

# Dark Tales

## Volume 12



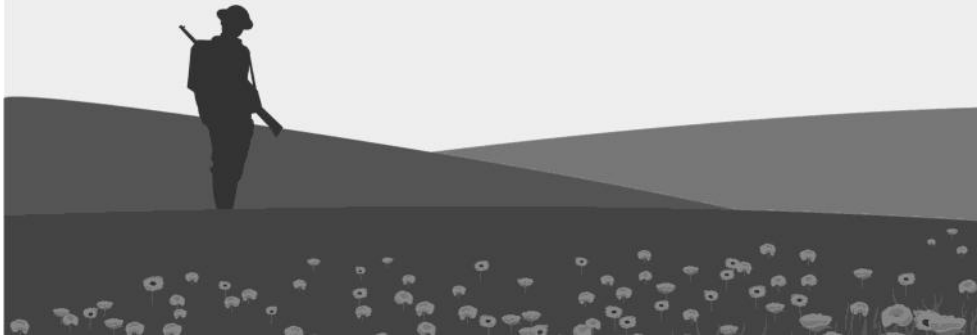
Dark Tales - Volume 12

Best new horror and speculative fiction

Edited by Sean Jeffery

## THE SUMMER GHOST

RICHARD SMITH



The air was cold and the light was fading.

George waited patiently, watching through the sights of his rifle. His target was one hundred yards away, out beyond the wire, hidden in a shell crater. The man had been crawling through the mud towards George's position. A sniper, possibly, or perhaps some poor soul sent out to report on positions or recover equipment. George had seen a movement and fired. He had hit the soldier, but it had not been a clean shot.

The enemy had scurried into the cover of the crater, and now George had him pinned down. Each time he attempted to move, George was ready. Seven rounds he had fired into the rim of the crater, each one showering mud into the air but always seeming to miss the sheltering soldier by inches.

Night came quickly. The sun sunk behind the hills at George's back and the shadows lengthened and then merged until all the land was grey and dark. George's eyes strained to keep the crater in focus. It was hard to see anything. His quarry would use the cover of the night to slip away, George realised. It was fair play to him if he did get away, perhaps. He was wounded after all. George had done his duty, and defended his section. But he kept his sights on the crater. He had learned never to lower his guard.

In the distance he heard further rifle shots. All along the lines, sentries played their deadly games.

George's position was usually quiet. The main concentrations of German defences were half a mile further to the north. The chances of a full scale attack here were remote, because even if the Germans broke through the lines they would come up against impassable marshland behind. But this did not stop the constant threat of snipers, especially as the opposing trenches were so close.

He began to shiver. He needed to move about to keep warm. It would be a cold October night. Low in the sky, the moon appeared between dark, fast-moving clouds, but his target remained hidden. He may even have died, George thought. He lifted his eye from his sights and stretched his arms and legs in the makeshift trench. The idea saddened him a little. It made him realise how futile it all was.

There was nothing the soldier could have hoped to achieve. The war would have carried on just the same if they had both been at home in their beds. He felt alone, now that the night had closed in. He could not even see the British sentries further along the trench.

A voice called out from the darkness ahead, German, and George instantly brought his rifle back up. But the silence returned, and George began to wonder if he had heard the sound at all. He could still see the crater, out past the coiled wire, now just a smudge of black, backlit by the moon. Had the voice come from there? He could not tell for sure. He fired another shot, the bullet thudding into the earth; a warning that he was still watching.

He registered a sudden flash to the left of his vision. An instant later, a bullet ricocheted off his helmet. The force of the impact knocked him sideways, and as he dropped down into the cover of the trench he glimpsed a figure emerging from the crater, stumbling away to safety.

George scrambled a dozen feet along the trench, and then risked raising his head above the parapet. Far away, he heard a call from the second German to his rescued comrade as they withdrew back into the darkness. A challenging shot fired by a British sentry further along the line went unanswered.

George's hands shook as he brought his rifle up. He knew he was lucky to be alive. He had a grudging respect for the Germans. They had got the better of him, one firing on his position while the other man escaped. But he was glad that the German had survived. It was no way to die, alone out there in the cold night.

\* \* \*

Quiet and stillness returned once again. Only the rumble of British shells further to the north intruded through the darkness.

Having been fired upon, George was now wary of his position. He had to fight the instinct to keep his head below the parapet in order to maintain his watch. He longed for a cigarette, but he dared not light up. Instead he took a furtive gulp from his hip flask. As the brandy spread through his body, his nerves settled a little, until gradually he felt nothing but a numb tiredness.

A light rain began to fall. He pulled the collar of his trench coat higher about his neck. The rain meant the trench would fill with water, and the dampness would seep through his clothes into his bones.

As he scanned the dark ground ahead he spotted the unexploded shell. Half-buried in the mud, it looked to be a large one. British, he thought. Although it was some way off, it made him uneasy. It was bad luck. He would report it when he finished his watch at midnight.

George felt his eyelids drop, and he straightened up with a jolt. He was not sure how much time had passed. It did not matter how tired he felt, he would not - could not - fall asleep. Never when you were on duty.

A flicker of movement caught George's eye. He immediately raised his rifle, but as he pointed his weapon towards the threat, his face creased into a frown. It was hard to see in the dark, but it seemed that a young girl, no more than six or seven years

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old, was approaching through the mud. The girl wore a summer dress and she was carrying flowers. He heard the faint sound of her singing drift over to him as he watched.

He started to call out to her - to issue a challenge, or warn her back behind the lines - but something made him stop.

There was something unnatural about her. She seemed to shine, as if lit up by a star shell, straight overhead, but there were no flares or shells in the sky. And her clothes were spotlessly clean, her shoes and dress unblemished by the mud. She did not belong there, she was out of place, and George could only guess at what she was.

"A spirit..." he whispered in awe. A wandering soul, a ghost from earlier, more innocent times.

George felt tears in his eyes. She seemed so happy, at peace, in this desolate place. He tracked her as she wandered steadily closer to his position, his breath held in his throat. Could the Germans see her, too, he wondered, from their side? Surely they would not fire. No man would shoot at her. He could hear her voice clearly now: she sang in French, high and melodious.

George watched, mesmerised, until he realised she would pass by the unexploded shell. He did not know if it would do her harm, but he could not bear the thought of it.

"Go back!" He shouted in her language, although he could not speak it well. "Get away!" The girl froze. She looked towards him, noticing him for the first time.

"There's a shell here... go away - you'll get hurt," George urged, feeling frustration as he struggled with the words.

The girl stared at him, and then turned and ran, startled and afraid, away from George, racing back over the British lines and into the marshes beyond, until she disappeared from view.

\* \* \*

The day was warm and the sun was shining.

Claude was cutting wood in the shed next to the barn when he heard his daughter run in from the fields. "Papa, Papa!" she called, her voice excited, urgent.

"Brigitte, what is it?" he asked as he stepped out to see her. She ran to him and he circled his arms around her as she clung to his legs. "What is wrong?"

"There is a man in the field. He shouted at me."

"What man? Where? Show me."

The girl led Claude through the gardens next to the farm, then on down the slope to the cattle-grazing field behind. The field, unused that year, had grown wild with grass and flowers. Years ago Claude had helped his father cut ditches to drain what had then been waterlogged land. Eventually they came to a stop near one of the ditches in the middle of the meadow.

"I was picking flowers. He was hiding in the grass over there." Brigitte pointed to a spot beyond the ditch.

"Where?" Claude asked. He could see nothing. "Show me, exactly."

They crossed the ditch and the girl led him to a place in the grass, distin-

guished only by being set in a shallow depression.

"It was here, around here," she insisted. Claude looked all around. There was no sign that anyone had been there.

"What did he look like, this man?"

"He was a soldier," Brigitte replied. He had a gun, and a hat. And he was muddy."

"A soldier, with a gun?"

"Yes. He didn't speak very well. He told me to go away. He said there was danger, there was a bomb."

Claude scratched at his chin. It was not like Brigitte to lie. It was possible this man had since left the area, but there was no bomb. There wasn't anything here. But why would she make up a tale about a soldier? Someone had upset her. Perhaps the army were training here for some reason. He would make some enquiries.

Claude felt troubled by the incident, and decided to lead his daughter home. A gun, indeed. "The man has gone now," he said. "He won't be back. Let's go back to the house. Your meal is ready."

\* \* \*

George had no idea what the time was, or how long it had been since he had seen the girl. When he had unfastened his coat to check his pocket watch he had been dismayed to find it was no longer working. He knew it must be late because he felt exhausted.

The icy rain had subsided, but now an even colder mist had blown in, swirling, freezing, restricting what he could see in the night and smothering sound so that he could no longer hear the British sentries, or the guns that were rumbling beyond.

The silence made him uneasy. It was as if everyone else had deserted in the night, leaving him alone. Tiredness pulled at his eyes, his whole body. He resisted the urge to lay his head down against his rifle butt.

He would do his duty, and wait for the relief watch at midnight. He would ask if anyone else had seen that girl. It could not be long now.

\* \* \*

Claude was older now. Brigitte had moved away from the farm; she had married a local boy.

He was scrubbing the floor in the kitchen when a workman knocked on the back door. "Excuse me, Monsieur."

Claude looked up from the floor. "What is it?"

"The work on the ditch. It will have to stop."

"Why?" Claude asked.

"We have found something, an old bomb, unexploded. It's a big one. You'll have to call the authorities."

Claude stood up slowly. His joints were stiff. "Why don't you show me."

The workman led him to a field behind the gardens. And there, half exposed in the newly widened ditch, was an artillery shell.

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"I wouldn't go near it if I were you, it might still be dangerous."

A recollection of Brigitte, leading him to this very place, many years ago, stirred in Claude's memory. He nodded. "A bomb. Yes, dangerous indeed." He looked back further along the ditch, to a place where the workmen had made additional excavations on one side. "What have you found there?" he asked.

The workman shrugged. "We found a silver flask in the mud. We were curious. We'll fill it back. It's an old trench, perhaps. If you look, you can see there is a dip in the field."

"I want you to dig along it. See what you find. I'll call the bomb disposal men."

"But why? It's not part of the ditch. It will cost you more money," the workman warned.

"Don't worry, you will get paid," Claude said.

\* \* \*

The men from the War Graves Commission stayed at the farm for several days. The workmen had found the remains not far from the ditch.

The British serviceman's body had lain undisturbed in the mud for over eighty years. His boots and parts of his uniform were still intact.

Brigitte stood with her father as they carefully lifted the body away. She let out a tiny gasp as the helmet slipped, revealing a neat hole, no bigger than a finger's width, high in its side.

"What will happen to him?" she asked her father.

"They will give him a proper burial now," he told her. "Now he will be able to rest in peace."

\* \* \*

George's head nodded forward once again, his eyes closed.

The mist had grown thicker than ever, until he could see no further than a few feet ahead, and everything had become grey.

He had heard nothing from the sentries. The relief had not come. It was well after midnight now. So many hours had passed. But he had not left his post. He could not leave.

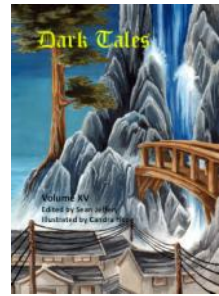
Finally, the tiredness had become overwhelming. Despite the cold, he had fallen into a listless, light sleep, his body folded at an awkward angle, slumped in the trench.

He stirred as he felt hands on his shoulders. A part of his consciousness registered that they had finally arrived, but he did not wake.

He let the hands gently lift him and carry him back to his comrades.

# Dark Tales

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# Dark Tales Short Story Competition

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7. For postal entries, stories must be typed or printed legibly, and the author's name and the title of the story must be printed at the top of each page.
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9. The deadlines for receipt of stories are 31st March and 30th September.
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11. Entries will be judged by Sean Jeffery and one other judge, whose decision is final, and no correspondence will be entered into.
12. The winner will receive £500, the runner-up £250 and third-placed £100, plus publication in Dark Tales. All other shortlisted and published entrants will receive £5. Each published entrant will be notified within approximately 60 days of the closing date. Critiques will be sent out as soon as possible afterwards.
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