

The Barrow Bride
by Paul Leone

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This rather curious account comes from the memoirs of Purity Carter, who was – per her word – present for the events in question. Parish records do confirm that Goodwife Purity, who died in Massachusetts in 1715 or 1716, was born in Dragford, Lancashire, the *mise-en-scène* of this macabre drama, a decade and a half before said events. As for the story itself, its veracity is known only to the author and God. Being a resident of Dragford, a village of some two hundred souls, it is beyond doubt Goodwife Purity would have been acquainted with all the figures given speaking roles herein.

As Goodwife Purity's memoirs are – to be as kind to the old Dissenter as I can be – the literary equivalent of an acquired taste, I have refashioned the tale in my own words. Those who seek the original can find it safely stored in Harvard University's Houghton Library. I wish them all the best should they endeavour to wade through its turgid prose, and recommend the task be accompanied with an ample glass of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

* * *

The time was the Year of Our Lord 1661 and the place was Dragford, Lancashire.

It was, I have no doubt, a source of much consternation to the god-fearing Dragforders when their long-absent squire, Francis Wingeate, and his daughter Emma returned from abroad. They, the villagers, had spent much of a generation without the presence of their High Church Anglican 'betters' and their return was salt in the wound that was the Restoration.

For their part, I am told, Mr. Francis Wingeate and Miss Emma truly missed the London social scene – especially young Miss Emma. The prospects for her in a small, remote village can be drearily imagined.

Our tale begins in earnest shortly after the Wingeates encamped in Dragford.

It was not a dark and stormy night. For Emma, though, it was a very unsettled one. She slept fitfully and had a very strange dream. In it, she was roaming the moors outside Dragford, specifically those further parts where the trees grow sickly and flocks of birds are often found dead.

Her wanderings, aimless as they seemed at first, had a definite direction and that was deeper and deeper into the worst part of the moors. The flat, boggy land began to rise in scattered hillocks, the burial mounds of the shadowy predecessors of the Saxons.

There, in the heart of the cluster of subterranean tombs, was...

Something!

Or perhaps some Thing.

Emma woke, flush and confused, and through her windows, saw it was the grey stirring of dawn.

* * *

On its own, such a vignette would be scarcely worth noting, even in one's own diary. But there was a sequel to the unsettling dream, and it came soon after Emma sat down to breakfast.

Her talk with her father turned, not unnaturally, to events in the village. Only then did Emma discover that one of the villagers had expired the night before. The woman – her name is unrecorded, even by Goodwife Purity – was, it seems, stricken with brain fever, and died in an agony of ranting and flailing.

Unsettling talk for the breakfast table, to be sure. Far worse was to come, though, and not much later.

After the meal, Emma took a stroll through the village. She came off as a rather aristocratic figure, dressed in her finery and toting a very expensive umbrella as if it was a royal baton, as she paced down the dusty high street of Dragford.

Suspicious gazes, hidden by down-turned faces, followed her everywhere. Emma was, of course, quite oblivious to all this. She stopped at the grocer's shop and purchased an apple. And then, offering a charming smile, or an attempt at said, asked "What lies on the moors?"

"Eh?" the grocer asked.

“The moors. What lies on it?”

“Nothing you need concern yourself with, young Mistress Emma,” the man said. “Death and bogs is all.”

“Death?” Emma inquired, still smiling. She had, of course, heard of the Battle of Dragford, one of the last frays of the late Civil War, wherein a Royalist cavalry troop had been ambushed and both massacred and been massacred by a squad of Roundhead musketeers. A minor skirmish of no import on the war’s outcome, but blood had been shed *en masse*. Was that what the grocer meant?

She recalled her dream and shivered a little.

“It’s best left alone. You’ll sink and won’t be seen again until Judgement Day,” the grocer declared.

Emma took that in and was about to reply, perhaps, when a shrill voice called out “DEATH!”

Startled, as anyone except the strong of heart would be, Emma jumped and turned.

It was Old Goodwife Innocence, the oldest woman in the village, if not all Lancashire. She pointed a gnarled finger at the sky and shouted “DEATH!” a second time. “THE MOOR ‘ET HER! MIND YER SOULS LEST YE BE NEXT!” Innocence shrieked. “DEATH SEEKS A BRIDE!”

She seemed to gaze at Emma as she thus spoke. It was at that point that Emma decided to stroll her way back to the manor house.

* * *

That night, Emma had another dream, one that was longer, clearer and stranger to a considerable degree.

As before, her dream journey lead Emma through the moors into the ancient, weatherworn mounds. And as before, she felt some Thing was waiting in the heart of the barrows... waiting for her.

Finally, as before, she awoke gasping and afraid, roused from the slumbering world just as she caught the vaguest glimpse of the Thing.

And yet, there was a strange sense of excitement in her fast-beating heart...

* * *

The sun rose above a veil of thick grey clouds that morning.

Shaken by her unsettling dream, Emma again ventured into town, perhaps unwisely and certainly unfortunately.

Those about at the hour gave her sullen looks, if anything at all, and Emma found it most novel and disagreeable that she often had to speak twice, or even thrice, before being acknowledged.

And then – a shriek from the end of the lane. It was Old Goodwife Innocence, and she was pointing a trembling finger at young Goodman Nehemiah White. No one looking could wonder why, for Barbon's wife was draped over the back of his horse, pale and still.

Then came the inevitable cry of "DEATH!" from the ancient Innocence. Emma expected that.

She did *not* expect the crone to turn and point at her, then cry "AND THOU'RT NEXT, GOLDEN LADY!" and punctuate it with a raspy cough.

The villagers near Emma stepped back, as if she'd suddenly caught fire, while those farther off turned and stared at her.

“I –”

“DEATH SEES THEE!”

“She awakened this evil!” someone else yelled. “She and her father, when they came a-skulking back to Dragford!”

“It’s ungodly!”

“Nay, worse, ‘tis Papist!”

“Let it take her and have done with us godly folk!”

Emma blanched, turned and fled.

* * *

Matters came to a head on the third night.

Emma retired early, anxious and cold. She hadn’t told her father of the shouts in the village, knowing all too well what his reaction would be – saddles and cudgels, if not sabers.

When finally she fell asleep, and it was not until the witching hour she managed the feat, Emma again experienced the dream. As on the previous two nights, she found herself straying into the moors, deep into the moors, to the desolate lands where the barrows of old lay. Some part of her realized and wondered at the fact she knew just where to step to avoid treacherously deep pools and sucking quicksand.

At last, she found herself before the dark heart of the barrows. There was an ancient doorway formed by three huge stones and sealed by a heavy wooden door. Emma laid one hand upon the door, then gasped and flinched back. The door was icy cold.

But there was a heat behind it. The Thing within, and she was sure this was its home, burnt with passion and hunger.

Only after a few seconds standing there, staring at the strange door, did Emma realize she was not, in fact, dreaming, but standing there in the flesh. The great barrow was real, a hulking thing covered with dead moss, broken branches, and scattered bones of small animals.

The door lay just before her, and beyond it, the Thing.

Scarcely realizing what she was doing, Emma pushed open the door...

* * *

It took a moment for Emma's eyes to adjust to the darkness, and a moment longer for her to realize it was so dark because the door had somehow shut behind her.

She didn't remember going so far in that the door was behind her instead of before her.

The descending stone hallway, scarcely tall enough for her to stand straight, was nearly pitch black. There was a very faint light up ahead, where the tunnel seemed to bend off to one side. It wavered strangely, like sunlight reflected onto the bottom of a bridge.

In that weird light, Emma could see a very faded mosaic at her left hand, rough work but rather enticing. There was a woman in green, wearing a black torc, hand raised in some sort of malediction that drove a black-cloaked figure back and into the barrow. It had been defaced with rough, shallow scrapes – almost as if fingernails had gouged at the mosaic in utter hatred.

To her right, a wall of sharp edged stones.

And there, at the end of the hallway, He was waiting.

Emma wavered a moment and then walked towards the black-cloaked figure.

* * *

A short while later, Emma was seated at the left hand of the king in a long, low room. A rough cairn served as a table, as yet bare of either meal or drink.

“Thy dress is odd,” the king said in a soft, halting voice.

To him, Emma supposed it might be. Her golden chemise was certainly a far cry from what they must have worn when he...

The thought refused to come to a conclusion.

Instead, Emma smiled as he continued. “Strange, but not ill-pleasing to the eye. I shall savor thee.”

“Mm?”

“At my side,” the king said, smiling back at her.

His smile was disarming, one that promised love and joy... forever...

Emma stared deep into her cup. There was something wrong there...

“Drink, my queen, and be with me...” the king urged with a smile on his pleasant face. He gestured regally at Emma’s cup. “Drink and be with me until the stars fall from heaven.”

At that, the scales fell from her eyes and Emma realized her folly and her danger. With a strangled cry, she jumped to her feet, flinging the gold chalice into the king’s face as she did. It was full of dust.

She saw it now for what it was – a tall figure, yes, and crowned with gold, but the strong, handsome body was, in truth, nothing more than the thinnest layer of brown, papery skin over misshapen blackened bones. Deep purple flames shone faintly in the sunken pits that had once been eyes.

The creature was far more startled than hurt, but that served Emma's purposes well enough. She dashed back up the low, jagged passage, racing for the promise of hope the starry skies offered. Behind her, she heard first a dry hiss, like a match being struck, and then the swift, loping gait of the Barrow-beast.

Emma cried out again as three sharp nails raked her back, cutting chemise and skin alike. She was caught in a cruel, iron grip. Then, an instant later, felt exquisite agony as ancient fangs pierced her neck...

* * *

The disappearance was not long undiscovered. A search, no doubt thorough, was conducted, but not the slightest trace of Emma Wingeate was ever found.

It was, of course, mere coincidence that the godly local men sealed up the barrow again that same day. Going further, they erected a cross upon the peak of the mound. Said cross could still be seen as late as the 1750s, according to a 1758 letter by Samuel Johnson.

Although the barrow, which was searched from top to bottom, was undeniably empty of any corpse, ancient or modern, residents of that district often dreamed of the Golden Lady, weeping or wailing in a king's embrace in a dark stone chamber, long, long after Emma's name had been forgotten...

E.P. Leighton

Ealing, Middlesex, 1897

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1921 EDITION

After this story was originally published in *The Strand* quite some time ago, I came across a source that completely altered the outcome of *The Barrow Bride* and cast a rather interesting if not especially flattering light on Goodwife Purity. The new source is a set of letters a colleague discovered while engaged in a study of theater in late Stuart Barchester. They came up in the course of ordinary conversation one night and, having some interest in Barchester, the scene of one of my other, longer, I asked if I might examine them. The offer was accepted.

Imagine my shock when one of the letters, dated 1663, was signed EMMA WINGEATE.

My curiosity naturally being aroused, I spent an enjoyable weekend tracking this particular Emma down. I am greatly indebted to the late Professor Kirkwell of the Barchester Historical Society for his assistance in the matter, without which I doubt I would have uncovered what I did.

Namely, that rather than dying at the hands of the Barrow-beast, Miss Emma survived and indeed thrived. The letter, written to a London relation, was, in fact an invitation to Miss Emma's forthcoming marriage to Sir Alexander P— of Barchester. From this union came three children of the recently extinct P— family.

Given the inescapable fact that our heroine survived her ordeal, we are forced either to conclude the entire tale was a fantasy of Goodwife Purity's or, more charitably, that she changed the outcome to make it a more suitable cautionary tale. I incline towards the latter, but leave it to the reader to decide which is ultimately true. I have no doubt that Emma herself was Purity's chief source and wonder if there was more to the enmity than that which might be expected between the daughters of a Roundhead and a Cavalier.

At any rate, these new facts have inspired me to craft a new ending to the story in line with Emma's known survival.

* * *

Emma cried out again as three sharp nails raked her back, cutting satin and skin alike. If it had grabbed her then, she would have been doomed. But she pushed on with one last desperate spurt and fell through the threshold. Upon landing on the cold, rough ground, Emma wasted no time. Fortune was with her, and even as the Barrow-beast's frigid fingers closed vise-like around one bare ankle, her own fingers clenched at a large stone.

A stone which she slammed hard into the steep brow of the King. There was a

sickening crunch of shattered bone. There was an unearthly bellow of rage and pain. There was a wild, desperate scabble.

And finally, there was a solid THUD as Emma slammed the barrow door shut, sealing its prisoner within once again.

The King's hand was still fixed to her ankle, its broken nails biting into her skin.

"Yeaagh!"

Emma managed to pry it loose, not without suffering deep gouges to her ankle. Repaying pain for pain, she smashed the groping limb to bits with the salutary rock, and then hugged said stone to her heaving bosom.

Then she went home and, after putting a substantial dent into a bottle of Rhenish wine, fell asleep.

She was not troubled by any more strange, sinister dreams... neither, though, did she venture out anywhere near the moor for the rest of her years in Dragford.