

THE WHISPERER

by

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The first time Miles Benton saw the little fellow was on the train. Benton was commuting to his office job in the city and he sat alone in a second-class compartment. The 'little fellow' – a *very ugly* little man, from what Benton could see of him out of the corner of his eye, with a lopsided hump and dark or dirty features, like a gnomish gypsy – entered the compartment and took a seat in the far corner. He was dressed in a floppy black wide-brimmed hat that fell over half his face and a black overcoat longer than himself that trailed to the floor.

Benton was immediately aware of the smell, a rank stench which quite literally would have done credit to the lowliest farmyard, and correctly deduced its source. Despite the dry acrid smell of stale tobacco from the ashtrays and the lingering odour of grimy stations, the compartment had seemed positively perfumed prior to the advent of the hunchback. The day was quite chill outside, but Benton nevertheless stood up and opened the window, pulling it down until the draft forced back the fumes from his fellow passenger. He was then obliged to put away his flapping newspaper and sit back, his collar upturned against the sudden cold blast, mentally cursing the smelly little chap for fouling 'his' compartment.

A further five minutes saw Benton's mind made up to change compartments. That way he would be removed from the source of the odorous irritation, and he would no longer need to suffer this intolerable blast of icy air. But no sooner was his course of action determined than the ticket collector arrived, sliding open the door and sticking his well-known and friendly face inside the compartment.

"Mornin', sir," he said briskly to Benton, merely glancing at the other traveller. "Tickets, please."

Benton got out his ticket and passed it to be examined. He noticed with satisfaction as he did so that the ticket collector wrinkled his nose and sniffed suspiciously at the air, eyeing the hunchback curiously. Benton retrieved his ticket and the collector turned to the little man in the far corner. "Yer ticket ... *sir* ... if yer don't mind." He looked the little chap up and down disapprovingly.

The hunchback looked up from under his black floppy hat and grinned. His eyes were jet and bright as a bird's. He winked and indicated that the ticket collector should bend down, expressing an obvious desire to say something in confidence. He made no effort to produce a ticket.

The ticket collector frowned in annoyance, but nevertheless bent his ear to the little man's face. He listened for a moment or two to a chuckling, throaty whisper. It actually appeared to Benton that the

hunchback *waschortling* as he whispered his obscene secret into the other's ear, and the traveller could almost hear him saying: "Feehly postcards! Vairy dairty pictures!"

The look on the face of the ticket collector changed immediately; his expression went stony hard.

"Aye, aye!" Benton said to himself. "The little blighter's got no ticket! He's for it now."

But no, the ticket collector said nothing to the obnoxious midget, but straightened and turned to Benton. "Sorry, sir," he said, "but this compartment's private. I'll 'ave ter arsk yer ter leave."

"But," Benton gasped incredulously, "I've been travelling in this compartment for years. It's never been a, well, a 'private' compartment before!"

"No, sir, p'raps not," said the ticket collector undismayed. "But it is now. There's a compartment next door; jus' a couple of gents in there; I'm sure it'll do jus' as well." He held the door open for Benton, daring him to argue the point further. "Sir?"

"Ah, well," Benton thought, resignedly, "I was wanting to move." Nevertheless, he looked down aggressively as he passed the hunchback, staring hard at the top of the floppy hat. The little man seemed to know. He looked up and grinned, cocking his head on one side and grinning.

Benton stepped quickly out into the corridor and took a deep breath. "Damn!" he swore out loud.

"Yer pardon, sir?" inquired the ticket collector, already swaying off down the corridor.

"Nothing!" Benton snapped in reply, letting himself into the smoky, crowded compartment to which he had been directed.

The very next morning Benton plucked up his courage (he had never been *avery* brave man), stopped the ticket collector, and asked him what it had all been about. Who had the little chap been? What privileges did he have that an entire compartment had been reserved especially for him, the grim little gargoyle?

To which the ticket collector replied, "Eh? An 'unchback? Are yer sure it *was this* train, sir? Why, we haint 'ad no private or reserved compartments on this 'ere train since it became a commuter special! And as fer a 'unchback – well!"

"But surely you remember asking me to leave my compartment – *this* compartment?" Benton insisted.

"'Ere, yer pullin' me leg, haint yer, sir?" laughed the ticket collector good-naturedly. He slammed shut the compartment door behind him and smilingly strode away without waiting for an answer, leaving Benton alone with his jumbled and whirling thoughts.

"Well, I never!" the commuter muttered worriedly to himself. He scratched his head and then, philosophically, began to quote a mental line or two from a ditty his mother had used to say to him when he was a child:

The other day upon the stair

I saw a man who wasn't there...

Benton had almost forgotten about the little man with the hump and sewer-like smell by the time their paths crossed again. It happened one day some three months later, with spring just coming on, when, in acknowledgement of the bright sunshine, Benton decided to forego his usual sandwich lunch at the office for a noonday pint at the Bull & Bush.

The entire pub, except for one corner of the bar, appeared to be quite crowded, but it was not until Benton had elbowed his way to the corner in question that he saw why it was unoccupied; or rather, why it had only one occupant. The *smell* hit him at precisely the same time as he saw, sitting on a bar stool with his oddly humped back to the regular patrons, the little man in black with his floppy broad-brimmed hat.

That the other customers were aware of the cesspool stench was obvious – Benton watched in fascination the wrinkling about him of at least a dozen pairs of nostrils – and yet not a man complained. And more amazing yet, no one even attempted to encroach upon the little fellow's territory in the bar corner. No one, that is, except Benton ...

Holding his breath, Benton stepped forward and rapped sharply with his knuckles on the bar just to the left of where the hunchback sat. "Beer, barman. A pint of best, please."

The barman smiled chubbily and stepped forward, reaching out for a beer pump and slipping a glass beneath the tap. But even as he did so the hunchback made a small gesture with his head, indicating that he wanted to say something ...

Benton had seen all this before, and all the many sounds of the pub – the chattering of people, the clink of coins and the clatter of glasses – seemed to fade to silence about him as he focused his full concentration upon the barman and the little man in the floppy hat. In slow motion, it seemed, the barman bent his head down toward the hunchback, and again Benton heard strangely chuckled whispers as the odious dwarf passed his secret instructions.

Curiously, fearfully, in something very akin to dread, Benton watched the portly barman's face undergo its change, heard the *hissss* of the beer pump, saw the full glass come out from beneath the bar ... to plump down in front of the hunchback! Hard-eyed, the barman stuck his hand out in front of Benton's nose. "That's half a dollar to you, sir."

"But ..." Benton gasped, incredulously opening and closing his mouth. He already had a coin in his hand, with which he had intended to pay for his drink, but now he pulled his hand back.

"Half a dollar, sir," the barman repeated ominously, snatching the coin from Benton's retreating fingers, "and would you mind moving down the bar, please? It's a bit crowded this end."

In utter disbelief Benton jerked his eyes from the barman's face to his now empty hand, and from his hand to the seated hunchback; and as he did so the little man turned his head towards him and grinned. Benton was aware only of the bright, bird-like eyes beneath the wide brim of the hat – not of the

darkness surrounding them. One of those eyes closed suddenly in a wink, and then the little man turned back to his beer.

“But,” Benton again croaked his protest at the publican, “that’s *my* beer he’s got!” He reached out and caught the barman’s rolled-up sleeve, following him down the bar until forced by the press of patrons to let go. The barman finally turned.

“Beer, sir?” The smile was back on his chubby face. “Certainly – half a dollar to you, sir.”

Abruptly the bar sounds crashed in again upon Benton’s awareness as he turned to elbow his way frantically, almost hysterically, through the crowded room to the door. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that the little man, too, had left. A crush of thirsty people had already moved into the space he had occupied in the bar corner.

Outside in the fresh air Benton glared wild-eyed up and down the busy street; and yet he was half-afraid of seeing the figure his eyes sought. The little man, however, had apparently disappeared into thin air.

“God damn him!” Benton cried in sudden rage, and a passing policeman looked at him very curiously indeed.

He was annoyed to notice that the policeman followed him all the way back to the office.

At noon the next day Benton was out of the office as if at the crack of a starting pistol. He almost ran the four blocks to the Bull & Bush, pausing only to straighten his tie and tilt his bowler a trifle more aggressively in the mirror of a shop window. The place was quite crowded, as before, but he made his way determinedly to the bar, having first checked that the air was quite clean – ergo, that the little man with the hump was quite definitely *not* there.

He immediately caught the barman’s eye. “Bartender, a beer, please. And –” he lowered his voice “– a word, if you don’t mind.”

The publican leaned over the bar confidentially, and Benton lowered his tone still further to whisper, “Er, *whois* he – the, er, the little chap? Is he, perhaps, the boss of the place? Quite a little, er, *eccentric*, isn’t he?”

“Eh?” said the barman, looking puzzledly about. “Who d’you mean, sir?”

The genuinely puzzled expression on the portly man’s face ought to have told Benton all he needed to know, but Benton simply could not accept that, not a second time. “I mean the hunchback.” He raised his voice in desperation. “The little chap in the floppy black hat who sat in the corner of the bar only yesterday – who stank to high heaven and drank *my* beer! Surely you remember him?”

The barman slowly shook his head and frowned, then called out to a group of standing men: “Joe, here a minute.” A stocky chap in a cloth cap and tweed jacket detached himself from the general hubbub and moved to the bar. “Joe,” said the barman, “you were in here yesterday lunch; did you see a – well, a – how was it, sir?” He turned back to Benton.

“A little chap with a floppy black hat and a hump,” Benton patiently, worriedly repeated himself. “He was sitting in the bar corner. Had a pong like a dead rat.”

Joe thought about it for a second, then said, “Yer sure yer got the right pub, guv? I mean, we gets no tramps or weirdos in ’ere. ’Arry won’t ’ave ’em, will yer, ’Arry?” He directed his question at the barman.

“No, he’s right, sir. I get upset with weirdos. Won’t have them.”

“But ... *this* is the Bull & Bush, isn’t it?” Benton almost stammered, gazing wildly about, finding unaccustomed difficulty in speaking.

“That’s right, sir,” answered Harry the barman, frowning heavily now and watching sideways.

“But –”

“Sorry, chief,” the stocky Joe said with an air of finality. “Yer’ve got the wrong place. Must ’ave been some other pub.” Both the speaker and the barman turned away a trifle awkwardly, Benton thought, and he could feel their eyes upon him as he moved dazedly away from the bar towards the door. Again lines remembered of old repeated themselves in his head:

He wasn’t there again today –

Oh how I wish he’d go away!

“Here, sir!” cried the barman, suddenly, remembering. “Do you want a beer or not, then?”

“No!” Benton snarled. Then, on impulse: “Give it to – *to him!* – when next he comes in ...”

Over the next month or so certain changes took place in Benton, changes which would have seemed quite startling to anyone knowing him of old. To begin with, he had apparently broken two habits of very long standing. One: instead of remaining in his compartment aboard the morning train and reading his newspaper – as had been his wont for close on nine years – he was now given to spending the first half hour of his journey peering into the many compartments while wandering up and down the long corridor, all the while wearing an odd, part puzzled, part apologetic expression. Two: he rarely took his lunch at the office any more, but went out walking in the city instead, stopping for a drink and a sandwich at any handy local pub. (But never the Bull & Bush, though he always ensured that his strolling took him close by the latter house; and had anyone been particularly interested, then Benton might have been noticed to keep a very wary eye on the pub, almost as if he had it under observation.

But then, as summer came on and no new manifestation of Benton’s *problem* – came to light, he began to forget all about it, to relegate it to that category of mental phenomena known as ‘daydreams’, even though he had known no such phenomena before. And as the summer waxed, so the nagging worry at the back of his mind waned, until finally he convinced himself that his daydreams were gone for good.

But he was wrong ...

And if those two previous visitations had been dreams, then the third could only be classified as – nightmare!

July saw the approach of the holiday period, and Benton had long had places booked for himself and his wife at a sumptuously expensive and rather exclusive coastal resort, far from the small Midlands town he called home. They went there every year. This annual ‘spree’ allowed Benton to indulge his normally repressed escapism, when for a whole fortnight he could pretend that he was other than a mere clerk among people who usually accepted his fantasies as fact, thereby reinforcing them for Benton.

He could hardly wait for it to come round, that last Friday evening before the holidays, and when it did he rode home in the commuter special in a state of high excitement. Tomorrow would see him off to the sea and the sun; the cases were packed, the tickets arranged. A good night’s rest now – and then, in the morning ...

He was whistling as he let himself in through his front door, but the tone of his whistle soon went off key as he stepped into the hall. Dismayed, he paused and sniffed, his nose wrinkling. Out loud, he said, “Huh! The drains must be off again.” But there was something rather special about that poisonous smell, something ominously familiar; and all of a sudden, without fully realising why, Benton felt the short hairs at the back of his neck begin to rise. An icy chill struck at him from nowhere.

He passed quickly from the hall into the living room, where the air seemed even more offensive, and there he paused again as it came to him in a flash of fearful memory just *what* the awful stench of ordure was, and *where* and *when* he had known it before.

The room seemed suddenly to whirl about him as he saw, thrown carelessly across the back of his own easy chair, a monstrously familiar hat – a floppy hat, black and wide-brimmed!

The hat grew beneath his hypnotised gaze, expanding until it threatened to fill the whole house, his whole mind, but then he tore his eyes away and broke the spell. From the upstairs bedroom came a low, muted sound: a moan of pain – or pleasure? And as an incredibly obscene and now well-remembered chuckling whisper finally invaded Benton’s horrified ears, he threw off shock’s invisible shackles to fling himself breakneck up the stairs.

“Ellen!” he cried, throwing open the bedroom door just as a second moan sounded – *and then he staggered, clutching at the wall for support, as the scene beyond the door struck him an almost physical blow!*

The hunchback lay sprawled naked upon Benton’s bed, his malformed back blue-veined and grimy. The matted hair of his head fell forward onto Ellen’s white breasts and his filthy hands moved like crabs over her arched body. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open and panting; her whole attitude was one of complete abandon. Her slender hands clawed spastically at the hunchback’s writhing, scurvy thighs ...

Benton screamed hoarsely, clutching wildly at his hair, his eyes threatening to pop from his head, and for an instant time stood still. Then he lunged forward and grabbed at the man, a great power bursting inside him, the strength of both God and the devil in his crooked fingers – but in that same instant the hunchback slipped from the far side of the bed and out of reach. At an almost impossible speed the little man dressed and, as Benton lurched drunkenly about the room, he flitted like a grey bat back across the bed. As he went his face passed close to Ellen’s, and Benton was aware once again of that filthy whispered chuckle as the hunchback sprang to the floor and fled the room.

Mad with steadily mounting rage, Benton hardly noticed the sudden slitting of his wife’s eyes, the film

that came down over them like a silky shutter. But as he lunged after the hunchback Ellen reached out a naked leg, deliberately tripping him and sending him flying out onto the landing.

By the time he regained his feet, to lean panting against the landing rail, the little man was at the hall door, his hat once more drooping about grotesque shoulders. He looked up with eyes like malignant jewels in the shadow of that hat, and the last thing that the tormented householder saw as the hunchback closed the door softly behind him was that abhorrent, omniscient wink!

When he reached the garden gate some twoscore seconds later, Benton was not surprised to note the little man's complete disappearance ...

Often, during the space of the next fortnight, Benton tried to think back on the scene which followed immediately upon the hunchback's departure from his house, but he was never able to resolve it to his satisfaction. He remembered the blind accusations he had thrown, the venomous bile of his words, his wife's patent amazement which had only served to enrage him all the more, the shock on Ellen's reddening face as he had slapped her mercilessly from room to room. He remembered her denial and the words she had screamed after locking herself in the bathroom: "Madman, madman!" she had screamed. And then she had left, taking her already packed suitcase with her.

He had waited until Monday – mainly in a vacant state of shock – before going out to a local ironmonger's shop to buy himself a sharp, long-bladed Italian knife ...

It was now the fourteenth day, and still Benton walked the streets. He was grimy, unshaven, hungry, but his resolution was firm. Somewhere, *somewhere*, he would find the little man in the outsize overcoat and black floppy hat, and when he did he would stick his knife to its hilt in the hunchback's slimy belly and he would cut out the vile little swine's brains through his loathsomely winking eyes! In his mind's eye, even as he walked the night streets, Benton could *see* those eyes gleaming like jewels, quick and bright and liquid, and faintly in his nostrils there seemed to linger the morbid stench of the hybrid creature that wore those eyes in its face.

And always his mother's ditty rang in his head:

The other day upon the stair

I saw a man who wasn't there.

He wasn't there again today –

Oh, how I wish...

But no, Benton *did not* wish the little man away; on the contrary, he desperately wanted to find him!

Fourteen days, fourteen days of madness and delirium; but through all the madness a burning purpose

had shone out like a beacon. Who, what, why? Benton knew not, and he no longer wanted to know. But somewhere, *somewhere* ...

Starting the first Tuesday after that evening of waking nightmare, each morning he had caught the commuter special as of old, to prowl its snakelike corridor and peer in poisonously through the compartment windows; every lunchtime he had waited in a shop doorway across the street from the Bull & Bush until closing time, and in between times he had walked the streets in all the villages between home and the city. Because somewhere, *somewhere* !

“Home.” He tasted the word bitterly. “Home” – hah! That was a laugh! And all this after eleven years of reasonably harmonious married life. He thought again, suddenly, of Ellen, then of the hunchback, then of the two of them together ... and in the next instant his mind was lit by a bright flash of inspiration.

Fourteen days – *fourteen days including today* – and this was Saturday night! Where would he be now if this whole nightmare had never happened? Why, he would be on the train with his wife, going home from their holiday!

Could it possibly be that –

Benton checked his watch, his hands shaking uncontrollably. Ten to nine; the nine o’clock train would be pulling into the station in only ten more minutes!

He looked wildly about him, reality crashing down again as he found himself in the back alleys of his home town. Slowly the wild light went out of his eyes, to be replaced by a strangely warped smile as he realised that he stood in an alley only a few blocks away from the railway station ...

They didn’t see him as they left the station, Ellen in high heels and a chic outfit, the hunchback as usual in his ridiculous overcoat and floppy black hat. But Benton saw them. They were (it still seemed completely unbelievable) arm in arm, Ellen radiant as a young bride, the little man reeking and filthy; and as Benton heard again that obscene chuckle he choked and reeled with rage in the darkness of his shop doorway.

Instantly the little man paused and peered into the shadows where Benton crouched. Benton cursed himself and shrank back; although the street was almost deserted, he had not wanted his presence known just yet.

But his presence *was* known!

The hunchback lifted up Ellen’s hand to his lips in grotesque chivalry and kissed it. He whispered something loathsomely, and then, as Ellen made off without a word down the street, he turned again to peer with firefly eyes into Benton’s doorway. The hiding man waited no longer. He leapt out into view, his knife bright and upraised, and the hunchback turned without ceremony to scurry down the cobbled street, his coat fluttering behind him like the wings of a great crippled moth.

Benton ran too, and quickly the gap between them closed as he drove his legs in a vengeful fury. Faster and faster his breath rasped as he drew closer to the fugitive hunchback, his hand lifting the knife for the fatal stroke.

Then the little man darted round a corner into an alleyway. No more than a second later Benton, too, rushed wildly into the darkness of the same alley. He skidded to a halt, his shoes sliding on the cobbles. He stilled his panting forcibly.

Silence ...

The little devil had vanished again! He –

No, *there* he was – cringing like a cornered rat in the shadow of the wall.

Benton lunged, his knife making a crescent of light as it sped toward the hunchback's breast, but like quicksilver the target shifted as the little man ducked under his pursuer's arm to race out again into the street, leaving the echo of his hideous chuckle behind him.

That whispered chuckle drove Benton to new heights of raging bloodlust and, heedless now of all but the chase, he raced hot on the hunchback's trail. He failed to see the taxi's lights as he ran into the street, failed to hear its blaring horn – indeed, he was only dimly aware of the scream of brakes and tortured tyres – so that the darkness of oblivion as it rushed in upon him came as a complete surprise ...

The darkness did not last. Quickly Benton swam up out of unconsciousness to find himself crumpled in the gutter. There was blood on his face, a roaring in his ears. The street swam round and round.

“Oh, God!” he groaned, but the words came out broken, like his body, and faint. Then the street found its level and steadied. An awful dull ache spread upwards from Benton's waist until it reached his neck. He tried to move, but couldn't. He heard running footsteps and managed to turn his head, lifting it out of the gutter in an agony of effort. Blood dripped from a torn ear. He moved an arm just a fraction, fingers twitching.

“God mister what were you doing what were you *doing*?” the taxi driver gabbled. “Oh Jesus Jesus you're hurt you're hurt. It wasn't my fault it wasn't me!”

“Never, uh ... mind,” Benton gasped, pain threatening to pull him under again as the ache in his lower body exploded into fresh agony. “Just ... get me, uh, into ... your car and ... hospital or ... doctor.”

“Sure, yes!” the man cried, quickly kneeling.

If Benton's nose had not been clogged with mucus and drying blood he would have known of the hunchback's presence even before he heard the terrible chuckling from the pavement. As it was, the sound made him jerk his damaged head round into a fresh wave of incredible pain. He turned his eyes upwards. Twin points of light stared down at him from the darkness beneath the floppy hat.

“Uh ... I suppose, uh, you're satisfied ... now?” he painfully inquired, his hand groping uselessly, longingly for the knife which now lay half-way across the street.

And then he froze. Tortured and racked though his body was – desperate as his pain and injuries were – Benton's entire being *froze* as, in answer to his choked question, *the hunchback slowly, negatively, shook his shadowed head!*

Dumbfounded, amazed and horrified, Benton could only gape, even his agony forgotten as he helplessly watched from the gutter a repeat performance of those well-known gestures, those scenes remembered of old and now indelibly imprinted upon his mind: the filthy whispering in the taxi driver's ear; the winking of bright, bird eyes; the mazed look spreading like pale mud on the frightened man's face. Again the street began to revolve about Benton as the taxi driver walked as if in a dream back to his taxi.

Benton tried to scream but managed only a shuddering cough. Spastically his hand found the hunchback's grimy ankle and he gripped it tight. The little man stood like an anchor, and once more the street steadied about them as Benton fought his mangled body in a futile attempt to push it to its feet. He could not. There was something wrong with his back, something broken. He coughed, then groaned and relaxed his grip, turning his eyes upwards again to meet the steady gaze of the hunchback.

"Please ..." he said. But his words were drowned out by the sudden sound of a revving engine, by the shriek of skidding tyres savagely reversing; and the last thing Benton saw, other than the black bulk of the taxi looming and the red rear lights, was the shuttering of one of those evil eyes in a grim farewell wink ...

Some few minutes later the police arrived at the scene of the most inexplicable killing it had ever been their lot to have to attend. They had been attracted by the crazed shrieking of a white-haired, utterly lunatic taxi driver.