

St. George the Vampire*

by A. J. B. WACE

THE saints in Greece occasionally have curious epithets. In Attica all know St. John the Hunter. In Naxos there is St. George the Drunken and in Thessaly you will find St. Nicholas the Murderer. Now too in Argolis you will hear of St. George the Vampire.

The little church or rather shrine dedicated to that saint is in a kind of open cave which is really the entrance to a Mycenaean rock cut chamber tomb and it lies on the outskirts of the village of Thymari at the base of the tangle of hills at the western foot of Mount Arachnaeus. If you go to the village and visit the shrine you will probably be told fantastic tales of the Vampire and the English archaeologist who was afterwards killed fighting the Bulgarians. The exact circumstances of the case you will probably not be able to discover. Even those of the village most closely connected with the events which led to the dedication of the shrine have allowed more freedom to their imaginations than they should. The village priest Athanasios nowadays is in his dotage and his cups, and not competent to give a credible or even a coherent version of what really took place and the part he played. Evesham himself is dead, because as you know he was killed on the Salonika front in 1917. Our foreman (for it all happened when Evesham was excavating the Mycenaean site he had discovered at Kastraki near Thymari) died of diabetes some five years later. Of the two watchmen one was killed while serving in the Serres Division on the Macedonian front in 1918 and the other was lost somewhere in Asia Minor in the disastrous retreat in 1922. I am therefore the principal survivor for I was the only other archaeologist with Evesham at the time unless you count our technician and mender Spyros, but his mind was always far more concerned with dressing up so as to make an impression on local damsels. So it is, I think, desirable that I should put on record as soberly and straightforwardly as I can all the various happenings. Then those who think it worth their while to read what I have written can judge for themselves and adopt any explanation they please. I propose therefore in what follows to put down without prejudice the events as they occurred and as I observed them at the time. I have refreshed my memory by my note book.

As I have written elsewhere, Evesham discovered the important Mycenaean settlement on the hill of Kastraki round the chapel of the Panagia Makrembolitissa in the spring of 1911. Kastraki itself lies in the plain, surrounded by vineyards dotted with fruit and olive trees slightly separated from the foot of the main ridge on which the village of Thymari itself stands. Below Thymari towards the base of the slope and opposite Kastraki Evesham found, when he began his excavations, a cemetery of Mycenaean rock-cut chamber tombs the existence of which he had suspected when he first explored the site. The excavation itself was carried out during June and July when the fine, dry weather made the work go easily. The expedition consisted of Evesham, myself, Jack Stuyvesant, a travelling student from Yale and a distant cousin of Evesham, and David Jones, a Welsh architectural student from Cambridge as surveyor and draughtsman.

After the excavation had been in progress for about a month and we had cleared half a dozen tombs in addition to our exploration of the inhabited site and the Cyclopean walls on Kastraki we found one day the entrance passage of what promised to be a large, rich, and important tomb. The passage, cut straight into the rock of the sloping hillside as

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an open gallery, was wider than the rest. There were also other peculiarities which we noticed as we proceeded. Usually in the soil fragments of pottery and occasionally small objects are found which have been thrown out of the tomb on some occasion when the family vault was reopened to admit a fresh tenant. Here, however, we found literally nothing at all in the soil we dug out, sifted, and observed with special care. Further, the work was impeded by great masses of large stones and heavy rocks, which looked almost as if they had been deliberately placed there by the ancients to annoy any archaeologist of times to come who might try to violate the sepulchre.

Finally, in front of the door of the tomb itself the whole width and height of the entrance passage was blocked by a solid mass of stone. I remarked to Evesham that it had probably been purposely built up in this manner by the original owners of the tomb to protect their ancestors and their treasures from the investigations of any Schliemann of the future. Old Manoles, our most experienced workman, expressed the view that the ancients had done this to prevent 'them' from getting out, but he did not specify what he meant by 'them'. He did, however, one day call my attention to the fact that on the surface of the hillside above the chamber of the tomb there was no vegetation. True on a barren rocky Greek hillside like that little does grow except Greek sage, thyme, spurge, and similar plants that can resist the summer drought; but here even such herbage was absent.

After some days of hard work we removed the mass of stone and then found before us the doorway of the tomb. This again was most securely walled up with gigantic cyclopean blocks of the hardest limestone, tightly fitted together with great skill and with all the joints carefully packed with yellow clay. When they saw this our workmen and even our foreman rubbed their hands and said we were bound to find great treasures of gold inside, for only to protect gold or 'ivory statues with diamond eyes' would any man ever have gone to such trouble. When the heavy job of removing these great blocks had gone on for two days Stuyvesant, badly stung by a scorpion which came out of a crack between two boulders, had to return to Athens for treatment. He was accompanied by Jones whose spectacles had been shattered by a splinter that flew off one of the rocks when he was testing it with a crowbar, and he could not continue his work without procuring a new pair.

Our workmen began to speculate and even to bet on what we should find in the tomb. Gold was the dream of all, and our foreman who had absorbed a little knowledge of antiquities suggested, to tickle our archaeological palates, bronze mirrors with carved ivory handles, sculptured steatite jars, engraved sealstones, golden tablets with mysterious signs. Old Manoles, however, with a dry chuckle foretold that there would be nothing in the tomb but the bones of a donkey, and put forward the theory that it was all a great prehistoric practical joke devised by Odysseus for the discomfiture of tomb robbers and resurrectionists.

Finally one Thursday we removed the last stones and were able to enter the chamber which, owing to the solidity of the blocking wall in the doorway, had less than half a metre of fine soil on its rock floor. To our surprise and to the dismay of all the workmen except old Manoles, there was no gold visible. No vases even of clay, still less of precious materials, and no objects of any kind were to be observed anywhere. Indeed there was only one skeleton and that lay against the centre of the back wall, flat on its back, with its head to the west. It was too late that afternoon to begin to remove the soil from the tomb and sift it in search of small objects or jewellery. So we picked out one of our trusted men and appointed him watchman to sleep in the doorway of the tomb that night to prevent unauthorized interference.

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We had rented for our headquarters a large new stone-built house with a fine first floor balcony on the edge of the village. Evesham and I shared a room and in it kept the boxes containing the more important finds. Early on the Friday morning just before dawn we were awakened by a violent knocking at our door and in burst the watchman. We hastily lit the lamp and saw him standing before us wild-eyed and all of a tremble. He asserted with many appeals to the Virgin and the saints that all had gone well till about half an hour before. Then he became aware of a rustling sound and a slight rattle as of bones. Evesham said it was someone coming up the entrance passage from outside making a noise to frighten him. The watchman denied this and said the noise was within the tomb. He had called out a challenge but received no answer. Then something touched his foot and he lost his nerve and ran to tell us. We summoned our foreman and the three of us armed with good electric torches went to the tomb. We could see no signs of any disturbance in the entrance passage and so walked carefully up it searching the sides with our torches. As we reached the entrance the first rays of 'rosy fingered dawn' shot across the sky and at the same time we heard a cock crowing. We explored the tomb chamber itself in great detail but found no signs of disturbance except that the skeleton seemed to have been moved slightly and in the soft earth of the tomb there were odd marks as if a bird with curious feet or a peculiar reptile had dragged itself over the floor. The foreman bluntly expressed the view that the watchman had entered the tomb and had begun to rifle the skeleton, when something interrupted him and so he had invented the story of something mysterious and imagined he could prove his good faith by running to tell us.

The next day we carefully cleared out all the fresh earth from the tomb and sifted it thoroughly but without finding anything. We also cleaned and photographed the skeleton most carefully. On it and round it there was nothing, but among its ribs was a curious bronze spearhead of a type which Evesham said had been found only at Mycenae itself, in Thessaly, and in Santa Maura. Evesham removed the skull from the skeleton which was in remarkably good condition and said we must keep it safe for the craniological museum in Athens. He also took the spearhead and put it gently into a stout cardboard box lined with cotton wool. The skull which was wrapped in cotton wool in a palm leaf basket, and the spearhead in its cardboard box we locked up in a strong wooden box with a stout padlock. It stood between our camp beds and on it Evesham kept some of his personal belongings, such as an ikon of St. George and a New Testament in Greek which the Abbot of Stephani had given him not long before on his birthday.

To guard the tomb that night we selected another watchman, for Evesham decided we would remove and pack the rest of the skeleton the next day. This man had served in the royal Evzone bodyguard at Athens and had shot two wolves on Mount Arachnaeus. There was thus no fear of his courage and our foreman and the village doctor both guaranteed his absolute honesty. Further we knew him as a first-class workman and had great confidence in him. He took with him an old six chambered revolver and a heavy cavalry sabre and set himself to watch in the doorway determined to make short work of any intruders.

Towards four o'clock on the Saturday morning the whole village was aroused by the wild echoes of revolver shots and presently our fearless watchman came running with his story. He like his predecessor had heard a rustle and a rattle as of bones coming from inside the tomb. He could see nothing either in the entrance passage or in the tomb itself. He challenged but could obtain no answer. So then he fired four times into the tomb itself and the last two shots down the entrance passage to clear the way. Then his nerve shaken by the reverberation of the explosions and the flashes of the shots he had

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come to tell us. Again we went and explored the tomb. We found all in order, with the watchman's goat hair cloak where it had fallen from his shoulders and in the entrance passage his empty revolver and the cavalry sabre where he had dropped them in his flight. Only in the tomb itself we found the skeleton had disappeared and again we noticed the curious reptile like tracks across the little soft earth still remaining on the floor. Evesham was puzzled. I thought the villagers were playing some game at our expense and suggested they were probably in collusion with the watchman to rob the tomb and had found some secret hiding place of treasure.

That day our foreman went to Argos to attend the weekly market and bring back some badly needed supplies. Evesham and I spent most of the day in the tomb. We swept up the rock floor very carefully and sifted all the earth and dust but we found nothing. Not even a potsherd rewarded our efforts. We had to work alone because not one of our workmen would come into the tomb with us. We stopped work as usual about five o'clock because Saturday was pay-day. Then after paying the men and writing up our accounts and checking the results we sat down to our well-earned supper. It was sometime after dark and the moon now past the full had risen when our foreman returned from Argos. He handed to us his marketings, and we observed that he seemed rather white and nervous. So Evesham asked if anything had gone wrong. He replied that he had often heard tales of things that wandered about the hills after dark especially in the watercourses but he had never before believed in such tales. We asked further why he was now inclined to believe them.

'Listen', he said, 'to what has just happened to me and my horse'.

He was just approaching the village on his return and had reached the bottom of the slope up which the bridle path runs. This goes zigzag up the hill protected on either side by a low stone wall to keep a clear track among the dry herbage and passed not far from the Mycenaean cemetery we had discovered. Soon after it begins the ascent the bridle path crosses a dry watercourse. By the time he reached this the moon had risen. As he rode his horse across the watercourse it began to show strong signs of nervousness. It fidgeted, jibbed a little, and then displayed a desire to bolt. When he reined it in hard the horse neighed and then dropped its head and tried to kick. The foreman could see or hear nothing. He looked around and behind him and at the sides of the path but the moonlight revealed nothing, no living animal, no human being which might cause a horse to shy. After he had passed the watercourse and was following up one of the zigzags his horse was more nervous than ever and fidgeted violently. He too himself then heard or thought he heard a rustle and rattle as of bones in the dry herbage behind the low stone wall at the side of the path. Still he could see nothing. Finally he became cross and turned in his saddle and called loudly to the unseen.

'Come out and show yourself!' he shouted, 'I am not afraid of you. I have a gun. Don't be so cowardly. Come out and show yourself! I am not afraid!'

Nothing appeared. There was no answer. Soon the path came abreast of a small chapel of the Virgin on the edge of the village. His horse became normal again and whinnied for its feed. There was no rustling or rattling. Still there had been something. What was it? Do such things really exist? Or are they mere imagination? Evesham suggested it was imagination and that the horse had shied at shadows cast by the moonlight for horses are often frightened by moon shadows more than by sun shadows.

'Don't I know my own horse?' asked the foreman indignantly. 'I know it felt or saw something. Though I never believed them before, such things exist apparently'. After more conversation about the excavation and its affairs the foreman bade us good night and we retired to bed.

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When we were in bed before I extinguished the light I asked Evesham if he did not think we had better lock our door and shutter the window.

'Now, Cassius, don't be a silly ass!' he objected. 'Who is going to attack us here? We are far safer in this village than anywhere else in the world. You could not be safer in Piccadilly Circus surrounded by six of the biggest London bobbies. Also I tell you flat I am not going to have the window shuttered. Who would want to frowst on a gorgeous moonlight night like this?'



FIG. 1

The foreman's story, however, must have told on my nerves because I slept badly. I dozed fitfully and did not seem able to sleep properly. My blanket slipped off, the mattress was lumpy, my pillow would not keep straight and the very frame of the camp bed seemed to find every bone in my body. I also had dreams, bad dreams, nightmares. I felt some unseen danger was threatening me, threatening us, and I helpless and powerless could do nothing. Finally I seemed to be awake and thought I could hear the danger creeping nearer and nearer with a rustle and a dry rattle across the bare boards of the floor. I dreamt that in my despair I crossed myself fervently and called loudly on the Virgin in Greek. Then I really awoke and heard the echo of my cry in the room. I seized the electric torch by my bedside and flashed it round. I could see nothing except

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that the night breeze had apparently set our door ajar. Alongside me Evesham lay sleeping peacefully with his right arm outstretched just touching the ikon of St. George. Reassured I switched off the torch and curled myself up in the blanket and slept till day at last broke clear and sunny.

That day Sunday the church bells in the village were ringing all day to keep off evil spirits and all devils. The priest Athanasios after the morning service went in full form to Kastraki. He took the ikon of the Panagia Makrembolitissa thence in solemn procession with chants and incense through and all round the village (FIG. 1) before returning



FIG. 2

it to its chapel where St. Narcissus is buried. In the afternoon he came and had a long private talk with Evesham who never told me what it was all about. I can only surmise from what followed.

The next morning when we should have resumed work after breakfast at about half-past eight Evesham first bade the foreman summon all the men to the tomb. Then he went to our house and came back with the basket in which the skull was packed and the cardboard box containing the bronze spearhead. Accompanied by the priest he laid the skull as near as he could in the position in which he had found it and placed the spearhead where the ribs should have been. This done the priest withdrew to vest himself. He came back in a ceremonial procession accompanied by the priests of two or three neighbouring villages also fully vested. With them was a company of boys as acolytes bearing

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lighted candles, censers, crosses, vessels of holy water with sprigs of basil, and other ritual appurtenances. The priests went round all the tomb sprinkling it with holy water and censuring it frequently while they intoned appropriate prayers. This done led by Athanasios the service for the exorcising of evil spirits was chanted. Evesham and I with our foreman stood in the tomb just behind the priests and there were also in the tomb some of the bolder spirits among the villagers including old Manoles. The more timid remained outside in the long wide entrance passage or else gathered on the hillside above whence they could peer down into the tomb. As the service reached its climax there was a sudden violent gust of wind which swept up the entrance passage into the tomb. The candles, the sole illumination, for the sun was overcast, flickered strongly for a few moments and then went out. We were plunged into complete darkness and in the sudden hush heard a rustle and a dry rattling followed by the sound of metal striking an object. The next instant there was indescribable confusion. All almost with one accord began to call loudly on the Virgin, the Almighty, the archangels and all the hosts of the saints and at the same time to rush madly for the entrance to escape. Our foreman, a tall and powerful man, put one arm round Evesham and the other round me and propelled us by main force through the crowd and along the entrance passage into the daylight and open air. The whole tomb and its entrance passage emptied as if by magic in spite of the turmoil. As the congregation recovered its breath, quick excited talk began to enquire what had happened.

'Did you see him?' 'We saw him!' some of the acolytes cried, crossing themselves. They were asked whom they had seen.

'The saint in armour on the white horse' (FIG. 2), they replied in chorus. They declared that he, spear in hand, had dashed into the tomb with a rushing wind just before the candles were blown out. Neither Evesham nor I had seen anything of the kind, but Evesham said he was going back into the tomb to see. Ignoring the protests of the villagers and accompanied only by our foreman and by the village priest Athanasios we lighted candles and re-entered the tomb. The floor was covered with fallen candles, ikons, crosses, censers, holy water vessels, sprigs of basil, service books, and all the ritual objects which the religious had dropped in their panic. We turned our candles to the centre of the back wall of the tomb. There was the skeleton complete as we had first found it lying on its back with its head to the west. Sticking upright among its ribs in the region where its heart would be if a skeleton could have a heart was the bronze spearhead. In front of it also standing by some miracle upright was an ikon of St. George which someone had dropped. The priest and our foreman as they collected the fallen objects said that all would now be well.

The same afternoon the villagers under the leadership of Athanasios and our foreman walled up the tomb again, but they left the ikon of St. George, the skeleton and the spearhead exactly as we had found them. When the walling of the doorway, which was done solidly and thoroughly, was satisfactorily completed a small niche with a half roof was made in the front of it. Another ikon of St. George was placed in it with a lighted oil lamp hanging before it. St. George, they said, it must be, for he was the patron saint of Evesham himself and of the kings of England and of Greece and was accustomed to deal with dragons and all evil things.

When I revisited Thymari on my return to Greece in 1919, I found that the pious villagers had enlarged the little shrine in the entrance passage of the Mycenaean tomb into a sort of small chapel which they were now calling St. George the Vampire. I lit two candles, one for Evesham and one for the unhappy soul within.