



Library podcast

Thrilling Tales Spooktoberfest, "The Red Lodge" by H. Russell Wakefield

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[00:00:37] Hello everybody. Welcome. Welcome to 'Chilling Tales, Seattle Public Library's story time for grown ups. It's great to see you here. Thrilling Tales usually happens twice each month but in October we're doing it weekly so we can honor the season with some spooky stories. My name is David. I'm a librarian here. It's nice to meet you. I work up on the third floor. Do come and see us sometime if you're ever looking for something good to read or a movie to watch or something like that. All right. On the sign I put up, I said I was, I usually will do an introductory story kind of a short short story and I mentioned a story called "The Jam". Not going to do that. I'll bank that away for a future story time because I didn't want to rush this story. Many of the stories that we do at Thrilling Tales have a lot of plot to them. You want to know who's gonna die, who's gonna get murdered, who did it. Are the aliens going to destroy the planet, Earth? You know there's a lot of things going on but some of them at this time of year we sometimes have a story like this one which is a classic horror story from the 1920s. Right at the sort of the last last era of the sort of the Great Age of ghost stories and they're very different. They're very sort of moody and subtle and they kind of take their own time. So I didn't want to feel any sense of rush, so I invite you to join me in just kind of sinking into this story, going with me to the Red Lodge which is the name of this story by a writer named

[00:02:16] H. Russell Wakefield. The Red Lodge.

[00:02:27] I am writing this from an imperative sense of duty for I consider the Red Lodge is a foul death trap and utterly unfit to be human habitation. It has its own proper denizens, and because I know its owner to be an unspeakable blackguard, to allow it to be so used for his financial advantage. He knows the perils of the place perfectly well. I wrote him of our experiences and he didn't even acknowledge the letter. And two days ago I saw the ghastly pest house advertised in Country Life. So, anyone who rents the Red Lodge in the future will receive a copy of this document as well as some uncomfortable words from Sir William. And that scoundrel Wilks can take what action he pleases. I certainly didn't carry any prejudice against the place down to it, with me. I'd been too busy to look over it myself but my wife reported extremely favorably. I take her word for most things. And I

could tell by the photographs that it was a magnificent specimen of the medium-sized, Queen Anne house, just the ideal thing for me. Mary said the garden was perfect, and there was the river for Tim at the bottom of it. I had been longing for a holiday and I was in the highest spirits as I traveled down. I have not been in the highest spirits, since. My first vague faint uncertainty came to me so soon as I had crossed the threshold. I'm a painter by profession and therefore sharply responsive to colour tone. Well it was a brilliantly fine day, and the hall of the Red Lodge was fully lighted. And yet it seemed a shade off the key as it were, as though I were regarding it through a pair of slightly darkened glasses. Only a painter would have noticed it, I fancy. When Mary came out to greet me she was not looking as well as I had hoped or as well as a week in the country should have made her look. "Everything all right?" I asked. "Oh, yes," she replied.

[00:04:57] But I thought she found it difficult to say so, and then my eye detected a curious little spot of green on the maroon rug in front of the fireplace. I picked it up. Seemed like a patch of river slime. "I suppose Tim brings those in," said Mary. "I found several.

[00:05:18] Of course he promises he doesn't," and then for a moment we were silent, and a very unusual sense of constraint seemed to set a barrier between us. I went out into the garden to smoke a cigarette before lunch and sat myself down under a very fine mulberry tree. I wondered if, after all, I had been wise to have left it all to Mary. There was nothing wrong with the house of course, but I am a bit psychic and I always know the mood or character of a house.

[00:05:52] One welcomes you with the tail-rising enthusiasm of a really nice dog, makes you at home and you're at ease at once.

[00:06:01] The others are sullen, watchful, hostile, with things to hide.

[00:06:08] They make you feel that you have obtruded yourself into some curious affairs which are none of your business. I had never encountered so hostile, aloof, and secretive a living place as the Red Lodge seemed when I first entered it.

[00:06:26] Well, it couldn't be helped though it was disappointing. And there was Tim coming back from his walk and the luncheon gone.

[00:06:35] My son seemed a little subdued and thoughtful though he looked pretty well and soon we were all chattering away with those quick changes of key which occur when the respective ages of the conversationalists are forty, thirty three, and six and one-half. And after half a bottle of Merseau and a glass of Port, I began to think that I'd been a morbid ass. I was still so thinking when I began my holiday in the best possible way, by going to sleep in an exquisitely comfortable chair under the mulberry tree. But I have slept better.

[00:07:13] I dozed off but I had a silly impression of being watched, so that I kept waking up in case there might be someone with his eye on me. I was lying back and I could just see a window on the second floor framed by a gap in the leaves and on one occasion when I awoke rather sharply from

one of these dozes, I thought I saw for a moment a face peering down at me. And this face seemed curiously flattened against the pane, just a carryover from the dream,

[00:07:51] I concluded. However, I didn't feel like sleeping anymore and I began to explore the garden. It was completely walled in I found, except at the far end where there was a door leading through to a path which, running parallel to the right hand wall, led to a river a few yards away. I noticed on this door several of those patches of green slime for which Tim was supposedly responsible. It was a little dark corner cut off from the rest of the garden by two rowan trees, a cool, silent, little place, I thought it. And then it was time for Tim's cricket lesson which was interrupted by the arrival of some infernal callers. But, well they were pleasant people, as a matter of fact, the local newts I gathered, who owned the manor house. Sir William Prowse and his lady, and his daughter.

[00:08:45] I went for a walk with them after tea. "Who had this house before us?", I asked. "People called, Hawker", he replied. "That was two years ago". "Oh, I wonder why the owner doesn't live in it", I said. "It isn't an expensive place to keep up." Sir William paused as if considering his reply.

[00:09:07] "I think he dislikes being so near the river.

[00:09:11] I'm not sorry, for I detest the fellow, but, by the way, how long have you taken it for?" "Three months," I replied.

[00:09:20] "Till the end of October." "Well, if I can do anything for you, I shall be delighted. If you're in any trouble

[00:09:30] come straight to me." Slightly emphasized that last sentence. I rather wondered what sort of troubles Sir William envisaged for me.

[00:09:41] Probably he shared the general opinion that artists were quite mad at times and that when I had one of my lapses I should destroy the peace in some manner. However, I was duly grateful. I was sorry to find Tim didn't seem to like the river. He appeared nervous of it and I determined to help him to overcome this. For the fewer terrors one carries through life with one the better, and they can often be laid by delicate treatment in childhood. Curiously enough the year before at Rinton, he seemed to have no fear of the sea. The rest of the day passed uneventfully. At least I think I can say so. After dinner I strolled down to the end of the garden meaning to go through the door and have a look at the river. Just as I got my hand on the latch,

[00:10:29] there came a very sharp, furtive whistle. I turned round quickly but seeing no one, and I concluded that it had come from someone in the lane outside. However, I didn't investigate further

[00:10:44] but I went back to the house. I woke up the next morning feeling a shade depressed. My dressing room smelled stale and bitter and I flung its windows open. And as I did so I felt my right foot slip on something. It was one of those small slimy green patches. Now, Tim would never come into my dressing room. An annoying little puzzle. How on earth had that patch? Which question kept

forcing its way into my mind as I dressed. How could a patch of green slime, how could a patch of green slime... Dropped from something? From what? I'm very fond of my wife.

[00:11:35] She slaved for me when I was poor and always kept me happy, comfortable and faithful and she gave me my small son, Timothy. I must stand between her and patches of green slime. What in hell's name was I talking about? And it was a flamingly fine day. Yet, all during breakfast my mind was trying to find some sufficient reason for these funny little patches of green slime and not finding it. After breakfast I told Tim that I would take him out in a boat on the river.

[00:12:10] "Oh must I, daddy", he asked looking anxiously at me.

"Oh no, of course not," I replied a trifle irritably. "But I believe you'll enjoy it".

"Should I be a funk if I didn't come?"

"No Tim. But I think you should try it once anyway".

"All right", he said.

[00:12:32] He's a plucky little chap and did his very best to pretend to be enjoying himself. But I saw it was a failure from the start. Perplexed and upset, I asked his nurse if she knew of any reason for this sudden fear of water. "No sir", she said. "The very first day he ran down to the river just as he used to run down to the sea. But all of a sudden he started crying and he ran back to the house.

[00:12:58] It seemed to me that he'd seen something in the water which frightened him".

[00:13:07] We spent the afternoon motoring around the neighborhood and already I found a faint distaste at the idea of returning to the house. And again I had the impression that we were intruding and that something had been going on during our absence which on our which our return had interrupted. Mary, pleading a headache, went to bed soon after dinner and I went to the study to read. Directly I had shut the door, I had again that very unpleasant sensation of being watched. It made the reading of Sidgwick's "*The Use of Words in Reasoning*" an old favorite of mine which requires concentration, a difficult business. Time after time I found myself peeping into dark corners and shifting my position and there were sharp little sounds, just the oak paneling cracking I suppose. After a time I became more absorbed in the book and less fidgety, and then I heard a very soft cough just behind me. I felt little icy rays pour down and through me,

[00:14:23] but I would not look round and I would go on reading.

[00:14:31] I just reached the following passage: 'However many things may be said about Socrates or about any fact observed, there remains still more that might be said if the need arose. The need is the determining factor. Hence the distinction between complete and incomplete description though perfectly sharp and clear in the abstract, can only have a meaning, can only be applied to actual cases, if it be taken as equivalent to sufficient description, the sufficiency being relative to some purpose.'

[00:15:04] Evidently the description of Socrates as a man, scanty though it is, may be fully sufficient for the purpose of the modest inquiry into whether he is mortal or not. When my eye was caught by a green patch which suddenly appeared on the floor beside me and then another and another following a straight line towards the door, I picked up the nearest one and it was a bit of soaking slime.

[00:15:43] I called on all my willpower for I feared something worse to come and it should not materialize, and then no more patches appeared.

[00:15:56] I got up and walked deliberately slowly to the door turned on the light in the middle of the room and then came back and turned out the reading lamp and went to my dressing room, sat down and thought things over.

[00:16:13] There was something very wrong with this house. I had passed the stage of pretending otherwise and my inclination was to take my family away from it the next day.

[00:16:23] But that meant sacrificing one hundred and sixty-eight pounds and we had nowhere else to go.

[00:16:31] It was conceivable that these phenomena were perceptible only to me.

[00:16:37] Being half a Highlander, I might be able to stick it out if I were careful and kept my tail up, for apparitions of this sort are partially subjective. One brings something of oneself to their materialization. This is a hard saying but I believe that to be true. If Mary and Tim and the servants were immune, it was up to me to face and fight this nastiness. As I undressed

[00:17:06] I came to the decision that I would decide nothing there and then and that I would see what happened. I made this decision against my better judgment, I think. In bed I tried to thrust all this away from me by a conscious effort to change the subject as it were. The easiest subject for me to switch over to is the myriad-sided, useless, consistently abused business of creating things, stories out of pens and ink and paper, representations of things and moods out of paint, brushes and canvas, and our own miseries perhaps out of wine, women, and song. With a considerable effort therefore and with the edges of my brain anxious to be busy with bits of green slime, I recalled an article that I had read that day on a glorious word, 'Jugend-bewegung' (German), the 'Youth Movement', that pregnant or merely wind-swollen Teutonism! How ponderously it attempted to canonize with its polysyllabic sonority that inverted Boy Scoutish-ness of said youths and maidens.

[00:18:16] One bad mad deed, the sonnet scribble of some kind, lousy daub, a day. Bunk without spunk, sauce without force, futurism without a past, merely a transition from one yelping pose to another. And then I suddenly found myself at the end of the garden, attempting desperately to hide myself behind a Rowan tree while my eyes were held relentlessly to face the door. And then it began slowly to open. And something which was horribly unlike anything I had seen before, began passing through it and I knew, it knew I was there, and then my head seemed to burst and flamed asunder, splintered and destroyed, and I awoke trembling to feel that something in the darkness was poised an

inch or two above me, and then, drip, drip, something began falling on my face. Mary was in the bed next to mine and I would not scream, but flung the clothes over my head, my eyes streaming with the tears of terror and so I remained cowering till I heard the clock strike five, and dawn, the ally I longed for, came, and the birds began to sing, and then I slept. I awoke a wreck and after breakfast feeling the need to be alone I pretended I wanted to sketch and I went out into the garden and suddenly I recalled Sir William's remark about coming to see him if there was any trouble. Not much difficulty in guessing what he had meant. I'd go and see him about it at once. I wished I knew whether Mary was troubled too. I hesitated to ask her for if she were not, she was certain to become suspicious and uneasy if I questioned her. And then I discovered that while my brain had been busy with its thoughts, my hand had also not been idle but had been occupied in drawing a very singular design on the sketching block. I watched it as it went automatically on. Was it a design or a figure of some sort? When had I seen something like it before? God, in my dream, last night.

[00:21:02] I tore it to pieces and I got up in agitation and I made my way to the manor house along a path through tall, blowing, stripped grasses hissing lightly in the breeze. My inclination was to run to the station and take the next train to anywhere. Pure undiluted panic and insufficiently analyzed word. That which causes men to trample on women and children when death is making his choice. Of course I had Mary and Tim and the servants to keep me from it. But supposing they had no claim on me should I desert them? No, I should not! Why? Well such things aren't done by respectable inhabitants of Great Britain, a people despised and respected by all other tribes, despised as Philistines, but it took the jawbone of an ass to subdue that hardy race. Respected for what? Birkenhead stuff. No, not the noble Lord, for there were no glittering prizes for those who went down to the bottom of the sea in ships.

[00:22:08] My mind deliberately restricting itself to such highly debatable jingoism, I reached the manor house to be told that Sir William was up in London for the day but would return that evening. Would he ring me, upon his return? Yes sir. And then with lagging steps back to the Red Lodge. I took Mary for a drive in the car after lunch. Anything to get out of the beastly place. Tim didn't come as he preferred to play in the garden. In the light of what happened I shall be criticised for leaving him alone with the nurse.

[00:22:44] But at that time I held the theory that these appearances were in no way malignant and that it was more than possible that even if Tim did see anything, he wouldn't be frightened not realizing that it was out of the ordinary in any way. After all, nothing that I had seen or heard at any rate during the daytime would strike him as unusual. Mary was silent and I was beginning to feel sure from a certain depression and oppression in her manner and appearance that my trouble was hers. I was on the tip of my tongue to say something but I resolved to wait until I'd heard what Sir William had to say.

[00:23:24] It was a dark, sombre, and brooding afternoon and my spirits fell as we turned for home. What a home.

[00:23:34] We got back at six and I had just stopped the engine and helped Mary out when I heard a scream from the garden. I rushed round to see Tim, his hands to his eyes, staggering across the lawn, the nurse running behind him and then he screamed again and fell. I carried him into the house and I laid him down on a sofa in the drawing room and Mary went to him. I took the nurse by the arm and out of the room. She was panting and crying down a face of chalk.

"What happened? What happened?" I asked.

"I don't know what it was sir but we had been walking in the lane and had left the door open. Master Tim was a bit ahead of me and went through the door first and then he screamed like that."

"Well did you see anything that could have frightened him?"

[00:24:19] "No sir, nothing". I went back to them.

[00:24:24] It was no good questioning Tim and there was nothing coherent to be learned from his hysterical sobbing. He grew calmer presently, and was taken up to bed. Suddenly, he turned to Mary and he looked at her with eyes of terror. "The green monkey won't get me, will it mummy?"

"No, no, it's all right now," said Mary. And soon after he went to sleep. And then she and I went down to the drawing room.

[00:24:55] She was on the border of hysteria herself. "Oh, Tom, what is the matter with this awful house? I'm terrified. Ever since I've been here I've been terrified. Do you see things?"

[00:25:08] "Yes," I replied.

[00:25:11] "Oh I wish I'd known. I didn't want to worry you if you hadn't. Let me tell you what it's been like. On the day we arrived I saw

[00:25:19] a man pass ahead of me into my bedroom. Of course I only thought I had and then I've heard beastly whisperings. And every time I pass the turn in the corridor I know that there's someone just round the corner. And then the day before you arrived I woke suddenly and something seemed to force me to go to the window and I crawled there on hands and knees and peeped through the blind.

[00:25:52] It was just light enough to see and I suddenly saw someone running down the lawn, his or her hands outstretched. And there was something ghastly just beside him and they disappeared behind the trees at the end. I'm terrified every minute."

"What about the servants?"

[00:26:11] Nurse hasn't seen anything but the others have, I'm certain. And then there are those slimy patches. I think they're the vilest of all. I don't think Tim has been troubled till now but I'm sure he's been puzzled and uncertain several times."

"Well", I said, "it's pretty obvious that we must clear out. I'm seeing William about it tomorrow, I hope. And I'm certain enough of what he'll advise.

[00:26:37] Meanwhile, we must think over where to go. It was a nasty jar though, I don't mean merely the money, though that is bad enough, but the fuss. Just when I'd hoped that we were going to be so happy and and settled. However it's got to be done. We should be mad after a week of this filth-drenched hole." Just then the telephone bell rang. It was a message to say Sir William would be pleased to see me at half past ten,

[00:27:09] tomorrow. With the dusk came that sense of being watched, waited for, followed about, plotted against, an atmosphere of quiet, hunting malignancy. A thick mist came up from the river and as I was changing for dinner I noticed the lights from the window seemed to project a series of swiftly changing pictures on its grey crawling screen. The one opposite my window for example was unpleasantly suggestive of three figures staring in, and seemed to grow nearer and larger. The effects must have been slightly hypnotic, for suddenly I I started back, for it was as if they were about to close on me. I pulled down the blind and I hurried downstairs. During dinner we decided that unless Sir William had something very reassuring to say, we would go back to London two days later and stay at a hotel till we could find somewhere to spend the next six weeks. Just before going to bed

[00:28:18] we went up to the night nursery to see if Tim was all right. The room was at the top of a short flight of stairs. As these stairs were covered with green slime and there was a pool of the muck just outside the door,

[00:28:36] we took him down to sleep with us. The permanent occupants of the Red Lodge waited till the light was out, but then I felt them come thronging, slipping in one by one. Their weapon,

[00:28:53] fear. It seemed to me they were massed for the attack. A yard away my wife was lying with my son in her arms,

[00:29:02] so I must fight. I lay back, gripped the sides of the bed and strove with all my might to hold my assailants back. As the hours went by I felt myself beginning to get the upper hand and a sense of exaltation came to me. But an hour before dawn they made their greatest effort. I knew that they were willing me to creep on my hands and knees to the window and peep through the blind, and that if I did so, we were doomed. As I set my teeth and I tightened my grip till I felt wracked with agony, the sweat poured from me,

[00:29:45] I felt them come crowding round the bed and thrusting their faces into mine and a voice in my head kept saying insistently, "You must crawl to the window, look through the blind." In my mind's eyes I could see myself crawling stealthily across the floor and pulling the blind aside, but who would be staring back at me? Just when I felt my resistance breaking I heard a sweet sleepy twitter from a tree outside, and I saw the blind touched by a faint suggestion of light, and at once those with whom I had been struggling left me, went their way. Utterly exhausted,

[00:30:35] I slept. In the morning I found somewhat ironically that Mary had slept better than on any night she'd come down. Half past ten found me entering the manor house, a delightfully nondescript

old place which started wagging its tail as soon as I entered it. Sir William was waiting for me in the library. "I expected this wouldn't happen," he said gravely.

[00:31:00] "And now, tell me." I gave him a short outline of our experiences.

[00:31:06] "Yes", he said, "it's always much the same story, every time that horrible place has been let. I felt a sense of personal responsibility and yet I cannot give a proper warning, for the letting of haunted houses is not yet a criminal offence, though it ought to be! And I couldn't afford a libel action. And as a matter of fact one old couple had the house for fifteen years and were perfectly delighted with it, being troubled in no way. But now let me tell you what I know of Red Lodge. I have studied it for forty years and I regard it as my personal enemy. The local tradition is that the second owner early in the 18th century wished to get rid of his wife and bribed his servants to frighten her to death. Just the sort of ancestor I can imagine that blackguard Wilkes being descended from. What devilries they perpetrated I don't know, but she is supposed to have rushed from the house just before dawn one day and drowned herself; whereupon her husband installed a small harem in the house.

[00:32:24] But it was a failure for each of these charmers, one by one rushed down to the river just before dawn, and finally the husband himself did the same. Of the period between then and forty years ago I have no record, but the local tradition has it that it was the scene of tragedy after tragedy, and then was shut up for a long time. When I first began to study it,

[00:32:55] it was occupied by two bachelor brothers. One shot himself in the room which I imagine you use as your bedroom, and the other drowned himself in the usual way.

[00:33:08] I may tell you that the worst room in the house, the one the unfortunate lady is supposed to have occupied is locked up. You know, the one on the second floor.

[00:33:18] I imagine Wilkes mentioned it to you."

"Yes, he did." I replied. "He said he kept important papers there." "Yes,

[00:33:28] well he was forced in self-defense to do so 10 years ago and since then the death rate has been lower. But in those forty years 20 people have taken their lives in the house or in the river. Six children have been drowned, accidentally. The last case was Lord Passover's butler in 1924. He was seen running down the river and leapt in.

[00:33:55] He was pulled out but he died of shock.

[00:33:59] The people who took the House two years ago left in a week and threatened to bring an action against Wilkes but they were warned they had no legal case and I strongly advise you, more than that, I implore you to follow their example.

[00:34:14] Although I can imagine the financial loss and the great inconvenience for that house is a death trap."

"I will", I replied. "I forgot to mention one thing. When my boy was so badly frightened he said something about a green monkey?"

"It", said Sir William sharply. "Well, then it is absolutely imperative that you should leave at once.

[00:34:43] You remember I mentioned the death of certain children. Well in each case they had been found drowned in the reeds just at the end of the lane. And the people about here have a firm belief that the green thing or the green death that is sometimes referred to, as the first and sometimes as the other, is connected with the danger to the children."

[00:35:09] "Have you ever seen anything yourself?" I asked.

"I go to the infernal place as little as possible," replied Sir William. "But when I called on your predecessors I most distinctly saw someone leave the drawing room as we entered it.

[00:35:25] Otherwise, all I've noted is a certain dream which recurs with curious regularity. I find myself standing at the end of the land and watching the river always in a sort of a brassy half light and presently something comes floating down the stream. I can see it jerking up and down and I've always felt passionately anxious to see what it may be. At first I think that it is a log. But when it gets exactly opposite me it changes its course and comes towards me and then I see that it is a dead body, very decomposed. And when it reaches the bank it begins to climb up towards me and then I am thankful to say that I always awake.

[00:36:21] Sometimes I have thought that one day I shall not wake just then. And that on this occasion something will happen to me.

[00:36:31] But that's probably merely the silly fancy of an old gentleman who has concerned himself with these singular events rather more than is good for his nerves."

[00:36:42] "That is obviously the explanation," I said, "and I am extremely grateful to you.

[00:36:48] We will leave tomorrow. But, but don't you think we should attempt to devise some means by which other people may be spared this sort of thing and this brute Wilkes be prevented from letting the house again?"

"I certainly do so and we will discuss it further on some other occasion.

[00:37:03] "And now go and pack!" Very great and charming gentleman, Sir William, I reflected as I walked back to the Red Lodge. Tim seemed to have recovered excellently well but I thought it wise to keep him out of the house as much as possible.

[00:37:23] So, while Mary and the maids packed after lunch, I went with him for a walk through the fields. We took our time and it was only when the sky grew black and there was a distant rumble of thunder and a menacing little breeze came up from the west, that we turned to come back. We had to hurry and as we reached the meadow next to the house there came a ripping flash and the storm broke. We started to run for the door into the garden when I tripped over my boot lace, which had



come undone, and fell. Tim ran on. I had just tied the lace and I was on my feet again when I saw something slip through the door.

[00:38:12] It was green, thin, tall.

[00:38:18] It seemed to glance back at me. And what should have been its face was a patch of soured slime. At that moment, Tim saw it, screamed, and ran for the river. The figure turned and followed him and before I could reach him, hovered over him. Tim screamed again and flung himself in. A moment later I passed through a green and stanching film and I dived in after him. I found him writhing in the reeds and brought him to the bank. I ran with him in my arms to the house and I shall not forget Mary's face as she saw us from the bedroom window. By nine o'clock we were all in a hotel in London and the Red Lodge an evil fading memory. I shut the front door when I had packed them all into the car. As I took hold of the knob, I felt a quick and powerful pressure from the other side and it shut with a crash. The permanent occupants of the Red Lodge were in sole possession, once more.

[00:39:57] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

