

RAY BRADBURY - The Finnegan

To say that I have been haunted for the rest of my life by the affair Finnegan, is to grossly understate the events leading up to that final melancholy. Only now at three score and ten can I write these words for an astonished constabulary who may well run with picks and shovels to unearth my truths or bury my lies.

The facts are these:

Three children went astray and were missed. Their bodies were found in the midst of Chatham Forest and each bore no marks of criminal assassination, but all had suffered their life blood to be drained. Only their skin remained like that of some discolored vineyard grapes withered by sunlight and no rain.

From the withered detritus of these innocents rose fresh rumors of vampires or similar beasts with similar appetites. Such myths always pursue the facts to stun them in their tracks. It could only have been a tombyard beast, it was said, that fed on and destroyed three lives and mined three dozen more.

The children were buried in the most holy ground. Soon after, Sir Robert Merriweather, pretender to the throne of Sherlock Holmes but modestly refusing the claim, moved through the ten dozen doors of his antique house to come forth to search for this terrible thief of life. With myself, I might add, to carry his brandy and bumbershoot and warn him of underbrush pitfalls in that dark and mysterious forest.

Sir Robert Merriweather? you say.

Just that. Plus the ten times ten plus twelve amazing doors in his shut-up house.

Were the doors used? Not one in nine. How had they appeared in Sir Robert's old manse? He had shipped them in, as a collector of doors, from Rio, Paris, Rome, Tokyo and mid-America. Once collected, he had stashed them, hinged, to be seen from both sides, on the walls of his upper and lower chambers. There he conducted tours of these odd portals for such antique fools as were ravished by the sight of the curiously overdone, the undersimplified, the rococo, or some First Empire cast aside by Napoleon's nephews, or seized from Hermann Goering who had in turn ransacked the Louvre. Others, pelted by Oklahoma dust storms, were jostled home in flatbeds cushioned by bright posters from carnivals buried in the wind-blown desolations of 1936 America. Name your least favorite door, it was his. Name the best quality, he owned it also, hidden and safe, true beauties behind oblivion's portals.

I had come to see his doors, not the deaths. At his behest, that were commands, I had bought my curiosity a steamship ticket and arrived to find Sir Robert involved not with ten dozen doors, but some great dark door. A mysterious portal, still un-found. And beneath? A tomb.

Sir Robert hurried the grand tour, opening and shutting panels rescued from Peking, long buried near Etna, or filched from Nantucket. But his heart, gone sick, was not in this what should have been delightful tour.

He described the spring rains that drenched the country to make things green, only to have people to walk out in that fine weather and one week find the body of a boy emptied of life through two incisions in his neck, and in the next weeks, the bodies of the two girls. People shouted for the police and sat

drinking in pubs, their faces long and pale, while mothers locked their children home where fathers lectured on the dooms that lay in Chatham Forest.

"Will you come with me," said Sir Robert at last, "on a very strange sad picnic?"

"I will," I said.

So we snapped ourselves in weather-proofs, lugged a hamper of sandwiches and red wine and plunged into the forest on a drear Sunday.

There was time as we moved down a hill into the dripping gloom of the trees, to recall what the papers had said about the vanished children's bloodless flesh, the police thrashing the forest ten dozen times, clueless, while the surrounding estates slammed their doors drum-tight at sunset.

"Rain. Damn. Rain!" Sir Robert's s pale face stared up, his gray mustache quivering over his thin mouth. He was sick and brittle and old. "Our picnic will be ruined!"

"Picnic?" I said. "Will our killer join us for eats?"

"I pray to God he will," Sir Robert said. "Yes, pray to God he will."

We walked through a land that was now mists, now dim sunlight, now forest, now open glade, until we came into a silent part of the woods, a silence made of the way the trees grew wetly together and the way the green moss lay, in swards and hillocks. Spring had not yet filled the empty trees. The sun was like an arctic disc, withdrawn, cold and almost dead.

"This is the place," said Sir Robert at last.

"Where the children were found?" I inquired.

"Their bodies empty as empty can be."

I looked at the glade and thought of the children and the people who had stood over them with startled faces and the police who had come to whisper and touch and go away, lost.

"The murderer was never apprehended?"

"Not this clever fellow. How observant are you.?" asked Sir Robert.

"What do you want observed?"

"There's the catch. The police slipped up. They were stupidly anthropomorphic about the whole bloody mess, seeking a killer with two arms, two legs, a suit of clothes and a knife. So hypnotized with their human concept of the killer that they overlooked one obvious unbelievable fact about this place. So!"

He gave his cane a quick light tap on the earth.

Something happened. I stared at the ground. "Do that again," I whispered.

"You saw it?"

"I thought I saw a small trap door open and shut. May I have your cane?"

He gave me the cane. I tapped the ground.

It happened again.

"A spider!" I cried. "Gone! God, how quick!"

"Finnegan," Sir Robert muttered.

"What?"

"You know the old saying: in again, out again, Finnegan. Here."

With his pen-knife, Sir Robert dug in the soil to lift an entire clod of earth, breaking off bits to show me the tunnel. The spider, in panic, leaped out its small wafer door and fell to the ground.

Sir Robert handed me the tunnel. "Like gray velvet. Feel. A model builder that small chap. A tiny shelter, camouflaged, and him alert. He could hear a fly walk. Then pounce out, seize, pop back, slam the lid!"

"I didn't know you loved Nature."

"Loathe it. But this wee chap, there's much we share. Doors. Hinges. Wouldn't consider other arachnids. But my love of portals drew me to study this incredible carpenter." Sir Robert worked the trap on its cob-web hinges. "What craftsmanship! And it all ties to the tragedies!"

"The murdered children?"

Sir Robert nodded. "Notice any special thing about this forest?"

"It's too quiet."

"Quiet!" Sir Robert smiled weakly. "Vast quantities of silence. No familiar birds, beetles, crickets, toads. Not a rustle or stir. The police didn't notice. Why should they? But it was this absence of sound and motion in the glade that prompted my wild theory about the murders."

He toyed with the amazing structure in his hands.

"What would you say if you could imagine a spider large enough, in a hideout big enough, so that a running child might hear a vacuumed sound, be seized, and vanish with a soft thud below. How say you?" Sir Robert stared at the trees. "Poppycock and bilge? Yet, why not? Evolution, selection, growth, mutations, and--pfft!"

Again he tapped with his cane. A trap door flew open, shut. "Finnegan," he said.

The sky darkened.

"Rain!" Casting a cold gray eye at the clouds, he stretched his frail hand to touch the showers. "Damn! Arachnids hate rain. And so will our huge dark Finnegan."

"Finnegan!" I cried, irritably.

"I believe in him, yes."

"A spider larger than a child?!"

"Twice as large!"

The cold wind blew a mizzle of rain over us. "Lord, I hate to leave. Quick, before we go. Here."

Sir Robert raked away the old leaves with his cane, revealing two globular gray-brown objects.

"What are they?" I bent. "Old cannonballs?"

"No." He cracked the grayish globes. "Soil, through and through."

I touched the crumbled bits.

"Our Finnegan excavates," said Sir Robert. "To make his tunnel. With his large rake-like chelicerae he dislodges soils, works it into a ball, carries it in his jaws and drops it beyond his hole."

Sir Robert displayed half a dozen pellets on his trembling palm. "Normal balls evicted from a tiny trap door tunnel. Toy size." He knocked his cane on the huge globes at our feet. "Explain those!"

I laughed. "The children must've made them with mud!"

"Nonsense!" cried Sir Robert irritably, glaring about at trees and earth. "By God, somewhere, our dark beast lurks beneath his velvet lid. We might be standing on it. Christ, don't stare! His door has beveled rims. Some architect, this Finnegan. A genius at camouflage."

Sir Robert raved on and on, describing the dark earth, the arachnid, its fiddling legs, its hungry mouth, as the wind roared and the trees shook.

Suddenly, Sir Robert flung up his cane.

"No!" he cried.

I had no time to turn. My flesh froze, my heart stopped.

Something snatched my spine.

I thought I heard a huge bottle uncorked, a lid sprung. Then this monstrous thing crawled down my back.

"Here!" cried Sir Robert. "Now!"

He struck with his cane. I fell, dead weight. He thrust the thing from my spine. He lifted it.

The wind had cracked the dead tree branch and knocked it on my back.

Weakly, I tried to rise, shivering. "Silly," I said, a dozen times. "Silly. Damn awful silly!"

"Silly, no. Brandy, yes!" said Sir Robert. "Brandy?"

The sky was very black now. The rain swarmed over us.

Door after door after door, and at last into Sir Robert's country house study. A warm rich room where a fire smoldered on a drafty hearth. We devoured our sandwiches, waiting for the rain to cease. Sir Robert estimated that it would stop by eight o'clock when, by moonlight, we might return, ever so reluctantly, to Chatham Forest. I remembered the fallen branch, its spidering touch, and drank both wine and brandy.

"The silence in the forest," said Sir Robert, finishing his meal. "What murderer could achieve such a silence?"

"An insanely clever man with a series of baited, poisoned traps, with liberal quantities of insecticide, might kill off every bird, every rabbit, every insect," I said.

"Why should he do that?"

"To convince us that there is a large spider nearby. To perfect his act."

"We are the only ones who have noticed this silence, the police did not. Why should a murderer go to all that trouble for nothing?"

"Why is a murderer? you might well ask."

"I am not convinced." Sir Robert topped his food with wine. "This creature, with a voracious mouth, has cleansed the forest. With nothing left, he seized the children. The Silence, the murders, the prevalence of trap door spiders, the large earth balls, it all fits."

Sir Robert's fingers crawled about the desk top, quite like a washed, manicured spider in itself. He made a cup of his frail hands, held them up.

"At the bottom of a spider's burrow is a dust-bin into which drop insect remnants which the spider has dined. Imagine the dust-bin of our Grand Finnegan!"

I imagined. I visioned a Great Legged thing fastened to its dark lid under the forest and a child running, singing in the half light. A brisk insucked whisk of air, the song cut short, then nothing but an empty glade and the echo of a softly dropped lid, and beneath the dark earth the spider, fiddling, cabling, spinning the stunned child in its silently orchestrating legs.

What could the dust-bin of such an incredible spider resemble? What the remnants of many banquets? I shuddered.

"Rain's letting up." Sir Robert nodded his approval. "Back to the forest. I've mapped the damned place for weeks. All the bodies were found in one half-open glade. That's where the assassin, if it was a man, arrives! Or where the unnatural silk-spinning, earth tunneling, architect of special doors, abides his tomb."

"Must I hear all this?" I protested.

"Listen more." Sir Robert downed the last of his burgundy. "The poor children's prolapsed corpses were found at thirteen day intervals. Which means that every two weeks our loathsome eight-legged hide and seeker must feed. Tonight is the 14th night after the last child was found, nothing but skin. Tonight our

hidden friend must hunger afresh. So! Within the hour, I shall introduce you to Finnegan the great and horrible!"

"All of which," I said, "makes me want to drink."

"Here I go." Sir Robert stepped through one of his Louis the Fourteenth portals. "To find the last and final and most awful door in all my life. You will follow."

Damn, yes! I followed.

The sun had set, the rain was gone and the clouds cleared off to show a cold and troubled moon. We moved in our own silence and the silence of the exhausted paths and glades while Sir Robert handed me a small silver pistol.

"Not that that would help. Killing an outsize arachnid is sticky. Hard to know where to fire the first shot. If you miss there'll be no time for a second. Damned things, large or small, move in the instant!"

"Thanks." I took the weapon. "I need a drink."

"Done." Sir Robert handed me a silver brandy flask. "Drink as needed."

I drank. "What about you?"

"I have my own special flask." Sir Robert lifted it. "For the right time."

"Why wait?"

"I must surprise the beast and mustn't be drunk at the encounter. Four seconds before the thing grabs me, I will imbibe of this dear Napoleon stuff, spiced with a rude surprise."

"Surprise?"

"Ah, wait. You'll see. So will this dark thief of life. Now, dear sir, here we part company. I this way, you yonder. Do you mind?"

"Mind when I'm scared gutless? What's that?"

"Here. If I should vanish." He handed me a sealed letter. "Read it aloud to the constabulary. It will help them locate me and Finnegan, lost and found."

"Please, no details. I feel like a damned fool following you while Finnegan, if he exists, is underfoot snug and warm, saying, 'ah, those idiots above run about, freezing. I think I'll let them freeze.'"

"One hopes not. Get away now. If we walk together, he won't jump up. Alone, he'll peer out the merest crack, glom the scene with a huge bright eye, flip down again, ssst, and one of us gone to darkness."

"Not me, please. Not me."

We walked on about sixty feet apart and beginning to lose one another in the half moon light.

"Are you there?" called Sir Robert, from half the world away in leafy dark.

"I wish I weren't," I yelled back.

"Onward!" cried Sir Robert. "Don't lose sight of me. Move closer. We're near on the site. I can intuit, I almost feel --"

As a final cloud shifted, moonlight glowed brilliantly to show Sir Robert waving his arms about like antennae, eyes half shut, gasping with expectation.

"Closer, closer," I heard him exhale. "Near on. Be still. Perhaps . . . "

He froze in place. There was something in his aspect that made me want to leap, race, and yank him off the turf he had chosen.

"Sir Robert, oh, God!" I cried. "Run!"

He froze. One hand and arm orchestrated the air, feeling, probing, while his other hand delved, brought forth his silver-coated flask of brandy. He held it high in the moonlight, a toast to doom. Then, afflicted with need, he took one, two, three, my God, four incredible swigs!

Arms out, balancing the wind, tilting his head back, laughing like a boy, he swigged the last of his mysterious drink.

"All right, Finnegan, below and beneath!" he cried. "Come get me!"

He stomped his foot.

Cried out victorious.

And vanished.

It was all over in a second.

A flicker, a blur, a dark bush had grown up from the earth with a whisper, a suction, and the thud of a body dropped and a door shut.

The glade was empty.

"Sir Robert. Quick!"

But there was no one to quicken.

Not thinking that I might be snatched and vanished, I lurched to the spot where Sir Robert had drunk his wild toast.

I stood staring down at earth and leaves with not a sound save my heart beating while the leaves blew away to reveal only pebbles, dry grass, and earth.

I must have lifted my head and bayed to the moon like a dog, then fell to my knees, fearless, to dig for lids, for tunneled tombs where a voiceless tangle of legs wove themselves, binding and mummifying a thing that had been my friend. This is his final door, I thought, insanely, crying the name of my friend.

I found only his pipe, cane, and empty brandy flask, flung down when he had escaped night, life, everything.

Swaying up, I fired the pistol six times here into the unanswering earth, a dumb thing gone stupid as I finished and staggered over his instant graveyard, his locked-in tomb, listening for muffled screams, shrieks, cries, but heard none. I ran in circles, with no ammunition save my weeping shouts. I would have stayed all night but a downpour of leaves, a great spidering flourish of broken branches fell to panic and suffer my heart. I fled, still calling his name to a silence lidded by clouds that hid the moon.

At his estate I beat on the door, wailing, yanking, until I recalled: it opened inward, it was unlocked.

Alone in the library, with only liquor to help me live, I read the letter that Sir Robert had left behind:

My dear Douglas:

I am old and have seen much but am not mad. Finnegan exists. My chemist had provided me with a sure poison that I will mix in my brandy for our walk. I will drink all. Finnegan, not knowing me as a poisoned morsel, will give me a swift invite. Now you see me, now you don't. I will then be the weapon of his death, minutes after my own. I do not think there is another outsize nightmare like him on Earth. Once gone, that's the end.

Being old, I am immensely curious. I fear not death, for my physicians tell me that if no accidents kill me, cancer will.

I thought of giving a poisoned rabbit to our nightmare assassin. But then I'd never know where he was or if he really existed. Finnegan would die unseen in his monstrous closet, and I never the wiser. This way, for one victorious moment, I will know. Fear for me. Envy me. Pray for me. Sorry to abandon you without farewells. Dear friend, carry on.

I folded the letter and wept.

No more was ever heard of him.

Some say Sir Robert killed himself, an actor in his own melodrama and that one day we shall unearth his brooding, lost and Gothic body and that it was he who killed the children and that his preoccupation with doors and hinges, and more doors that led him, crazed, to study this one species of spider, and wildly plan and build the most amazing door in history, an insane burrow into which he popped to die, before my eyes, thus hoping to perpetuate the incredible Finnegan.

But I have found no burrow. I do not believe a man could construct such a pit, even given Sir Robert's overwhelming passion for doors.

I can only ask, would a man murder, draw his victims' blood, build an earthen vault? For what motive? Create the finest secret exit in all time? Madness. And what of those large grayish balls of earth supposedly tossed forth from the spider's lair?

Somewhere, Finnegan and Sir Robert lie clasped in a velvet lined unmarked crypt, deep under. Whether one is the paranoiac alter ego of the other, I cannot say. But the murders have ceased. The rabbits once more rush in Chatham Glade and its bushes teem with butterflies and birds. It is another spring, and the children run again through a loud forest, no longer silent.

Finnegan and Sir Robert, requiescat in pace.