

**TALES FROM "BLACKWOOD": BEING THE  
MOST FAMOUS SERIES OF STORIES EVER  
PUBLISHED, ESPECIALLY SELECTED  
FROM THAT CELEBRATED ENGLISH  
PUBLICATION. SERIES II, VOL. I**

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**H. CHALMERS ROBERTS**

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*Selected by*

H. CHALMERS ROBERTS



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## TALES FROM "BLACKWOOD."



### CHRISTMAS EVE ON A HAUNTED HULK.

BY FRANK COWPER.

I SHALL never forget that night as long as I live. It was during the Christmas vacation 187-. I was staying with an old college friend who had lately been appointed the curate of a country parish, and had asked me to come and cheer him up, since he could not get away at that time.

As we drove along the straight country lane from the little wayside station, it forcibly struck me that a life in such a place must be dreary indeed. I have always been much influenced by local colour; above all things, I am depressed by a dead level, and here was monotony with a vengeance. On each side of the low hedges, lichen-covered and wind-cropped, stretched bare fields, the absolute level of the horizon

being only broken at intervals by some mournful tree that pointed like a decrepit finger-post towards the east, for all its western growth was nipped and blasted by the roaring south-west winds. An occasional black spot, dotted against the grey distance, marked a hay-rick or labourer's cottage, while some two miles ahead of us the stunted spire of my friend's church stood out against the wintry sky, amid the withered branches of a few ragged trees. On our right hand stretched dreary wastes of mud, interspersed here and there with firmer patches of land, but desolate and forlorn, cut off from all communication with the mainland by acres of mud and thin streaks of brown water.

A few sea-birds were piping over the waste, and this was the only sound, except the grit of our own wheels and the steady step of the horse, which broke the silence.

"Not lively is it?" said Jones; and I couldn't say it was. As we drove "up street," as the inhabitants fondly called the small array of low houses which bordered the highroad, I noticed the lack-lustre expression of the few children and untidy women who were loitering about the doors of their houses.

There was an old tumble-down inn, with a dilapidated sign-board, scarcely held up by its rickety iron-work. A daub of yellow and red paint, with a dingy streak of blue, was supposed to represent the Duke's head, although what exalted member of the aris-



ocracy was thus distinguished it would be hard to say. Jones inclined to think it was the Duke of Wellington ; but I upheld the theory that it was the Duke of Marlborough, chiefly basing my arguments on the fact that no artist who desired to convey a striking likeness would fail to show the Great Duke in profile, whereas this personage was evidently depicted full face, and wearing a three-cornered hat.

At the end of the village was the church, standing in an untidy churchyard, and opposite it was a neat little house, quite new, and of that utilitarian order of architecture which will stamp the Victorian age as one of the least imaginative of eras. Two windows flanked the front door, and three narrow windows looked out overhead from under a slate roof ; variety and distinction being given to the façade by the brilliant blending of the yellow bricks with red, so bright as to suggest the idea of their having been painted. A scrupulously clean stone at the front door, together with the bright green of the little palings and wood-work, told me what sort of landlady to expect, and I was not disappointed. A kindly featured woman, thin, cheery, and active, received us, speaking in that encouraging tone of half-compassionate, half-proprietary patronage, which I have observed so many women adopt towards lone beings of the opposite sex.

"You will find it precious dull, old man," said Jones, as we were eating our frugal dinner. "There's

nothing for you to do, unless you care to try a shot at the duck over the mud-flats. I shall be busy on and off nearly all to-morrow."

As we talked, I could not help admiring the cheerful pluck with which Jones endured the terrible monotony of his life in this dreary place. His rector was said to be delicate, and in order to prolong a life, which no doubt he considered valuable to the Church, he lived with his family either at Torquay or Cannes in elegant idleness, quite unable to do any duty, but fully equal to enjoying the pleasant society of those charming places, and quite satisfied that he had done his duty when he sacrificed a tenth of his income to provide for the spiritual needs of his parish. There was no squire in the place; no "gentlefolk," as the rustics called them, lived nearer than five miles; and there was not a single being of his own class with whom poor Jones could associate. And yet he made no complaint. The nearest approach to one being the remark that the worst of it was, it was so difficult, if not impossible, to be really understood. "The poor being so suspicious and ignorant, they look at everything from such a low standpoint, enthusiasm and freshness sink so easily into formalism and listlessness."

The next day, finding that I really could be of no use, and feeling awkward and bored, as a man always is when another is actively doing his duty, I went off to the marshes to see if I could get any sport.

I took some sandwiches and a flask with me, not intending to return until dinner. After wandering about for some time, crossing dyke after dyke by treacherous rails more or less rotten, I found myself on the edge of a wide mere. I could see some duck out in the middle, and standing far out in the shallow water was a heron. They were all out of shot, and I saw I should do no good without a duck-punt.

I sat down on an old pile left on the top of the sea-wall, which had been lately repaired. The duck looked very tempting; but I doubted if I should do much good in broad daylight, even if I had a duck-punt, without a duck-gun. After sitting disconsolately for some time, I got up and wandered on.

The dreariness of the scene was most depressing: everything was brown and grey. Nothing broke the monotony of the wide-stretching mere; the whole scene gave me the impression of a straight line of interminable length, with a speck in the centre of it. That speck was myself.

At last, as I turned an angle in the sea-wall, I saw something lying above high-water mark, which looked like a boat.

Rejoiced to see any signs of humanity, I quickened my pace. It was a boat, and, better still, a duck-punt. As I came nearer I could see that she was old and very likely leaky; but here was a prospect of adventure, and I was not going to be readily daunted. On examination, the old craft seemed more water-tight