. What lay beyond these the traveller couldn't quite make out, but it looked like old wooden trunks that spilled rags and clothes onto the stone-flagged floor. His host followed him in from the door with a slightly uneven step.

'It's cold in here and the fire's poor,' he acknowledged. 'I'd give you a room but they're worse – nobody's been in them

for years and they're full of damp.' The old man bent forward and lowered his voice almost confidentially. 'I'm sure that you've heard – this place has a bad name. There's supposed to be ... things in some of the rooms, and there are those that have stayed in them who have been found wandering across the mountain with their minds gone.' He lowered his voice even further till it was no more than a whisper. 'Sometimes when I'm here at night on my own, I think I hear a child crying or glasses clinking behind the doors. But there's nothing there – or so I tell myself.'

The old man straightened up again and resumed a normal tone. 'It's strange how your mind can play tricks when you're alone and in an old place – isn't that right, sir?'

The traveller swallowed hard. Just for a moment, he felt slightly unsure of himself.

'I—I suppose it is,' he faltered. 'Don't bother about any of the rooms. I can sleep in this chair as well as any bed!' He instinctively stretched out his hands towards the paltry blaze. 'It's better than facing the mountain, I can assure you. Now, if you'll see to my horse, I'll just settle myself here for the night. Can you see to it yourself or is there an ostler?'

The other shuffled off to his left, across the stone floor. 'There's none here but myself, sir,' he answered. 'Jabez Mullan's my name and I'm the master of this place now. It's a hard and lonely life here now – nobody stops here any more, so I've little money to employ staff. What I can do, I do myself. So I'll see to your horse, sir?'

The traveller nodded. Into the dank chill of the old place, the fire threw out a faint warmth. Now that he was settled, he preferred to stay where he was.

'Sit here for a while, then,' said Mullan, 'And when I come back I'll make you something to eat – though there's not great choice in the way of food ...'

'Please don't bother on my account,' the traveller protested. 'I dined well enough before I left Coleraine. A seat in front of your fire for the night'll be enough.'

Taking the hint, his host shambled forward and began to gather up some broken branches near the hearth to toss onto the fire.

The traveller chuckled drowsily. 'You mentioned the Ram's Horn's reputation and atmosphere. Is the place supposed to be ... haunted maybe?' He had chosen his words carefully, but looked up to find Mullan regarding him coldly.

'There's people that'll tell you they've seen ... things,' he said, 'And so they might've. Who knows? It is not for me to judge. All I know is this place is very remote, and enough loneliness can drive you mad.'

Was it the traveller's imagination or did the queer inn-keeper cast a furtive glance into the dark shadows of the room beyond the flickering glow of the fire?

'Your name, now,' the traveller began again, trying to change the subject, 'It's a curious one, isn't it?' High up on the bare stone wall above the fireplace, strange shapes seemed to dance, caused no doubt by the burning sticks below. 'Are you a local man?'

‘Mullan’s a common enough name around Ringsend and Benbradagh, sir, which is where my mother came from. There’s scores of Mullans living up there.’ The old man licked his thin lips. ‘They say that the Mullans were old kings and priests over by Benbradagh Peak.’

‘It’s your ... Christian name that intrigued me,’ the traveller went on. ‘Jabez must be an English name, and yet I thought that Ringsend was a fearfully Irish place.’

‘My “Christian” name?’ replied Mullan. ‘It was the name my mother gave me, sir. I was born in this very inn.’

The traveller leaned forward, sensing that he was going to hear more.

‘My mother came here to work for a man called Luther Todd,’ continued the old man. ‘He owned the Ram’s Horn at that time – and he was an Englishman. They say my father came from Ringsend but I never knew him. The man Todd looked after us both ...’

His listener began to suspect that the years of loneliness in this isolated place were taking their toll and that Jabez Mullan was grateful for someone to talk to.

‘And was it an odd place even in those days?’ the traveller asked, trying to draw out his host.

Jabez Mullan hesitated. ‘The people round here still talk about it. They said things about the man Todd – that he was in with the highwaymen and that they drank here; that he’d secret rooms built in to the mountain where they could hide!’ Mullan cackled. ‘All nonsense! If he did, sir, I’ve never found

them. It’s true he never turned any away as long as their money was good – but he wasn’t a criminal himself.’

Mullan stretched his own calloused hands towards the growing blaze.

‘He was murdered when I was just a boy,’ he said bleakly. ‘They said that it was highwaymen from Ringsend that did it – a falling-out or something, the times were very bad then. My mother and I had gone to Coleraine and didn’t get back until that evening. The place had been ransacked, sir, and he’d been hanged from one these beams over the fire.’

Mullan pointed upwards. ‘Some said that the robbers came in and surprised him. Some said that there’d been a quarrel about loot. That’s what the military from Coleraine said anyway. I was just a boy at the time. Some people thought that it was his neighbours that did it, for he wasn’t that well liked.’

Mullan looked deep into the flames of the fire. ‘Some say that his ghost still haunts the place, but I’ve never seen it.’ He paused. ‘I’d better see to your horse, sir.’ And, with that, he went hobbling off into the dark.

The traveller waited. Stealthy shadows, distorted by the spluttering light of the candles, began to crowd around him and, as the fire started up in the grate, it seemed to create more. They glided round him to form knots of darkness in the corners close to the chimney breast. He started up. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought that someone – or something – had just run quickly behind the high back of his seat, just out of his line of vision. There was something else, too.

He could swear that he heard a low whispering.

'Hello, Mullan?' called the traveller into the dark, though he knew in his heart that the old man would never have been able to stable his horse so quickly.

The whispering steadily increased – feathery sounds that were gone almost as soon as he was sure he'd heard something. He thought that there were words mingled amongst them but he couldn't really make them out.

'Hello?' he said again. 'Is anybody there?'

The sounds seemed to be coming from the gloom behind him, from the dark corners of the room but, turning round and squinting, he found the shapes too vague to make anything out. The traveller turned back to the fire.

'It's Mullan's queer story,' he murmured to himself. 'And I must be exhausted.'

The strange light in the huge room – a mixture of candle-light and firelight– flickered eerily along the wall, making strange shapes on it. The traveller found his gaze wandering back to the bare patch of wall, high up to the right of the fireplace, where the dancing shadows seemed most distorted. Was it his imagination or was the outline of a dancing figure again taking shape before his eyes? A figure turning and spinning in the firelight? A figure with a rope around its neck ...

The traveller sat up and shook his head vigorously.

'This is the result of Mullan's silly stories,' he growled. 'I'm letting my imagination run away with me.' Yet he could see

the outline, appearing to grow more and more distinct as the seconds passed. 'It's just my own fancy,' he repeated aloud. 'There's nothing there – nothing at all.'

Suddenly the traveller felt a tug at the sleeve of his coat. He turned sharply. There was nothing there. Yet he could have sworn that something had touched him – he had distinctly felt it. The fire crackled and spat but the traveller was now feeling that there was nothing either homely or reassuring about the sound. He rubbed his eyes. All he needed was a good sleep. But even as he formed the thought, there was another definite movement in the gloom behind him. He span round. Jabez Mullan stood in the doorway.

'Your horse is fed and stabled, sir,' he said. 'Maybe it's as well that you didn't chance the mountain tonight for there's a deal of rain and I see a fog of some sort starting to come together a little ways further up.'

The old man spoke with a repressed excitement, which the traveller though a strange reaction to the fog's approach. Perhaps the strange old man liked the inn to be completely cut off.

Suddenly, the traveller jumped, as if startled. 'Did you hear that?' he said.

'Hear what?' replied the other.

'That whispering sound ...?'

'No, sir,' said Mullan smoothly. 'Now, are you sure that I can't get you something to eat? You're welcome to share what I have.'

The traveller waved the offer away and the landlord stooped to tend to the fire once more. Behind them in the dark, it seemed that the whispering was growing in intensity, but Jabez Mullan remained untroubled by it.

The traveller tried to take his mind off the insidious sound. 'You were telling me about the previous owners of this place?'

Mullan looked up from the fire. 'Ah yes. Well, long before Todd's time there was a woman here, sir. And a wicked woman she was, by all accounts. Scotch. Name of Tibby Fawe. People said that she was a witch with the power t'raise old spirits. She may have even built the Ram's Horn herself on this spot for that reason – it is the site of an old pagan place of worship, y'see.'

The traveller nodded.

'Oh, yes, a wicked woman,' Mullan continued dreamily. 'Her and her son lived here – muddled in his mind, he was, but very, very strong. They say that the two of them murdered folk who came to stay here and buried their bodies up in the mountain.'

The traveller heard the whispering behind them growing very insistent – and there were new sounds too, like the scurrying of rats or mice. Despite the crackling fire, he felt cold.

'But there's worse, sir! They say that Tibby Fawe practised witchcraft and that she used some of the bodies in ... horrible practices.'

The traveller swallowed audibly. Part of him did not want to hear any more, but part of him was fascinated. 'And what became of this ... witch-woman?' he wavered. Again he thought he felt something reach round his chair and tug at his sleeve. And then it was gone.

Mullan shook his head. 'Nobody can rightly say, sir,' he replied. 'She and her son just disappeared one night. Some say that they got lost on the mountain and died, some say that they fled to avoid the law, and some that the son killed the mother and then fled. Others'll tell you that the Devil came for them both.' Mullan cast a furtive glance into the shadows. 'They'll tell you too that their ghosts still haunt this place – strangling people, like they did in times gone by.'

Raising his eyes, the traveller looked towards the blank space above the fire – it was empty. No shadow dangled there. The whole thing, he imagined, had been nothing more than a fancy.

Suddenly, Mullan cocked his head. 'Did you hear that, sir?'

The traveller listened but could hear nothing over the scuffling and whispering in the background gloom.

'Is it, perhaps, the wind in all the trees around the property?' he asked hopefully.

His host straightened himself and peered uncertainly into the gloom. 'I thought it was a voice,' he mumbled. 'Somebody calling. Maybe another traveller out on the mountain, round the back of the inn. I'll go and see – settle my mind.' And with his awkward step, he disappeared into the murk.

'I'll be only a moment!' he called back. 'There it is again – I'm sure it was a voice. Somebody lost in the storm ...' The last words trailed away, and then he was gone – swallowed up by the darkness that seemed to creep across the stone-flagged floor.

The traveller waited to hear the sound of a door closing but none came. Only the snap and crack of the fire in the grate. His eyes wandered back to the patch of bare stonework above the fire. The odd light had once again played its trick, and the shadows were again dancing, forming into the shape of a man with a noose around his neck, spinning in the wind ...

From behind the chair, something tugged sharply at his sleeve and then darted back into the blackness. As the traveller stared around him, the fire suddenly flared wildly and fell away. The traveller squashed his rising fears, sat back and closed his tired eyes for a second.

When he opened them again, it seemed to be some time later, for the light had changed. There were more lanterns and candles, a low table had been placed between him and the blaze, and several chairs were drawn up on the other side.

On the chairs, sat three evil-looking men. Two of them had narrow, feral faces that squinted aggressively towards him across the firelight. The third, also looking in his direction, was very badly scarred. On a low suttu-stool between them all sat an old crone with a bit of coarse cloth tied about her head like a scarf, and a crude pipe wedged firmly between her toothless gums. Greasy, black hair escaped from under the

head covering, falling down to her thin shoulders. Her hollow eyes were deepest black and she, too, stared at the traveller with almost palpable hostility. In the shadows, seated near the chimney breast, loomed the monstrous outline of a huge, overgrown boy. He was picking scraps of bloody meat from a tin plate on his lap with a slow, awkward motion.

Even though he knew it to be impossible, the traveller had no doubt that he was looking at Tibby Fawe and her weak-minded son, together with some of their evil guests. He opened his mouth to call out, but no sound would come. To his horror, he found he was paralysed and unable to move from his seat.

One of the narrow-faced men lifted a creaky fiddle and began to play tunelessly – the traveller heard the distorted sound as if it were echoing from far away. He could also hear the whisperings of the hag on the other side of the hearth. She seemed to be muttering urgently to the others, the pipe moving up and down in the corner of her mouth. Although he could not hear what she said, he knew she was talking about him, for the men kept glancing at him and at each other. A feeling of panic swamped him as he struggled pointlessly in his seat.

Leaning forward, the scarred man reached down into his boot and produced a long-bladed knife, grinning at the horrified traveller opposite. Meditatively, he tested its sharpness between his thumb and forefinger. A drop of blood glistened in the firelight. Tibby Fawe quickly leaned over, snatched the

man's hand and licked the blood off. Then she whispered something to him, making descriptive gestures in the traveller's direction that she did not trouble to conceal.

Summoning all his strength, the traveller again tried to shout. 'Mullan! Jabez Mullan!' But his efforts only produced a harsh croak as the name died in his throat. The horrid gathering on the other side of the table threw back their heads in distant laughter.

On the flagstones by the fire, the traveller noticed the blood-streaked tin plate lying discarded, and he realised that Tibby's weak-minded son was right behind him. At that moment, an enormous pair of hands reached round and grabbed him about the throat.

As the traveller gagged and choked and shuddered, trying to shake off the grip of the monster, the ghostly gathering leapt to their feet and again howled with laughter. The pressure on his neck increased. As the traveller twisted and turned his head, his frantic gaze settled on the stretch of stonework above the fire. This time there was no mistake. The shadow was back, so clear that the traveller could see the whites of Luther Todd's eyes rolling back as he danced toward his death on the end of the rope.

'Look!' The word was felt rather than heard. 'Look up there!' Tibby Fawe was pointing towards the shadow. 'That's your fate, too! What befell Luther Todd will befall you this night!' With that, the company roared and danced with a fiendish glee.

The traveller felt the pressure on his neck slacken for an instant. Desperate, and realising he was looking into the face of death, he called on his last reserves of strength. suddenly finding his voice, he screamed, 'In the Name of God!'

The effect on the company was dramatic. At the mention of the Holy Name, Tibby Fawe, her son and the three vile men all fell to their knees wringing their hand and howling. 'In the Name of God!' shouted the traveller again. In front of his very eyes the awful vision in front of him rippled – and then vanished, leaving darkness and firelight in its wake.

With another cry, he sprang from his chair and ran gibbering over the stone-flagged floor towards the inn door, as if pursued by demons. As he ran, his ears were filled with whispering, and he fought off something invisible that dragged relentlessly at his arms.

'Mullan!' he sobbed, 'Where are you?'

There was no answer. In front of him, the inn door hung from its hinges, bordered by weeds and nettles. Dashing through, he found his horse grazing under a tree nearby and, without thinking, he threw himself awkwardly into the saddle. Around him, the wind shrieked like the howling of Tibby Fawe and her horrid friends. Rain slapped his face like a wet fist but he didn't care. He didn't care about anything but to be away from that hellish place. He urged his horse on into the dark and storm as fast as it would go.

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The hamlet of Ringsend was no more than a huddle of several low, mean thatched houses, clustered in the shelter of the mountain's upper slopes. Most of the dwellings were in darkness, their owners long in bed. Even so, a black iron lantern still glimmered in the window of a small shebeen halfway along the track that served as a village street. Leaping from his mount, the traveller hammered on the barred door of the place.

'Hello! Hello! Open up! Please open up!' His voice carried an edge of hysteria. Bolts were drawn back and a sleepy landlady looked out, roused by his frantic knocking. 'Let me in! For God's sake, let me in!' He stumbled past her into the small house whist the woman stood gape-mouthed.

'What is it that ails ye?' she at last found her voice. 'Is it something out on the mountain road?' Finding a rough seat, he spilled out his story – the strange innkeeper, the terrible vision of a man hanging from the rafters, his ghastly encounter with Tibby Fawe and her evil guests, the ghostly and menacing atmosphere of the Ram's Horn. She stared at him in disbelief.

'But sir,' she eventually said, 'The Ram's Horn's a near ruin – abandoned. The land round about's been bought over by a man from Derry City but he's done nothing with the old inn, just left it to rot. It falling down. There's no shelter to be had there. You must have stayed somewhere else and had a bad dream. Were you over in Shanlongford perhaps?'

The traveller shook his head vehemently. 'No! it was the Ram's Horn! The landlord was Jabez Mullan ...'

The woman shook her head in her turn. 'That place is but a shell, sir. Boarded up and left to rot. There was a Jabez Mullan there all right, but he's long dead. He lies over in an old churchyard near Articlave. A dark man he was, born of dark blood. I heard my grandfather speak of him many a time. They found him hanging from a rafter in that old place, just as they found the previous landlord, the man that brought him up – Todd his name was. History repeating itself. No-one ever knew why they did it. No, you won't have seen Jabez Mullan, sir, not in this world anyway.'

She paused and looked at him piercingly. 'And Tibby Fawe's been dead even longer, though nobody knows where she's buried. It was all but a bad dream, sir.'

The woman went behind the low counter in the corner of the room. 'Are you all right, sir? Here, you look very frightened and cold, and you've gone very white. I'll get you a drink – put the warmth back in your bones.'

'Mullan's dead for years?' the traveller stammered. 'But I spoke to Mullan this very night and he was sitting there as real as you are. And the Ram's Horn is ruined and boarded up? It's a rough, cold place, to be sure, but it was still habitable. I was there. There was a fire...'

She looked at him queerly.

'No, sir. None lives at the Ram's Horn. It must've been some other place. And you couldn't have spoken with Jabez Mullan – unless you can talk to the dead.'

A chill began to creep up the traveller's back.

'My husband,' the woman continued, 'Can take you to where he lies – cold and in the clay.' Her guest looked at her blankly, shivering with more than the chill of the creeping dawn light.

Later that morning, the traveller returned along the road with the innkeeper's husband. To his right was the familiar stand of dark trees, alive with crows that sailed up and down on the breeze. The short laneway was still there, though more overgrown and potholed than he'd remembered from the previous night. His horse still moved uneasily down towards the trees, and the other man kept well behind him. As they drew nearer, the traveller saw the low building of the night before, close to the stand of trees. Beyond it the land stretched away, hard and sour, to the mountain heights.

The traveller dismounted and saw clearly that the dwelling ahead was in ruins, with its upper storey open to the elements. It was obvious that the place had been uninhabited for many long years.

'There y'are, sir,' said the Ringsend man. 'That's all that's left o' the Ram's Horn.'

The traveller looked over the grey stone walls, green with climbing ivy and weeds; the crumbling chimney; the gaping window frames; the empty doorway. He knew that nobody could possibly live there. And yet there was the niche in the stonework where the lantern had hung and there was the incised cross in the lintel above the now-doorless doorway.

'It was a great inn in its time,' the other continued. 'They say that it might open again as an inn or a private house, but that's not the wish of the locals. Better that it's left t'fall down on its own.' And he spat from the saddle of his horse into a clump of bushes. 'Bad cess to it!'

The traveller continued to gaze at the ruin and a crow, perched on the ruined gable returned his gaze with a sharp and beady eye. Were his wits deserting him? Just what had he seen the night before? Some madness brought on by the evil atmosphere of the ruin in front of him?

'Where was I?' he asked wonderingly, fearing for his sanity.

The other shrugged thin shoulders.

'Who can say, sir?' he answered, his tone softening a little. 'Some people imagine things on these uplands. But there's some'll tell ye that old powers and ghosts sometimes manifest themselves t'them that are willin' t'see. Always in places cursed by old wickedness.' He gave a slightly nervous laugh. 'But it was probably all a dream. Stranger things have happened.'

Somewhere across the mountain, a bird called with a cackling laugh – like a lost, mad soul crying out to them. The traveller shuddered again as he relived the horrors of the previous night.

'Yes,' he said softly, 'Stranger things have happened.'