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JOHN WYNDHAM

(1903-1969)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

John Wyndham

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Version 2

The Complete Works of
JOHN WYNDHAM



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Complete Works of John Wyndham

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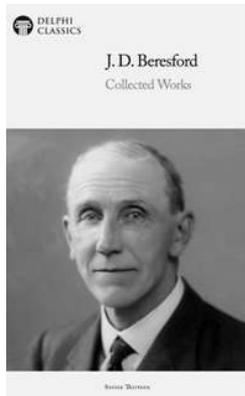
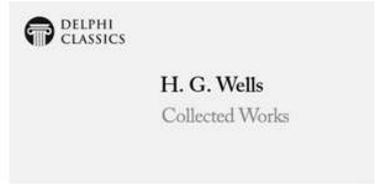
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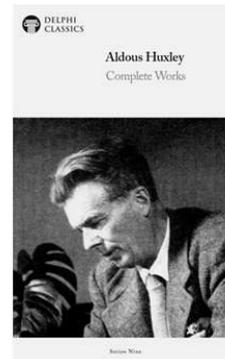
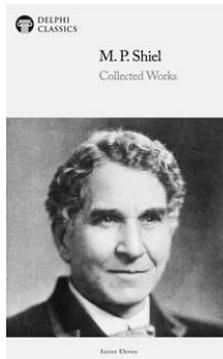
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The Novels



Dorridge, a large village near Knowle, Warwickshire, c. 1905 — John Wyndham was born in Dorridge on 10 July 1903.

The Curse of the Burdens (1927)



John Wyndham was born the son of George Beynon Harris, a barrister, and Gertrude Parkes, the daughter of a Birmingham ironmaster. His early childhood was spent in Edgbaston in Birmingham, but when he was eight his parents separated. Following this, he and his younger brother, the future writer Vivian Beynon Harris, spent the rest of their childhoods at a number of English preparatory and public schools.

After completing his education, Wyndham tried several careers, including farming, law, commercial art and advertising; however, he mostly relied on an allowance from his family to survive. He eventually turned to writing for money in 1925 and by 1931 he was selling short stories and serial fiction to American science fiction magazines.

The Curse of the Burdens was Wyndham's first published story, though it appeared under the by-line of John B. Harris (Wyndham was born John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris). It was first published in February 1927 as no. 17 in the *Aldine Mystery Novel* series.

It tells the story of James Burden, who unexpectedly inherits Shotlander Priory after the mysterious death of his cousin. For nearly four hundred years the descendants of Sir James Burden have inherited the property, though it had never passed directly from father to son. Perhaps that had something to do with the curse, for when the Old Prior crossed the worn threshold for the last time he called down a curse on those that were to take over the property, saying: 'By fire and water, your line shall perish...'. Some dismissed them as the foolish words of an old and dying man. Some did not.

Two recent deaths in the Burden family, the disappearance of the protagonist, Dick Burden, and the appearance of ghosts are all, for a while, ascribed to this curse. Could Albert Honeyman, a religious fanatic and the son of an ugly Burden cousin be behind these events? And what happens with the love triangle of Dick Burden, his older brother James and the lovely Letty Kingsbury?

Whilst some critics have cast doubt on whether this short novel was actually written by Wyndham, stylistic analysis strongly supports the suggestion that it was, as does its position in his early career. Later in life, Wyndham would ignore this book when it came to discussing and detailing his early work. It was only reprinted under the Wyndham name many years after his death.



Wyndham as a young man

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CHAPTER I. SHADOW OF THE CURSE



“WHY TALK ABOUT an allowance?” said James Burden coldly. “You know the state of affairs as well as I do. It is quite impossible for me to make you an allowance, Dick. I’m sorry, but we’re up against facts.”

His brother laughed. He was a good-looking young fellow of thirty, with a bronzed, clean-shaven face and merry gray eyes. But the wrinkles — the tiny wrinkles that only showed about the corners of his mouth when he laughed — spoke of something that had aged him beyond his years. That something had been the Great War, long past, but still written on the faces of thousands of young men. And behind the laughter in the eyes there was always a shadow — not of pain or grief, but of things remembered.

“The facts are these, old son,” Dick replied. “You never expected to come into this property until you were an old man. You might never have inherited it at all, for our good cousin Robert was looking round for a wife when he fell into the sea and was drowned. This property was of the nature of a windfall.”

“Yes, and rotten, like most windfalls,” James said sourly. “It takes me all my time to get anything out of it. Ten thousand acres and a mortgage that swallows up all the rents! And this house thrown in — a white elephant that has to be kept, and eats its head off!”

“I’d like to go into the figures.”

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t oblige you” said James stiffly, “and you wouldn’t understand them if I did. Father left us each two hundred and fifty a year. You can live on that and you can work.”

“I’ve been trying to get work, old son — for three years I’ve done all I can think of. But no one wants me. I shall get hold of a job later on, but just now — well, I thought you could spare me a trifle — say another two-fifty.”

James Burden, seated at a writing table in the library of Shotlander, smiled grimly. He was a dark-haired man of forty with a pale, handsome face. He was stouter than his younger brother, but there was no getting over the fact that they were both members of a very good-looking family. One could trace their resemblance to the portrait of their grandfather over the mantelpiece of the library. But whereas in Dick the face had been refined and hardened by a strenuous, active outdoor life, in the elder it had grown more soft and heavy and almost gross in its outlines.

“Two-fifty,” said Dick, “until I get a job.”

“Ridiculous! Why should you live in idleness on five hundred a year? Five pounds a week is quite enough for a young chap with no ties or responsibilities.”

“I’m taking all that on, old chap. I’m thinking of getting married.”

“Married? Oh, this is really too much of a good thing! I cannot afford to get married myself and you have the cheek to ask me to support your wife.”

Dick Burden laughed pleasantly and lit a cigarette. He had been standing by the fire but now he strolled to the big writing table and seated himself on the edge of it.

“We’re the last two,” he said, “and we ought both to marry. You don’t seem to like taking it on, but I’ve been thinking about it a good deal. We don’t want to let that old monk get the best of us.”

James Burden shrugged his shoulders. He did not say “What old monk?” or pretend that he did not know what his brother was talking about. Shotlander Priory

had been given or sold to a certain Sir James Burden by Henry VIII at the dissolution of the monasteries. The old prior, crossing the worn threshold for the last time, had called down the curse of Heaven on those who were to take over the property of the church. "By fire and water," he had said, "your line shall perish." And they had seemed the foolish words of an old and dying man. For nearly four hundred years the descendants of Sir James Burden had held the property, though it had never passed from father to son.

"You see, old son," Dick continued, "we're the only two left now, and it looks as if our friend the prior had the best chance he's ever had of knocking us out. Robert was drowned, and that's getting rather near the point, isn't it? We may be drowned or burnt to death, so far as I can see. It'd be a pity for there to be none of us left."

"Do you think so?" said James dryly. "Well I'm not quite so sure about that. But look here, Dick, you can't get over me with all this rot about the race dying out and that sort of thing. You've fallen in love with a girl as silly as yourself and you want me to keep the two of you. If you asked me for two hundred and fifty pence a year I wouldn't give it to you. I'm sorry. If you want to get married soon you'd better find a girl with money or else rough it with the one you've got."

The words were harsh, but they were spoken quite gently. Dick Burden was not in the least offended. He regarded his brother as a "dry old stick" — very practical and full of wisdom.

"Letty wouldn't mind waiting," he replied, "and she wouldn't object to roughing it. But I'm not going to spoil her life for her."

"Letty, eh?" queried James Burden. "So that's her name."

"Yes — Letty Kingsbury."

James Burden's eyes narrowed to two slits. He placed his hand to his forehead as though he were trying to remember something. His face was like a white mask.

"You've met her," Dick went on, "at Easthill on Sea — at the boardinghouse; they call it a private hotel but I call it a boardinghouse. Don't you remember? We went down there last year. Robert was staying there when — at the time of the accident. A slim, dark-haired girl — father a retired Indian judge — old chap with brown face and white moustache. Surely you remember her?"

"Yes — I remember her," said James, speaking very slowly, and then, after a pause, "Has money I suppose?"

"None. Father's got a pension — that's all."

"H'm, yes. Sir Julius Kingsbury — I remember him. Hardly the sort of man to approve of this marriage, eh?"

"Oh, your memory is improving," laughed Dick.

"Yes. Sir Julius gave evidence at the inquest on poor Robert. Sir Julius, so far as is known, was the last person to see Robert alive."

"That's right."

James Burden leaned his elbows on the table and pressed the tips of his fingers together. His eyes were fixed on the portrait of "Buck" Burden, who had sold nearly everything he could dispose of to pay his gambling debts.

"On the whole," said James after a pause, "it's just as well that you can't afford to marry this girl."

"What d'you mean by that, eh?"

"The evidence the baronet gave at the inquest was very unsatisfactory — in my opinion. In fact, I may say that I have grave suspicions that Sir Julius pushed Robert over the edge of the cliff."

“Look here,” Dick said heatedly, “I won’t have you talking rot, Jim. You’re crazy — that’s what it is. Your health’s bad and your brain’s affected.”

“You evidently thought so if you expected me to allow you two hundred and fifty a year.” He paused and looked at his watch. “If you start for the station now you’ll just have time to do it quietly — without hurrying.”

“I’m not going to leave this house or this room until you explain your infamous suggestion.”

“I’m going to explain nothing, Dick. You’ve just said I’m crazy, and mad men say things they cannot possibly explain.”

“You’re not mad. For some reason or another you want to prevent this marriage.”

“Lack of money will do that,” James Burton said. “It will not be necessary for me to interfere. You’ll miss your train, Dick, if you don’t look sharp.”

“By Jove,” Dick muttered. “If your heart weren’t dicky, I’d knock the truth out of you.”

“There’s nothing to knock out,” James sneered. “But I’ll tell you this: I mean to get at the truth, and I’m going down to Easthill-on-Sea in a few days’ time. And I shall stay at the Warlock Hotel.”

“Oh, you’re a fool! I’ve no patience with you.”

“Perhaps not. And I doubt if you’ll have any patience with the police either.”

“You don’t mean to tell me that the police—”

“I don’t mean to tell you anything more. You can warn Sir Julius if you like. He won’t bring an action for libel against me; I can promise you that. I know nothing, but I intend to learn everything.”

“This is too funny,” Dick laughed. “Why you are the only person who has benefited by Robert’s death.”

“Think that if you like. But if anything were to happen to me — and it might happen before a week is over — you would inherit a white elephant and the money that’s not enough to keep it in food.”

“Oh, I see. You think Sir Julius is going to commit murder wholesale in order to provide his daughter with an eligible husband? Upon my word, Jim, the theory of the curse is dreary common sense compared to this. I’m sorry for you, old chap. I hope you’ll be better in the morning. I can catch that train if I run all the way to the station. Good night.”

James Burden made no reply, but when he was alone — when the door had closed and he was alone with the portrait of the family spendthrift — the white mask seemed to fall away from his face, and his dull eyes glowed with fire.

His white, rather puffy hands moved toward each other on the table, and he clasped them together with such force that when he drew them apart again, the flesh of his fingers was red and indented.

He looked out of the window and saw his brother running down the drive. Then he thrust his hand into his pocket, and taking out a portrait of a very beautiful young woman, gazed at it with hungry eyes.

It was a photograph of Letty, the only child of Sir Julius Kingsbury.

CHAPTER II. LOVE'S ENEMIES



IN LATE SPRING, in the summer, in early autumn there was about as much privacy on the pier at Easthill-on-Sea as one would hope to find in Piccadilly Circus. The band played at the end of it, and there was a concert hall and sideshows and penny-in-the-slot machines of extraordinary variety and fascination.

In the winter, however, when the sea was gray, and either sullen or angry, and the sou'westerly gales blew, and the rain came down in torrents, the pier was deserted by all the residents except the untiring anglers, and it was a place where lovers might meet with as little fear of interruption as in a country lane. And there were innumerable shelters from the wind and rain — shelters of glass and wood, facing all ways, so that one could find protection from every wind that blew.

In one of these shelters Dick Burden stood with his back to the sea. In a corner of the seat that faced him sat Letty Kingsbury, her knees crossed and her gloved hands clasped round them. She was wearing a thick ulster of thick brown fleecy material and a neat little hat. She had the pale olive skin of girls who have lived the best part of their lives in India and the red healthy cheeks of a young woman who has recently spent two years by the sea and put in a good deal of her time out of doors. She was radiantly and splendidly beautiful.

And her dark beauty, almost of an Eastern type, was allied with the strength and vigor and vitality of the English "sporting girl." It was said of her that her life in India had "done her no harm." It might have been more truly said that it had given her something that a life spent entirely in England could never have given.

"It comes to this, Dick," she was saying, "we've got to wait."

"Yes, old girl — of course — of course. We couldn't rub along on two hundred and fifty a year, could we?"

"Oh yes, we could! But you know it isn't that. My father won't hear of our marriage. He has even forbidden me to see you or write to you."

"But you've disobeyed him, eh?"

"Yes — for this once."

"Does that mean you're going to give in to him?"

"I don't know."

"How do you mean, Letty? You don't know?"

"Oh, well," she laughed, "Father has thrown himself on my mercy."

"He put it like that, did he?"

"Yes — just like that. Dick, I'm very worried about my father. Up to a week ago he was just — well he was the ordinary prudent father who doesn't want his daughter to make an imprudent marriage. And then — Dick, I suppose you won't believe me when I tell you he really did implore me to have nothing more to do with you. He didn't command or threaten me. He just — well, he seemed to break down altogether. And he is not that sort of man."

"No, by Jove, he isn't. And he gave you no reason — except that I'm very ineligible?"

"He gave no reason at all. He did not talk about money."

"Just thinks I'm a rotter, eh?"

"Don't be absurd, Dick. You know quite well that Father likes you." Dick Burden asked no more questions. He fancied he knew what had happened. He had his brother

to thank for this. James had by some means or other acquired a hold over Sir Julius Kingsbury. It was, of course, ridiculous to suppose that Sir Julius had murdered Robert Burden. But the baronet might have been the victim of very strong circumstantial evidence — known as yet only to one man, but quite sufficient to justify the police in making an arrest. A rather eminent retired judge like Sir Julius might shrink from anything of the nature of a public scandal. Innocent, and yet perhaps unable to prove his guiltlessness, he would be inclined to give way, not to actual blackmail but to strong persuasion.

It was a very awkward situation, for Dick could not take Letty into his confidence. It was quite impossible for him to tell her of his brother's suspicions. Could any young man say to the woman he loved, "My dear old girl, I think I can explain this. My brother told me a fortnight ago that your father," etc., etc.? It would have been not only ridiculous, but the end of everything between them. It would be suicide, and a most contemptible form of suicide. Jim would have to be fought with other weapons than freedom of speech.

Later on he might have to be kicked. But for the present he must be treated as the honest head of an old family, who wished to save his brother from an unfortunate marriage.

"You are very silent," said Letty after a long pause. "Are you weighing your own merits and deciding whether I spoke the truth when I said that Father liked you?"

"No, old girl. I was only wondering what kind of bee he has got in his bonnet and how we can catch it. Put a little salt on its tail, I suppose."

"Don't talk rot, Dick. I'm pretty cheerful as a rule, but this beats me altogether. We're up against something terribly serious, Dick. I am very worried about my father. He went up to London about a fortnight ago, and ever since then he seems to have changed — to have got so much older and more feeble. The other day he burst into tears, and about nothing at all, as far as I could see."

"I expect he's ill. Perhaps he went up to town to see a doctor. But look here, Letty, you're not going to give way to him — about me I mean?"

"Yes, openly I am. You must not come to the hotel. I'll meet you there as often as I can. He generally sleeps after lunch, as you know. And I — oh, well, Dick, I'm supposed to be playing golf."

"I don't like this hole-and-corner sort of business, Letty."

"Nor do I, dear. But — well, it would be different if Father were quite himself. And — oh, it's either this or nothing."

The young man flung himself on the seat beside her and put his arm round her neck. Only the gray sea and the gray sky were looking when he drew her closer to him and kissed her passionately. Just these and the yellow, impassive back of a fisherman, clad in oilskins, who was standing twenty yards away from them. The stranger had been there all the time, forever flinging his weighted line far out into the water and never turning his head. He could not possibly have heard a word of their conversation above the noise of the wind and the rain, for he was on the far side of another shelter and was only to be seen through the glass of it.

"I don't see who's going to get the better of us," whispered Dick, "it's just a question of waiting. I'll soon get a job, old girl, and then—" He kissed her again and again, and she suddenly cried out:

"Oh, Dick, that man is looking at us."

He let go of her and laughed. The disciple of Izaak Walton was no longer gazing at them, but he was standing with his face toward them and was taking a flashing, wriggling fish off the hook.

“The first he’s caught,” said Letty. “How awkward he should have just landed it at that moment!”

“Dick Burden made no reply. He was fascinated by the extraordinary ugliness of the man’s face — by the size of it, the thickness of the lips, the thin straightness of the nose, by the small eyes set so far apart that they seemed to be on the very edges of the cheekbones.

And, above all, Dick Burden’s attention was not only caught but held by the ridiculous idea that this hideous face was a caricature of his own — a gross and horrible caricature of the Burden type of face.

There were the full lips, and the thin nose, and the eyes set wide apart, but each feature was so exaggerated that it had become a monstrosity.

“A nice-looking chap, eh?” said Dick. “Enough to frighten all the fish out of the sea.”

The man turned and flung his re-baited hook into the water again. Far and straight the lead swung through the air for over a hundred feet.

“Some cast, that, eh?” laughed Dick. “I should say he’s a pretty hefty fellow. Does he remind you of anyone, Letty?”

“I’m glad to say he doesn’t. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more repulsive face. She rose to her feet and picked up a bag of golf clubs which stood in the corner. “I must be getting along, Dick.”

“I’ll walk back with you.”

“Oh no, you won’t! You’ll stay here and give me at least ten minutes’ start. I’m not taking any chances. Goodbye, you dear.”

“Tomorrow — here — the same time?”

“Yes, yes, Dick.”

She darted out of the shelter and vanished from his sight. He sat down and lit a cigarette. He had been happy enough so long as Letty was with him, but now, left alone with his thoughts, a hard look came into his eyes.

“What’s Jim driving at?” he kept saying to himself. Well, it would be best to ask his brother that question. Very likely he would deny that he had had an interview with Sir Julius Kingsbury and that he had interfered with their love affair. Well, then, he, Dick Burden, would have to see Sir Julius himself. He wanted to avoid that if possible. But somehow or other he would have to get at the truth.

He smoked his cigarette until the hot ash was close to his lips, flung the end out into the rain, and rose to his feet.

He was buttoning up the collar of his overcoat when he heard the sound of hurried footsteps on the planking of the pier, and his brother suddenly came in sight.

“Hallo!” said Dick. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to have a talk with you. I thought I should find you here. I’ve just seen Miss Kingsbury.”

“Indeed. And she told you I was here?”

“Oh no, she did not stop to speak to me. But she was just coming out through the turnstile — with her golf clubs, and I rather fancied I should discover you here. I’m sorry you have taken no notice of what I told you.”

“We may as well have it out,” Dick laughed unpleasantly. “I don’t care a hang for your opinions, but apparently Sir Julius does. I suppose I have to thank you for setting him against me.”

“Most certainly you have to thank me, Dick. I want to save you from this unfortunate entanglement, and I had to speak very plainly to Sir Julius.”

“So I imagined. This crazy idea about Robert, eh?”

“Sir Julius would hardly have listened to my suggestion,” James retorted, “if there had been no force in my arguments. There was no scene. The baronet is a very reasonable man.”

“Oh, is he? Well, I’m not, Jim. You’re a liar — no, worse than that — you’re a cunning rogue.”

“Steadily Dick, steadily. I can’t have you talking to me like that.”

“And I’ll tell you this,” Dick continued. “I only hope there is something in that moth-eaten curse. It’s about time the family came to an end if you’re the head of it.”

“I wouldn’t speak so loudly if I were you,” James Burden smiled. “There’s a man fishing on the other side of that shelter.”

And at that moment, as though the fellow heard the remark, he turned and gazed at them — only for a few seconds and then he faced the sea again.

“You might get to look like that,” said Dick, “if you live long enough. But I hope you won’t, Jim.”

“Waiting for dead men’s shoes, eh?”

The two men stared at each other. Dick’s face was as white as his brother’s. Then, with a fiery smolder of hate, the red light began to burn in their eyes.

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End of Sample