

The Haunting of Harry Laurel Synopsis

The Haunting of Harry Laurel: a Supernatural Spoof for Adults Only

The haunting starts with the innocuous smell of perfume and ends with Harry Laurel fighting for his life. Charged with the murder of Anne Bowden and her daughter Jenny, Harry is forced to fight a war on two fronts. Despite overwhelming evidence, his denial of all charges is strenuous and consistent. But everyone knows he's a habitual liar. Only his loyal wife believes in his innocence.

As Harry prepares for his trial, the haunting becomes more intense, and the outrageous acts perpetrated on him grow progressively nasty until he's forced to confide in someone. His efforts to garner help in dispatching the ghost are constantly frustrated since everyone believes he's attempting to cop a plea for insanity. But he knows that to confess the identity of the ghost would only confirm his guilt. And Harry's misery is multiplied ten-fold by the reactive hilarity he causes to those who would otherwise have very little to smile about.

PROLOGUE

Buffeted by a fierce wind, Anne Bowden snatched the key from the lock and slammed the door shut against the driving sleet. A weary sigh escaped her lips as she stepped into the hall and switched on the light. Feeling miserable and apathetic, she wanted nothing more than to flop down in an easy chair and chill out with the TV and a glass of Chardonnay. She threw down the keys on the scuffed half-moon table, triggering a resonant clatter.

Shrugging off her coat, she paused and cocked her head. The sodden coat hung from her shoulder as she cast about for signs of Jenny. Something about the house wasn't right. It was only then she registered the unexpected frostiness in the air; the failure of the dog, Benny, to welcome her with his big heavy paws, thumping tail and dripping tongue.

Why wasn't Jenny playing that awful noise she called music? It was always the first thing to assault her ears on arriving home from work. She glanced towards the kitchen. It was shrouded in darkness, the door slightly ajar. There should have been the usual rattling of crockery as Jenny performed her daily chore of setting the table for their evening meal.

"Jenny," she called. "Jenny, why haven't you put the heating on? It's freezing." It should have been on a timer, but she hadn't yet been able to figure out how to set it. And, since she and Alec had separated, it was just one more thing to add to the growing list of DIY.

There was no welcoming answer. As she stepped further into the hall and towards the stairs, her coat slid to the carpet. "Jenny," she called again, hesitantly.

The total hush was unsettling, ominous. A singular feeling of dread crept up her spine, prompting goose bumps. Instinctively, her heartbeat quickened. Irrational fear suddenly coursed through her, fear that Jenny hadn't made it home from school. Every mother's nightmare reared up in her mind's eye, ugly scenarios setting logic aside.

Please, God, no.

But then, she saw her daughter's school bag lying at the bottom of the staircase, casually angled as if Jenny had hurriedly thrown it down. But instantly the moment of relief met a fresh wave of fear as it coalesced with the continuing silence. Anne's basilisk gaze remained fixed for a while, and then, unnervingly, a slight sound that she couldn't quite grasp but knew didn't fit, attracted her eyes in a slow, lazy upward motion. The sight of a man standing on the landing at the top of the stairs, very still, very quiet, shot through her like a bolt of lightning. Her breath dragged, yet she displayed no outward sign of alarm, merely recognition.

His features were set in a strange, solidified expression.

An apprehensive ripple of terror undulated beneath her calm exterior, making her heart skip several beats. All the tiny hairs on her body responsively stood on end. And then her heartbeat began to accelerate at breakneck speed, causing her chest to visibly thump.

Real time hung suspended as they shared a fixed exchange, their expressions almost identical in one of petrified shock. Finally, Anne shattered the moment by staring once more at Jenny's school bag. A frightened gasp escaped her lips as she returned a questioning look upon the intruder.

He spread his hands in a gesture of uncertainty. Then, on a gulp of panicky breath, he offered a response to her unspoken question: "There's been an 'orrible fracas, I think. Nothin' to do with me. Honest. I didn't do it." Heavy with the local accent, his voice was low, gritty and nervous. Shrugging helplessly, he dropped his hands loosely but made no move to descend the stairs. He remained still, waiting, uncertain and reactively planning. His eyes darted about like a pair of rolling peas as if expecting a miraculous exit to appear before him at any moment.

For an infinitesimal moment, her shoulders sagged. She knew. The complete quiet of the house and the intense look on his face seemed to answer all. She started up the stairs, slowly, deliberately and fearlessly with frenzy-filled adrenalin flowing through every fibre of her being.

Something very strange happened then. The atmosphere charged and began to crackle with static electricity as her eyes quickened with white-hot rage. The dead dog in the kitchen would have envied Anne her capability as she consciously drew back her lips in a bestial snarl and growled, "Even if I have to come back from the dead, I'm going to kill you ..."

CHAPTER ONE

Hands stuck in his trouser pockets against the cold, Harry turned the corner into Keyside Road and then pulled up short. To his utter dismay he saw that his near neighbours, Mr Clarkson and *Ten O'clock News*, were standing on the kerbside directly opposite his house. He quickly ducked back around out of sight. *Ten O'clock News*, a.k.a. Olive Beardmore, had been awarded her epithet many years ago owing to her habit of being the first one in the road to broadcast any local gossip. Since an unfortunate exchange during the summer of eighteen months ago, Harry always actively avoided the woman whose appearance was the epitome of the proverbial old battle-axe: squat, dumpy, with massive breasts and broad shoulders, a face like a pug dog and a razor-sharp tongue to match. Her head, covered in frizzy grey hair, would punctuate every spoken word with aggressive affirmations that would brook no challenge. Mr Clarkson, on the other hand, was a quietly spoken man in his early seventies, slight of figure, pleasant-looking craggy features and far too inoffensive to break free of Olive's grasp. Harry realised that the poor man would have no alternative but to listen and respond politely until she was ready to end the conversation and go back indoors.

Leaning up against the wall, Harry inwardly commiserated with him. He could just make out their voices as he cocked his head to listen. They appeared to be discussing the fight that had broken out the day before between two of the brothers at the Davidsons' house on the corner at the other end of the road. They were a family of eight given to warring on the entire neighbourhood, as well as themselves, and they were always the first to be suspected of any crime in the immediate

neighbourhood, and rightly so. Harry was well aware that his name followed a close second on the list.

He wiggled his toes in an effort to keep them from going numb, feeling sure that a snowfall couldn't be far away. Given the icy temperatures, surely they wouldn't jabber on for much longer? Young as he was, it was putting an ache in his bones. Besides which, his sympathy for Clarkson didn't extend to allowing his balls to freeze off. His features gradually imploded with growing impatience.

He couldn't be sure, but he thought he'd just heard his own name mentioned. And if it was in the same breath as Davidson, he couldn't think why, seeing as how he, along with all the other residents in the entire area, never had anything to do with them – if they could help it.

Becoming irritated now, he stamped his feet and flapped his arms, more from exasperation at the stoicism of his neighbours to stand the cold than the severity of the weather itself. Finally, patience at an end, he decided to cross the road from the corner and rush along on the opposite side. It wasn't a long road; just a dozen houses in all, six either side. The corner where Harry was standing led off into Beacon Hill Road, the main thoroughfare into Stafford. At the other end, the road turned a slight bend into Wilmot Avenue, long and tree-lined with several uniformed poplars and chestnut, and two mountain ashes stuck on the end like an afterthought. There were no trees along the grass verge in Harry's road. But the hedges were high. Everyone appreciated privacy with the exception of Olive Beardmore whose hedge was clipped to precisely three-feet-six to afford her a good view of the frontage.

One of the street lights was out and Harry was thinking that if he was quick about it, he might just get past Olive without a lash of her tongue – the normal course of events if he happened to have the bad luck to be caught in her sights. Treading softly, he moved off quickly and crossed the road at an angle. On reaching the other side he avoided the cracked paving stones and walked on the grass verge, one eye on his chattering neighbours and the other on his intended path. If he unknowingly trod on a dog-turd and trailed it into the house he'd never hear the last of it.

But if Harry thought he was going to sneak past under cover of darkness he was wrong. *Ten O'clock News* spotted him with her eagle eye as he went through the front gate, the click of the latch sounding loud in the quiet. He cursed; convinced she must have heard it.

"There he goes, the shiftless, good-for-nothing layabout," he heard her say. Without a word of response or even a look in her direction, he shut the gate and hurried up the path.

He started whistling tunelessly as he turned the corner of the house, heading for the back door. On reaching it, he grabbed the handle and started to turn it, his foot poised on the step. Abruptly he jerked to a halt, his whistling fizzling out on a nondescript note. His limbs hung suspended in a gawky pose. Only his nostrils twitched. About to enter he attempted to shrug off this weird incursion, but then, almost immediately, he stood frozen to the spot once more, his head to one side, ears pricked and eyes roving nervously. His breath made little curly wisps as it traversed in and out of his open mouth. Pressing his lips together, he breathed in deeply through his nose, the nostrils expanding and contracting like an old pair of bellows. Inexplicably, he could swear he'd just caught a whiff of perfume in the air. But it seemed to have gone now and all that remained was a smell of damp night air. Shaking his head, he dismissed it as nothing more than one of his frequent fancies and pushed open the door.

Pat had just covered his dinner and was putting it in the oven to keep warm. The microwave was broken, something else to add to all their other vicissitudes. Taking the plate to the table, she said, "Where've you been till now?" D'you know what time it is?"

Harry mumbled an appropriate response, "Out on a job."

Noticing that he was wearing his *special* heavy but roomy coat, she said, "Working late, aren't you? Well, what kept you?"

"*Ten O'clock News* and Mr Clarkson, gabbing on about that Davidsons' brawl." There was no need to explain further. Pat was all too aware of his daily efforts to avoid Olive and her insults.

She poured two cups of tea. “Did you get much?” her voice rising on a note of expectation.

Reaching in his trouser pocket, he pulled out a wad of notes and chucked it on the table by the side of the teapot. Then he went over to the kitchen sink to wash his hands.

“Hurry up, your dinner’s gettin’ cold.” She experienced a fleeting moment of guilt, but her eyes were on the money and she was already calculating which of the outstanding bills it would pay off. Exactly where and from whom he’d stolen it, she would never ask.

As he stood rinsing his hands under the tap, Harry watched Pat’s reflection in the kitchen window. She was laboriously putting an exact number of chips on her bread and as the melted butter ran down her fingers she quickly licked the greasy stream away. Taking a bite out of her chip butty, she worked the morsel round to the side of her mouth and half turned her head to look at Harry. Dipping the corner of her sandwich in HP Brown Sauce, she took another bite and chewed on it animatedly. She flicked a strand of bleached blonde hair behind her ear, then her eyes narrowed as she pinned them on the back of Harry’s head.

After vigorously wiping his hands, Harry paused to take in a shuddering breath before turning to face her. “If anyone asks, I got in before four-thirty. OK? Don’t forget!” He threw her a meaningful nod.

There followed a short spat along a well-travelled path. Pat was worried about red-letter demands and Harry’s opposition to gainful employment. Their social benefits had been stopped due to his refusal to join a course for the long term unemployed. And the threat of redundancy was hanging over her, doubling her anxiety. He could get a *proper* job if he wanted to, she was always telling him, and then they could start a family. But he was dead set against this, too.

Harry was easy to manipulate in most instances, but on these two subjects he was pugnaciously obstinate. Their financial woes couldn’t have come at a worse time. First she had tried wheedling, cajoling, and then gently arguing and, finally, screaming her needs at him. It was all a waste of breath. Now, she was riding on the back of deceit, having stopped taking the contraceptive pill weeks ago.

Slapping his thigh impatiently, a habitual gesture of his, Harry said, “I don’t want any squallin’ kid messin’ things up. Everythin’s just fine as it is. And don’t you worry none about money. I’ve got a few ideas on how to get that rollin’.”

Enraged, Pat sprang to her feet. “Well pour your own bloody tea,” she yelled. And she defiantly turned her back on him, the anger fizzing like a firecracker about to go off.

“I’m not hungry,” he muttered. “And I could do with somethin’ a bit sharper than tea.”

Withering under her fiery expression, he was persuaded to relent a little. He crept up behind her and flung his arms around her slim body. Towering over her five-foot-two frame, he leaned over and planted a noisy kiss on the back of her neck. “Don’t be bitchy, hon, I’ve had a lousy day of it without you startin’ in on me. Let’s just chill out, babe, everythin’s cool. We’ve years yet.”

In return for this unexpected show of affection, Pat tightened her lips and rewarded him with stony silence, jerking her head away angrily. Acid poured from her expression.

He opened his mouth to say something, but all thoughts bar one suddenly fled his mind and he visibly stiffened. Then Harry bent his head and sniffed at her wrist, all the while looking straight through her with a worried frown. He mumbled something about it not being the same one and marched off into the living room, leaving Pat to puzzle over his odd remark.

CHAPTER TWO

Harry was all decked out in his best suit, standing in front of the mirror and admiring himself: six-foot-two, baby-blue eyes, lustrous, black spiked hair and just enough chunky muscle on him to pass the beanpole look. He found his reflection so pleasing that he was half inclined to kiss it. He turned his head slightly to yell, “urry up or it’ll be time to come back home again before we’re even out the door.”

Pat checked the contents of her bag and picked up her coat. “Comin’.” As she came down the stairs, she took out her perfume spray and squirted some behind her ears and a generous amount down her low cleavage. She walked over to the front door and waited patiently while Harry went through his obsessive ritual of checking the doors and windows, after which he set the burglar alarm. Pocketing his keys, he took her arm and pulled her onto the small porch, slamming the door behind them. Then they started off down the path.

She pulled up short. “Oh, I’ve forgotten me gloves.”

“Tough!”

She shrugged disconsolately and caught up with him. As she fell into step beside him she started to ask where they were going but the words caught in her mouth when he suddenly jerked her to a standstill. She watched as Harry sniffed the air, turning his head first one way then another. Then he murmured something about perfume once more and started off again. As they walked down the road he lifted her hand, not once but several times, sniffing her wrist and shaking his head in puzzlement.

“What’re you sniffin’ at? You sound like a bloodhound.” When he didn’t reply she added, “Are you gettin’ a cold, or what?”

Harry just shook his head. For some reason he wasn’t feeling quite so cocky now.

The quarrel had started over something Pat thought quite petty: sniffing. All night he'd been snatching at her wrists to catch a whiff of her fragrance. But when he'd started going the rounds with several other females close to their table, her temper had snapped. Unable to stand it a moment longer, she'd left him in the pub after lambasting him with a torrent of abuse worthy of Olive Beardmore.

Harry had quickly caught up with her. But just as he was about to explain his behaviour, the immediate atmosphere suddenly filled with that dreaded aroma yet again. Stupidly, he asked if she could smell it too. And she, believing that Harry was mocking her, snorted contemptuously and gave him another black look before marching on in silence.

Trying desperately to ignore the powerful fragrance enveloping him, Harry followed closely, tongue-tied for several minutes as he fought to bring reason to this strange phenomenon. But once the scent evaporated as quickly as it had formed, he gathered his wits, returned his attention to the earlier pedantic ranting of his wife, and told her quite plainly what he thought about the little scene she had enacted back at the pub.

Having turned the corner into Keyside Road, they were still arguing fiercely with raised voices certain to bring a twitch to Olive Beardmore's net curtains.

"You're not layin' out rules and regulations for me, and that's that," he told her flatly.

They continued to swap moronic threats until Harry inserted the key in the lock.

He rushed to switch off the alarm and threw over his shoulder, "That bloody tongue of yours could propel a boat." Turning round to face her, he inclined his head and pulled down on his earlobe. "Give this one a rest and try the other, will you!"

Pat knew that he'd never raise his hand to her. With a derisive jerk of her head, she kicked off her shoes and ran upstairs.

It wasn't long before Harry followed her. As he strolled into the bedroom, he saw that she was already ensconced beneath the thick duvet, lying on the edge of the bed, facing away from his side and with an illusory big 'no' written on the back of her head. He shrugged absently, feeling an unusual indifference to her enmity. He started to undress, thinking he had other things on his mind more important than a goodnight cuddle. He neatly folded his trousers, placed them on a coat hanger under his suit jacket, and then carefully positioned it in the wardrobe, allowing a little space between the other hangers

to avoid crushing. Where his clothes were concerned, Harry was an orderly man and particular about keeping them clean and pressed.

Dropping his boxer shorts on the carpet, he grabbed his pyjama bottoms from the end of the bed. One more glance at Pat's huddled figure had him reaching for the jacket, figuring he was in for a chilly night. He wouldn't normally go to bed in his socks but he couldn't seem to get his feet warm.

The last thing he did before climbing into bed was to sidle up to the window, which faced the front, and look out. He must have stood there for at least a minute before the chill in the air broke his concentration and prompted him to the dubious warmth of the bed. He jumped in with deliberate heavy bounces and thumped the pillow several times before finally lying down and drawing the duvet over his head.

Heavy, angry breathing now surrounded the connubial bed. Then:

"Harry."

"What!"

"I'm cold." Pat turned over and stuck her feet between his legs.

He was feeling a touch more than cold himself. In fact, from the moment he'd ceased moving, he suddenly imagined that an icy tendril of something unspeakable was gradually creeping over his entire body. He had a feeling of being completely encompassed in a vortex of freezing pressure, squeezing and pressing in on him, choking him, even. It was almost as if his body were becoming trapped in a solid block of ice. And Harry was frightened.

"Ooh, you're as warm as toast," Pat murmured, snuggling up to him.

Her words didn't register. Feeling close to desperation now, he flung an arm round her and pulled her into a tight embrace. Pat found she couldn't breathe properly and started to push him away when she realised he was trembling. As the spasms gripped him, he involuntarily relinquished his hold.

"What's the matter, Harry?"

"C-c-cold."

Cold? But he wasn't cold at all. Hadn't she just commented on the warmth of his skin? Waves of heat were radiating from his body. She laid a hand on his shoulder. "But you can't be cold ... Harry, you're burnin'."

The tremors that had been tearing through his body suddenly ceased, and then he lay rigid.

“Harry?”

He sucked in air, greedily, and then let out a deep, tremulous sigh.

“HARRY?”

“Er, I’m all right, now... Jeez, it felt like I’d been shoved in a freezer.”

What on earth was he talking about? This was strange behaviour for Harry. “But you’re not cold. You’re hot – and I mean hot ... I know, p’raps you’re comin’ down with the flu. Yes, of course, that’s it. You always feel a little shivery, even with a fever ... And you’ve been sniffin’ all night!”

Harry turned his back on her and settled into an uneasy quiet.

“Give us a goodnight kiss, Harry.”

The idea of making love was the furthest thing from Harry’s mind but he promptly turned over, since it was unthinkable he could ever turn down the chance of a nightcap. But, some ten minutes later, it became clear this had been a gross mistake on his part. He was lying flat on his back, staring wide-eyed through the dimness at the ceiling, and feeling utterly miserable as he listened to Pat’s patronising and sympathetic reassurances on his failure to elicit an erection. He put an end to it with a forthright, “Goodnight.”