

# *The Tortoise Shell Comb*

## **The Fantasy of a Mad Brain**

**By ROYLSTON MARKHAM**

"WELL, the ghosts of the men hung at Is-Sur-Tille have company. For myself, I wouldn't even want a photograph of the place. No, sir, not me. I can remember it without that. That's why they've put me in this hospital with all these crazy people. Yet a tortoise shell comb is as good an alibi as any. . . .

"What? Ghosts? No sir, of course not; I don't believe in 'em, not on this side of the Atlantic . . . . who ever told you I believed in ghosts.

"The hospital interne? . . . . If they'd kept me 'round that chateau in the woods at Is-Sur-Tille, it might 'a' been different. It had a queer story about it, that chateau. That's what set me off; that and the fact that I never did like Captain Bott.

"He was hardboiled, that guy was. No, sir; he didn't own that French chateau, although at one time he acted as though he thought he did. . . . I'm coming to that.

"Over there the frogs said the original owner of the place, in his youth, had fallen madly in love with a young girl and married her. He must 'a' been crazy about her all right because, according to their story, he often was seen combing her hair—yes, sir, the French folks are like that; that's romance—combing her long red hair as it hung over the back of her chair, touching the floor.

"I particularly remember that they said her hair was long, very long, and red, like copper is red in candle light. After a year, she died, suddenly, of heart disease—'killed by love itself,' one of the frogs said; that's romance, and he, her husband, the owner of that chateau there in the woods at Is-Sur-Tille, left that part

of the country on the very day of her funeral. The place, probably, is there yet, like it was when I saw it, late in the summer of 1918.

"The house was set back from the road among the trees. It looked, then, as though it had been deserted for a long time. Most of the furniture had been removed from it, except in one room—I'm coming to that—and the gate leading into the yard had fallen open on one rusty hinge. Grass filled the paths; and you couldn't tell the flowerbeds from the lawns except by the weeds.

"Nobody had used the place, even in wartime, until our outfit was billeted at Is-Sur-Tille. That ghost story of a dead bride begging some one to comb her hair had kept the Frenchies off the place. But Captain Bott was a hard-boiled guy.

"We went into the house late one afternoon, Captain Bott and me. He led the way into the kitchen and through the first floor into a large hall, where the stairs went up to the floor above. Dust was over everything. The only room in the house that looked at all as though it had been occupied in years was that bedroom upstairs where, they had told us, the bride had slept and died. We recognized it because it was the only room in the house where the door was shut.

"We opened it—that is, Captain Bott did—and went in. I stood in the doorway until he swore at me and ordered me to follow him in. The room smelled moldy. It smelled dead. It was a fine room for a ghost. It was dark in there, but gradually my eyes got accustomed to the gloom enough to make out that there was a bed in it. On the captain's orders I went to the

window to open it for light, but I had to break the rusty hinges of the outside shutters before I could loosen them.

"At the court martial inquiry they wouldn't believe me when I said that was the only reason I went into the room, and on the captain's orders.

"The room was on the north side of the house and the sun was setting, so opening the window didn't help much. There was pillows and a mattress and sheets—yellow sheets, yellow with age—on the bed. The chairs seemed all in confusion. There was another door in the room, probably leading to a closet. It was closed.

"Captain Bott went over and felt of the mattress and patted the pillows—the pillows on which they had said the bride's head, nestled in its mass of copper-colored hair, had rested when she died. Captain Bott was hard-boiled, like I just said. He didn't believe in ghosts.

"He said it was the best shakedown he'd seen in weeks.

" 'I'll damned soon get a good night's rest,' he said.

"And he ordered me to go for some candles and his stuff; and, when I got back, I was to clear the place up. I went. I was glad to go. But I hated like hell to return."

"WHEN I did get back into the house, it was twilight and, inside, as dark as a black cat's belly. Downstairs, in the kitchen, I lighted one of the candles and held it before me in one hand, the other being occupied with the captain's luggage. Then. I went through the first floor into the large hall where the stairs went up to the floor above.

"In the light of my candle at the landing I saw that the door into the bedroom was closed again, as it had been the only room in the house where the door was shut when we first went up there together—the captain who didn't believe in ghosts and I, who did, over there . . .

. No sir, of course not; I *don't* believe in 'em, not on this side of the Atlantic. But, in the woods, at Is-Sur-Tille at night, that's different.

"And it must be worse, since they hung those men there . . . and with Captain Bott who thought the bed of a dead bride was a handsome billet He was sure hard-boiled, that guy. I hated him for it.

"When I left him to go for the candles, that door had been open. When I returned, it was closed. I didn't like to open it again. But he was alone there in the dark in that bedroom. I knew that if I waited for him to come to open the door, stumbling across chairs and things, he sure would cuss me out—that's the hell of being a private and a servant to an officer; no white man likes it—so, finally, I opened the door, with the hand which held the candle.

"Everything seemed as before, but so quiet. My ears were straining for sound like they used to do at the sudden cessation of barrage-firing. But I heard nothing, nothing at all. And the place smelled moldy. It smelled dead. It was a fine room for a ghost. I thought of it then.

"And, as I stepped across the threshold, I noticed that that other door in the room, probably that of a closet, was open. It had been closed. I thought perhaps that the captain had opened it while I was gone. It wasn't so dark when I left him as when I returned, and maybe he would 'a' been snooping around a bit, out of curiosity, perhaps. I'm not curious like that. But Captain Bott was hard-boiled. And he didn't believe in ghosts. . . .

"All these things I'm telling you about what I saw and thought and felt, they wouldn't hardly listen to at the court martial inquiry. . . .

"I don't know how long it was from the time I lighted the candle in the kitchen downstairs until I stood with it in the doorway of the bedroom of the dead bride. Not very long, probably, because the melting candle grease was just beginning to run hot onto my fingers when I turned to glance toward the bed,

wondering why the captain had kept so damned quiet. It wasn't like him.

"And there he was, lying across the bed on his back, the tips of his shoes just touching the floor. Asleep! No. I don't know how I knew he wasn't asleep . . . the court martial inquiry kept asking me that . . .

"But I saw he had something wound round his neck, something that glinted in the candle light like the braid of a woman's copper-red hair. And his hands were above his head. One of them clutched a tortoise-shell comb. I knew he wasn't asleep. I knew he was *dead!* . . .

"How I knew, I couldn't tell you nor any damned court martial inquiry on earth. God knows they drove me crazy enough asking me that and what else I saw. . . .

"Didn't I see nothing else! No, but I thought I heard or felt something move near that black hole where that other door opened yawning into a closet. My candle went out—maybe it was only the night wind from the window—and I dropped it. I dropped the bundle of things belonging to Captain Bott. I crossed the threshold. I went - down the stairs in the dark, running.

"I fell at the bottom. I remember that . . . And I told the court martial inquiry so; 'twas about the only thing those smug guys believed that I told them. . . . But I was on my feet and out of that house before I knew I had fallen. . . ."

"HA! I can see it! You, too, think I'm soft-boiled. . . . So did the court martial inquiry.

That's why they sent me here, among these crazy people. But say, Buddy, don't believe what the hospital interne tells you. He's crazy, like the rest of 'em. He's as hard-boiled, too, as Captain Bott was. And that guy was so hard-boiled he didn't believe in French ghost stories."

" 'THAT nut you just talked with tells his story to anyone who will listen' the interne remarked casually, as we returned to the office of the commandant of the Army and Navy Insane Asylum. "Probably you think you've heard a crackin' good ghost story, but what you really heard was the confession of a crazy murderer who ought to have been the third on the gallows at Is-Sur-Tille."

"Isn't there a haunted chateau at Is-Sur-Tille, and didn't the officer he tells about die in the bedroom there?"

"*Oui, mais certainement!* as the frogs have it. If that chateau isn't haunted, it ought to be. There's a story in the village of the bride's death there. And Captain Bott died there all right enough. But that thing they found twined around his neck 'like the braid of a woman's copper-red hair' was, in fact, real copper—copper wire stolen from a lineman's kit. It might look like hair to a crazy man."

"But that comb?" I persisted. "What about that tortoise-shell comb?"

"That? Oh, the nut stole that, too. It belonged to one of the girls of the town whom the private knew before the captain beat his time with her."